



Blame it on the social media

There is a manual for Facebook. It was written three-quarters of a century ago: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Facebook may be more than just an online popularity contest, but for many "friend"-counting teenagers that'll do nicely. It's just one part of a social media revolution that is transforming, digitising, human networks. What to make of it? BY SARAH LANG

AT TWO YEARS, NINE MONTHS, Aucklander Monty Khan is as happy at home playing videos and games on his dad's iPhone as he is playing with "real world" toys. "He had to show me where to find videos we'd taken and how to play them – shame!" says his smiling mum Dianne Khan.

The toddler also uses the gadget to take, view and rotate photos, and is an aficionado of Skype, which lets him make voice/video calls over the internet for free. Monty often Skypes his mother (without adult help) and his friend Malakai to sing Wiggles songs with him.

Because Monty's extended family lives in the UK, he knows his nana, grandpa, aunts, uncles and cousins only through Skype.

Another wee Skyper, Wellington three-year-old Cole Schwartfeger, thought his extended family lived in the computer. When they turned up on his doorstep, he kept pointing at the computer, back at them and back at the computer as though they'd somehow got out.

These toddlers are part of a new generation of "screenies", growing up used to socialising online. And while for now they're only dabbling in social media, it's only a matter of time before they graduate to websites like Facebook and Twitter. From two-

year-olds au fait with iPhones to 90-year-olds finding their way around Facebook, different generations are using the internet to communicate in all sorts of ways.

First, a quick digression to explain just what "social media" actually are: different things, depending on who you talk to. Simon Young, partner at Auckland social media consultancy sy-ENGAGE, puts it this way: social media are where news, information and influence (media) come from the people we interact with online (social). For an interaction to qualify as social media, it depends on whether it is a one-to-many communication

"For the past couple of years the fastest-growing social media demographic has been the baby boomers and older generations."

or one-to-one. For instance, Skypers who post updates are using social media; those on Skype only for one-to-one calls aren't.

There's no doubt social media have evolved at a rapid pace over the past decade. With Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn overtaking the original Myspace and Bebo, YouTube holding tight to its spot as the leading video-sharing site, Trade Me wading in with the >

AD

popular oldfriends.co.nz and Google+ trying to get in on the action, there's a social-media website to suit everyone.

Andrew Long, the university academic who founded Dunedin social media advisory Know Social Media, says it's amazing that, before they turn 10, social media sites can be both embedded in everyday culture and the world's most trafficked websites.

Yes, social media have definitely supplanted email as the most commonly used internet platform.

How many of us are logging in? A 2011 NZ Herald-Digipoll Survey on New Zealand's social-networking habits found half of us are users. Half of users check their chosen site daily, with one in 10 admitting they're addicted. Social media services firm Catalyst90 recently counted New Zealand accounts on the major sites. Twitter, where you send and read posts of up to 140 characters and can "follow" others by automatically receiving their posts, had 75,182 members. Professional networking site LinkedIn tallied 463,792.

But that's peanuts compared with the whopping 2,052,420 New Zealanders on Facebook, a site that probably needs no introduction. New site Google+ may have racked up 40 million-plus users worldwide



“I used to call them my internet friends – now I just call them my friends.”

in its first four months, but that's still 760 million behind Facebook. Long doesn't think any other site will rival or overtake the behemoth. “Over time, people have invested so much of themselves into their Facebook personas and networks that they won't move to another service and start again.”

So, it's largely teens and 20-somethings turning “Facebook” and “friend” into verbs. In New Zealand, one in four Facebook users is aged 18-24, and the number of users aged 13-17 is rising. “We call them Generation C, others call them digital natives,” says 36-year-old Young of the youngsters who've grown up comfortable with social media and using the internet wherever, whenever. Nowadays, of course, you don't even need a laptop to log in – with smartphones and such devices, social

your fingertips, anytime, anywhere. (It's estimated that by 2013 more mobile devices will be connected to the internet than any other device, such as desktop computer or laptop.)

Masterton 18-year-old Ash Morrison joined Facebook at 13, when her peers ditched Bebo. “Then I went to a site called Tagged but it was too much like a dating site and I had heaps of old guys talking to me so I deleted that pretty fast.”

At school, her friends used Facebook to plan parties and their social lives, but she mainly looked at photos to see what everyone was up to. “I used to spend way too much time on it, it was tragic.” Now she uses the site to keep in contact with family and friends who don't live in Masterton. “It's cheaper than calling and texting.”

During our teenage years, when friends are crucial to our identity, it can be a case of “look how many Facebook friends I have”, and “poor so-and-so only has a few friends”.

“Facebook's definitely a popularity contest for some girls,” says Morrison, who has 210 friends. While the average NZ Facebook user has 124 friends, most teens have more than that, although research shows the maximum number of real relationships one person can manage effectively is around 150.

It's not just the younger generation posting about last night's dinner or date. In New Zealand, about one in six Facebook users are aged 35-44. For most, updates and photos let them check out what friends and family have been up to. For others, social media are the backdrop >

to their lives. Take Monty’s mum Dianne, a 44-year-old who uses Facebook and Twitter for both her work and personal life. “Spot the addict!” Social media sites help her run four online businesses from home, including FloBusiness, a social media advisory for small businesses.

Dianne Khan’s one of many “work-from-homers” (either paid work or caring for children) who use social media as a replacement for the water-cooler chats you’d have in the workplace. The UK expat found most of her “real life” New Zealand friends through the bulletin boards at everybody.co.nz, chatting there during IVF, pregnancy and new motherhood. They later met in the flesh, and now talk in person and on Facebook, some on Google+ and Twitter.

“I used to call them my internet friends – now I just call them my friends.”

For those after business smarts, there’s LinkedIn, the world’s largest professional (online) network. Often used to find jobs or recruit people, it’s also an easy, efficient way of networking. “In the US, LinkedIn is as mandatory as business cards,” Long notes. Worldwide there are 120 million users; 350,000-and-counting in New Zealand.

Auckland-based patent and trademark attorney Leonard Cousins joined in 2007 to track down former colleagues and now uses LinkedIn to find up-to-the-minute



“Social media are a fantastic way for the elderly or groups within society who can’t get out and about readily to keep up to date and participate.”

industry information, join in industry debates and discussions, select foreign agents for clients, and suss out mutual connections. “I’ve gone from using it as a contact-details store, to a networking tool, to a searching resource and an online posting of credentials.”

We’re also using social media to get the news. Facebook and Twitter are favourite sources for a younger generation used to getting news online. “Every significant news organisation has a Twitter account or several to help redistribute their content,” explains Long. On Twitter, you can follow say, BBC World News through to less mainstream media outlets through

to your favourite celebrity.

We’ve all read about the role social media have played in recent revolutions. As Andrew Long puts it, “social media give oppressed peoples a voice”. In countries where media freedom is severely curtailed, like Libya, Syria and China, photos/video taken on cellphones and posted on social media sites are sometimes the only footage available, and social media updates are the only coverage.

What about the elderly? They’re embracing social media slowly, but just as surely.

“For the past couple of years the fastest-

growing social media demographic has been the baby boomers and older generations,” says Long. “If they want to communicate with their kids, family and friends, they need to sign up.”

At 82, Aucklander Joan Cowley learned to manoeuvre those “difficult mouse thingies” at community classes so she could communicate with her son’s family in Perth and daughter’s family in London via Facebook. Auckland psychologist Sara Chatwin is all for this. “Social media is a fantastic way for the elderly or groups within society who can’t get out and about readily to keep up to date and participate.”

It’s worth remembering most elderly people don’t use it, though. One woman, who prefers not to be named, says social media scare her because she doesn’t understand them and feels left out. Left behind. She wishes she could see hard copies of family photos, but they’re usually just posted online.

Writer/mum Stacey Anyan, 35, who steers clear of social media sites “because they ‘own’ your details and photos”, concurs. “It annoys me that so many friends have joined up and ditched emailing, especially photos. I also miss out on some news between friends.”

Another dissenter is Auckland mum-

many other parents won’t let their kids near social media.

“From the time children first experience the internet, they’re using social media more often than you may think,” says WebSafety NZ’s Dean Stewart, who points out that many children’s websites, like Club Penguin, provide social media

children, but overuse or use of adult sites carries risks of under-developed “real world” communication skills, access to inappropriate material, obesity, cyber-bullying, invasions of privacy, and even mental health problems (see our fact box for safety tips).

While it’s difficult to predict the future,

“Nowadays you don’t even need a laptop to log in – with smartphones and such devices, social media is at your fingertips, anytime, anywhere.”

of-three Hannah Sperber, who with her husband stopped using Facebook two years ago “so we could focus more on our own lives and moments, instead of what everyone else is up to. And when people can’t text or Facebook you, communication with others feels authentic.” That’s one reason she and

forums. Although only people 13 and over can use Facebook, that’s easily and often got around by ticking a different birth year; a seven-year-old I know counted seven classmates with Facebook pages; others wanted one but weren’t allowed.

Chosen and used appropriately and correctly, social media can benefit

experts expect to see social media users becoming more mobile, more private and more choosy. “Social media will continue to affect the world from a social, cultural, political, economic, and technological perspective,” says Long. Whether you’re 13, 30 or 90, it’s all about making it work for you.

Safety for children

Dean Stewart of Web Safety NZ (websafety.co.nz), which provides Kiwis with resources for internet safety, shares some guidelines for safer internet and social media use:

2-9 years

- Before allowing a young child on the internet, install some form of parental/filtering software, which filters out certain categories you don't want your child to come across. A good free option, although limited in functionality, is K9 Web protection – download at k9webprotection.com. Alternatively, as a minimum, ensure “safe search” is configured in search engines.
- See how at: google.com/support/websearch/bin/answer.py?answer=510.
- Use a search engine like Google to search for educational sites for kids. Review the sites before letting your child use them. A well-monitored New Zealand site is hectorsworld.com, which offers online adventures in an underwater cartoon environment and teaches children about internet safety in a fun way.

7-10 years

Another closely administered New Zealand site is minimonos.com, where each child takes the form of a cartoon avatar. Kids can make friends with others around the world while learning how to keep the planet green.

11-14 years

Teach kids about cyberbullying. Help them understand how it affects a victim, and that it can have lasting effects. See cyberbullying.org.nz. Help children build empathy by teaching them to understand how bullying makes people feel. NZ site NetSafe has some excellent resources: www.netsafe.org.nz/cyberbullying-advice-for-young-people-parents-and-teachers/

13-18 years

- Ask your kids to teach you how to set privacy settings on social networking sites. That way you empower them, while seeing how secure their profile is.
- Explain that the internet is the most public environment they'll ever be in, while feeling the most private.
- Help children understand that when a photo is posted on the internet, emailed or sent via a mobile phone, it can then be used by anyone, for any purpose. Tell them to only accept “friends” they know in real life.
- Monitor internet history using parental software.
- Tell them never to meet anyone from the internet without taking a trusted adult.

Safety for adults

- Don't say anything you wouldn't in “real life”.
- Think twice before you post, especially those party photos.
- Create separate groups on social networking sites for colleagues and social friends.
- Understand privacy settings on social networks, and use them.
- To avoid stalking, limit the amount of personal information posted anywhere on the internet, including social networking profiles. Less is better; never publish your phone number or address.
- If you suspect stalking, report it to the NZ Police and The Orb <http://theorb.org.nz/>, run by NetSafe who filter the reports and send them to the appropriate NZ organisation for action.
- Report anything inappropriate that happens on the internet to The Orb
- Don't send money to people requesting it over the internet.
- Avoid clicking on links sent to you by others. These often lead to malware (malicious software) or viruses.
- We can't stress the importance of passwords enough. Ideally, passwords should be at least eight characters, and a combination of letters (mixed case), numbers and special characters.

All ages

- Ask them to tell you, or a trusting adult, about anything they see, read or hear on the internet that makes them uncomfortable.
- Explain to children that the people they talk to on the internet are real people. This helps them understand that the way they behave in “real life” is no different to how they should behave on the internet.
- As children become aware of safe digital citizenship, parents can relax internet controls and use occasional monitoring.

AD