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Millennials expected to make online sharing a lifelong habit

Experts surveyed in Pew Internet/Elon University study say tech-savvy young people will stay active in virtual hangouts and continue sharing personal information as they age, have families

The Millennial generation is leading society into a new world of personal disclosure and information-sharing using new media, according to a recent survey of technology experts. They said the communications patterns "digital natives" have already embraced through their use of technology tools will carry forward even as Millennials age, form families, and move up the economic ladder. They added that new social norms and etiquette are being formed as a result.

The highly engaged, diverse set of respondents to this online, opt-in survey included 895 technology stakeholders and critics. The study was fielded by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and Elon University's Imagining the Internet Center.

67% agreed with the statement:

"By 2020, members of Generation Y will continue to be ambient broadcasters who disclose a great deal of personal information in order to stay connected and take advantage of social, economic, and political opportunities. Even as they mature, have families, and take on more significant responsibilities, their enthusiasm for widespread information sharing will carry forward."

29% agreed with the opposite statement, which posited:

"By 2020, members of Generation Y will have 'grown out' of much of their use of social networks, multiplayer online games and other time-consuming, transparency-engendering online tools. As they age and find new interests and commitments, their enthusiasm for widespread information sharing will abate."

Survey respondents were asked to explain their answers. Many said people open up to others in order to build friendships, form and find communities, seek help, and build their reputations and they have the tools to be able to do this more easily than ever before. They said Millennials have already seen the benefits and will not reduce their use of these social tools over the next decade as they take on more responsibilities while growing older.

"The majority noted that new social norms that reward disclosure are already in place among the young," said Pew Internet Director Lee Rainie. "Some experts also expressed hope that society will be more forgiving of those whose youthful mistakes are on display in social media such as Facebook picture albums or YouTube videos."

Some survey participants said new definitions of "private" and "public" information are taking shape in networked society. They said Millennials might change the types of personal information they share as they age, but the aging process will not fundamentally change the incentives to share.

“Some of the experts said an awkward trial-and-error period is unfolding and will continue over the next decade, as people adjust to new realities about how social networks perform and as new boundaries are set about the personal information that is appropriate to share,” noted Janna Anderson, director of the Imagining the Internet Center and a co-author of the study.

Nearly 30 percent of respondents said the abundant sharing of personal information on social networks by young people will fade, most of them noting that life stages and milestones do matter and do prompt changes in behavior. They cited an array of factors that they believe will compel Millennials to pull back on their free-wheeling lifecasting, including fears that openness about their personal lives might damage their professional lives, greater seriousness in dating and family formation as people age, and the arrival of children in their lives.

Among other things, many of the dissenting experts also said Millennials will not have as much time in the future to devote to popular activities such as frequently posting to the world at large on YouTube, Twitter or Facebook about the nitty-gritty details of their lives

This is the sixth and final report generated out of the results of a Web-based survey that gathered opinions on 10 Internet issues from a select group of experts and the highly engaged Internet public. (*Details about earlier reports can be found here:* <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/predictions/expertsurveys/2010survey/default.xhtml>. *Deeper details from this report are here:* http://www.elon.edu/e-web/predictions/expertsurveys/2010survey/future_millennials.xhtml.)

Following is a selection of respondents’ remarks:

“Publicity will replace privacy. Privacy will appear quaint, like wearing gloves and veils in church.”
—**Stowe Boyd**, *social networks specialist, analyst, activist, blogger and futurist*

“I wrote about my diagnosis of surgery for and recovery from prostate cancer on my blog under the headline, ‘The penis post.’ It doesn’t get much more transparent than that. Yet because of that, I received not only much support but also invaluable information from brave and generous patients who went before me; that was possible only because I revealed myself. I also inspired others to tell their stories and to get screening for the disease. I learned these benefits from the digital culture and I am confident that its so-called natives understand these benefits in their DNA. So I am convinced that publicness will continue. Not only that, but I believe that publicness will be seen as a public good and even necessity... I believe that keeping such information to oneself will one day be seen as antisocial.” —**Jeff Jarvis**, *blogger and author*

“Millennials will routinely engage in ubiquitous social networking, having seen that competitive edge it brings them in business and politics. It will be the norm in personal relationships. I wish I could keep up with them.” —**Craig Newmark**, *founder of Craigslist, former software engineer*

“Sharing is not ‘the new black,’ it is the new normal. There are too many benefits to living with a certain degree of openness for digital natives to ‘grow out of it.’ Job opportunities, new personal connections, professional collaboration, learning from others’ experiences, etc., are all very powerful benefits to engaging openly with others online, and this is something that Gen Y understands intuitively.” —**Matt Gallivan**, *senior research analyst, National Public Radio (US)*

“I see the new media becoming more institutionalized and adopted by workplaces, schools, governments and social organizations as primary channels for communication.” —**Gary Kreps**, *professor and chair of the department of communication, George Mason University*

“Privacy isn't Platonic, it's contextual and variable. Gen Y has permanent callouses where the boomers have privacy sensibilities. Remember that Brandeis called for a right to privacy because he was shocked that newspapers could publish his picture without his permission. Flickr users (3 billion photos and counting) may someday embrace Brandeis, but never his definition of privacy.” —**Stewart Baker**, *general counsel to the US Internet Service Provider Association, former general counsel for the US National Security Agency*

“Everyone is a socialist at 20 and a capitalist at 50. Didn't George Bernard Shaw say that? Now, everyone is an information socialist at 20 and an information capitalist at 50.” —**Barry Wellman**, *professor of sociology and Netlab Director, University of Toronto*

“It will be clear by 2020 that everybody has, if you will, skeletons (or nude pics or infidelities) in the closet, and it will be seen as absurd to make morality judgments based on these. In an ideal world, denying a person life or livelihood on the basis of these will be seen as a form of extortion, and condemned by society at large.” —**Stephen Downes**, *senior research officer, National Research Council of Canada*

“Unless Generation Y has a collective privacy-related epiphany, they will continue to happily trade it for convenience.” —**Gervase Markham**, *a programmer for the Mozilla Foundation*

“Things like homosexuality, pre-marital sex, non-married pregnancy, even having cancer, have greatly altered our sense of what has to be kept private. Our sense of what's shameful has changed steadily since the '60s. Gen Y will take different standards into the workplace and relationships and the norms will continue to drift.” —**David Collin**, *retired, formerly director of the American Cancer Society*

“This way of being is completely ingrained in their DNA now. The challenge will be for older generations to accept that expectations on sharing have changed, and to modify behavior and employment norms to take this into account.” —**Chris Jacobs**, *COO, Solutions for Progress, Inc.*

“We're still in the early stages of the Net's Cambrian explosion. By that metaphor Google is a trilobyte. We have much left to work out... User-controlled terms of use are coming. Two current technical developments, 'self-tracking' and 'personal informatics,' are examples of ways that power is shifting from organizations to individuals – for the simple reason that individuals are the best *points of integration* for their own data, and the best *points of origination* for what gets done with that data. Digital natives will eventually become fully empowered by *themselves*, not by the organizations to which they belong, or the services they use. When that happens, they'll probably be more careful and responsible than earlier generations, for the simpler reason that they will have the tools.” —**Doc Searls**, *fellow, Berkman Center, Harvard*

“Even by 2020, there may still be a substantial minority of holdouts, of non-participants, who do not engage in those practices. The more dominant sharing as the default practice becomes, though, the harder it will be for these non-participants to continue to abstain.” —**Axel Bruns**, *general editor of Media and Culture journal*

“There will continue to be strong corporate pressures on the consumer to share information, and those incentives will not abate. Today's digital natives have formed a habit of sharing information, and habits are almost impossible to break.” —**Hal Eisen**, *senior engineering manager at Ask.com*

“Over the next decade there will be increasing discrepancies between countries in terms of privacy laws and the protection of privacy. Advertisers and corporations will want people to provide their personal information and their ability to offer 'goodies' will increase. States will

want to collect as much personal information as possible in order to more efficiently control populations. Depending upon the relative strength of democratic forces in various nations, privacy will either expand or erode... If I were to hazard a guess, in the short-term in the US private information will become increasingly gathered by the government and corporations and will not be adequately protected.” —**Benjamin Mordechai Ben-Baruch**, senior market intelligence consultant and applied sociologist

“The flows are flowing and will continue to, and those who aren't digitally literate will miss out on crucial educational and economic opportunities. The real problem we face is the divide between the rich gadget hounds and the poorer Millennials. Not everyone can afford the freedom that releasing all that information makes possible.” —**Susan Crawford**, former assistant to President Obama for Science, Technology and Innovation Policy

“Sharing is the natural state of humans, in general. Our Industrial Age culture developed because our education and social systems adapted to that prevailing economy. It is a culture developed around the concept of competition for scarce resources. Primeval culture, the original reason for humans to socialize, is based on abundance by contribution. ‘Digital natives’ will show the ‘digital immigrants’ the abundance in the power of contribution. And even then some of us will still remain ‘digital undocumented workers.’” —**Jack Holt**, senior strategist for emerging media, US Department of Defense

Respondents were allowed to keep their remarks anonymous if they chose to do so. Following are two selected from the hundreds of anonymous comments from survey participants:

“Generation Y is heading for a social networking hangover. Big-time. The level of personal information sharing – forever stuck in the Web and beyond their control – will haunt many of the as they enter adulthood, like virtual tattoos that cannot be removed.”

“We could pass laws that grant ownership of personal information to citizens, effectively putting vast numbers of data brokers out of business as they are the legal bridge between commerce and crime.”

The Imagining the Internet Center (<http://www.imaginingtheInternet.org>) is an initiative of Elon University's School of Communications. The center's research holds a mirror to humanity's use of communications technologies, informs policy development, exposes potential futures and provides a historic record. Among the spectrum of issues addressed are power, politics, privacy, property, augmented and virtual reality, control and the rapid changes spurred by accelerating technology. Imagining the Internet is directed by Janna Quitney Anderson, an associate professor of communications.

The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project (<http://www.pewInternet.org>), directed by Lee Rainie, is a nonprofit, non-partisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It produces reports exploring the impact of the Internet on families, communities, work and home, daily life, education, health care and civic and political life. It is one of seven projects of the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization.

The survey results are based on a non-random online sample of 895 internet experts and other internet users, recruited via e-mail invitation, Twitter or Facebook. Since the data are based on a non-random sample, a margin of error cannot be computed, and the results are not projectable to any population other than the experts in this sample.