Participatory Culture in a Networked Era

A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics

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Chapter 2

Youth Culture, Youth Practices

Introduction by danah boyd

Today's youth are often assumed to be technically sophisticated as a simple byproduct of their birth. Little consideration is given to the diversity of how these supposed "digital natives" experience technology. This language, alongside the broader notion of "generations," obscures the nuances of youth participation. While young people are not the only ones using new technologies, mobile and social media have allowed teens to connect with one another in unprecedented ways. This is particularly notable given increasing limits on their mobility and agency. As teens have embraced social media, both parents and journalists have started to use generational rhetoric to describe – and dismiss – young people's technology use. By positioning youth as "other," adults fail to recognize or appreciate the ways in which youth use technology to connect with others, learn, and participate in public life. Meanwhile, by lumping all youth into a generational category and seeing technology through trend lines, adults fail to see the diversity of youth practices that emerge. The differences between how various populations of youth use technology are as important to understand as the differences between youth and their elders.

Youth culture, as we currently think about it, is a modern concept. The term "adolescence" emerged in the late 1800s, when psychologist G. Stanley Hall wanted to demarcate the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood (Hall 1908). His efforts had political

consequences, positioning an age group in a specific class based on their state of mind rather than the state of their physical body. Hall was very aware of the political dimensions of his work and attentive to the efforts by moral reformers to use the notion of "adolescence" to call for the need to protect those who were formerly understood as "young adults" from the demands of the labor force. This drove the eradication of child labor, as well as the emergence of compulsory high school and the rise of youth culture.

In the late 1940s, as many parts of the globe were struggling to recover from World War II, American businesses began to see an opportunity. Parents whose children had come of age during the war and the Great Depression wanted to make up for wartime deprivations and give their children what had been previously inaccessible (Savage 2007). Thus was born the notion of a "teenager," a marketing term used by businesses to target a subset of youth who were still primarily at home with their parents (Hine 1999).

Throughout the twentieth century, ideas about youth culture and the practices of youth continued to evolve, but what stayed consistent was the notion that an age cohort of people could be segregated from the rest of society for either economic or social purposes. Many assumptions were projected onto youth, often by journalists and politicians, who relished any opportunity to depict youth as either rebels and troublemakers or innocent and vulnerable. Twentieth-century parents were simultaneously afraid of and afraid for youth (Valentine 2004). Nowhere was this more visible than through society's attitude towards the media practices of youth.

Although moral panics pre-date conversations about teenagers, youth became the focus of most mid- to late twentieth-century moral panics (Springhall 1998). Drugs, sex, and music were seen as problematic youth vices, but media consumption was often implicated as well. Whether comic books were morally corruptive or video games made kids violent mattered less than the ability to drive fear through the heart of parents by suggesting that any new media would ruin their children.

It is within this context that we must grapple with how young people engage with the internet and new technologies writ large. So much is projected onto youth that it is often difficult to discuss what they are doing, and why, without observation being obscured by ideas of what they *should* or *shouldn't* be doing. Youth are rarely seen as deserving any agency and, yet, they are also judged based on what they choose to do. It quickly becomes a lose-lose situation, justifying restrictions and paternalism.

Part of what we collectively struggle with in this book is the need to unpack what people think about youth and technology versus what we are able to see through our research. Unlike many other topics discussed here, people think that they know something about youth either because they were once young or because they are parents to a young person. And, indeed, each of us – myself, Mimi, and Henry – has a history of how we got into this topic and a process by which we came to terms with the need to separate our own experiences from the experiences of those youth with whom we engage for research purposes.

In my study of youth participation in social media I wanted to understand what everyday teen life looked like once technology was commonplace (boyd 2014). I was a part of the first cohort of youth to have access to the internet as a teenager. At the same time, my experiences online were very much shaped by the types of people who were part of early internet culture – self-identified geeks, freaks, and queers. Given that I was all three, I fit right in. And yet, when I returned to examine teen practices in my early twenties, it was quickly apparent that the geeky internet that I knew and loved was not the same one environment that the majority of youth were experiencing.

I made an analytic decision to study mainstream American teen practices, in part because they were so foreign to me. In my personal life, my hobbies and interests have long dominated my attention to friends, and I have always been terrible at figuring out how to belong, let alone how to be cool. Thus, I knew that trying to make sense of everyday teen practices would not be an act of trying to relive or reimagine my own teenage years; studying mainstream practices functioned as an

anthropological exercise from the beginning. Yet, I often struggled with adults who dismissed my efforts as being biased because I was younger than them, even as teenagers regularly told me that I was old. It was this awkward position as a scholar that forced me to step back and examine the historical context in which today's youth are understood.

As we each struggle to understand the relationship between technology, youth practices, and youth culture, we are all forced to grapple with our own position as scholars, parents, and former youth. Our efforts to communicate what we see are further complicated by others' desires to claim expertise based on their vantage point. As scholars, we know that our perspectives are incomplete and we work diligently to address gaps in knowledge, but we also regularly struggle with others' outright rejection of what we see analytically because this information doesn't resonate with their personal experiences, assumptions, or fears. More than anything, this communicative challenge shapes our ongoing effort to make our work around youth accessible to broader publics. We are defenders of and advocates for youth, but many adults do not believe that youth are anything but innocent and vulnerable children. Thus, our decision to tell their story is often activist in nature, even if heretical to some.

Social Media and Young People's Push for Autonomy

Henry: danah suggests we each have our own trajectories into this topic. I was born and raised in a pre-digital era. I worked my way through my undergraduate degree by filing punch cards for a mainframe computer, so I fit the profile of the "digital immigrant," a term I find problematic for many reasons. My own focus on youth and new media came from two sources. First, I was a father who was watching my son come of age alongside the dramatic growth and domestication of digital technologies. I watched him grapple with social issues with his peers online and see how badly his teachers frequently responded to, failed to see, and often sought to protect him from what we now

see as the educational benefits of connected learning. For example, I watched the school librarian struggle to enforce a policy which allowed students to use "educational software" during their lunch breaks but not "games," and thus fail to identify how games might foster creative learning. When I was visiting schools, I would ask what kinds of net access they allowed students, and the first wave of responses were often defensive, viewing the internet more as a problem to be controlled than as a resource to be deployed. My son's teachers and principal, at what was a progressive private school, struggled with how much they should allow youth an autonomous space of free expression online and to what degree they should police what occurred there for liability reasons.

Second, I also served as a housemaster for an MIT dormitory, one noted for its diverse forms of subcultural expression (from goths to gamers, but above all geeks). From this place, I could see the first wave of young people who had enjoyed extensive access to digital technologies, observing the ways they were incorporating these tools and practices into all different dimensions of their life and work. Both of these vantages points helped me to recognize the ways that many adults were shutting down opportunities that were meaningful for young people, often out of a moral panic response to technological and cultural change.

Mimi: I sit between danah and Henry in the timeline of technology adoption. My first memories of networked culture were in my high-school years, sitting in my brother's bedroom with his Apple II and acoustic coupler modem, dialing into the pre-internet BBS scene. We were among the handful of kids in an adult-dominated BBS culture. Technology was a way to gain unprecedented kinds of access to adult worlds and power. My brother Joi started his first tech company as a teen, helped set up the first commercial ISP in Japan, and is now director of the MIT Media Lab. I have never identified as a geek myself, but, having grown up with and married into the geek scene, it's always been both foreign and close to home. In graduate school, I met my husband Scott Fisher, a pioneer in virtual and augmented reality. I would never

have become an ethnographer of digital and networked culture without these relationships and the opportunity to have close friends and family as key informants. I've been a fond but critical observer of networked and digital culture ever since those early years of playing video games and logging onto BBS forums with Joi. Now that I'm a parent of two teens, I continue to enjoy my close-but-not-quite status.

Colored by my formative experiences with technology, I've been fascinated by how young geeks have been at the forefront of defining not only new technologies but new cultural forms and social practices. At first my focus was on the more stereotypical leading edge of digital culture – gamers and fans – but I've increasingly tried to look at a more diverse range of youth innovation. For example, when I started my postdoctoral work in Tokyo, it was at the beginning of the massive wave of mobile text and visual communication, led by teenage girls. Although I had initially gone to Tokyo to study gaming culture, I added a study on girls' mobile phone culture so I could look at girl-led tech innovation. Now my team is immersed in understanding the proliferating range of youth affinity groups online, ranging from knitters to professional wrestling fans, many of which are culturally quite distant from the early geek online communities.

I try not to be completely blind to the dark sides of youth culture and practices, but I value their idealism, enthusiasm, and creativity. Without idealizing youth, it's important to shine a light on how adults often unreasonably curtail young people's freedom and voice. I see promise in how technology provides openings for young people to shape society and culture despite their lack of economic and institutional power and resources.

Henry: When we are discussing the early subcultural uses of digital media, we are focusing largely on the kinds of culture this first generation of digital youth helped to create for themselves. The young people who most urgently needed alternative channels of social connection and personal expression were those who were least well served by current institutional practices. Let's face it, public schools (and, to a large degree, private schools) are deeply destructive for kids that are

different, especially geek kids, queer kids, and kids who come from cultural and racial backgrounds different from the others around them. You are required by law to be there every day, yet you are often subjected to bullying, your social life is organized by principles of exclusion and humiliation, and you often cannot find others who share your passions or interests. I recall my own high-school years in terms of experiences of isolation, alienation, and loss of dignity. My hope was that the online world might allow young people to find others who share their interests without the constraints of geographic location. I certainly saw this phenomenon with my own son, who, when he found himself feeling isolated from the peer culture at his school, sought out friends through interest-driven communities online. He was maintaining an online romantic relationship with a girl living in Nebraska whom he met through a World Wrestling Entertainment chatroom, and he had an important friendship with another young woman who lived in Australia.

danah: My experience as a teenager was very similar. I saw the internet as my saving grace precisely because it allowed me to escape the town I grew up in and connect with people around the world. Some of my most formative experiences are with strangers that I met online – strangers who helped me grapple with my sexuality, strangers who helped me understand politics more generally. Like many who grew up during that period, I imagined that widespread use of the internet would mean that everyone who got online would have such transformative experiences. And yet, one of the things that was most striking to me in my early fieldwork was realizing that most youth who go online do not look to escape their home context.

Henry: Many young people continue to use social media today as a way to connect to some kind of larger community beyond their schools and local community. Liana Gamber Thompson (2012) has been interviewing young people who are affiliated with the US Liberty movement and, in some cases, the Libertarian Party for our Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics project, which is seeking to map different organizations and networks that have been particularly effective at

getting youth involved in political and civic life. While there has been a growth in Libertarian values among the current generation, many of these young people do not know anyone else in their school who thinks the way they do, and many of them lack the transportation and other resources physically to go to places where Libertarians meet face to face. Many of them describe the experience of finding other Libertarians online and realizing they were not "crazy." Obviously, over time, all youth – the popular kids as well as the outcasts – have gravitated towards the online world, but some functions of social media are still more apt to be explored by those who are outside dominant structures, while others are simply extensions of the norms of high-school culture more generally.

Coming of Age in a Networked Age

Henry: I often hear people claim that the internet was the first communication technology that young people were able to grasp before their parents, and this is simply not true. The Amateur Press Association in the nineteenth century was dominated by people in their teens or early twenties. The early amateur radio movement in the early twentieth century had strong youth involvement. Radio stations were started by scout troops, for example. There are cartoons during the period showing adults sweating as they try to answer their children's questions about radio, and, when the Federal Communications Commission sought to restrict amateur access to the airwaves, they justified the choice because "boys in short pants" were alleged to have abused the technology to pull pranks on adults. Science fiction fandom was started largely by men in their teens, who published the first zines, organized the first conventions, and eventually became the first generation of professional science fiction writers, agents, and publishers. Young people were drawn to these grassroots media practices because they were seeking a space outside of adult supervision, outside of the constraints of their local community, where they could find others

who saw the world the same way they did. This is not a "natural" phenomenon; we have to understand it in relation to the constraints on young people's lives, but young people have almost always been the early adopters of new communication practices and have often had to defend the communities they created for themselves against adult attempts at regulation or intrusion. This is often what fuels the cycles of moral panic that surround the introduction of any new expressive medium.

Mimi: Age is one of the most naturalized forms of oppression that we have. It's cross cultural and the least questioned among our structural forms of oppression like race, class, and gender. The ongoing generational tension and moral panics are indicative of how resilient these fault lines are. Ever since we started segregating young people in these age-delimited ways, they've gotten good at finding ways to push back at their elders.

With the advent of electronic media, the modern-day boundaries that protected youth from adult worlds are eroding. Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) work looks at how television gave children new kinds of visibility into adult worlds and how big a shift that was culturally. Today's social and mobile media are part of this longer trajectory of media and technology, giving young people tools to access and participate in adult worlds and having adult-like autonomy and privacy. It's not surprising that we're seeing a lot of generational tensions around these new forms of social media, because they're reconfiguring the contract about what we thought was appropriate visibility and public behavior for young people.

Henry: Meyrowitz is talking about the loss of childhood in terms of the ways that television grants youth access to what was once exclusively adult knowledge and experiences. He worries that this premature knowledge will destroy childhood innocence or damage children's respect for their elders. You see adults looking foolish on sitcoms, fighting in dramas. Meyrowitz argues that this premature exposure to adult knowledge damages the sense of security young people have within their family. But the opposite is also true. While

digital and mobile technologies have created more autonomous zones, they've also ensured that the social lives of youth are more visible to parents than ever before. Various forms of adult surveillance over young people's online lives get read as "good parenting." Adults are supposed to monitor what their sons and daughters are doing online, and, as a consequence, they find themselves witnessing aspects of the socialization process that would be closed to their view were they occurring face to face rather than through mediated communication. Adults historically could not monitor what children did down by the playground, what they talked about when they walked to school, what they said to each other at the mall, or what they did on their dates, but Facebook opens up all of these aspects of kids' lives to potential scrutiny by their parents, their teachers, and other adults. This is the reverse of what Meyrowitz described: adults now get to observe what youth are doing when adults are not around.

danah: Meyrowitz's arguments also hinted at how adults could see youth practices in new ways. I think of this in terms of "visibility" or the ability to see into the lives of other people. When coupled with a culture where parental surveillance is normative, the opportunity to leverage visibility to keep tabs on youth practices can be quite powerful. Of course, visibility cuts in many ways. Just as parents can see into the lives of their children, youth can see into each other's lives and the lives of people that they don't know. Through social media, people have the ability to see – and interact with – people who are radically different than them. This means that youth can be exposed to new ideas and new people, not just in the abstract but through direct interaction. Some see this as a good thing, but plenty of parents do not want their children to be exposed to or interact with children who aren't raised in the same way. The level of control parents are seeking to have over their children's lives has ratcheted up alongside the development of new media.

Even at the local level, visibility can complicate interpersonal interactions. Because interacting through technology often leaves traces, parents sometimes witness interactions out of context and panic. A

tiff between friends gets interpreted as bullying or the metaphorical use of a song lyric is taken literally. Concerned parents, determined to protect their children from harm, often go into overdrive, failing to see how misinterpretations amplify their fears. They often respond with restrictions that can limit opportunities, undermine trust, and result in other unintended outcomes. So much is projected onto youth – hopes and dreams, fears and anxieties. And there are so many conflicting messages. As Gill Valentine (2004) argues, people are afraid of and afraid for youth. What emerges are countless myths about teens and technology, many of which boil down to fears about safety, sexuality, and agency.

Gender, Fear, and Moral Panics

Mimi: Studies have shown that the rhetoric around social media is qualitatively different when it applies to girls versus boys. With boys it's about the violence and the video games and the nasty things that they're going to do, and with girls it's about protecting them from people on the internet (Cassell and Cramer 2008).

danah: In my fieldwork, I've consistently witnessed gendered rhetoric around issues such as online safety, but Eszter Hargittai and I conducted a study that doesn't confirm the rhetoric (boyd and Hargittai 2013). We have nationally representative survey data which suggests that a child's gender is not the most salient factor affecting parental concern. Among parents of children ages ten to fourteen, those with girls are significantly more concerned that their daughter will meet a stranger who will harm them and somewhat more concerned that she will be exposed to violent content than parents of boys are. But a child's sex plays no role in shaping parental concerns regarding exposure to pornography, being bullied, or being a bully. When we held for other factors, the sex of the parent also didn't seem to matter as much as other factors such as race. Race is a very significant predictor of parental concern. These findings surprised us precisely because we

hear gendered rhetoric all the time, but I've come to believe that what's at stake is probably much more complicated than I thought.

Henry: That is challenging data, danah, since so much of our analysis rests on the assumption that gender matters greatly when discussing the dynamics of family life. What E. Anthony Rotundo (1994) calls "boy culture," the process of peer-based masculine socialization, used to take place outside of the home and was structured around boys escaping the control and supervision of their mothers (at least in the wake of the industrial revolution, which separated the home from the workplace). But, now, this process has been domesticated. Moms are now observing the nasty business of turning boys into men, because it is taking place in their living rooms, often played out on their television or computer monitors, as young boys work through their aggressions or establish their status through video games. Video games make young boys' fantasy lives visible, and mothers feel they have to do something to regulate or correct it. In many ways, what's happening on screen is what earlier generations of boys (myself among them) used to draw in crayons on notebook paper or what we did in the woods at the end of the block. But, now, adults have a much clearer picture of what's going on and are attempting to shape it in ways my parents' generation could not have done.

You may be right, danah, that gender matters more for some concerns than others. We are increasingly recognizing that bullying occurs in both masculine and feminine culture, and, as pornography becomes more widely available, both boys and girls are encountering it in ways that make everyone uncomfortable (Livingstone 2009).

Mimi: It makes sense that gender matters to some concerns more than others, which is consistent with danah's survey results as well as with the range of qualitative studies that have examined these issues. A common tendency is to look at the regulation of media as a solution to these broader societal problems, whether it is violence, challenges to parental authority, or unsavory dimensions of peer culture. I wish people would not go first to whether technology is good or bad and, rather, start with the behavior and consider the different factors that contribute to it.

danah: Many parents I've met genuinely believe that youth today are more at risk than in previous generations because of technology. They have a distorted understanding of sexual predation and think that the internet introduces unprecedented risks of victimization, even though crimes against children have been on the decline since the introduction of the internet, and even though the overwhelming majority of children who are abused are harmed by relatives or people that they know from offline life (see Schrock and boyd 2008). Of course, the mere thought of a stranger harming their child sends chills through any parent.

Perhaps a better example of how adults scapegoat technology is the moral panic around cyber-bullying and other forms of meanness and cruelty in mediated environments (boyd 2014; Bazelon 2013). For better or worse, studies regularly show that no increase or decrease in bullying is associated with the internet (Levy et al. 2012). When surveyed, youth consistently report that bullying happens more frequently at school, with greater intensity, and with more social and emotional costs. Parents, on the other hand, focus on the digital realm. This goes back to the issue of visibility. If a child comes home with a black eye, a parent knows that there was a fight at school, but a grumpy child doesn't necessarily suggest that a bullying incident occurred. Online, where countless interactions leave traces, parents often jump to conclusions about what they see. Unfortunately, our society does not have a strong record in combating bullying – online or off. As a result, parents often want to "solve" the problem by making it less visible – by restricting children's access to social media or pushing for companies to scan for negative content. But this doesn't actually curtail bullying. It is only a Band-Aid on the fear.

Youth in Private and Public Life

danah: What fascinates me is that the battle over meanness and cruelty is taking place during a period in which youth are increasingly

encoding their content, rendering some of the most extensive dramas invisible or difficult to interpret. For example, I was sitting in North Carolina with Serena looking at her Facebook profile when I saw two posts that piqued my interest. One said, "She's such a bitch," and was liked by fifty people, while the other said, "I'm sick and tired of all of this," and was liked by thirty-two people. I asked Serena what this was about and she launched into a detailed explanation about the drama unfolding between these two girls over a boy (Marwick and boyd 2014a). These messages were visible enough to draw attention but vague enough only to leave concern in the minds of adults.

Over the last decade, my ability to decode what teens write online has declined, and not just because I'm getting older. With parents embracing social media, teens have developed sophisticated techniques for being private in public. They use song lyrics, pronouns, and in-jokes to have conversations that can technically be accessed but whose meaning is rendered invisible. My collaborator Alice Marwick and I talk about this in terms of "social steganography," or an act of hiding in plain sight (Marwick and boyd 2014b). At one level, none of this is new. Teens have long used song lyrics to express their emotions, and they've used encoding techniques to evade surveillance from snooping parents. Still, it's amazing to see the strategies teens develop to participate in public while maintaining a sense of privacy.

Mimi: One reason young people have led in the adoption of mobile and social media is because they're given so few opportunities for private conversation and for control of their social lives (Ito and Okabe 2005). These new technologies have intersected with that life stage in a particularly explosive combination. We grown-ups tend to have more control of our space and our privacy; we're not subject to the kinds of social controls that kids experience at home and at school, and we've been a bit slower to adopt technologies that give us more pervasive access to private and networked communication.

danah: Technology adoption can be strongly connected to youth agency, but much of social media hasn't simply been about having the opportunity for private conversations, but also about having the ability

to participate meaningfully in public life. Over the last few decades, we've seen a significant decline in young people's access to physical public places as well as limitations on their privacy due to ongoing adult surveillance, and so we see youth trying to create spaces where they can be in public as well as more intimate places where they can hang out with their friends. These two often get intertwined, with teens using social media both to participate in public life and to create an intimate space to hang out with friends. They want to be *in* public, but that doesn't mean that they always want to *be* public. This is where privacy and public life aren't necessary contradictory.

Mimi: Social media may have changed young people's relationships to public life, but, when mobile phones came along, the ability to have a private conversation was revolutionary for young kids. Before the advent of a mobile phone, when you called somebody, there was a high likelihood that a parent or sibling would answer. In other words, the adults in your life had some oversight of all your communications. Mobile phones were revolutionary, and teens led adoption because it was the first time that young people had ubiquitous private access to their peers (Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005). Similarly, social media were led by youth because of those unique conditions that youth experience.

At the same time, social media are being adopted by all age groups, just as we've seen with text messaging. So there's a transcendence of the cohort and the life stage to encompass other age groups. I don't think it's the case that kids will necessarily outgrow social media when they become adults. We do see a certain drop-off in technology use when kids gain autonomy. They have professional responsibilities. Youth often retire from fan culture when they get real jobs, for example. We also see a decline in text messaging, especially when couples start living together, versus when living apart. That's an example of life-stage effects. At the same time, I think that the kinds of innovations that young people adopt often foreshadow how other people in other age groups will use the technology – as we saw with text messaging and Facebook.

danah: Many journalists and entrepreneurs see the widespread youth adoption patterns that you're talking about as predictive of technology adoption writ large, but, even when youth adopt a service en masse, it doesn't mean that what they're doing there is at all indicative of how that tool will be used when taken up by non-youth. Sometimes, youth are early adopters of technologies that become widespread, particularly communication technologies. But, when their adoption practices are more deeply connected to their life stage, they are poor indicators of broader practices. I see youth less as a proxy for broader practices and more as an example of how constraints configure practices. For better or worse, the typical American teenager's life is heavily structured and scripted. Teens' lives are overwhelmingly organized around school, home, activities, friends, media, and, to a lesser degree, love interests, religious activities, and after-school jobs. Their movement is bounded and their opportunities to interact are limited. I've found that technology among youth is often employed as a relief valve, enabling them to feel some sense of freedom and power even when their physical bodies and movement are regulated. Their desire to engage in public life, coupled with their limited opportunities to do so, often erupts in fascinating ways. Out of frustration, they often help create *networked publics* – public spaces that exist because of networked technologies and networks of people that help instantiate an imagined community (Varnelis 2008; boyd 2014). Through networked publics, teens express themselves and assert control over their lives. Of course, this often brings them back to the perennial battle between teens and parents for control. This is one of the reasons why examining youth practices provides insight into social resilience.

The Myth of the Digital Native

Mimi: Young people have developed strategies to deal with the conditions of surveillance they encounter vis-à-vis adults in their lives, while at the same time participating more and more in public

settings online that have a wide mix of ages. The baseline platforms like text messaging and social network sites can be used in very age-segregated ways. On the other hand, many interest-centered groups are highly mixed as far as age. I see eleven- and twelve-year-olds in gaming communities, and there's little distinction between them and thirty-year-olds. These pockets feel like the internet during its early years, which was dominated by young adults but often mixed in age. There are contradictory effects: some kids take on adult-like autonomy and relationships very early, and other kids use technology to define a very teen-centric space. And the same teens who may be fine participating with people their parents' age on a gaming site would not want to be linked on a social network site with their parents or other adult relatives. Despite the belief that young people are "digital natives," I wonder how much of the distinctiveness of youth behavior has to do more with the unique social conditions that limit their autonomy than with some innate developmental imperative or generational identity.

danah: Digital native rhetoric reinforces generational differences in ways that simultaneously celebrate and pathologize youth. I'm fascinated by the ways in which adults use this language to imply that being "native" is a more illustrious position. As Genevieve Bell has noted, the natives never win. They have historically gotten enslaved, killed, or "harmonized" by powerful "immigrants" (a.k.a. colonizers). Sadly, I sometimes fear that this is a more accurate portrait of how we treat young people's online activities.

Henry: The myth of the digital immigrant generally gets framed in the opposite way: immigrants don't belong; they will never fully assimilate into the digital world; they will never engage with digital media as effectively as their children will. We'd never accept these assumptions today if you were talking about actual immigrants. We'd never accept the premise that immigrants bring nothing of value with them from the old world as they enter the new. So, even if we don't want to reverse the terms, we clearly need to add some more nuance to them. As danah suggests here, both "immigrant" and "native" are incredibly

loaded metaphors, and both come with a history of marginalization and unequal distribution of power.

For some adults, the phrase "digital immigrant" functions as a kind of learned helplessness: "I shouldn't be expected to learn how to use this new technology because I wasn't born in the right generation." Yet, senior citizens form one of the groups that moved most aggressively into a networked culture; they have used the internet in innovative ways that support their own needs and lifestyles. Seniors use Facebook to trade pictures, to have more regular contact with their grandchildren, to escape the social isolation of being housebound. They also play online games and buy more music online than young people do.

It's not about age, ultimately. It's about a refusal to participate. Some adults take a passive perspective: "I don't know what these kids are doing. I hope it's okay. I'm not going to touch that part of their life and therefore I have no accountability for it." Some take an aggressive stance: "I can't use this, so you shouldn't either." The latter group of adults can feel deeply threatened by the unknown world, by activities and platforms that were not part of their own growing-up experience. The digital immigrant/digital native language allows adults to let themselves off the hook for making the transition the rest of society has undergone.

Obviously, those gaps in internet usage have filled over time. I don't think middle-aged people lag that far behind the general population in use of digital technology at this point, but they were slower than people at either end of the spectrum to embrace online experiences.

danah: It saddens me how often adults use their status as "immigrants" to justify non-participation, as though they're too old to learn. In opposition, youth are positioned as actively engaged in participatory culture just because they're young. Yet, their position as "natives" also suggests that they're being enacted on, rather than functioning as an agented cohort making active choices to engage. I think that the issue of agency is central to the dynamic of participatory culture and is really missing from the "natives" frame.

Eszter Hargittai (2010) argues that, when we employ the language of "digital natives," we fail to recognize the development of skills necessary to be engaged in participatory culture. She holds that most youth are actually digitally naïve. Their willingness to experiment is notable, but they have limited media literacy, computational skills, or technical fluency. They're assumed to be capable of manipulating technology because they actively text and use Facebook, but their ability to construct a search query or interpret the results is often limited.

Henry: "Digital natives, digital immigrants," how do I loathe ye? Let me count the ways! These terms imply a fixed relationship in how these two generations relate to each other through technology. It assumes a world where the realms of children/youth and adults are absolutely separate, rather than one where they interact with each other in a networked culture in ways very distinct from their hierarchical relationships within schools, families, or churches.

The Risky Business of Youth Practices

danah: One of the consequences of the safety rhetoric is that it creates the generational divides that frame the "digital divide." The message that teens receive is that all adults are scary and dangerous, which means that youth are discouraged from interacting with adults online, even if the goal is to obtain health information or collaborate on educational tasks. Young people who are engaging in subcultural practices like fan fiction are breaking down generational boundaries even as these boundaries are getting broadly reinforced outside of participatory culture. Those who can escape the stranger-danger rhetoric and other rhetoric that reproduces generational divides find that interacting with adults enables them to learn a whole new set of skills, technical and otherwise, that result from intergenerational interaction. But, much to my chagrin, the majority of youth are consistently siloed into communities where intergenerational learning is taboo

and talking with adults is seen as inherently risky or dangerous. These youth are losing key opportunities.

Henry: There are spaces where adults and youth have extremely healthy cross-generational interactions. Take, for example, the "beta reading" process within the fan fiction community, discussed at length by Rebecca W. Black (2008). Here, fans read each other's work, offering advice for improvement. Such mentoring practices are built into many of the most popular fan fiction sites. In *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins 2006), I discussed how Flourish, then age fourteen, was giving writing advice to fans twice her age or more, but also learning from adults who shared her passions for Harry Potter. This is not at all unusual within fandom, where people are valued based on what they can contribute, and youth often gain status based on their skills and abilities. Young Potter fans help adults better understand the world of the child characters, and adults help the youth grasp the concerns of the teachers. Even this is too simple a way to describe the collaborations that take place in this space.

Carrie James (2009) has researched structures of digital mentoring and found that relatively few youth have access to adults who can give them meaningful advice about their online lives and help them think through issues of ethics or safety. Lynn Scofield Clark's book *The Parent App* (2012) reaches a similar conclusion. Clark found many different patterns of parental response to digital media, but relatively few of them result in constructive or open dialogues that enable youth to turn to adults for help in dealing with problems they encounter. Our response at the school level has been to declare certain social media or participatory culture practices off limits, to ban use of Facebook or YouTube, rather than to provide trained adults who can offer guidance in how to use social media safely, creatively, constructively, and ethically. There are complex reasons for this: some such limits are required via federal policies, some are a consequence of limited resources and poorly trained teachers, and some represent a defensive posture adopted by educators who have felt parental pressures inflamed via media sensationalism, moral panics, and culture wars. It is hard to

see how young people are safer if they have to deal with social media on their own without knowledgeable adults to turn to. Young people do not need adults snooping over their shoulders, but they do need people who can help watch their backs.

Mimi: What we see within so much of the mainstream messaging around media is that the role of adults is to monitor, regulate, and limit. The mark of good parenting in that historic middle-class narrative is all about saying "no" as the proper parental stance (Seiter 1995; Hoover, Clark, and Alters 2003; Livingstone 2002). This works against what you've been describing, Henry, as intergenerational mentorship. It also feeds into this idea of the digital immigrant. That in turn ties to a demonization of the World of Warcraft dad or the Facebook-obsessed mom. These are inappropriate subject positions for parents to take in that more traditional narrative. One challenge to this existing narrative is the emerging image of the geek or creative-class parent who is gaming with their kids, is tech-savvy, and provides a meaningful mentorship that values an empowered identity in relation to new media. This alternative orientation is defining a new digital learning elite characterized by particular kinds of social and cultural capital. For most kids, though, it's more about just negotiating enough autonomy to use social media and text messaging, not about jumping into these much more interest-driven and intergenerational spaces.

danah: This is part of why I am so passionate about youth having access to networked publics. It's only through interacting in and helping create meaningful publics that people can understand society as a whole. I get especially frustrated when adults lament young people's lack of engagement with political life. How can we expect youth to be a part of political publics when we alienate them from public life? I think of engagement in broader publics as cultural training wheels, and I think it's essential to enable young people to explore and take risks and try to make sense of a world beyond them and their classmates. But my passion for this seems almost heretical in certain communities.

Mimi: We have to reassert some important dimensions of the teen developmental narrative that get buried when we focus too much on

protecting youth from exploration and risks. We've set up a trajectory for young people that includes a period of their lives when they're experimenting with social identities and new forms of participation. It's a critical period of identity formation. Not that grown-ups don't do identity formation too, but there is a salience to a period when young people have the space to make forays into developing a public identity. Sonia Livingstone, Leslie Haddon, and Anke Gorzig (2012) have stressed that risks and opportunities are often integrally related, and young people can't reap most of the benefits of online participation without being exposed to some degree of risk. As danah already noted, the risks of interacting with new people are generally lower online than in real life, and in that sense the online world can be both safer and more beneficial at providing a start in public participation.

danah: Learning requires failure; there are often bumps and bruises along the way. When people talk about creating a "safe" internet, there's an implication that it's possible to protect youth from every negative experience. While there are certainly some who would love to lock teenagers in a padded room until they're eighteen, this would constitute torture. Teenagers need opportunities to learn how to interact in a healthy way in public and with strangers. They need to learn to take measured risks and face the consequences of their decisions.

I also find it ironic that we fear risky behavior around issues of online safety while rewarding it – even fetishizing it – in other contexts. We relish youth's risk taking when it comes to their openness to innovation, their entrepreneurship, or their willingness to risk their lives as soldiers when they turn eighteen, but we often think that paternalism is needed when their risks do not align with societal values or take place in a medium that we don't understand. It's important to call into question and challenge our assumptions about risk. All too often, brain research is used to suggest that teenagers are constitutionally incapable of having a rational thought. Even if we take brain science as the frame, the brain develops through interaction, experience, and iteration. Protectionism undermines youth's ability to develop healthy responses to risks. This doesn't mean that we should throw teenagers

into shark-infested waters to see if they can survive but, rather, we do need to provide training wheels and learn to let go and encourage freedom. Learning and development are life-long processes. There's no magic that happens on a child's thirteenth birthday or a teenager's eighteenth. One does not become Yoda simply by becoming old. Rather than seeing development as an age-based activity, we need to recognize the ways in which it is socially constructed and dependent on opportunities to learn.

Henry: Scholars in the sociology of childhood make a productive distinction between valuing adolescence as a state of being and valuing it as a state of becoming (James and Prout 1997). The developmental model can lead adults to dismiss the cultural lives of youth as meaningful only because of the learning processes involved. Part of what works within healthy participatory culture is that young people can learn to find their own voices in public. They speak out about their own agendas and about making a difference *now*. Those agendas are important in their own right and not simply as a process of identity formation or social experimentation, as steps towards something else. If, as I've argued, the fight for participatory culture should be shaped by the values we place on democracy and diversity, then we should care whether young people are being silenced or whether their voices are amplified through their access to digital media.

Mimi: It's unfortunate that we limit young people's ability to exercise agency, and then lament that they are irresponsible or slackers when they can't step immediately into adult shoes.

I would also point out that we highlight certain negative behaviors as part of the developmental stage of teens, and we can be incredibly unreflective about how adults exhibit these same needs and behaviors. We talk about young people as being obsessively peer-oriented and socially self-conscious without looking at how grown-ups are incredibly status and peer-conscious as well. Now that so many grown-ups are on Facebook and are texting, maybe the idea that young people are somehow pathologically concerned about social connection can be debunked. As social media migrates to other age groups, we are

starting to understand how social media orientations that we attached to youth – drama, oversharing, narcissism, attentional fragmentation – are certainly not age specific.

Sharing and Connecting

danah: It saddens me that teens are pigeonholed as the overshare-y cohort who, uniquely, are going to ruin their lives. Are people unaware of mommy bloggers or parenting forums? There's an entire online universe filled with parents documenting every gory detail of their children's lives before they even reach an age at which they can reasonably consent or object to the process. What's going to happen when these children become teens or twenty-somethings whose every poop and burp and childhood antic is documented? And why are people upset when teens share their challenges and struggles while celebrating when adults do the same? At least when teens overshare, they tend to be exposing their own bumps and bruises, not the ones of those around them. And, frankly, teens are often far less revealing in their practices than many adults.

Henry: Would this dismissal of "oversharing" have applied to the consciousness-raising process of the 1960s, when women were talking together outside of the family for the first time about domestic violence, reproductive rights, sexual dissatisfaction, or their desires for greater economic independence from their husbands? These processes of sharing are fundamental to the feminist mantra "the personal is political" and were foundational for the political movements of that era. Something similar could be said about disclosures about the impact of racism on the black community that came out in the churches, beauty parlors, barber shops, and other "hush harbors" (Harris-Lacewell 2006). Or we might talk about "coming out of the closet" as a longstanding tactic in the LGBT community, one which sought to call attention to sexual repression and discrimination in their lives. We deny that same level of political agency when young people

are involved in strategic disclosures through social media. We don't assume, when they're talking about their parents, their teachers, and the adult institutions that are imposed on them, that there's an emerging political discourse there. These are tactics of disclosure that allow people to identify and act upon common interests, just as there are disclosures which put them at risk. I am not sure it has ever been a simple matter to distinguish between the two.

Part of what makes disclosures risky in the digital era, as danah has suggested, consists of the ways in which participants lose control of what happens to the disclosed information once it enters into digital circulation. Information moves from "safe spaces" where feminist consciousness-raising occurs and almost immediately enters the view of people who may be much more hostile.

danah: One thing to keep in mind is that the tactics of disclosure can also be valuable tactics of enclosure. Years ago, I remember Angelina Jolie being interviewed on TV about her relationship with Billy Bob Thornton. The journalist was commenting on her tendency to share way too much about her life. Jolie smirked back at the journalist and said something like, "You know, the more that I share, the less you ask about what's really private." This is a sentiment I've heard over and over again from bloggers and others who are quite public online. Sometimes, the more you share, the more you get to maintain true privacy.

Many young people are actively looking to participate in public, but they don't necessarily want to *be* public (Marwick and boyd 2014b). That subtle difference is important because it means that they spend a lot of time making content available, even while the meaning is rendered invisible. So adults complain about youth oversharing, but teens aren't sharing everything. They're making choices – often performative choices intended to entice peers and challenge adults – that allow them to work out how publics work in a networked era. Their innovativeness in this domain gives me tremendous hope.

Mimi: This is another example of how kids are developing innovative and sometimes sophisticated strategies, just like adults are. It's

not only older folk who are being reflective and purposeful about their performance in public. Now that Facebook has become multigenerational, I see young people being much more deliberate about how they craft their identities there. Often they build alternative identities on sites like Tumblr or on Twitter as a way of creating firewalls of visibility. We saw this segmentation starting among more geeky kids when we were doing the Digital Youth study, and I feel it is getting more mainstream among youth and also crossing the age divide. The interesting thing about the rise of Twitter was it was not a youth-led adoption cycle, unlike earlier social media. I think the period when youth are this super-special category of early social media adopters might be over. Or maybe things are just getting more segmented and specialized at the platform layer.

danah: We've seen a fragmentation of tools being used, in part because young people are trying to find a place of their own. We're also seeing a movement towards self-expression channels that are more about photos and videos, because they provide a different mechanism for self-expression than previous genres. And, of course, the widespread availability of smartphones helps. We're also seeing fascinating new services pop up that challenge assumptions underpinning social media. For example, Snapchat enables people to take photos and share them in an ephemeral fashion. Adults have responded to Snapchat by flipping out that anything that youth might share through this service must be sexual or inappropriate simply because youth aren't trying to make it persistent. Yet, teens simply see no reason for everything to stick around forever and enjoy the playful nature of this app. I find the adult anxiety around Snapchat fascinating given broader concerns regarding privacy. It highlights the conflicting and hypocritical narratives adults tell about youth. And even when there are teens who are exhibitionists or engaging in risky behaviors, they're not representative of the whole cohort. Teens are not a homogeneous or uniform population. There's huge diversity in what they are trying to achieve, what they really care about, and how they employ what's available to them to get there.

Mimi: It's so important to remember the diversity in how young people take up this technology. That gets erased by the belief that there's some generational zeitgeist which everybody of a certain age is experiencing in the same way. The idea of a digital generation obscures issues of equity and stratification in ways we need to be careful about.

People who tend to be positive about the potential of digital media – and I get implicated in this – are often focused on the more privileged populations. Negative discourses tend to cluster around the behaviors of either more mainstream or less privileged kids. So much of the literature around young people and technology gets framed by the blanket discourse of "Is it good or bad?" because we aren't asking the more fundamental question: "For which kids and communities is it a positive or negative force?"

Henry: We definitely need better pictures of how different groups of young people encounter digital technologies and what kinds of differences those encounters do or do not make in their lives. For example, as part of the Digital Edge project of the Connected Learning Research Network, Andres Lombana Bermudez has been researching the role that digital media plays in the lives of second- and one-and-a-half-generation Latino immigrants living in the Austin area. On the one hand, these young people's use of technology receives much less attention from adults – either positive (in terms of mentorship) or negative (in terms of surveillance) – than that of the kinds of middle-class youth we have been discussing. In many ways, their experience of digital media follows a classic immigrant narrative: they are using these platforms as a means to gain access to shared cultural resources and thus to assimilate more fully into their peer culture, but they are also using them, especially in the family context, to maintain ties to the mother countries they left behind. Because of their greater ESL skills, and because of their greater exposure to American culture and institutions, these youth often end up mentoring their parents in how to use digital tools to achieve their adult goals (ensuring access to governmental and commercial services, tending medical needs, and learning English). On the other hand, these youth have far more

limited access to such platforms, given often impoverished family situations, frequently working with out-of-date technologies or enjoying limited access through schools and libraries, which barely allow them time to do their schoolwork, let alone participate in more peer-related interests. While many of the youth Lombana Bermudez has studied are able to kindle real passions and interests in, for example, game design or media production via school and afterschool programs, they lose access to many of these resources, and especially mentorship, as they graduate from high school. They often lack the scaffolding they needed to continue to integrate these interests into their adult lives.

If we are going to make meaningful interventions here, we have to go well beyond the myth of the digital native, which tends to flatten diversity and mask inequality. We need to engage more closely with the very different ways that young people encounter new media in the contexts of lives that are defined around different kinds of expectations and norms, different resources and constraints, from those encountered by youth raised under more privileged circumstances.

danah: Although categorized by age, youth are indeed extraordinarily diverse. Their experiences, desires, interests, and values range so wildly that it's often hard to talk about them meaningfully as one thing. As we try to make sense of youth culture and youth practices – and celebrate the amazing things that youth do – we too must constantly struggle with the easiness of flattening the diversity of youth experience that we know all too well. Finding the language to talk about youth simultaneously holistically and with nuance is nearly impossible, which is why we end up challenging stereotypes, assumptions, and panics more often than projecting a coherent storyline about what youth are. All three of us are committed to making certain that youth are better understood, but we also realize that this is often an uphill battle, particularly because a better understanding of youth requires us to question our adult norms, practices, and cultural values.