

# Albany HS Students Discuss Teen Internet Use on WAMC



Anyone who interacts with them knows that young people use technology and new media in ways vastly different from older generations. Their days regularly include IMing (instant messaging). They bare emotions and personal feelings on blogs for the entire world to read. Their Internet profiles may include everything from screen names, class schedules, daily routines and cell phone numbers.

While this degree of exposure and potential vulnerability gives many adults pause, high school students are extremely comfortable with communicating via the Internet, expanding the horizons of their contacts and social interactions. And this use is growing – according to the Pew Internet Project report in July 2005, 87% of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 reported having online access, up from 64% in 2000.

On Wednesday, **February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006**, tenth grade students from Albany High School and several community experts discussed how young people use the Internet for social communication at the WAMC Linda Norris Auditorium. The lively and informative Student Town Meeting tackled the question: “Are young people using the Internet to create a ‘brave new cyber-world’ of social relationships?” Joining the students were **Carolyn Brook**, library media specialist from Coxsackie-Athens High School; **Teresa M. Harrison**, Professor and Chair, Department of Communications, UAlbany; **Dr. Jeffrey Daly**, Medical Director of Children and Adolescent Out-Patient Services, Four Winds Hospital, Saratoga; and NYS Police Investigator **Joe Donohue**, of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. WAMC’s **Alan Chartock** moderated the taped discussion, which aired on *The Speakers’ Corner* in late February.

The student panelists appreciated the informality and non-judgmental qualities, plus the immediacy, of the Internet for communicating with current friends and new contacts at any time of the day or night. Professor Teri Harrison agreed that the affect of new media on social relationships is the hottest topic in the social sciences, and that this is the first generation to be significantly influenced by techno-communication. Several of the students remarked that the Internet made social interaction easier for shy or insecure adolescents, who hide behind screen names and feel protected, a protection that Investigator Joe Donohue pointed out is false, since many adult predators are now creating their own entries on popular blogs such as myspace.com to communicate with unsuspecting young people.

Because the Internet is a powerful tool for communicating, Jeff Daly acknowledged that exposure to new technology is essential for kids to get along in the world. However, time on-line can replace real face-to-face relationships for many, and can even become addictive. In his medical practice, Dr. Daly noted that it is not uncommon to find young people negatively affected by Internet connections through peer pressure, bullying, physical molestation and psychological manipulation.

In order to help their kids sort out the positive from the negative, “parents can’t afford to be ignorant of what kids are doing” on-line, said library/media specialist Carolyn Brook. Parents must find a way to remain somewhat current with new media. When she asked the students if their parents had established rules for their Internet usage at home, the majority replied that they had computers in their bedrooms with few restrictions. Mary Ann indicated that in her household, the computer was located in an open place; her parents limit each child’s on-line time, and IMing was a privilege acquired when each child in her family reached a designated age or grade level.

The young panelists brought up significant issues with the adults on the panel. Eli wanted to know how on-line peer pressure affects kids. Sam discussed techniques to prevent Internet addiction with Dr. Daly. And after listening to Investigator Donohue, Valerie asked how kids can verify to whom they’re talking on-line. The response: red flags should go up if someone you have not met in person asks specific, personal questions. Donohue also suggested doing Google searches, not giving out phone numbers or asking an unknown contact to call, and to go with your parents if meeting anyone from on-line contacts.

Dr. Chartock was amazed at how quickly the time went by, and complimented all the panelists on a fascinating and informative program.