

INTERNET IMPACT ON TEENS

In less than five years, the Internet has radically changed the way teenagers spend their after school time. According to a just-released study by Yahoo!, kids now spend more time online (16.7 hours per week) than watching TV (13.6 hours) or chatting on the phone (7.7 hours).

You could create your own stairway to heaven if you stacked all the books that have been written about the way TV, movies, and music have fundamentally impacted the way teenagers think, act, and feel. But next to nothing has been written on the Internet's deep influence on the teenage soul. So, given the Web's newfound dominance, let's take a whack at how it's changed kids.

*The music file-sharing/file-downloading phenomenon has fueled and revealed teenagers' basic right vs. wrong belief system. Over and over, file-sharing young people express shock, anger, and disbelief that there's anything wrong with downloading an artist's copyrighted material. "When it comes to downloading music or movies off the Internet, students... compare it with underage drinking: illegal, but not immoral. Like alcohol and parties, the Internet is easily accessible. Why not download, or drink, when everyone does it. "It's not something you feel guilty about doing. You don't get the feeling it's illegal because it's so easy. They sell these things (MP3 players), the sites are there. Why is it illegal?"

The bottom line: Today's teenagers have grown up on the Internet, and the Web teaches you that whatever you find there is free for the taking. In that sense, the Internet functions like a corral- all the cattle inside the corral are public property. You're only a cattle rustler if you steal cows outside the corral.

*Nobody "owns" information- it's a commodity owned by the collective. So many students have used the Internet to cut and paste information into their class assignments and papers that many colleges now require incoming freshmen to take a course that includes information on plagiarism.

*They've been raised in a sea of entitlements, where deprivation is almost unthinkable. In the past, kids caught stealing felt guilty as sin. Among their catalog of excuses, you never would've heard something like, "Because I can't afford this CD, I'm entitled to have it for free." Over and over, kids say they're offended about the record industry's lawsuits against file-sharers. They fundamentally question the right of big-bucks artists and labels to charge for their products. The most affluent society in the history of the world has taught them they should have what they want-now. And the Internet is their trusted enabler.