

Whether we're at home, at work or even walking down the street, the odds are that we're never beyond the technological reach of our social networks. Even as we sleep, many of us are within an arm's length of our cellphones, which are quickly becoming our primary tool for calling, emailing, texting or tweeting friends and family.

Strengthening Ties Through Technology

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The rapid evolution and spread of portable communication technologies over the past decade have been truly staggering, and as more and more Canadians acquire smartphones, tablet devices, laptop computers and social network profiles, we become all the closer to being a perpetually "connected" people. Once considered the purview of the young, these communicational tools are being embraced by a growing number of Canadians seeking to foster interpersonal and intergenerational connections in ways that weren't previously possible.

Connecting generations

Many Canadian parents now rely on communication technologies to help nurture and manage their family ties, whether it's by video chatting with their kids in university or texting their spouse while in the middle of a grocery run. Of the Canadian parents surveyed earlier this year, seven in 10 said that they "depend on technology to keep their families connected."¹ Surveys have also indicated that while parents are less likely than younger Canadians to use mobile

Internet devices to "stay close with their friends" (38% vs. 62%, respectively), they are *more* likely than their kids to report using them to stay connected with family (52% vs. 48%, respectively).²

While the over-50 crowd is often portrayed as technologically inept or otherwise not interested in today's gadgetry, research has shown that many older Canadians regularly use Web-based video communication services to keep in touch with loved ones. In a recent study on the use of online video communication among Canadians aged 55 and older, the majority of participants reported using video chatting services such as Skype on at least a monthly basis (a quarter of this group reported doing so "several times a week").³ The study also found that those who had regular contact with family and friends used video chatting because it enhanced their "social presence" due to the face-to-face nature of the communication. Participants noted that video chatting helped them to avoid the challenges of travel, particularly for those who were rural parents with urban children. Researchers concluded that

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“none of the participants in our study fit the ageist stereotype of being disinterested in technology.”⁴

Modern communication technologies are becoming increasingly popular among all age groups, but there’s no question that Millennials are the most likely to be tech-savvy. Their greater exposure to the Internet and modern communications from an early age has provided them with a “head start” above their older counterparts. As smartphones and tablet devices both feature user interfaces that are modelled after Web browsers (both in terms of look and functionality), people with a relative lack of Internet experience face a greater learning curve when trying to navigate through menus and applications via touch screens.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that young people tend to be more adept with these new technologies and more likely to use them frequently. Mobile phones and smartphones have become a staple among Canadian youth, with 81% of surveyed 18- to 35-year-olds reporting using these devices earlier this year (61% of 50- to 64-year-olds).⁵ For many people, these portable devices are quickly becoming a primary access point to the Internet: a 2011 Statistics Canada study showed that one-third of Internet users in Canada went online with wireless handheld devices, 59% of whom were under the age of 35.⁶

Portable connections

While it now seems hard to believe there was a time before we were “connected” 24/7, the first BlackBerry was released only in 2003, and the first iPhone a mere *six years ago*. While these devices were initially used mostly by mobile workers and technophiles, they have since become popular among Canadians of all stripes: in fact, nearly half (47%) of surveyed Canadians reported earlier this year that they used smartphones – up from 23% in 2011.⁷

Since the introduction of the iPad in 2010, the proliferation of tablet computers has been equally impressive: this year, 1 in 5 Canadians surveyed reported using tablets – *double* the proportion recorded last year.⁸ With such rapid growth in the portable communication technology market, statistics on the usage patterns of different Canadians quickly become obsolete (much like the technologies themselves). But with people now reporting that they use an average 2.3 of these devices, and the continued growth in ownership

and usage patterns, it’s clear that these tools have become a big part of our lives.⁹

Portable communication technologies are not only more prevalent, but also are used more frequently. Earlier this year, the majority (55%) of surveyed Canadians aged 16 to 64 reported that they “never” or “rarely” turned off their mobile phones or smartphones. Younger people were far less likely to take a break from their devices than their older counterparts: only 14% of 18- to 35-year-olds said that they shut their phones off “a lot of the time,” compared to 32% of Canadians aged 50 to 64.¹⁰

Social connections

Canada is one of the world’s most “socially networked” nations. Half of the surveyed population, or 60% of all online Canadians, reported having a social media profile in 2011.¹¹ While the 18- to 34-year-olds had the highest membership rates on social networking sites (86%), the majority of 35- to 54-year-olds (62%) and a growing number of Canadians aged 55 and older (43%) also reported having an account. A more recent survey designed to measure the frequency of social media use found that 51% of the 50 to 64 age group reported that they do *not* spend time on social networking on an average day (either because they use social media infrequently or because they don’t use it at all), compared with only 22% of those aged 35 and under.¹³

Communication technologies are being embraced by a growing number of Canadians seeking to foster interpersonal and intergenerational connections.





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Seven in 10 Canadian parents said that they “depend on technology to keep their families connected.”

Family connections

While we use social media for a variety of reasons, many of us use these services to nurture and maintain our family ties. In 2012, the majority (52%) of surveyed 18- to 24-year-olds said that they were friends with their parents on Facebook, and of those whose parents had an account, only one in 10 reported that they weren't “Facebook friends” with them.¹⁴ For parents whose kids are off at university or college, social media can provide a casual vantage point into their children's lives, one that would have been inaccessible through infrequent phone calls or periodic visits. In 2012, 21% of surveyed Canadian parents said that they use social media to “keep track” of their kids – something that may cause some tension among youth who are more guarded about their online social life. Regardless, many actively facilitate these

intergenerational ties, with four in 10 saying that they help their parents use technology that brings them closer together.¹⁵

The face of communication has changed significantly over the past decade. As high-speed Internet access – already ubiquitous in urban centres – continues to expand into rural and remote areas, the number of Canadians using portable and/or Web-based communication technologies to stay close to family and friends will almost certainly continue to rise. For anyone with access, these devices and services make communications possible as often as they please – and from wherever they please – without the traditional constraints of land lines and snail mail. However, while new technologies may have changed the nature and frequency of our communication, the content remains fundamentally the same: we all seek to nurture and maintain our social ties, regardless of the tools we use to do so.

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¹ Ipsos (2013). *Four in Five (84%) of Canadian Parents Believe Technology Allows Families to Be Better Connected*. Accessed June 28, 2013. <http://bit.ly/13hDPET>

² Vision Critical (2012). *Rogers Innovation Report: 2012 Trend Watch* (August 2012). Accessed January 16, 2013. <http://roge.rs/10pStMI>

³ Mary C. Milliken, Susan O'Donnell, Kerri Gibson and Betty Daniels (2012). “Older Citizens and Video Communications: A Case Study,” in *Journal of Community Informatics* (Vol. 8, No. 1). Accessed July 5, 2013. <http://bit.ly/1cGIWJ>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ipsos (2013). “Socialogue: Think Small,” from *Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange* (Detailed Tables). Accessed July 3, 2013. <http://bit.ly/13lwaek>

⁶ Statistics Canada (2011). “Individual Internet Use and E-Commerce,” in *The Daily* (October 12, 2011). Accessed July 5, 2013. <http://bit.ly/n5gbz7>

⁷ Ipsos (2013). “Close to Half of Canadians Now Own a Smartphone,” from *Mobil-ology* (Detailed Tables). Accessed March 3, 2013. <http://bit.ly/13hEy9f>

⁸ Ipsos (2013). “Close to Half of Canadians Now Own a Smartphone,” from *Mobil-ology*. Accessed March 3, 2013. <http://bit.ly/13hDPET>

⁹ Ipsos (2013). “Socialogue: Think Small,” from *Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange*. Accessed June 28, 2013. <http://bit.ly/14PudTJ>

¹⁰ Ipsos (2013). “Socialogue: Allergic to the Off Switch,” from *Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange* (Detailed Tables). Accessed June 28, 2013. <http://bit.ly/11aPHKD>

¹¹ Ipsos (2011). *Canada's Love Affair with Online Social Networking Continues*. Accessed July 8, 2013. <http://bit.ly/nnDhvk>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ipsos (2012). “Socialogue: The Most Common Butterfly on Earth Is the Social Butterfly,” from *Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange* (Detailed Tables, Section 2). Accessed July 9, 2013. <http://bit.ly/1eq0T9j>

¹⁴ Vision Critical (2012).

¹⁵ Ibid.