

NCA Preconvention Seminar, San Antonio 2006
November 15, 2006, 8:00am-5:00pm, Gonzales Convention Center, Room 102B

Preconference Title: “Urban Communication: Creating Sites for Connection and Action.” Organized by Gary Gumpert & Susan Drucker.

Paper Title: “Expect the Unexpected: Urban Screenagers’ Communication and Information Seeking Preferences”

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Abstract: Urban public libraries have emerged as one of the few safe places that young people can gather after school and on weekends to do homework, socialize, and get free access to the Internet (Radford, 2006). Today’s 12-18 year old members of the Millennial Generation have been referred to as “screenagers” because of their affinity for electronic communication via computer, phone, television, etc. screens (see Rushkoff, 1996). These young Millennials are at home in the instant messaging and chat environment. It is well known that their communication and information seeking behaviors are distinctly different from those of other age cohorts and radically different from the baby boomer generation. Libraries are providing Web-based virtual reference services (VRS) as alternatives to traditional face-to-face (FtF) reference services to meet the information needs of virtual as well as FtF library users. This paper presents the revealing results of an international study of communication and information seeking including a series of focus groups with 12-18 year olds and analysis of over 300 live chat reference transcripts. Analysis of these focus groups with ethnically diverse groups of urban, suburban, and rural screenagers compares and contrasts their communication and information seeking preferences. Unexpectedly these groups have revealed that they use IM for socializing and collaborative homework, yet perceive library VRS differently than these other virtual encounters and also express a preference for FtF encounters with librarians. Additional results will be presented with implications for communication research and theoretical development in urban and suburban contexts.

Note: This research has been funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc. The project website is <http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity/>

Cited References:

- Radford, M. L. (2006). The critical incident technique and the qualitative evaluation of the Connecting Libraries and Schools Project. *Library Trends*, 54(1), 46-64.
- Rushkoff, D. (1996). *Playing the future: What we can learn from digital kids*. NY: Harper Collins.