

The iGens – trying to connect from the privacy of their rooms

A new generation bred on smartphones and social media is changing social mores

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For *The Straits Times*

Few nation-states anywhere in the world have embraced information and communications technology (ICT) as enthusiastically, intelligently and successfully as has Singapore.

Along with Scandinavia and Estonia, South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan, it regularly ranks highly on league tables relating to ICT metrics, and the futuristic, high-tech character of the city-state is one of the first things that visitors notice and comment upon.

The Government, as usual, has long been out in front of ICT issues, having drawn up and largely implemented bold and far-sighted national ICT plans since the early 1980s. As a result, Singapore has largely fulfilled the goal of the Government's Intelligent Nation masterplan (iN2015), for which it certainly merits high praise.

That said, it might be time for all of us to shift greater attention at the margin to some of the downsides of information technology. Here, I'm not speaking so much of excesses in the political blogosphere, of attempts to spread misinformation and false facts, or even of cyber bullying, for various parties in Singapore and elsewhere have already weighed in usefully on such matters.

Rather, I'm speaking here about what the heavy reliance on electronic technology is doing to both our own moral development and to our ability to connect deeply with others around us.

Last year I wrote a piece for *The Straits Times* ("Digital natives risk losing empathy for real people"; Feb 13, 2016) where I discussed some of the issues raised by Dr Sherry Turkle in her 2015 book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power Of Talk In A Digital Age*.

In this important work, Dr Turkle, who teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argued that heavy reliance on electronic technology hurts individuals in a variety of ways, not least by reducing one's ability to conduct face-to-face conversations, to work in groups, and to engage productively in civic life.

In *iGen*, a new book attracting a lot of attention these days, psychology professor Jean M. Twenge from San Diego State University has gone one step further, analysing the deleterious effects of hyper connectivity not just on individuals, but on entire generations in the United States.

Although it is both wise and prudent to take generalisations made about entire generational cohorts with a grain or two of salt, Prof Twenge, at the very least, is on to something about the tendencies of "iGens", the cohort of Americans born between 1995 and 2012.

According to her, this cohort of over 74 million – about 23 per cent of the US population – is the first generation of Americans that grew up completely immersed in ICT. Unlike the millennial cohort that preceded it, iGens don't remember a world without the Internet, grew up with cellphones – most notably, the iPhone, which debuted in late June 2007 – and seem to live by and for social media.

Basing her generalisations largely on findings extracted from four respected longitudinal research surveys – beginning in 1966, 1972, 1976, and 1991 – Prof Twenge found that in terms of mindsets and behaviours, iGens differ in many

ways from the baby boomers, Gen Xers and millennials.

In some ways, the differences are positive. The iGens are more inclusive, egalitarian and tolerant than earlier generations, and far fewer drink or engage in premarital sex at early ages. Indeed, far fewer high school seniors even date – a little over half – as opposed to about 85 per cent among baby boomers and Gen Xers when seniors.

More worrisome – at least in the US – is the fact that iGens, who crave safety, seem to be growing up extremely slowly, and are reluctant to take on "adult" responsibilities such as working, learning to drive, establishing financial independence, moving out from

their parents' homes, and so on.

Such behaviours, if found in Singapore as well, would be less problematic, but other behaviours found among iGens in America might not be. For one thing, Prof Twenge found that iGens engage in far fewer face-to-face relationships, preferring to communicate via social media, generally from the privacy of their own rooms.

Some of the uses made of smartphones and social media are also causes for concern: often, cyber bullying among boys, and ostracising and excluding among girls.

So attached are iGens to their phones, in fact, that many report

that they sleep with them on or near their pillows. Phones are the last things checked before going to bed and the first things checked upon waking up the next day.

Given the above considerations, it is not totally surprising that iGens as a group suffer higher levels of unhappiness, anxiety, loneliness and depression than previous generational cohorts.

The long-term effects of such mindsets and behaviours on civil society are also worth pondering. The recent fury in American universities over free speech, micro-aggressions and trigger warnings seems to be associated with iGen characteristics – a yearning for inclusiveness, on the

one hand, and a concern for safety, on the other – thus, the collective "shh" increasingly characteristic of campus life in the US.

But can civil society function in America over the long run without open inquiry and rational debate? We are about to find out, it seems, for while many older Americans care deeply about this issue, it doesn't press heavily on iGens, who are not moved much by politics either.

Given the hold of smartphones and social media among iGens around the world, other nation-states, including Singapore, may soon be in the same fix. Would it not be ironic if the increased openness and debate informing

political life in Singapore in recent decades was set back going forward not by overt opposition but by iGen apathy?

Why bother with the hurly-burly world of politics when you can chill with your friends on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or QZone from the comfort of your bed?

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