



prACTice MATTERS

A collaboration of Cornell University, University of Rochester, and New York State Center for School Safety

October 2009

Using New Media to Promote Adolescent Sexual Health: Examples from the Field

by Deb Levine, MA

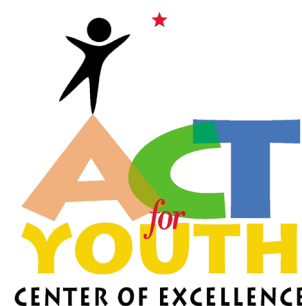
“Teens today are wildly different in their media behavior—not from other age groups, but from teens of generations past.”

- The Nielsen Company (2009)

In the United States, Internet and mobile technologies have become integrated into our lives as essential forms of communication. An entire generation has grown up with these new channels for gathering and sharing information. Those concerned with promoting adolescent sexual health are beginning to take advantage of the technologies available and to use preexisting (and thriving) online and mobile networks to improve access to services and communicate sexual health information to young people. This report will describe some of the technologies that have become popular, together with case examples demonstrating how this technology is being used for sexual and reproductive health.

SMS Text Messaging

Text messaging, also known as Short Message Service (SMS) technology, provides a cheap, easy, instant, and non-intrusive way for people to chat on-the-go. For many young people, text messages have taken the place of email (Lenhart, 2009).



SMS Text Messaging Example: SexINFO

In response to rising gonorrhea rates in San Francisco among African American teens, ISIS developed SexINFO, a sexual health text messaging service. SexINFO provides basic facts about sexual health and relationships, as well as referrals to youth-oriented clinical and social services. The service was set up as “opt-in,” where youth text the word “SexINFO” to a 5-digit phone number, then receive a menu with codes instructing them to text for answers to commonly asked questions, such as “what to do if ur condom broke,” “if s/he’s cheating on you,” or “if ur not sure u want to have sex” (Levine, McCright, Dobkin, Woodruff, & Klausner, 2008).

SexINFO has since been enhanced for State of California residents as Hookup, a weekly advice and referral SMS service. Youth text “HOOKUP” to a short phone number and are then subscribed to receive weekly educational nuggets and referrals to free clinic services statewide. In the first quarter of service, Hookup had 1,400 subscribers, with approximately 30% texting for clinic referral information.

<http://www.teensource.org/pages/hookup>

Deb Levine, MA is founder and executive director of ISIS, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing Internet and mobile technologies to enhance the sexual well-being of individuals and communities. Ms. Levine started her ground-breaking work designing the first online health question-and-answer service: Columbia University’s “Go Ask Alice!”

Social Networking Sites

Web-based social networking sites (such as Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, and Xanga) allow users to define a personal network by linking to other people's profiles. A profile is a page with pictures, personal statistics, and other customized information created to reflect your personality and characteristics. These sites are generally free, and the labor required to create a basic profile is minimal. Once an online profile is created, the user is part of a large searchable network that includes every user of the networking service. Users can communicate with all members of their personal network through bulletins, blogs, and status updates. Several social networking sites also have internal email, chat room, and instant messaging functions that allow users to communicate with each other. Together with texting, social networking sites have provided an alternative to email for young people communicating with their friends.

In 2006, 55% of online teens 12-17 years old had a profile on a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). Using social networking sites for professional purposes requires a fair amount of staff time. Sites must be monitored regularly and require new content to keep them fresh so that youth might continue to visit.

Widgets and Apps

"Widgets" and "apps" are small software programs that can be embedded within a social networking profile (app) or social networking profiles and website pages (widget). Widgets and apps can have a variety of functionalities and interactive features. Apps take advantage of the existing features of the particular social network they run on, such as MySpace or Facebook. Widgets and applications are created to be shared with friends, either via their websites or social networking profiles. For health communications, creative use of widgets and apps offers potential for boosting peer-to-peer sharing of content, information, and interactivity.

Both widgets and apps are usually built by engineers. Widgets are most often built in Java or Flash, and apps are built specifically for a platform such as the iPhone, Facebook, or MySpace. Free and low-cost software is available to build simple widgets on sites such as Widgetbox.com or Sprout, but some programming skills are still needed to get them looking and working properly.

Social Networking Example *Sex, Etc. MySpace Profile*

Sex, Etc., an online peer education project of Rutgers University, has created a MySpace profile for their organization in an effort to reach more teens. Taking advantage of the formatting capability MySpace offers, Sex, Etc. has created a very polished profile dominated by a running series of captioned photos of their teen staff, and youth-generated videos. Sex, Etc.'s MySpace page drives users to their blog, forums, and magazine.

<http://www.myspace.com/mysexetc>

Widgets & Apps Examples

AIDS.gov has three widgets that can be downloaded and shared: A podcast widget, an HIV testing day widget, and the "9 and a half minutes" widget. Nine and a Half Minutes is a campaign to raise awareness that every 9 and a half minutes, someone in the U.S. is infected with HIV. Through the widget, you can conduct a zip code search for an HIV testing site, or get in-depth information about HIV and AIDS.

<http://www.aids.gov/widgets.html>

RH Reality Check has sexual and reproductive health news and commentary feed widgets. They are updated daily and easy to install.

<http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/widgets>

Sexpert, a Facebook app by the 15 and Counting campaign, has a sex education quiz to test your knowledge, and an advocacy component for better sex education and sexual health services for all. The 15 and Counting campaign was developed by International Planned Parenthood Foundation in response to the International Conference on Population and Development's call to action in Cairo 15 years ago. The components of the Facebook app include a blog, a toolkit, and a petition to sign and pass around.

<http://preview.tinyurl.com/yzvkwxu>
(requires Facebook log-in)



Video Sharing Example *Teensource YouTube Channel*

Teensource.org is a website run by California Family Health Council as a resource for teens and young adults seeking information on healthy and responsible sexual lifestyles. Teensource has a YouTube Channel for their videos on a variety of themes. As of this writing, some 35 videos had been posted. Some are testimonials by young teenagers regarding their life goals and thoughts about teen pregnancy. “Are you getting it?” is a video series written and performed by high school students in Hollywood. A music video by Shana, a professional musician, focuses on “choices” young women make. The site also hosts promo videos for Teensource’s semi-annual condom contest and for their website.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/teensource>

Video Sharing Sites

Video sharing sites like YouTube, MySpaceTV, and smaller sites like CurrentTV and TeeVee, allow registered users to upload and stream digital video to the web where they can be viewed, tagged with keywords, rated, “favorited,” and commented on by others. YouTube allows organizations to set up profiles and channels for their own video content and related favorites.

According to a 2007 Pew Internet and American Life Study (Lenhart et al.):

- 57% of online teens* watch videos on video sharing sites.
- 39% of online teens share their own artistic creations on sites like YouTube, up from 33% in 2004.
- 14% of online teens have uploaded a video file to a sharing site, compared with just 8% of adults.
- Teen boys are nearly twice as likely as girls to have posted videos online where someone else could view it.

* “Online teens” are teens who use the Internet—93% of all American teens.

Podcast Examples

Sex. Really: The Show, a podcast series for 18-24 year olds, is part of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s website SexReally.com. Podcasts are updated every two weeks and hosted by Laura Session Steppes, a journalist and author. Podcasts are approximately 7-8 minutes long, and cover topics such as “When to End a Relationship,” “Is Dating a Lost Art,” and “The Female Condom.”

<http://www.sexreally.com/the-show>

Planned Parenthood Online’s Speaking of Sex is a podcast that explores a wide range of issues in sexuality. Topics covered in the series include family planning, getting tested for STIs, and an interview with sex advice columnist Dan Savage. The content has been vetted by Planned Parenthood health educators.

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/speaking-of-sex.htm>

Podcasts and Vodcasts

Podcasts and vodcasts are Internet-based audio and/or video files available for download. Providing a low-cost, portable way to distribute content, podcasts are used for self-guided tours, music, talk shows, trainings, storytelling, education, and advocacy. Lenhart et al. (2007) report that 19% of online teens download podcasts.



Online Games

Online games can be used as study guides or learning supplements to promote safer behaviors, and to teach collaboration, critical thinking, and deductive skills. Online video games offer rich, interactive environments that motivate learning, in some cases in groups of young people from around the world (MMOGs—massively multiplayer online games).

The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak, 2008) found that 99% of boys and 94% of girls play games on a console, computer, portable gaming device, or cell phone. Among teens who play daily, 65% of are boys; 35% are girls.

Online Game Example *RePlay: Finding Zoe*

RePlay: Finding Zoe is an online video game that seeks to promote healthy relationships and challenge the acceptance of violence and unhealthy relationships in young people's lives. The game centers on a group of kids searching for their friend Zoe, who is believed to be in an abusive relationship. Players discover Zoe's diary, in which she chronicles her boyfriend's transformation from "perfect" to controlling, suspicious, and abusive. While seeking clues to her whereabouts and gathering friends to show Zoe they care, players are faced with multiple choices in response to rumors and gossip. Players are also asked to take a multiple choice survey about their own relationships. The game was created by Take Action Games and Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (Ontario).

<http://www.metrac.org/replay/index.html>

<http://seriousgamessource.com/item.php?story=14353>

UGC Example

In Brief: What if Your Undies Had the Last Word

For STD Awareness Month 2008, ISIS launched the In Brief contest, asking youth aged 16-24 to design a pair of underwear with a safer sex message. The contest aimed to promote communication as key to sexual health by showcasing that a simple chat before you get naked can help stop the spread of STDs, HIV, and unplanned pregnancies. For a six-week contest period, In Brief had over 500 entries; 650,000 engagements through votes, views, and reviews; and entries could be seen in close to 700 different places online. The winning entry had the slogan, "You need a ticket to ride this ride," along with drawings of a roller coaster and a ticket with a condom on it. Posters for print and web distribution have been made available online since the contest closed.

www.undiescontest.org

User-Generated Content

User participation is encouraged on many websites, collectively known as user-generated content (UGC). UGC takes many forms: text/comments, videos, pictures, software applications, etc. Often UGC is monitored by website administrators to avoid offensive content or language and copyright infringement issues, or simply to be sure content posted is relevant to the site's topic. There are usually no fees for uploading UGC. Contests are a practical application of user-generated content in the youth arena; contests in poster design, storytelling, songwriting, and video creation could be used to promote sexual health.

Youth Activism

Youth, supported by adult professionals, teachers, parents, and concerned community members, are using digital media to become activists for sexual health and reproductive rights. Activists use all the technology tools previously discussed—social networking, text messages, online contests, podcasts, games, etc.—to achieve their goals of building momentum for the sexual and reproductive health movement.



Resources

ISIS, Inc.

A non-profit organization working locally, nationally, and internationally to use technology and new media for sexual health promotion and disease prevention. ISIS projects are highlighted on the site, and the blog and “In the News” sections keep up to date on effective new projects and technologies.

<http://www.isis-inc.org>

Pew Internet and American Life Project

Regularly updated statistics and reports exploring the impact of the Internet on families, communities, work and home, daily life, education, health care, and civic and political life. NOTE: Pew surveys are conducted via landline telephone; data excludes information from youth and households who are solely cellular users.

<http://www.pewinternet.org/>

SexTech

Home of ISIS’ annual conference on youth, technology, and sexual health, providing opportunities for networking with professionals working on the cutting edge of the digital space. Past presentations and videos are housed on the site.

www.sextech.org

Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)

Offers Teen Tech Week annually, along with regular updates on teens and technology from librarians across the nation.

<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/yalsa.cfm>

Ypulse

Provides independent coverage of youth marketing and media for academic, agency, brand, cause, and media organizations. Daily newsletters, blogs, and updated website cover the gamut of what’s new and happening with teens and tweens.

<http://www.ypulse.com>

Activism Example: Youth Resource

Youth Resource, supported by Advocates for Youth, is a website created by and for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) young people. There are youth-generated monthly features, message boards, and online peer education on activism, culture, sexual health, and other issues that the youth editors deem important.

www.youthresource.com

Lessons Learned

In the 16 years since I pioneered Columbia University’s Go Ask Alice, I have focused my work on the intersection of sexual health and technology. The biggest lesson learned is that the world of technology is ever-changing: What’s “hot” today will be outdated soon enough. In order to stay in touch, sexual health educators need to be flexible, interactive, and fresh. If we manage to keep up, the digital world will provide opportunities to reach large numbers of youth with accurate information, and the ability to increase access to sexual and reproductive health services for those most in need.

With this in mind, here are a few tips:

- Go where youth are, rather than asking them to come to you. Follow the trends, while keeping your information current, accurate, and accessible.
- Use each form of technology for what it can do best. For instance, text messages are only 160 characters (2-3 sentences)—certainly better for referrals and reminders than unraveling complex sexuality issues.
- Engage young people in design, implementation, and evaluation of your technology efforts. Young people can guide tech efforts to success, and those who work with you will be the best marketers you’ll ever have, engaging their own friends and social networks in your cause.
- To be successful, digital efforts in sexual and



reproductive health need to be more than comprehensive and accurate. They also need to be collaborative and user-centered, and integrate expert and peer perspectives.

Conclusion

Technology is here to stay. While it will never replace human interaction and intimacy, the power of the digital world to reach large numbers of youth with accurate sexual health information cannot be underestimated. In the fast-paced world of new media, encouraging dialogue between experts, educators, parents, and youth can only increase the possibility of healthy sexual experiences and better sexual communication, now and in the future.★

References

- Lenhart, A. (2009, August). *Teens and mobile phones over the last five years: Pew Internet looks back*. Retrieved September 22, 2009, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/PIP%20Teens%20and%20Mobile%20Phones%20Data%20Memo.pdf>
- Lenhart, A., Kahne, J., Middaugh, E., Macgill, A., Evans, C., & Vitak, J. (2008, September). *Teens, Video Games, and Civics*. Retrieved September 22, 2009, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Teens-Video-Games-and-Civics.aspx>
- Lenhart, A., Madden, M., Macgill, A. R., & Smith, A. (2007, December). *Teens and Social Media*. Retrieved September 22, 2009 from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Teens-and-Social-Media.aspx>
- Levine, D., McCright, J., Dobkin, L., Woodruff, A., & Klausner, J. (2008). SEXINFO: A Sexual Health Text Messaging Service for San Francisco Youth. *American Journal of Public Health, 98*(3); 393-395.
- Nielsen Company. (2009, June). *How teens use media: A Nielsen report on the myths and realities of teen media trends*. Retrieved September 22, 2009 from http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/reports/nielsen_howteensusemedia_june09.pdf

More from ACT for Youth Center of Excellence

The ACT for Youth Center of Excellence connects youth development research to practice in New York State and beyond. **You can receive announcements of new publications and youth development resources by subscribing to the ACT for Youth Update, an e-letter that appears 1-2 times each month. To subscribe, email Amy Breese: act4youth@cornell.edu**

The ACT for Youth Center of Excellence is a partnership among Cornell University, Cornell Cooperative Extension of New York City, the New York State Center for School Safety, and the University of Rochester Medical Center.

Family Life Development Center
Beebe Hall • Cornell University • Ithaca, New York 14853
607.255.7736 • act4youth@cornell.edu

Suggested citation:

Levine, D. (2009, October). Using new media to promote adolescent sexual health: Examples from the field. *prACTice Matters*. Ithaca, NY: ACT for Youth Center of Excellence.

