

of how we use language to show our identity when we're having a conversation. And there's a tantalizing inking that we can express our true selves through language online as well: age-old linguistic practices like language play and switching between languages and styles are becoming written down and electronic. But the youthful, the vernacular, and the digital sides of language are still too easily overlooked: let's find out what we can learn when we take them seriously.

Chapter 3

Internet People

Can you make friends on the internet?

This is an old question that's been a long time dying. In 1984, a researcher wondered if the internet was "ill-suited for such 'social' uses of language" as making friends, while in 2008, another mused that perhaps the internet was "basically alienating and unfulfilling. To type is not to be human, to be in cyberspace is not to be real. Rather all is pretense and alienation, a poor substitute for the real thing. *Ipsos facto*, cyberspace cannot be a source of meaningful friendships."

And yet, as the discussion raged on, we've ended up conducting a sizeable portion of our social lives online. Close friends send funny links back and forth, grandparents and grandchildren videochat, partners text constantly about day-to-day activities, family members and old friends post photos that we like or comment on, and people join internet communities around a particular interest and end up becoming invested in each other's lives as well.

Internet friends and communities spill over into the physical world, too. I went to an early live performance of the cult hit podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* in 2014, at which Meg Bashwiner framed the preshow announcements by saying, “You know the internet, right? Many of you are even from there.” The audience laughed with a note of recognition: *Welcome to Night Vale* became popular because people shared it with each other on the internet, especially on Tumblr, which rocketed it to the top of the iTunes charts and led to attention from mainstream media. The early live shows were the first physical manifestations of a community that had started online.

By one estimate, over a third of couples who got married between 2005 and 2012 met online. By another, 15 percent of American adults have used online dating, and 41 percent know someone who has. The first year that marriages from internet dating were widely reported was 1995, which means that children born of the first internet-mediated relationships are—at least hypothetically—now old enough to internet date and have kids of their own. Internet grandbabies! Pretty much the opposite of “alienating and unfulfilling.”

The population of the internet is larger than any one country, and its denizens aren’t just technology users; they’re a kind of community. Let’s call the members of this community Internet People. Sure, a few Non Internet People still conduct their entire social lives via bodily interaction and letters and landline phone calls. Some stay offline voluntarily, like older folks whose friends and family are geographically local or still willing to take landline calls, or people who’ve decided to live off the grid or avoid social media. Others are offline involuntarily: people in remote areas, who don’t speak a language with a major internet presence, or who can’t afford a device and a connection. And technically speaking, only about half of the world’s population has access to the internet. But a whole lot of people—four

billion in the latest count—*are* online. The cyberfriendship skeptics were right in one sense, however: our language online would need to be molded and reshaped in order to be suitable for social purposes. Luckily, Internet People have been doing just that.

First Wave

People migrate all around the world, and yet within a generation or two, their kids are generally speaking the local language the same way all the neighbor kids are speaking it. Linguists call this “the founder effect,” a term borrowed from ecology by the linguist Salikoko Mufwene: the earliest members of a speech community exert a disproportionate influence on how it develops later, especially when that local norm is supported by institutions, like books and schools and signage. Most families who immigrate to the United States don’t speak English—they arrive speaking the languages of Poland or China or Mexico or Senegal—and yet a kid who grows up in Texas or California will speak American English like their friends and classmates, regardless of what their parents speak. The distinctive accents in regions like Boston and Virginia can be traced to founding populations of British settlers from particular regions.

But if you get a big enough group of people moving into the same region at the same time, they can alter the local dialect. The vowels of Raleigh, North Carolina, became less Southern after a wave of tech workers from Northern states started arriving in the 1960s, and Cockney has been replaced in working-class central London by Multicultural London English, which draws on a mix of Cockney, Afro-Caribbean English, Indian English, Nigerian English, and Bangladeshi English, especially since many Cockneys moved out to the suburbs after the Second World War.

So when we're analyzing internet dialects, it makes sense to look at it through the lens of our founding population and our waves of immigration. Social platforms often report their user numbers and demographics, but they don't know the key variable that I'm interested in: Where else have their users hung out? We saw in the previous chapter that your childhood and adolescent peers give you a linguistic base, and that joining a new social group is a prime time to adopt that group's way of speaking. So where did you spend your formative internet years, establishing your first internet-mediated relationships? The internet is a population, but it doesn't keep migration records. There's no Ellis Island of the internet—a boon to the free flow of information, but a bit of a pain for research.

To address this issue, I did a survey. I had a question of internet usage that interested me, and I had a theory, based on research and an internet lifetime of observation, about how to organize people into internet cohorts. The original question proved to not be terribly interesting, but the cohorts turned out great. I asked people to sort themselves by age range: thirteen to seventeen, eighteen to twenty-three, twenty-four to twenty-nine, and thereafter by decade: thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, and over seventy. I then asked them to select a grouping of social platforms that best represented when they first started socializing with people online. There were four options.

- Usenet, forums, IRC, BBS, listservs, or similar
- AIM, MSN Messenger, blogs, LiveJournal, MySpace, or similar
- Facebook, Twitter, Gchat, YouTube, or similar
- Instagram, Snapchat, iMessage, WhatsApp, or similar

Both questions were optional and had a write-in box for other answers, but only 150 out of over 3,000 respondents either didn't

answer or wrote in something else. This means that 95 percent of people felt themselves adequately described by these four clusters of social platforms. I deliberately left out generic email and texting, because an email address or mobile phone number is the prerequisite for every other platform, and they have their own cross-generational communication styles, which we'll talk about in Chapter 6. The survey doesn't represent a random cross-section of the population, but it got at least a hundred responses in each age group from teens to fifty-plus, and if it overcounts anyone, it probably overcounts people who spend a lot of time on the internet, which is essentially what I was looking for anyway.

I did the survey in 2017. Conveniently, this means we can subtract a neat two decades to get people's ages in 1997, at the very beginning of the mainstreamization of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Our teenagers weren't born yet, our twenty-somethings were children, our thirtysomethings were teens, and so on. We can also subtract a decade to get their ages in 2007, the year after Facebook opened up accounts to anyone with an email address rather than just students: our twenty-somethings were then teens, our teens then children, and so on.

Your experience of the internet and the language therein is shaped by who you were and who else was around at the time you joined. How much tech savvy was required to participate in conversations? Were you going online because your friends were already there, or to meet new people? Were you entering a community with established norms, or one where things were still in flux? And did you learn these norms implicitly, through immersion, or through an explicit rulebook? Your answers to these and similar questions have a big effect on what your variety of internet language looks like. In a world where, to use the expression of technologist Jenny Sunden, you're writing yourself into existence, how you write is who you are.

Broadly speaking, there are five main ways that Internet People have written themselves into existence so far.

OLD INTERNET PEOPLE

Let's start with our founding population, the first wave of people to go online. I call this group Old Internet People, because they're the people who remember the old internet, and it's the closest thing to a unified name that they have for themselves. Searching for "old internet people" brings me to a hand-coded HTML website (first created 1998, last updated 2006) defending the idea of building your own site without using graphics or templates ("some explanation from us 'old Internet people'"), a forum thread from 2011 ("us old Internet people need to get used to a social web"), and a tweet agreeing with a 2018 *New York* magazine article on the decline of typing memorized urls to get to websites directly, rather than go through a search engine or social media ("Looks like it's really hitting a note with us 'old' internet people"). The self-conscious quotation marks suggest that users of this term often feel themselves to be coining it spontaneously, but the fact that several people have done so means that it's an emerging norm that I'm picking up on. Old Internet People are old in internet years: they're not actual senior citizens, but rather people who were "jacking in" to networked computers before it was cool. (Although the ones who were using computers back in the punchcard days are quite possibly real senior citizens by now.)

Because they generally went online before most of their friends and peers, they were interacting with strangers. To find strangers they wanted to socialize with, Old Internet People used topic-based tools like Usenet, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Bulletin Board Systems (BBSes), Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), listservs, and forums. If you don't know what some of these are, that's kind of the point.

Many of these platforms remained pretty obscure even after the internet caught on. The best known was Usenet, a centralized "user's network" which let people start discussion threads and reply to each other's threads within a wide range of discussion groups of various sizes, such as rec.humor.oracle, talk.politics, and alt.tv.simpsons. Usenet was archived wholesale into Google Groups, where posts back to 1981 can still be browsed, and it's an ancestor of later internet forums like Reddit.

Old Internet People may object to being called "internet" people at all, because they remember the days when we had multiple Nets, and would like to point out that I'm actually talking about the World Wide Web, thank you very much. This is true, historically speaking, but common usage has moved on and therefore so do I. A decade or two ago, it would have made sense to subdivide this group further into people who used computers back when they occupied large rooms versus those who started with smaller personal computers, earlier LISP hackers versus later UNIX hackers, ARPAnetters from the 1960s and 1970s versus Usenetters in the 1980s and 1990s, or both of them versus those who started after the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989. But today these historic rivals have more traits in common with each other than they do with subsequent internet users: they were all ahead of their time, excited about the possibilities of technology, and highly motivated to learn how to use it.

Until the early 2000s, tech adeptness was a requirement for computer users. Before and during the technological era that would later be called web 1.0, it was still fairly difficult to get online. Actually participating required even more tech savvy: hand-coding your own HTML homepage or figuring out IRC commands wasn't for the faint of heart, but even posting on a Usenet group, installing an instant messaging client, or setting up an email server took some doing. In the 1998 email comedy movie *You've Got Mail*, one character

asks another, "Are you On Line?" You can hear the space between the last two words, and it's clear from context that the question means "Do you ever use the internet?" rather than "Are you currently in front of your device?" Dialing up or jacking in was a choice of hobby rather than a rite of passage at this stage, and it was a hobby that had few restrictions on age: this cohort ranges from those who went online as precocious preteens to adults of all ages. The core members of this group were around college or working age when they first got online, since early network access often came via a university computer science department or a major tech company. Among my survey respondents, almost two-thirds of the fortysomethings selected the Usenet group as their first social platform, and so did a third of thirtysomethings and nearly half of the fiftysomethings, sixtysomethings, and older. This definitely doesn't mean that half of all senior citizens got online in the Usenet days: this means that, of the small percentage of seniors that I could reach by doing a public internet survey in the 2010s, many of them have been online longer than me.

As a group, Old Internet People have the highest level of average technological skill, generally knowing a decent inventory of keyboard shortcuts, the basics in a programming language or two, and how to look at the inner workings of a computer behind its graphical user interface. They're often skilled in some other specific area, such as computer hardware assembly, browser encryption, Wikipedia editing, or forum moderating. They've got a lot of browser extensions or other custom configuration tools on their computer and can't imagine living without them. While some people in later waves of internet adoption also have these skills, it no longer goes without saying: the average internet user no longer needs to know how to code or replace their own hard drive.

The everyday techspeak of Old Internet People overlaps a lot

with programmer jargon. In the beginning, knowing how to program was the only way to get online, so it was something that everyone had in common. Much of this language was chronicled by its speakers in a document that became known as the Jargon File. At first, this was a text file of "hacker slang" maintained from 1975 onwards by a series of volunteer editors affiliated with the computer science departments at MIT, Stanford, and a few other universities connected to ARPANET. It was published on paper as *The Hacker's Dictionary* in 1983, by one of the original editors. The text file itself then stagnated for a few years until a new editor took on the project of revising and updating it, leading to two later print editions in 1991 and 1996, as *The New Hacker's Dictionary*. A website version of the Jargon File continued to be updated until late 2003.

When the Jargon File was a live index of slang, the convention was to replace older versions with the newest update. This may have made sense when storage was expensive, but it's rather a challenge for historicizing. In 2018, an archive was recovered from backup tapes dating back to 1976, and sifting through the different versions is like entering an internet time-travel machine. The oldest version of the Jargon File that's been recovered is a plain text file dated August 12, 1976, containing forty-nine words and their definitions, about half a dozen pages long. Some of its words are slang of the day, such as "win" meaning "succeed," and computer slang that later entered the mainstream, like "feature," "bug," and "glitch." Others are hacker cultural terms, like "foo" and "bar" as placeholder names. There's also a distinctly uncomplimentary definition of "user": "A programmer who will believe anything you tell him. One who asks questions." Other terms in the file are now obscure extensions of technical programming jargon: JFCL for "to cancel," from a command that quickly made a program stop whatever it was doing. But perhaps the most interesting thing about this oldest Jargon File is

what's *not* in it. There's no trace of what we now think of as classic internetspeak: no acronyms like "lol" or "omg," no emoticons, not even a note about all caps indicating shouting.

The very next year, between March and April 1977, we see the beginning of the social acronyms. This version describes them as "a special set of jargon words, used to save typing" in Talk mode, an early kind of chat. These acronyms include the now unremarkable R U THERE? but also the now obscure BCNU (be seeing you), T and NIL for "yes" and "no," and CUL, "see you later." (I've kept the acronyms in all caps in this section, because that's how the Jargon File lists them, but it's unclear whether this is a reflection of how people typed them at the time or an editorial addition on the part of the Jargon File's contributors. I rather suspect the latter.) A version in December 1977 picked up the still-current BTW and FYI, but other than that, this was all we got for social slang, up to and including the first published version in 1983. Then there was a freeze on editing for the rest of the decade.

When the Jargon File resumed updating in 1990, its records started really looking like the social internet: emoticons like :-) and :-/, all caps as shouting, and a list of further acronyms, most notably LOL, BRB, b4, CU LSTR, and AFK, were all added that same year. Sure, some have gotten a bit dated (CU L8R is more an internet cliché than active slang at this point), and others haven't survived at all, such as HHOJ (haha only joking) and its mate HHOS (haha only serious). But they're clearly the underpinnings of later internet language: acronyms and all caps and emoticons are all recognizable to a mainstream internet user of the 2010s in a way that the programming jargon from only a couple years earlier is not. The 1990 edition itself reflected on this shift, saying that much of the slang was now from Usenet and that the acronyms had been reported from platforms where "on-line 'live' chat" was common but that

"these are not used at universities; conversely, most of the people who know these are unfamiliar with FOO?, BCNU, HELLOP, NIL, and T." But techie communities were one of the first to adopt these new conventions: a 1991 update noted that "IMHO, ROTF, and TTFN have gained some currency there," that is, "at universities or in the UNIX world." Since Usenetters were already too spread out among different discussion topics to compile their own linguistic guide, we need to rely on this outsider perspective. But in the end, it doesn't matter so much: together, the earlier techies and the still-tech-savvy Usenetters and chatroom frequenters all make up our founding population.

The earliest internet slang could assume not just that people knew a bit about programming, but that they knew specific commands in a specific language. Technological skills and knowledge of in-group references went hand in hand: the more acronyms you could decipher, the more likely it was that you'd been online for a long time. Or at least, that you had read and reread the help documentation, whether that was a linguistic guide like the Jargon File, the readme file for an open source project, or the FAQ of a forum or newsgroup.

Some Old Internet People eventually became early adopters of blogs or Twitter, and their facility with internet-mediated social interaction often made them highly visible, influential users. Some became the first generation of internet researchers, writing up the practices of their own communities. Others just kept puttering along in their familiar internet byways, and now find themselves having to explain to young whippersnappers that just because they're older doesn't mean they don't know technology—they were programming computers and dialing in via phone lines before said whippersnappers were even born. What the Old Internet People have in common

is that they still probably conduct a fair bit of their social lives online, often having a long-standing pseudonym that they use everywhere and internet-first friends that they've known for longer than some of their meatspace friends. They're the social internet users most likely to have never gotten or to have barely used Facebook, because for them the internet is a place to tap into a global community rather than reinforce a local one. (In the late 2010s, many of them started contemplating switching to Mastodon, a social networking platform with a decentralized, topic-based structure and a lack of user-friendliness which both recalled the early internet.)

As the internet's role in everyday life has matured, Old Internet People have become harder to distinguish unless you ask them. Depending on their age and who they hang out with online, some can be confused for one of their two neighboring cohorts, the people who came online in the next wave. Most of the vocabulary from Old Internet People has either been adopted by the mainstream ("btw" for "by the way," "crash" as in "my computer crashed") or fallen into disuse (the acronym UTSL for "use the source, Luke!" a Star Wars-ian way of suggesting that people read the source code before asking questions about it). Some nerdy bits of vocab remain alive in particular techy, hackerish, or other older internet communities without being common for the internet as a whole.

The biggest linguistic contribution of Old Internet People wasn't a particular word—it was a state of mind. Remember those naysayers who deemed the internet "ill-suited for such 'social' uses of language"? The speech communities of the nascent internet grappled with that exact problem: how to convey emotion in informal writing. A study of people who played chat-based online role-playing games in Germany in the late 1990s found that these factors were deeply intertwined: the participants who used the most smileys and

other internet slang, and who were the least skeptical about the social potential of the internet, were also the ones who reported forming the most friendships via chat.

The story of the acronym "lol" for "laughing out loud" is a great example of emotions leaping out of the internet and into the physical world. The most commonly accepted account of the creation of "lol" comes from a man in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, named Wayne Pearson, who recalls coining it in a chatroom in the 1980s:

A friend of mine who went by Sprout (and I believe he still does) had said something so funny in the teleconference room that I found myself truly laughing out loud, echoing off the walls of my kitchen. That's when "LOL" was first used.

We of course had ways of portraying amusement in chatrooms before that (>grin< >laugh< *smile*) and the gamut of smiley faces, but I felt that none of them really got across the fact that the other person just made you feel foolish by laughing out loud in a room all by yourself (or worse, with other family members in another room, thinking you quite odd!)

The exact time and date when "lol" was created may be forever lost to cyberspace, but Pearson's account does fit the facts we can verify. The first known citation for LOL appears in a list of already common internet acronyms in an online newsletter called *FidoNews* from May 1989, as spotted by the linguist Ben Zimmer. Regardless, Pearson's story evokes the era of Old Internet People: an internet friend, a long-standing pseudonym, laughter at the computer, the bafflement of non-techy family members. Once the next wave of internet users arrived, people would become a lot less surprised that friends and funny stuff happened online.

Second Wave

The second wave of people going online was the biggest for the English-speaking world. Over a few short years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the internet became mainstream. Internet access was no longer exclusive to tech companies, universities, and the homes of a few geeky people. Regular people started getting online at home, at high schools, and at workplaces. The first year that over half of Americans used the internet was 2000, according to Pew Research, although usage rates were already over 70 percent for those that were college-educated or between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. In 1995, a mere 3 percent of Americans had visited a webpage, and only a third had a personal computer. The movie *You've Got Mail*, in 1998, was at the early stages of this mainstreamization: only some of the characters were online, and they went online to meet strangers in chatrooms, but they were bookstore owners, not techies. In 1999, a journalist named Rob Spiegel wrote, "What a difference a year makes. Twelve months ago, I never would have predicted that Internet usage would become completely mainstream by November 1999. . . . I must say, it is hard to get used to everyone understanding what I mean when I say 'online' or 'Web.'"

The dominant narrative of the internet shifted from a story of hackers to a story of digital immigrants and digital natives: an older generation coming online and marveling at how a Net Generation, often the older generation's children, was "born digital," seeming to use computers as easily as they breathed. Even as this narrative was being proposed, researchers were starting to question it: one study of college students in the early 2000s found that there was no significant difference in their ability to do things like edit a spreadsheet or create a digital photo, between the twenty-year-old students and the

mature students over forty. A critical review of the evidence for and against digital natives describes it as a myth, "the academic equivalent of a 'moral panic.'" That is, when a group or activity is perceived to be a threat to society, but sensationalist media is far more prominent than any actual evidence for it. Not to mention that not everyone fits neatly into a parent/child dichotomy, or that a decade or two of daily practice can make even the most floundering of digital arrivals reasonably adept.

The true difference between the groups that came online at this time was their social choices, not their technical skills. One cohort fully embraced the internet as a medium for their social lives—they became what I call Full Internet People. The other cohort used the internet as a tool but mostly kept their social lives as before, trickling into internet-mediated friendships later and more gradually—the Semi Internet People. These groups are correlated with age but not completely defined by it: the Full Internet People tended to be younger, still in school, and susceptible to new trends and what their peers considered cool, while the Semi Internet People tended to be older, in the workplace, and with an established social life. But the important distinction lies in what they were doing on the internet, rather than their exact age: in 1999, a newbie who sought out a topic-based messageboard to meet new people would still inherit many of the cultural touchstones of the Old Internet, while a second newbie who started instant messaging daily with existing friends would become Full Internet, and a third who got into forwarding funny chain emails would become Semi Internet. These newbies could all be the same age, but the speech communities they'd be joining would be very different. As with any generalization, it's worth describing them in bright-line terms to clearly illustrate the options, but some may find themselves on the borders between one group and another.

FULL INTERNET PEOPLE

Full Internet People came of age with the beginning of the social internet in the late 1990s to early 2000s. They joined an internet that had already established many of its communicative norms, and they acquired them, not explicitly from a Jargon File or FAQ but implicitly, from their peers joining at the same time, via the same cultural alchemy that transmits which music is cool or which jeans are desirable. The internet is “full” for this cohort because they never questioned its social potential: How could they, when they began by using it to communicate more with people they already knew? It would be absurd to assert that the internet is asocial or that Internet People are somehow not real when a breakup that happened last night over IM is all anyone can talk about the next day at lunch.

IM, or instant messaging, like AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), MSN Messenger, and ICQ (I seek you), was new and at the core of the Full Internet People’s first internet social experience, as were personalized homepages and profile pages where you could add neon-colored backgrounds and small, blinky gifs, such as GeoCities, Angelfire, Xanga, Neopets, LiveJournal, and MySpace. According to my 2017 survey, this group was centered around ages twenty-four to twenty-nine, over three-quarters of whom chose AIM, MSN Messenger, blogs, LiveJournal, MySpace, or similar as their first social platform. Around half of eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds and thirtysomethings, and a quarter of fortysomethings, started with these platforms as well. That’s a lot of teens, preteens, and twenty-somethings in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

This group didn’t keep a list of its slang the way that the Old Internet People had with the Jargon File, because by its very nature the Full Internet community was huge, decentralized, and took its discourse practices for granted. (Though, if I had a time machine,

you can bet that I’d tell my fourteen-year-old self to start such a list!) As grown-ups, however, this cohort has plenty of access to media platforms and periodically gets hit by waves of nostalgia for their early internet days. A videogame called *Lost Memories Dot Net* by Nina Freeman draws on Freeman’s own adolescent selfies and memories of the 2004 internet: you play as a fourteen-year-old girl designing her new anime fansite-slash-blog and IMing with her best friend about the boy they both have a crush on, in a tabbed interface that resembles an Internet Explorer theme from the era. An article reminiscing about the early-2000s teen internet highlighted how it replicated offline social structures: friends would link their homepages in webrings or cliques, and decorate them with bright and pastel HTML tables and cute, tiny cartoon animal gifs. When this cohort did hang out with internet strangers, it was often on virtual-pet websites like Neopets and Petz.com, which journalist Nicole Carpenter fondly described as “a mix between Tamagotchi and Pokémon” that provided “a safe place for girls to play in an often unfriendly Internet.” There were waves of nostalgia when archivists scrambled to preserve GeoCities sites after Yahoo shut them down in 2009 and when AOL shut down AIM for good in 2017. When AIM shut down, a tech culture reporter recalled how in middle school she would print out AIM conversations with boys so that she could analyze them with friends.

A few years after joining the social internet, Full Internet People also became the first Facebook and Twitter users. But here, my survey demographics are just as interesting for where this group *wasn’t*. We know for a fact that they were the first users of Facebook, because it was only open to Harvard students when it launched in 2004, before expanding to universities in general, then high school students, and to the general public in 2006. The catch is that very few people in this age range (less than 10 percent) had their *first*

social experiences on Facebook. The founding populations of the Usenet group and the IM group were both people who were newly online; Facebook, by contrast, was founded by people who switched from an older platform to something new.

When Facebook started, it was anomalous among social platforms for how it linked your online identity with your offline name and social networks. The assumption, carried down from the Old Internet People, had been that you went online to meet new people and experiment with identity, in which case Facebook looked like a weird rupture. But in fact, Facebook was simply making explicit something that its early users had been doing since middle school. Your friends on IM often had fanciful pseudonyms that looked superficially like the ones Old Internet People had gone by on Usenet and chatrooms, but their actual function was completely different. Whereas Wayne Pearson, the guy who invented “lol” in the 1980s, had an internet friend he only knew as “Sprout,” Nina Freeman’s 2004 self in Lost Memories Dot Net knew perfectly well that TarnishedDreamZ was Kayla from her class at school.

Those who joined the internet to meet new people kept the same username across platforms for years, decades even, so that their internet friends could find them. But for the internet users who joined in order to hang out with people they already knew, screennames were a way of performing identity, rather than obscuring it: your username might honor a favorite band or movie quote, and could change a few months later as your pop cultural allegiances shifted. Your friends knew it was you the whole time, but if other people lost track of your shifting names, so much the better. It wasn’t so much of a stretch to start using your real name on Facebook, when your online and offline selves had been effectively linked within the minds of your primary social network for years. In fact, it could be felt to be a sign of maturity that you weren’t performing your iden-

tity through your username anymore (albeit a kind of “maturity” that involved posting photos of people drinking warm beer out of red plastic cups).

A great illustration of this attitude difference between Old and Full Internet People comes from *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, technologist danah boyd’s detailed and highly readable ethnography of teenagers using the internet across the United States from 2005 to 2012.

I had spent my own teen years online, and I was among the first generation of teens who did so. But that was a different era; few of my friends in the early 1990s were interested in computers at all. And my own interest in the internet was related to my dissatisfaction with my local community. The internet presented me with a bigger world, a world populated by people who shared my idiosyncratic interests and were ready to discuss them at any time, day or night. I grew up in an era where going online—or “jacking in”—was an escape mechanism, and I desperately wanted to escape.

The teens I met are attracted to popular social media like Facebook and Twitter or mobile technologies like apps and text messaging for entirely different reasons. Unlike me and the other early adopters who avoided our local community by hanging out in chatrooms and bulletin boards, most teenagers now go online to connect to the people in their community. Their online participation is not eccentric; it is entirely normal, even expected.

In our terms, this difference in attitudes is because boyd is an Old Internet Person, and the teens she surveyed are Full Internet People and younger: the sites in her book stretch from MySpace to Insta-

gram. boyd links the impetus for younger people to socialize online with restrictions like anti-loitering laws and car-centric neighborhoods that reduce the opportunities for physical socialization in places like malls and public parks. Similarly, a 2000 survey of students in California public schools reported that teens overwhelmingly favored private messaging with friends they already knew over going on public chatrooms and messageboards to talk with strangers.

To be sure, some Full Internet People did eventually make friends via the internet, whether for dating, professional networking, or bonding over a shared interest (just as many Old Internet People did eventually link their online and offline identities). The first generation of internet users had brought with them a certain smugness, a feeling of internet exceptionalism, the conviction that Internet People were better than regular people, and that it was just as well if the internet was a place where the previous norms of social interaction need not apply. If the language was a bit rough around the edges, prone to misinterpretations, so much the better for keeping out those who didn't get it. The first generation to join the social internet en masse had a different motivation: to maintain friendships with a local community, rather than join a global one. They weren't trying to reinvent communication; they were just trying to get on with living, to have the normal flirtations and breakups and crises using the communication tools available. But by using informal writing to convey the regular dramas of human life, they also started reshaping informal writing into something that could more deeply convey the full range of human emotions.

It is perhaps ironic that this Full Internet generation, the first to use the internet to baffle their parents collectively, is also the last to be baffled by their own children. While Fulls can draw on their own teen years to understand chat apps in the frame of instant messaging, or Tumblr in the frame of GeoCities, they didn't have a digital

childhood. They're the first to reckon with unfamiliar questions like how much iPad time is too much for a toddler, what to do when a child stumbles across a disturbing parody version of a children's cartoon, and whether to post photos and anecdotes of a child on social media when faraway relatives may enjoy them but the child may grow up to find them embarrassing.

As far as internet facility goes, Full Internet People have some nostalgia for earlier technology and some insecurity about whether they've lost touch with what younger people are doing online, but they're well adapted to both social networking sites and professional electronic communication. They have at least one and possibly many social media accounts, and get a lot of their news and entertainment online, whether that's from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Netflix, or podcasts. They've been serving as family tech support since adolescence and they're one of the primary vectors by which new technology percolates into the mainstream. They're comfortable with a variety of phones, computers, and other devices, as well as email, instant messaging, general internet browsing, word processing, and probably other office tools like spreadsheets and presentations. While Full Internet People may or may not remember a time before they had home internet access, they definitely don't remember an internet without basic internet slang. Abbreviations like "lol" and "wtf" emoticons like :-:) and <3, and conventions like all caps for shouting were already in place. They picked up most of their internet slang from context and their peers, and associate it with tone of voice.

Their skill levels with other kinds of technology vary considerably. A study of myths and realities of tech-savviness among American college students in 2004 found that while virtually all of them had the previously mentioned skills, only a minority knew how to create graphics, edit audio or video, or make a website. Later surveys

in countries like the UK, Australia, and South Africa have found the same thing—facility with technology for social purposes was nearly ubiquitous among those born after 1980, but more specialized technological skills (like coding, editing a wiki, keeping a blog, or following RSS feeds) were found among a minority, from about 2 percent to 30 percent. This percentage doesn't represent a single, savvy minority and a larger tech-clueless group, as in the early days of computers, but rather inconsistent, piecemeal knowledge: people reported learning tech skills on a need-to-know basis. And these were surveys of college students, who are already more likely to be technologically adept than the non-college-going population.

Predictions about digital natives were only partly accurate. The divide between techie and non-techie has blurred, but it didn't happen by converting the entire population into techies. The buzzword in the tech skill surveys of the early 2000s was ICT: information and communications technologies. But the information and the communication parts need to be analyzed separately. It's true that the generations born into the internet would become intimately comfortable with an online social life, just like the generations born into the telephone or the automobile didn't find themselves alienated by a disembodied voice crackling down a wire or alarmed by the prospect of traveling above sixty miles an hour. But unlike for Old Internet People, there's barely any relationship between how well a Full Internet Person can socialize via computers and how well they can talk to the computer itself. The first car drivers were all skilled mechanics, because the vehicles broke down so regularly, but as cars became mainstream, they needed to be drivable even by people who didn't know an oil pump from a carburetor. As computers, too, became usable even by people who'd never "looked under the hood," the relationship between tech skills and internet socialization loosened—a development that we'll be following for the rest of the chapter.

SEMI INTERNET PEOPLE

Like Full Internet People, Semi Internet People came online at the beginning of the social internet, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. But they don't know most of the cultural touchstones of Full Internet People, because they weren't online for the same reasons—they generally started going online for work, and shortly thereafter expanded to other functional tasks like reading the news, looking up information, shopping, and making travel plans. The social side was an area they only dipped their toes into later and more gradually. They're "semi" because they're only partially committed to an internet social life: they may have some relationships that they keep up with via the internet, especially younger family members, and some where they do so by other means, especially old friends, but they've retained a cautious attitude towards getting to know people primarily online. At any rate, they have vivid memories of what it was like to maintain relationships via letters and phone calls.

A 2007 survey of internet users and nonusers in Britain found that the biggest gap in terms of internet use in general wasn't between young adults and middle-aged people, but between people who were over and under age fifty-five. We'll get to the over-fifties later, but the users below this threshold still had an interesting split in terms of how they used the internet. Around two-thirds of internet users below age twenty-five used at least one social networking site, but only around half of twenty-five- to forty-four-year-olds and a third of those forty-five and over did the same. In the years after 2007, a lot of the older group started using social networking sites, or as the media put it, "My parents just got Facebook." In 2017, Pew Research estimated that over 60 percent of American adults between fifty and sixty-four had become users of Facebook, not even counting other social networks. This aligns with the survey I did of peo-

ple's first social platform. We already saw that the Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Gchat cluster is curiously hollow in the middle age ranges because its first users switched to it from somewhere else. But it does have two peaks of users who started their internet social experience there: the over-fifties and the under-twenty-threes. Of course, a forty-five-year-old and a thirteen-year-old both joining Facebook as their first social network in 2008 didn't have the same experience of it, so we're going to hold off on the younger half of the Facebook-first cohort until later in this chapter.

While the Full Internet People were learning internet language by immersion in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Real Adults coming online at the same time wanted a travel guide, an explanation of the social landscape that they were only partially entering. After all, if they'd been drawn to do-it-yourself internetting and a computer-mediated social circle, they could have gotten online earlier and become Old Internet People instead. The most comprehensive of these guides was *Wired Style*.

Wired Style started as the style guide for the technology magazine *Wired*, which was founded in 1993. Normally, magazines and newspapers follow a style guide, such as *The Associated Press Stylebook* or *The Chicago Manual of Style*, in order to ensure that all the writing in a particular publication is consistent when it comes to matters like the Oxford comma, whether periods should be included in acronyms, and the spelling of words with multiple recognized options. But these existing style guides weren't keeping pace with the technological innovations *Wired* was writing about. Even when the classic style guides did have recommendations, they were often too conservative for a tech publication that considered itself on the bleeding edge. It's fine if a more staid newspaper is still writing "Web site" or "E-mail" for a few years after most of its readers have moved

on to "website" and "email" (*The New Yorker's* identity is partly defined by its deliberately conservative diaeresis on words like "cooperate"), but for *Wired* (as with this book), being stylistically behind on internet formatting would have seriously undermined its credibility.

So *Wired's* copyeditors, Constance Hale and Jessie Scanlon, devised their own in-house style guide to provide a consistent manual on matters like whether to capitalize or hyphenate "email" (no to both) and how to capitalize and punctuate internet acronyms (caps but no dots, as in "LOL," not "L.O.L." or "lOl"). Publishers saw the potential to interest a broader audience, and Hale and Scanlon's style guide was published with revisions and expansions as a book called *Wired Style* in 1996, with a second edition in 1998.

Academic papers were being written about internet language at the same time, but documents like *Wired Style* and the Jargon File are particularly important because they were written for a general audience and reflected internet practice back onto its users. While the internal *Wired* style guide had initially been created to standardize a group of writers who were already tech savvy and writing for a tech-savvy audience, *Wired Style* was aimed at the internet as it became mainstream, providing guidance on linguistic "netiquette" for new "netizens." Semi Internet People didn't necessarily read *Wired Style* itself when they first got online, but it's the most comprehensive of the many guides that were passed around via photocopy or printed in sidebars of newspapers and magazines at the time, teaching people that all caps signified shouting, that B and 4 and 2 and U and LOL were abbreviations for "be" and "for" and "to" and "you" and "laughing out loud," and that business emails weren't supposed to be as formal as a business letter. But this knowledge was sometimes more hypothetical than practical, because they were exchanging emails primarily with members of the same generation.

Just as with the hypothesized digital natives, we need to be careful not to conflate the functional side of being online with the social side: the Semi Internet group was called digital immigrants, which was supposed to represent their fundamental discomfort with technology and tendency to print out their emails. But after a decade or two of practice, Semi Internet People are broadly comfortable with the personal and professional internet that they inhabit. Like Old Internet People, their level of comfort with internet slang is related to their level of comfort with other internet tools—both indicate how long they've been online and whether they feel at home there. While no other generation is going to match the average level of tech savvy of the people for whom getting online was truly difficult, the Semi Internet People tend to have depth over Full and younger Internet People's breadth. They're often highly skilled at a few technological things that they've been doing for a long time, like PhotoShop, Microsoft Office, or other tools they've been using at work for a decade.

Despite their facility with familiar tools, despite the fact that they're now just as likely to be providing tech support to their own elderly parents or older friends as receiving it from younger people, they still consider themselves "not really a computer person." Their first reaction when encountering a new technological task is to ask for help from a person they know offline, such as their half-grown offspring or a younger coworker. Or sometimes merely the nearest available offline person—a middle-aged couple at a café once asked me to fix some app on their phone based on no other qualification than the fact that I was sitting next to them with my laptop. I can't say it's an ineffective strategy: I did, after all, successfully fix the phone. But it was a problem that I, too, had never encountered before, and I solved it by dint of the process described in an *xkcd* comic titled "Tech Support Cheat Sheet," which reads, in part, "Find a

menu item or button which looks related to what you want to do → Click it → Did it work? → No? → (repeat) → I've tried them all → Google the name of the program plus a few words related to what you want to do." I've asked people in coffeeshops for the wifi password or if they can pass me a menu, but for tech problems I turn to digital people: googling with the hope that a helpful expert has written a comprehensive how-to article, but willing to settle for a random person on a forum five years ago who had the same issue.

Like how Old Internet People defined themselves by knowledge of technology and excitement about meeting other people through it, their age-mates who became Semi Internet People defined themselves by ambivalence towards technology and an orientation towards offline relationships over online ones. Facebook was successful among Semi Internet People because it let them replicate their offline network rather than trying to encourage them to make internet friends. I ran a follow-up survey later in 2017 using the same demographic categories to ask about a different word, but this time I posted the link on Twitter a few days before I posted the same link on Facebook. I had no shortage of forty- and fifty-somethings filling out the survey via Twitter, but they were almost all in the Usenet- or earlier, Old Internet cohort. Within hours of posting the link on Facebook, my over-forties had balanced out again to what they looked like in the first survey, with plenty of Facebook-first joiners (despite the fact that I'd lumped Twitter into the same category as Facebook). Ten years after Facebook first became open to non-college students, the people who preferred it still had very different attitudes towards online relationships, even compared to other social platforms from the same era.

But Semi Internet People didn't start using the social internet with Facebook: they started with email, which I deliberately left off my survey because it was popular with everyone before and during

the time that the internet became mainstream. In 1995, Pew found that three times as many American adults used email somewhat regularly than had ever visited a website, and email use remained saturated at around 90 percent of the internet-using population from 2002 to 2011. Semi Internet People tend to be very good at email, and often follow top-notch early email etiquette, involving a large, complicated folder system, interspersing replies to a long email after the bits that are being replied to, and sometimes even changing the subject line as the topic of the email changes. (Some Old Internet People do this, too; Full Internet People tend to be horrified by it, as it messes up the later, Gmail-style technology that automatically threads emails by subject line and hides repeated blocks of text.) Semi Internet People's early internet cultural touchstones consist more of funny chain emails than the crudely animated Flash videos of the Full Internet People.

Although they took longer to develop, by now Semi Internet People do generally have some relationships that they keep up via technology, especially using email, texting, chat apps, Facebook, Skype, FaceTime, or other video calls. They're often aware of internet slang, especially the kinds that got popularized in the late 1990s, when they were first coming online. They never quite got into as many emoticons as the more internety cohorts, probably sticking to *;-)*, but they leapfrogged directly into emoji. To Semi Internet People, the meaning of internet language is simply "this is a message I'm sending via the internet." All meaning is face value meaning, and if you want to convey a more subtle layer of social meaning, that's what a voice conversation is for. Their assumption is that text is fundamentally incapable of conveying the full social landscape. This is the exact opposite of what Full Internet People believe.

A closer look at "LOL" and "lol" illuminates this difference between the two second-wave cohorts. Semi Internet People learned

all-caps "LOL" from lists of internet slang. It didn't stand for "Little Old Lady" or "Lots Of Love" anymore, they were told, by young people and internet manuals: it's an acronym for "laughing out loud." But words are slippery little creatures, especially online. Full Internet People learned "lol" from their peers, in the social crucible of the internet, where words—and especially time-saving acronyms—are in all lowercase unless they're emphatic. And while "lol" started out indicating laughter, it quickly became aspirational, a way of showing your appreciation of a joke or defusing a slightly awkward situation even if you didn't technically laugh at it. As early as 2001, the linguist David Crystal was doubting how many lols were truly out loud, and as one widely shared Reddit post put it, "We should change 'lol' to 'ne' (nose exhale), because that's all we really do when we see something funny online."

I did a survey of how people used "lol" in 2017, and found a word in transition. Not only was it steadily losing its capitalization, but its meaning was also evolving. Over half of Semi Internet People indicated that they used it to indicate laughing out loud, although a substantial proportion also said they could use it for general amusement that wasn't necessarily actual laughter. Other meanings, like sarcasm or wryness, were not common choices for them. The Old and Full Internet People had all three: they favored amusement when pressed to pick a primary meaning, but could also broaden it into both ironic pseudo-amusement and genuine laughter (the latter especially by expanding it into "LOLOLOL" or "actual lol"). The youngest group flat-out rejected the idea of capitalizing "lol" or using it to indicate real laughter, even when expanded to "LOLOLOL," and instead preferred the meanings of amusement, irony, and even passive aggression. This subtle new social function of "lol" raises further questions, like what exactly we mean by irony, so we'll get back to it shortly when we talk about the Post Internet People.

Third Wave

The third wave of Internet People trickled online after the population as a whole had already done so, when the internet had become unavoidable. Half of this wave are those who are too young to remember life before the internet and started going online as they learned how to read and type: these are Post Internet People. The second half is older, consisting of people who thought they could just ignore this whole internet thing but eventually, belatedly, decided to join: we'll call them the Pre Internet People. (Those who are still offline might be termed Non Internet People.)

The Old Internet, Semi Internet, and Pre Internet cohorts are artifacts of how the internet was introduced. Mixed-age technophiles got online much earlier, the somewhat skeptical majority waited until it was the normal thing to do, and the most technophobic delayed entry as long as they could. That's going to stop happening. Sure, an individual person can still be a Luddite, just like an individual person can elect to live in a cabin in the woods with no electricity, but in wealthy societies, and increasingly around the world, the internet has become something everyone has some exposure to. Kids are all getting online at the same young age, socializing there as preteens or early teenagers, the same age when their peer groups start to take on an outsize importance in their lives offline. So for future generations, the same demographics that have always influenced language—age, gender, race, class, networks, and so on—will become more important than when you first went online.

An easy way to identify both cohorts in the third wave is by their relationship with email—or, more accurately, their lack of one. Old, Full, and Semi Internet People first went online when social media was still nascent and email was a vital part of both personal and

professional communication—it still is, for many of them. For people who came online in the late 2000s and into the 2010s, social media was already ubiquitous. These users were typically either retired from work or too young to use email for professional reasons, so they often skipped directly to social media and chat apps instead.

PRE INTERNET PEOPLE

The members of our oldest cohort are on the internet (sporadically), but they're not of it. Pre Internet People were around for the previous waves, when the internet came into existence and became mainstream, but at the time they figured they could get by just fine without it. In the 2010s, many of them gradually found their way online, as so much information and socialization had moved there. Pew Research reported that only 14 percent of Americans over age sixty-five used the internet in 2000, the first year that more than half of the general adult population was online. But that number rose to 50 percent by 2012, and that stat has continued to grow a percentage point or two per year. Pew also found that a third of seniors were using social media in 2017, a rise from just one in ten in 2010.

While not all Pre Internet People are over sixty-five, and not all those over sixty-five are pre-internet (a sixty-five-year-old in 2015 was a spy thirty in 1980, and could well have been an early adopter), the oldest demographic offers the clearest example of delayed rates of internet and social media adoption. Curiously, Pre Internet People share some commonalities with Post Internet People, who came online around the same time. They've both never really known an internet without Facebook and YouTube and wifi and touchscreens, and they're both disproportionately likely to be using their family members' cast-off electronics.

Pre Internet People generally have one account somewhere that

a more adept internet person set up for them, which may be on email, “the Facebook,” a text chat app like WhatsApp, or videochat like Skype or FaceTime. They know how to do basic things like send and receive messages there, but if they ever get logged out or if the app changes its interface, they’re going to have to ask for help again. They might only use the internet through a touchscreen device like a smartphone or tablet, but if they use a computer, they probably have a desktop shortcut helpfully labeled “The Internet” or “E-Mail,” and woe betide them if anything ever happens to it. They definitely can’t code, and they may not even know how to copy-paste, but some do know how to touch-type: they learned on an actual typewriter.

Late internet arrivals aren’t studied or worried about as much as tech-happy youth and early adopters, but one source of information comes from Jessamyn West, a librarian (and Old Internet Person) who has been running weekly drop-in tech help sessions in rural Vermont since 2007. West periodically documents these sessions online so that the internet at large can better understand this population. Most of the people West works with are between fifty-five and eighty-five, and while the percentage of the population that doesn’t use the internet had been dropping, between 2015 and 2018 it remained steady at around 11 percent of Americans. This rate is higher among people in rural areas with slow connection speeds, people who prefer to use the internet in a language that isn’t English, and people with failing eyesight or who are hard of hearing. All of these characteristics are more common among older people. West emphasizes that you don’t get to being a non-internet user in the 2010s simply by accident: the people she works with have had some exposure to computers and decided it wasn’t for them, but now they’re faced with something that can only be accessed online, like a government service or photos of a grandchild. Her role becomes as much about coaching them

through their anxiety about technology and confusing user interfaces as it is about the specific tasks at hand.

While Semi Internet People associate internet slang with any kind of informal communication via technology, and the younger cohorts of Internet People use internet slang to convey tone of voice, Pre Internet People simply don’t use “LOL” and other internet acronyms (much less their hipper, lowercase versions) and may not even recognize them. Adopting the language of a particular community, as we saw in the previous chapter, is as much about believing that it is a desirable thing to be a member of that community as it is simply being exposed to it: despite their internet use, Pre Internet People do not accept the internet as a legitimate source of social influence—they’re the primary cohort that leaves the internet again, once they’ve joined, because it’s not necessarily a high priority to get their devices fixed. If they use any written slang, it might be rebus forms that predate the internet, such as B, U, and 2 for “be,” “you,” and “too,” or emoji that get brought up automatically by an auto-predict keyboard and seem readily interpretable as little pictures.* Internet slang like acronyms and emoticons is not just unfamiliar to them, it signals membership in a group that they have no desire to be a part of. To put it in the words of an older person who talked to me after using Facebook for a year or so, “I keep seeing people writing a colon and then a parenthesis. . . . What do they mean by that?” But even after I explained (“Oh, that’s rather clever!”), I have never once seen this person use a smiley.

This cohort may not have the same linguistic norms online as Internet People proper, but that doesn’t mean that they’re typing in newspaper-ready formal English any more than anyone else is online.

*Though the seeming obviousness of emoji can be deceptive, as we’ll see in Chapter 5.

By nature, these are the kind of internet residents that you can't reach with a large internet survey, but the most common piece of linguistic anecdota that I kept seeing myself and hearing about from other Internet People concerns their use of separation characters. Many people in this group use hyphens or strings of periods or commas to separate one thought from the next ("I just had to beat 2 danish guys at ping poong.... & ..they were good....glad i havent lost my chops" or "thank you all for the birthday wishes - great to hear from so many old friends - hope you all are doing well -- had a lovely dinner" or "Happy Anniversary,,, Wishing you many more years of happiness together,,,").

We don't have statistics about the exact prevalence, but the dash or ellipsis as generic separation character seems to be found throughout, at least, the English-speaking world. When I asked for more anecdotes on Twitter, someone commented, "So you've texted with my-in-laws?" Why do all these people, who primarily went online to reach younger family members, still type more like each other than like their interlocutors? Our first clue comes from a senior that Jessamyn West videoed at one of her library drop-in tech sessions, sending his very first email. The man, Don, says to West behind the camera, "First time I ever typed a thing in my life." Then he pauses and asks, "Something I use a lot of times, when I'm writing by long-hand, is rather than normal punctuation, when I get to the end of a thought, I go 'dot dot dot.'" He gestures to the computer: "Is that just period, period, period?" When West says it is, Don turns back to the keyboard and triumphantly types dot, dot, dot.

Don's expression of triumph contrasted sharply with the bafflement that I heard from younger Internet People about separation characters, so I took the hint and went searching for more longhand. Where I ended up was postcards. One particularly fruitful source was a book of scanned postcards sent to Ringo Starr by the other three members of the Beatles. John Lennon and Paul McCartney

tended to write longer messages with relatively standard punctuation, but George Harrison's shorter messages read, in transcription, almost exactly like a text from a Pre Internet Person. A postcard sent to Starr from Harrison in 1978 has a whole five dots:

Lots of Love from Hawaii.

George+Olivia

Other postcards in the book have emoji-like sketches—a bear with a speech bubble, a smiley face below the signature. I found more postcards from Harrison on auction sites: one to his father has all the dashes you could ask for, as well as "xx" for kisses at the end, which is still common in British text messages:

Hi Dad - Eileen -

Hope you are O.K. and had a good drive back. We came to North Sweden for a week - Pretty Cold. But very nice - makes a change - Be back next week - speak to you then

Love George + Olivia xx

It's not just a Beatles thing, or even just an English thing. A corpus study of over five hundred Swiss postcards from the 1950s to the 2010s notes two common features of the genre: repeated punctuation marks, like, ???, and !!!, as well as smiley faces, hearts, and other emoticon-like doodles. Indeed, this influence goes in both directions: a study comparing the postcards and text messages of Finnish teenagers in 2003 noted that they had begun writing sideways emoticon faces like :) in their postcards.

Other genres of informal writing also show dashes or ellipses as a generic separation character, especially when space is constrained. For example, this scanned, typewritten recipe card for "BONNIE DOON OATIES" cookies, attributed to one Joyce Viele, uses repeated dots, this time with spaces between them, while other handwritten recipes use dashes to separate each step.

Combine shortening, sugars, eggs, salt, and vanilla and beat thoroughly . . . Sift flour and soda together; add to first mixture with coconut and oats and mix well. . . . Drop level tablespoons of dough on greased baking sheets . . . Bake in moderate oven (350°F). 10-15 minutes. Makes 3 dozen cookies.

Postcards and recipe cards have a couple key features in common with social media posts. They're both written by a single person, without editing—not like a published cookbook or a novel told in letters. Both provide a constrained space to write in, which encourages a certain breeziness, and both are often semipublic: directed at a specific person or two but implicitly viewable by a much larger group. It's not an invasion of privacy to pick up and read a postcard or recipe card lying on a table the way it would be to unfold and read a letter addressed to someone else. These similarities explain both the generic separation characters as well as the surprisingly rapid adoption of emoji by older groups in comparison to internet acronyms like "lol." Pre Internet People (along with some Semi and Old Internet People who also use the dot dot dot, though not quite as extensively) are faithfully reproducing the conventions of a genre as they're fluent in but that their baffled younger audience has lost in our digital age. This genre already contained a mental "slot" for little doodles, and emoji fit right in. This group provides an intriguing bridge between digital and analogue informal writing: even

people who are almost completely at sea with the technical side of things have correctly identified the social framework and mapped it onto familiar linguistic practices.

In many ways, this oldest internet cohort is more interesting than the younger ones. We have some idea of what it means to be a young person with internet-mediated friendships. There's not that much difference between a late-1990s teenager constantly sending mundane but vital updates via AOL Instant Messenger and creating social drama about who was in their top eight friends on MySpace and a mid-2010s teen who's constantly sending mundane but vital updates via Snapchat and creating social drama about who liked whose selfie on Instagram. But we haven't seen an older generation mass-adopt a large-scale communications technology in quite a while—perhaps not since the invention of the telephone. So far, we're only getting the first glimmerings of what it's like for a whole cohort of seniors to be longtime Internet People, but small-scale efforts to teach older folks how to use the internet do suggest it can lead them to feeling more socially connected. I'd love to see a proper corpus study comparing postcards and texts from younger and older people, to see what else we can learn by drawing together informal writing across different generations and mediums.

POST INTERNET PEOPLE

When I was growing up, my family didn't have a television. This made me a trifle eccentric among my peers, but I nonetheless picked up, by cultural osmosis and glimpses at other people's houses, the essentials of TV culture: how to operate a remote control, the *Jeopardy!* theme song, and the social progression of *Sesame Street* from "the best" to "a thing for babies" to the nostalgia-fueled best again. I grew up in a post-television generation, irrespective of my own (lack

of) participation in it. The Pre Internet People don't feel socially connected to the internet even when they do use it, and the Post Internet People are the inverse: socially influenced by the internet regardless of their own level of use. They don't remember the first time they used a computer or did something online, the way that earlier generations don't remember when they first watched a television or used a telephone, and they can talk about the social implications of following and liking even if they don't personally have an account on a given platform or even use social media at all. It's just part of the social landscape.

Practically speaking, the bright line question that divides Full and Post Internet People is often, did you get Facebook before or after your parents? Or in more general terms, did you arrive on the social internet after it was already ubiquitous, or were you on it when it was still a niche or young-person thing? In the survey that I did in 2017, the first social platform of the thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds was a pretty even split between either the Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Gchat cluster or the Instagram, Snapchat, iMessage, WhatsApp cluster. About a third of eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds joined them in selecting the Facebook cluster. (Another half of the eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds selected the IM cluster and are thus grouped with the Full Internet People above.)

Digital residency tends to start around age nine to fourteen. Small children use touchscreens as media devices, for playing games and watching videos. But their use of the internet for communication is still mediated by their caregivers, just like their offline relationships: parents coordinate a videochat with grandparents or arrange with another parent for their kids to be able to videochat just as they're in charge of playdates or going to the park. This is partly for practical reasons: internet communication still often takes knowing how to read and type, there are real concerns about age-

appropriate material, and the age requirement for most social networking sites is thirteen.* But even for open platforms like texting, and even assuming some users lie about their ages, the switch to regularly carrying a device and using it for your own, autonomous communication happens in the tween or early teen years. This is the period when parents want to be able to coordinate logistics directly with their kids rather than through other adults, and kids start asking for phones because the social life of your peers becomes more enticing than hanging out with your parents.

Since this is the youngest cohort, it's tempting to treat them as our crystal ball, and try to divine from their social media practices what we're all going to be doing in another decade or two. But it's important to be cautious about any attempt at Divination By Teenager. We need to separate out the linguistic and social features that are characteristic of this stage in life from those that will follow them as they age.

A certain genre of trendy article pops up every couple months in which the writer explains how teens are using social media right now—sometimes by interviewing a teenage relative, sometimes by profiling a handful of supposedly representative teenagers, sometimes by being an older teen and reflecting on the usage of their friends. What these profiles inevitably find is that popular teenagers are texting or snapping or other-kind-of-messaging each other, for seemingly no reason, at rates completely unfathomable to the adult writer. Thousands of texts a month! Running up data bills! If they dig a step deeper, they may also find that shyer, nerdier, or more introverted teens are doing less of all this.

*The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act has various regulations for websites catering to those aged twelve or younger, and for ease of enforcement many sites simply require users to be thirteen or older.

But none of this is unique to the internet. As the linguist and internet researcher Susan Herring points out, her generation of baby boomer teens hung out "aimlessly" in malls, at drive-in movies, at sock hops and school sports games and public parks. They created codes and wrote backwards to pass notes, the same way kids in internet generations create inventive language for texting, and they decorated their lockers or bedrooms like a younger generation takes great care with their social media profiles. Whether they're spending hours on the landline telephone, racking up a massive texting bill, or being "addicted" to Facebook or MySpace or Instagram, something that teens want to do in every generation is spend a lot of unstructured time hanging out, flirting, and jockeying for status with their peers.

Herring also points to a French sociology study from 1981, which found that sociability is highest among teenagers and young adults, and declines as people get older. "All else being equal," writes Herring, "this suggests that one should interpret observed differences in digital sociability between younger and older users as life-stage related, rather than as indicating an ongoing change in the direction of increased sociability for all digital media users." Even the fact that teens use all kinds of social networks at higher rates than twenty-somethings doesn't necessarily mean that they prefer to hang out online. Studies consistently show that most teens would rather hang out with their friends in person. The reasons are telling: teens prefer offline interaction because it's "more fun" and you "can understand what people mean better." But suburban isolation, the hostility of malls and other public places to groups of loitering teenagers, and schedules packed with extracurriculars make these in-person hangouts difficult, so instead teens turn to whatever social site or app contains their friends (and not their parents). As danah boyd puts it, "Most teens aren't addicted to social media; if anything, they're addicted to each other."

Just like the teens who whiled away hours in mall food courts or on landline telephones became adults who spent entirely reasonable amounts of time in malls and on phone calls, the amount of time that current teens spend on social media or their phones is not necessarily a harbinger of what they or we are all going to be doing in a decade. After all, adults have much better social options. They can go out, sans curfew, to bars, pubs, concerts, restaurants, clubs, and parties, or choose to stay in with friends, roommates, or romantic partners. Why, adults can even invite people over without parental permission *and* keep the bedroom door closed!

The true influence of Post Internet People on general internet socialization was both more subtle and more important than simply a shiny new social networking site. By joining the social internet after their parents were already there, they faced an especially dire version of "context collapse." This is danah boyd's term for when people from all your overlapping friend groups see all your shared posts from different aspects of your life. For adults who occasionally see a coworker's personal photos or political updates, context collapse is a fairly minor issue, a problem of specific individuals being indiscreet. For young people, context collapse is a collective problem: they need space to figure out who they are, where they aren't being constantly supervised by authority figures.

The Full Internet People solved this problem by using social tools that their parents weren't on, jumping ship for a new one every couple years to remake their networks afresh, and leaving their cringiest moments buried on defunct platforms. Friendster gave way to MySpace gave way to Facebook. Social networking sites tried to solve this and prevent themselves from being abandoned by letting people set privacy settings and pick a specific list of people to share each post with. But switching platforms every couple years and keeping all your friends sorted into lists gets tiring. Post Internet

People instead came up with a more durable strategy, organized along three principles.

First, things should disappear more, the way conversations throughout history have naturally not left records. Private messages that vanish after they're seen, live video streaming, manual deletion of old posts, and story-style posts that only stay visible for twenty-four hours all reduce the likelihood that messages will be encountered outside their intended context. Second, not all social networks need to be all things to all people. Rather than using a single dominant social platform, or maintaining an account on every single one, you pick and choose your platforms to help control your contexts, perhaps interacting with school friends on Instagram and fandom friends on Twitter, or doing more résumé-safe activities with a public account under your real name but putting more private activities into a locked or pseudonymous account. Finally, social groups also need to be organized at levels more fluid and granular than an entire platform, including both large, open options like hashtags and public groups, and small, closed options like groupchats or secret groups.

The Post Internet People have also continued the semantic shift of "lol." We know that lowercase "lol" hasn't necessarily indicated full-on laughter since the early 2000s, but what does it mean when the Facebook- and Instagram-associated young people indicated that it has shades of meaning around softening, irony, and passive aggression? The linguist Michelle McSweeney decided to find out. She created a corpus of 45,597 text messages donated by fifteen Spanish-English bilinguals in New York City between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, and analyzed how "lol" was used in it in collaboration with the youths themselves.

The first thing McSweeney and her collaborators noticed is that "lol" only appears once per phrase: people say "feeling a bit sick lol" but they don't bracket it on both sides of a simple utterance ("lol

sounds good lol") or stick it in the middle ("sounds lol good"). If there was more than one "lol" in a single message, the message would have multiple parts that could have each stood alone, each one with its own lol: "Yeah lol / my mom was annoyed when I said it lol." The other thing she noticed is that "lol" occurs with certain types of emotions, like flirting, requesting or offering empathy, alluding to undisclosed information, repairing a previous message, or softening a confrontation, but not with others, like expressing love, exchanging information, and small talk—people say "got a lot of homework lol" or "you look good in red lol" but they don't say "i love you lol" or "good morning lol." The youth explained that you could technically say "good morning lol" as a way of ribbing someone if it was actually the afternoon (where it's alluding to undisclosed information rather than simple small talk), but you really shouldn't say "i love you lol"—you'd be making fun of someone in quite a mean way.

McSweeney reasoned that "lol" must be conveying a message about the phrase as a whole, a meaning that's compatible with flirting, softening, and empathy but not with love, directness, and checking in. The difference between flirting and saying "i love you" is plausible deniability. Likewise, using "lol" can soften what might otherwise be interpreted as a confrontation ("what are you doing out so late lol"), but would undermine a serious direct statement ("you hurt me so much in our relationship"). "Lol" can subtly request empathy ("Lol I'm writing an essay :(") but isn't necessary when asking a direct question ("Can you tell me your schedule so I know when to text you").

Some statements are direct; others wrap their meaning in layers. Including "lol" indicates there's a second layer of meaning to be found, telling the recipient to look beyond the literal words you're saying. The exact nature of that second layer depends on the meaning of the first: it's reassuring when your statement might otherwise

be perceived as rude, sarcastic, or confrontational, but "I love you" is already maximally warm and fuzzy, so if you add a second layer of meaning to it, things can only get worse.

In some ways, "lol" hasn't changed its meaning so very far from its roots in laughter. Sure, sometimes we laugh at a direct joke, something we can point at and say, "That's funny." But there's also nervous laughter, social laughter, and polite smiles. We laugh more at a comedy performance if we have other people to laugh with: even a studio audience or a laugh track helps. One study of natural conversations found that only 10 to 20 percent of laughter was actually in response to humor. Flirting often involves laughing at nothing in particular, but when someone says "I love you" for the first time, you probably want it to be delivered with a straight face. On the internet, real laughter calls for a representation that hasn't become trite through overuse. In my survey of 2017, people favored the ever-increasing repetition in "hahahaha" or expanded, ad hoc phrases such as "I actually just spat water on my keyboard from laughing." But, by necessity, the way we express genuine laughter keeps changing.

Just as the older half of the third wave of people to go online have managed to participate in online social activity without becoming tech people, young internet people's social savvy is also no guarantee of technological skill. Post Internet People may know the latest cool apps and be able to derive tone of voice from an errant comma or period, but their levels of technological knowledge vary dramatically. Some enter the working world without technical skills that seem basic to digitally adept older folks, like organizing documents in folders or adding up a column of numbers in a spreadsheet, while others have coded their own apps or websites. Some have a sophisticated knowledge of internet culture and social media strategy, and have made memes or accounts seen by millions of people; some don't know how to write an informative email subject line.

Some are highly skilled in one area and don't even know what they don't know in another. As with many societal divides, those kids with parents who can afford the latest devices, send them to coding camps, or advise them on professional etiquette often do better than those struck with secondhand phones or filtered computers at schools and libraries.

This high degree of variance, both within and between Post Internet People, tends to be the hardest thing for their parents and teachers to grasp. Social and technological savvy online were virtually the same for Old Internet People and still loosely linked for Full and Semi Internet People, but they've become completely decoupled for the Post cohort. This defies predictions that digital natives would pick up technological skills as easily as speaking. Rather, "computer skills" have become as meaningless a category as "electricity skills." Like children of the offline kind of immigrants, second-generation internet kids do grow up fluent in the communication styles of their peers, but no generation anywhere has ever mastered the skills of adulthood without mentorship. The Post Internet challenge is to parse out which tech skills are acquired incidentally while socializing and which skills were incidental a decade or two ago but now aren't, and so need to be taught.

On the other side of the age divide, Posts often assume that because older people in their lives seem to be familiar with Facebook and texting, they also share certain baseline assumptions about the meanings of associated communicative signals like "lol" and punctuation marks. The dot dot dot is especially perilous. For people with experience of informal writing offline, it's a generic separation character, as we just saw. But for internet-oriented writers, the generic separator is the linebreak or new message, which has left the dot dot dot open to taking on a further meaning of something left unsaid. When dealing with the generations above them, the Posts often

overinterpret: they infer emotional meaning from minor cues that are more subtle than the older folks ever dreamed of sending. This level of nuance conveyed through choices in punctuation and capitalization is so varied and interesting that it deserves its own chapter, and we'll get to that next.

But in a discussion of generations and cohorts, here's the sharpest line dividing internet writers: Who is the imaginary authority in your head when you choose how to punctuate a text message? Is it the prescriptive norm of an offline authority, like your former English teacher or a dictionary? Or is it the collective wisdom of your online peers, the anticipation of their emotional reaction to your typographical tone of voice? The difference between how people communicate in the internet era boils down to a fundamental question of attitude: Is your informal writing oriented towards the set of norms belonging to the online world or the offline one?

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down,
getting louder or softer, emphasizing some words more than others, or undercurrents of growling or giggling, to indicate what the robot's thinking or feeling.

We don't want to sound like robots to our internet friends. (Even robots themselves are sounding less stereotypically robotic.) Traditionally, bridging that gap between writing and emotions has been the task of novelists and poets—writing that line that makes a character sympathetic rather than annoying, or providing that flash of insight which perfectly expresses a feeling that's gone unnamed for too long. Artistic writing about feelings isn't easy, but in a way it has lower stakes. If you write bad poetry or stiff characters, you can work to