COLUMN ONE

24/7, Teens Get the Message

Digital devices keep young people connected -- to each other. E-mail is too slow but 10 hours a day on a cellphone isn't too much.

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SAN FRANCISCO — In a not-at-all unusual month, Will Wu spent more than 10,000 minutes on his mobile phone — an average of 5 1/2 hours a day.

Sometimes he talked, sometimes he listened. But most of the time, the 15-year-old just dialed up a friend and left the phone on. Connected only by wireless headsets, Will and his pal spent entire days — together, but apart — shopping, snacking, doing homework and even nodding off to sleep.

"If I ever wanted to talk I could just say something into the phone and there'd be someone on the other end. You wouldn't have to dial," said Will, a sophomore at Miramonte High School in Orinda, east of San Francisco, whose Cingular Wireless calling plan includes free calls to any other Cingular customer. "Basically it was convenient."

Like an increasing number of youths growing up in an age of cheap mobile phones and fast Internet connections, Will is connected 24/7 to family and friends through an array of gadgetry. So obsessed are teens with devices like digital music players, cellphones, digital cameras and hand-held organizers, that 15-year-old girls are now the world's top consumers of computer chips, said Chuck Byers, director of global marketing at chip maker Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co.

Children these days get cellphones as early as elementary school and pick up computer-speak abbreviations — AFK for "away from keyboard," for instance, or A/S/L, meaning "age/sex/location?" — at an age when they are memorizing state capitals for social studies class.

"Teenagers have adopted this technology very aggressively, in part because it's inexpensive now, and it's mobile — and everything a teenager does is about being mobile and untethered," said David Greenfield, a professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of Connecticut. "With the complexity of our world and the scheduling kids have compared with 25, 30 years ago, it's a newer way of connecting socially."

But it fills an age-old need that dates to adolescents slouching out to meet other prehistoric pubescents.

"All young generations interact socially, and part of their adolescence is interacting apart from their parents; that's been true since the Neolithic revolution," said economist and historian Neil Howe, who as co-author of the book "Millennials Rising" chronicled the social and cultural direction of millennials — those born in 1982 and later. "Millenials are using the technology to express a need to push in a fundamentally different direction: back toward reconnecting people to larger groups," Howe said.

And the sizes of those groups are exploding, driven in large part by technologies such as instant messaging, or IM. Users are able to see who among their friends is online, and can send messages that pop up on the recipient's screen instantaneously.

More than a quarter of 15- to 18-year-olds in the U.S. can send instant messages from their bedrooms, said Victoria Rideout of the Kaiser Family Foundation, which in March published an extensive study on Internet use by 8- to 18-year-olds.

"Think about a kid who may be online IM-ing 10 other kids, each of them IM-ing 10 other kids," Rideout said. "You've potentially got 100 kids in a social group more or less in instant communication."

Ryan Miller's group is pretty big. The 13-year-old's IM "buddy list" teems with 110 people, mostly people he sees regularly and all of whom he messages at least occasionally in this rite of bonding over bandwidth. For Ryan, a seventh-grader in Centennial, Colo., the messaging does not only define his community. It's also a social necessity.

"It's a big popularity thing," Ryan said in a phone conversation as he was holding IM dialogues with four friends. "If you don't talk online to people, like most other people do, you miss things they talk about. There could be a whole event that happened, like somebody dumped somebody, and you talk about it online and if you're not there, then the next day you don't know what people are talking about."
The most popular instant messaging program, AIM, is distributed by America Online. "If you don't have AIM, you don't have friends," Will Wu said. On a recent evening, Will sat in front of his computer and flipped among seven simultaneous online IM sessions. In one, he argued the relative merits of Volkswagen's Golf R32 and the BMW M3. In another, he fretted over an upcoming Spanish test. He gossiped about classmates in another and discussed Asian music videos in yet another.

Between munches of grapes, Will's hands flew between the keyboard and the mouse in a rhythm too fast for a visitor to read the incoming messages, let alone Will's rapid-fire responses. "Pieces" by the band Sum 41 streamed out of his computer speakers, but before the track was over, he switched to "She's the Blade" by Sugarcult and then to Ace Troubleshooter's "Tonight."

Will's mother checked in on him: he was supposed to study for three tests in two days. How could he concentrate on homework while being bombarded with so many audio, visual and digital stimuli?

"I just switch between them," he said with a shrug. "I'm good at multi-tasking."

The idea of today's youths' brains being "wired differently" is more than just a catch phrase.

"People's brains are different based on their experiences," said Alan Fiske, director of UCLA's Center for Culture, Brain and Development.

"Humans presumably evolved in small face-to-face groups where people were together a lot and just talked to each other," Fiske said. Now, though, youths who know each other can be separated by miles but can communicate over the Internet. "At some level, any change in behavior indicates changes in the brain," he said.

Researchers say they're surprised by the speed at which children adapt the Internet to their own uses and interests. When the Internet first came into people's lives, one of its anticipated roles was connecting children around the world, a kind of text-based ham radio that would allow youths in the U.S. to hold a dialogue with others in Russia or Brazil or Tibet.

"But it's a lot more about connecting kids across town or down the street," said Rideout of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

The Net can also be an escapist way for youths to experiment with different images, a kind of self-voyeurism to arrive at the right persona for them.

"A teen may be a biology and ballet student offline, but online she becomes 'darkgirl79,' and goes to Goth blogs to experiment with that kind of personality, but not be seen that way by her ballet friends," said Amanda Lenhart of the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

What is clear is that for teens, drifting from instant messaging to talking on a cellphone to using the cellphone to send and receive text messages is second nature. They switch devices depending on the complexity or emotional level of the conversation, their location or the availability of a computer.

"They don't make the same distinctions between online and offline; they pick the best medium for them," said Abbe Don, a consumer researcher at computer maker Hewlett-Packard Co., which recently completed a study of Internet use by so-called tweens, those ages 11 to 14.

Different messages fit different methods of delivery. Teens who want an immediate response say the cellphone is best. E-mail is old school: it can be a day or two before someone replies, an eternity in the frenetic lives of today's teens, although acceptable in certain contexts.

To many teens, instant messages and cellphone-based text messages are simply quicker.

"You have to dial, they might not pick up, you have to leave messages," says Samantha Bruno, 18, who just graduated from high school in Coconut Grove, Fla., a Miami suburb. "Texting is a simple message, you don't have to go through formalities and say hi, how was your day. Everything's so time-crunched these days."

IM and text messaging also allow a person to reflect before answering.

That helped Bruno begin a romance online with a classmate when she was a freshman and had just moved to Florida from Temecula.

"I had heard that a guy in my English class wanted to get to know me better, so we got each other's screen names, and after one weekend of IM-ing we decided to be boyfriend and girlfriend, solely on the basis of IMs," Bruno recalled.

"He would say something, and I'd have time to say, 'What should I say back?' instead of just mumbling something. I'd type something and just before sending, would rethink it," she said. "Just the fact that you're not expected to write back right away helps. You're expected to be talking to other people. You can kind of use that to your advantage."

Even for conversations that should be face to face — or at least voice to voice — computers can play a role.

Bruno was on the receiving end of an online breakup from a boyfriend once.

"You could tell the relationship was not working out, which was fine," she said. "Instead of talking about it or calling me and having a sad, miserable conversation, it was like, 'I think we should break up — SEND.'"

Bruno's 14-year-old stepsister Tasneem Campos once broke up with a boyfriend online.
"I was on the computer doing homework and he just came online so I decided to get it over with," she said. "I definitely see it as a level below a face-to-face conversation. But online you can take more time to think of what to say, and there's no emotional factor."

Teens are online beyond the time they spend sitting in front of their computers. Although seventh through 12th graders spend an average of 53 minutes a day online, according to the Kaiser study, there are many who spend enormous amounts of time connected.

Will typifies the active, online teenager of today, coming home from school or sport practice around 4:30 p.m. and logging on to his computer for the next seven hours or so. But, he says, "I'm always connected, 24/7" via his always-on computer and his "away" message, a note that appears to people who message, or "ping" him, telling them he's not at his desk but will get the message later.

Multitudes of teens don't miss a beat with their "away" messages, many of which contain cryptic phrases drawn from song lyrics and embellished with smiley faces and colored fonts.

"It's the digital equivalent of the corkboard on the door," Pew researcher Lenhart said. "It's the idea that you're constantly connected even if you're not at your computer."

Some teens even have their instant messages forwarded to their cellphones for the ultimate always-on connection.

Kalee Britton, 18, of San Francisco, lives and breathes by her phone. It's more than the fashion accessory that some phones are designed to be — she spends almost 10 hours a day on the phone, tied to it less for its bling than for its ring. And when she's not talking, she's often text messaging. "The cellphone is a drug," she said with a chuckle.

Britton, who takes advantage of her calling plan's free night and weekend minutes, doesn't chat with that many people — usually it's her boyfriend, identified by the special ring tone she has assigned to him ("Turn Da Lights Off" by R&B singer Tweet).

The two will carry out their days separately, but are connected by phone for hours at a time. "We're just going around," Britton said. "He might have a whole conversation with his mom!" while on the phone with Britton.

"You get so used to it you don't think about it — I'm just always on the phone."

She can't always recall what they talk about for so long.

"We always find stuff to talk about — it's weird. Something will happen, and he'll tell me about it," Britton said during a recent 40-minute cellphone conversation with a reporter while she was shopping at a Safeway with her father — and while her boyfriend was on hold during the duration of the reporter's call.

As the conversation ended, she said with a hearty laugh, "I'll just click over and tell him everything that happened just now."