Young People and Social Media

Contemporary Children's Digital Culture

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Critical Perspectives on Social Science

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

About the Collection

This edited collection explores Children, Youth, and Digital Culture — in particular the practices, relationships, consequences, benefits, and outcomes of the experiences of young people with, on, and through social media — by bringing together a vast array of different ideas about childhood, youth, and young people's lives. The ideas here are drawn from scholars working in a variety of different and often seemingly disparate disciplines, and more than just describing the social construction of childhood or the everyday actions in children's lives, this collection seeks to encapsulate not only how young people exist on social media but also how their physical lives are impacted by their digital presence.

One of the goals for exploring youth interaction with social media is to unpack the structuring of digital technologies in terms of how young people access the technology to use it as a means of communication, a platform for identification, and a tool for participation in their larger social world. During longstanding and continued experience in the broad field of youth and digital culture, we have come to realize that not only is the subject matter increasing in importance at an immeasurable rate, but the amount of textbooks and/or edited collections has lagged behind considerably. There is a lack of sources that fully encapsulate the cannon of texts for the discipline, or the rich diversity and complexity of overlapping disciplines that create the fertile ground for studying young people's lives and culture. Our hope is that this text will occupy some of that void and act as a catalyst for future interdisciplinary collections and research.

The intended audience for this collection is undergraduate students studying Child and Youth Studies. However, given the interdisciplinary nature of the collection, this text would lend itself to proficiency in a variety of disciplines and courses in anthropology, psychology, sociology, communication studies, cultural studies, media studies, medicine, education, human rights, biology, literature, film studies, geography, and more. It will also distinguish itself within a constantly evolving media landscape by drawing on the most current and up-to-date research and theories across the landscapes of more than a dozen different academic fields.

About the Editors

Dr. Steve Gennaro has a Ph.D. from McGill University that explores intersections of media, technology, psychology, and youth identity. He completed a Postdoc in Philosophy of Education at UCLA with Douglas Kellner. He is one of the founding members of the Children, Childhood, and Youth Studies Program at York University and is the author of *Selling Youth*, and co-author, with Blair Miller, of *The Googleburg Galaxy* (forthcoming Lexington 2022). Dr. Gennaro regularly publishes in areas related to the philosophy of technology, education, critical theory, and media studies of youth, identity, and politics.

Blair Miller is a published author and poet. He has a Bachelors in Philosophy and a Master's in Film Studies, and his scholarship and publications continue to explore the connections between the self and media technologies. Blair teaches at York University in the Department of Humanities and the Department of Film Studies, where he has taught *Stories in Diverse Media*, *Popular Technology and Cultural Practice*, and *Information and Technology* among others for the last decade.

About the Authors

The Office of Research – Innocenti (Sonia Livingstone, Marium Saeed, and Daniel Kardefelt Winther) is UNICEF's dedicated research centre. It undertakes research on emerging or current issues to inform the strategic direction, policies and programmes of UNICEF and its partners, shape global debates on child rights and development, and inform the global research and policy agenda for all children, and particularly for the most vulnerable.

Office of Research – Innocenti publications are contributions to a global debate on children and may not necessarily reflect UNICEF policies or approaches.

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Roslyn M. Satchel is an award-winning media and culture scholar-activist who hails from West Palm Beach, Florida originally. She serves as a professor at Pepperdine University, where she's also faculty advisor to Tau Lambda Chapter. Dr. Satchel's recent book, *What Movies Teach about Race: Exceptionalism, Erasure and Entitlemen*t, brings her media, legal, and religious background together to examine cultural representations in the most influential films of all time. Dr. Satchel earned a Ph.D. in Media & Public Affairs at LSU, J.D. and MDiv degrees at Emory, and a B.A. in Communication at Howard.

Berkeley Media Studies Group (Laura Nixon, Sarah Han, Pamela Mejia, and Lori Dorfman) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding advocates' ability to improve the systems and structures that determine health. BMSG is a project of the Public Health Institute. BMSG is based in California but works across the U.S. and internationally.

Berkeley Media Studies Group conducts research to learn how the media characterize health issues. Through media advocacy training and consultation, the staff helps advocates, community organizers, and public health practitioners harness lessons from that research and develop the skills they need to shape journalists' coverage of health issues so that it illuminates the need for policies that improve the places where people live, learn, work and play so everyone, no matter where they live, can grow up healthy. BMSG also works with journalists to help them understand the public health implications of the issues they cover.

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Editors' Note

This text brings together more than 30 different authors across over a dozen academic disciplines to provide readers with the most compressive "meta view" of young people's relationships with social media. While exciting, this type of depth and breadth also presents real challenges. In working to remain consistent with the original publications for many of the reprinted articles, the intentions of the multiplicity of authors, and the wide breadth of academic disciplines, scholarly speciality, and medical practices involved in this collection, we have taken some liberty as the editors to waiver from an entirely consistent document with *Chicago Style* formatting. We have tried, where appropriate, to make adjustments to ensure consistency across the document, however we recognize the importance to discipline-specific work and to the original spirit of the piece for each of the authors, and in some cases, the desires of the original author, publishers, or discipline practice are given priority. This is particularly evident when citing, quoting, and paraphrasing the voices of young people themselves and with social media posts.

Preface: It Ain't Easy to Theorize or Teach Media

Shirley R. Steinberg

Werklund School of Education, The University of Calgary

Incanting a lyric from The Eagles of my days, *it ain't easy* to consider the notions of young people, children, social media and digital culture. When I bought my first Apple 2C, a behemoth machine skinned in undefinable gray/green plastic, I had no idea of what future ramifications it contained. Computers of the mid-80s were close to the price of a used VW Bug, and many of us considered them a type of souped-up Selectric, the ultimate word "processing" apparatus. In a word, to the layperson, teachers, parents, kids, it was a new way to *type,* and with sophistication, play *Pong*…two miraculous changes to our lives: all for the betterment of children, youth and adults.

Many of us were introduced to computers through early sci-fi films and books, but *Star Trek, "The Ultimate Computer"* (Season 2, Episode 24 March 8, 1968), brought together computers and humans when the M-5 was introduced to the crew of the *Enterprise* with the intention of the computer to handle all issues, problems and *without any human involvement*. The M-5 was quickly able to handle traditional spaceship needs, and indeed, tasks were done with brevity and accuracy; the crew found that they could not possibly keep up with M-5. The downside of this superb invention was that the M-5 engaged in unexplained and misunderstood acts, which diminish the crew's ability to make decisions and function for the benefit of the inhabitants of the *Enterprise*. The M-5 cut off power (and air) in different areas of the ship and re-directed this power.

Identifying another vehicle, the M-5 attacked and Captain Kirk attempted to take the M-5 off-line; however, the order is moot, and a forcefield surrounded the computer for its protection. More situations develop which threaten the ship and other space crafts, while the creator of the M-5 continues to insist that the computer is created for *our own good*. Not one to spoil an ending, suffice my story to end with an assurance that the *Enterprise* and *Star Trek* continued for another season.

Early science fiction's bread crumbs were followed by technological advances, leading to expectations and continued changes…inspired by science, and most definitely by the unquenchable desire for capital a la the Bill Gates/Steve Jobs express, M-5's interventions on the *Enterprise* have multiplied and sophisticated. It's not like we weren't informed, warned about the implications of technology; as early as 1964, McLuhan (1964, 2001) noted that new technologies would bring more than the medium was indeed the message (1964). That we could not separate the technical from the interventional, the intellectual, the hermeneutic. That the device/machine/apparatus was intrinsically entwined with what it could accomplish. Neil Postman (1993) went on to caution us that technology would overcome society and culture to be shaped by the technology itself. Both scholars were ridiculed at the absurd assertions that mere machines could overcome humanity…and not much more than two decades ago, students of the media began to understand McLuhan's and Postman's warnings, but we had not yet begun to comprehend that bigger than the technology, the post-modern M-5's were the social and ideological implications of the words and images distributed. Social media had become the technical behemoth. Unlike the M-5, harmful, often irreversible, life-changing decisions and activities created by technology were now made by humans, by children as young as 2 or 3. The ultimate cultural hegemony was born through social media.

Young People and Social Media is a collection of contemporary and forward-thinking essays examining the different dimensions of social media, its multiple meanings and workings and the ways in which children and youth engage in and with it. The editors clearly articulate the importance of understanding the everyday and future ways in which young people engage with, operate within and are influenced by social media. I believe there is no more important personal, academic and pedagogical discussion than to participate in a never-editing examination and critique of social media. The book has been put together for the ultimate consumers, undergraduate teachers, who were/are still involved with social media, subject to it and the essential task for them to engage in a critical pedagogical read, analysis and curriculum which alerts students to the benefits, possibilities, probabilities, dangers and futures of social media. Media literacy is barely taught in many schools; indeed, it has passed us by. Social media is the new generation of media, and educational professions should be demanding appropriate attention to the strongest global influence on children and youth today. Steve Gennaro and Blair Miller have served us well to compile this volume. Read it, share it, and write about it… and begin to think about the next steps. Social media is here, and we can't get over it; we must get a handle on it and our students need the tools to responsibly use it, disseminate it, define it and if needed, decry it.

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Introduction: Contemporary Children's Culture in Digital Space(s)

Steve Gennaro, Blair Miller

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There is a vital passage in Plato's *Republic* that eminent philosopher Bernard Williams summarizes thusly: "It is not a trivial question, Socrates said: what we are talking about is how one should live".[1] Framed this way, morality — how one ought to live — begs attention despite being obvious. Some things that we normalize in our society become overlooked as a result; whereas they were literally world-changing at the time, they become part of our background understanding of how one ought to live. There is nothing wrong with this per se, as long as we remain aware of the idea that from the beginning of (North-)Western society moral virtues that would ideally come instinctually instead require discourse, attention, and responsiveness to change over time — and that these things run the risk of evading those very same processes due to their entrenched nature. As Williams' claim asserts, this endeavor, this discourse itself, is an intrinsically moral one.[2]

The very notion of youth meets these criteria. Childhood itself is a social construct of Romantic and Puritan discourse, spurred forth in large part by the drastic shifts in labour that defined the Industrial Revolution.[3] Prior to this point in history, individuals of most ages were considered and treated in more similar ways, but once established as separate and more vulnerable, children were granted extra protections against physical and psychological threats.[4] Thus, childhood represents a moral decision in that the very concept and its characteristics exist as an ethical response to fluid existential standards. Under Williams' terms, youth benefits from — if not begs for — the aforementioned attention and discourse, and it does so with moral weight. As such, inquiry is ongoing; childhood and our relationship to it is something that gets updated in order to better position youth within safe and nurturing limits, and the perpetual moral urgency involved here details a learning curve whose slope humbles us in self-reflexivity. Witness how obvious it should have been to distinguish children from adults under the pall of coal fumes, or how the UN Convention on Rights of the Child is 30 years young.

For an indication that such moral decisions are indeed still immediate when concerning youth look no further than the tech industry's leading minds — not at their public stances toward the use of technology, but rather the stance they take when it concerns their own families. During research for *Irresistible*, his incisive look into technology and addiction, Adam Alter came across a 2014 article by *New York Times* journalist Nick Bilton, who discovered that at least several leaders in Silicon Valley — Apple's Steve Jobs and Twitter co-founder Evan Williams among them — exacted restrictions upon their own children in terms of which sorts of technology they are allowed to use, and how often. Alter draws a telling, if harsh analogy: "It seemed as if the people producing tech products were following the cardinal rule of drug dealing: never get high on your own supply".[5]

This realization is helpful in asserting two claims: that those who know the most about the technology they have ushered into ubiquitous roles in our lives know that children should not be interacting with it unfettered, and that morality is constitutive of relationships between youth and technology. In other words, the closest experts believe in mediation between youth and technology, and that this — from the ground up — is imbued with moral reasons and ethical manifestations of them in the form of rules, restrictions, monitoring: discourse. Although the maxim "it takes a village to raise a child" can inhabit the ranks of cliché, this discourse is clearly misrepresented when limited to direct parent-child and/or child-tech dynamics because to accurately encompass the scope of youth interactions with technology would require recognition of myriad other spheres overlapping to form an intersectional whole. It isn't just technology — especially social media — that is ubiquitous among youth, but also the duty to call for and act out discourse about both, and from as many fields as possible. *Young People and Social Media* represents an attempt to answer that call to duty, which inherently outlines moral standpoints that are sensitive to the ubiquity of social media among youth as well as notions of play and inclusivity for young people within participatory family (and, to a broader extent, social) frameworks.

This edited collection explores children, youth, and digital culture — in particular the practices, relationships, consequences, benefits, and outcomes of the experiences of young people with, on, and through social media — by bringing together a vast array of different ideas about childhood, youth, and young people's lives. The ideas here are drawn from scholars working in a variety of different and often seemingly disparate disciplines, and more than just describing the social construction of childhood or the everyday actions in children's lives, this collection seeks to encapsulate not only how young people exist on social media but also how their physical lives are impacted by their digital presence. Adaptable as humans are, that can often be the

problem: nascent technologies require more discourse than the time popular culture affords them. To be sure, social media has entrenched itself into everyday life much faster than even sufficient conscientious analysis could have foreseen. This might be especially true among youth.

Proliferation, play, patronage

The role played by digital media in the lives of children constantly presses up against our sensibilities. The notion that moral standpoints are indeed not trivial gathers more force as the occasions that call for said standpoints become more ubiquitous. On top of its injection into the everyday, discourse about youth and digital media also matters deeply when it comes to typical aspects of children at play, and how youth is mediated by adulthood — each interaction a child has with digital media elicits ethical standards of behaviour, both of which carry moral consequences that feed back into technologies themselves, and so on. To engage in discourse about youth and digital media means at first to accept and integrate these truths, but not blindly, or without the sort of conscientious landscape that can be surveyed by a locus of perspectives such as the one provided by the pages that follow.

Since the impact of technology upon children remains so complicated to grasp, assessing the extent to which digital — and specifically social media — plays a role in the lives of youth is still a prerequisite for our discourse. While that discourse might apply aptly to technology in general, in terms of moral awareness around youth one statistical access point is the use of mobile devices. Smartphones in particular are the most ubiquitous. The use of these devices by children is resoundingly taken up by time on social media, and in arguably a more private manner than a tablet or family computer. In the United States of America, a prime sample ground for unfettered social media use, teen access to a smartphone has risen dramatically in recent years: from 73% of teens surveyed in 2014-2015 to 95% just three years later. The same study states "smartphone ownership is nearly universal among teens of different gender, races and ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds".[6] However, coinciding with that increase of access has been a near-doubling of time spent online. Over the same time span, 45% of teens claim to use the internet "almost constantly" — up from 24%. Add to this that another 44% report going online several times per day, which means that in 2018 approximately nine out of every 10 American teenagers went online at least that often.[7] Guided by social custom within young demographics, teens likely drive usage behaviour in a trickle-up and trickle-down manner to other age groups as well.

Regardless, this dramatic surge in internet usage begs the question, what are teens now *doing* with their time online? Here in Canada, where both us editors

reside, four out of five Canadians say that they keep up to date with the news through social media sites "like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter"[8] — and that does not account for the time users spend on social media for other, dare we say, more functionally-specific reasons, such as posting content, direct messaging, and video links. Furthermore, as many of the chapters in this collection indicate, social media is serving an increasing number of functions for users as its existence proliferates into areas such as health, exercise monitoring, and gaming. One effect has been the hybridizing of communicative media technologies such as chat functions in video games with the greater realm of social media in ways that have increased and intensified due to necessity during the current COVID-19 pandemic, and young people are no exception.[9] In fact, youth rule the day when it comes to social media use. As recently as 2017, a UNICEF report concludes that across many socioeconomic and geographical spheres young people use social media at a higher rate than any other age group.[10] Still, precise data in these areas remains elusive, as another UNICEF report from the year prior explains — while also confidently asserting its titular claim that one third of all online users worldwide are children.[11] It follows, then, that in terms of both online presence and social media proclivity, the only "sure things" about youth and social media is that most of them use it often — extensively so — and that it is difficult to appraise the nuances of this phenomenon with quantifiable precision.

As is the case when reaching the stage of learning something as layered and complex as a new language, what this statistical knowledge does is help us better grasp how much we do *not* know. There are daunting numbers; it is not just the sheer volume that is so dizzying, but its multifaceted nature. It is difficult to properly contextualize something so everywhere, something that also grows and changes exponentially, seemingly by nature. (These statistical challenges do not even account for the increasingly proprietary nature of user statistics online, ultimately limiting authentic access.) *Young People and Social Media* approaches this task as a challenge to be met diligently. Arguably the most demanding contested space for our species and planet is our collective future(s) – and as the retread maxim states, that space *is* our children. Honouring this obligation is the general goal of this collection. Whether said goal is satisfied or not is, like the burgeoning future of youth, open-ended.

As though it possesses a sort of self-awareness, the notion of contestation refuses to be overlooked in these discourses. Open-ended spaces, childhood, the future, are necessarily under negotiation, and the young individual brings these forces together through acts of play. Even the way online play is "born", so to speak, is often done by (re-)negotiating access to online space in a subversive manner — one which exposes some key gaps in youth online

access. Specifically, one of our own children has at least one online profile that claims his/her birth year to be longer ago than our own, merely to gain access to online content that requires users be at least 13 years of age. This hinderance to concrete data for tracking youth activity online delineates the space as subversive from the outset; that space's inability to maintain its own user rules also shapes it as contested. More generally, contested spaces need not be considered primarily on negative terms. Those spaces are contested by nature, but not necessarily competitive — contestation and/or negotiation can occur without healthy or unhealthy rivalries. In this sense, contested spaces for youth can verge more on the playful side than that of a contest, illuminating their characteristics as matching those of social media spaces as children are wont to use them. Drawing a more direct line that extrapolates from these claims, contested spaces are made for play. Now, consider some characteristics of youth: finer motor skills, mental flexibility and ability to absorb and integrate than their adult counterparts, especially in the case of new languages and literacies. Like contested spaces, youth is made for play; children are practically built for it. The overlap here is considerable.

Circling back to Williams' claim at the outset, youth play and its exigent circumstances are not trivial matters. The patterns of subversion from the outset position acts of play as modifiers in children's lives. Put more concretely, children use play as one constitutive way to make sense of their lives. Through sequences of imagination that allow internalized present moments and surroundings to elicit "virtual" or imaginary futures, children decode the actual physical world around them. Considered this way, play holds a somewhat privileged status in youth as playing a role in socialization, identity formation, and development. In other words, play paints children's pathways to their futures by making sense of the present moment in more dynamic (or at least alternative) ways than at-hand empirical sensory recognition. To play is to engage with futures. This carries moral weight to it — what is formative is what either enables or prevents moral cognisance to varying degrees.

But as with most things passed through the prism of globalization, play can also be refracted, separated, warped, distorted. The lion's share of online user activity across all ages amounts to "involuntary"[12] participation in informal market research conducted by the controllers of each site or platform on behalf of themselves and/or paying clientele. For youth, that results in the expansion of online play into work — commodified child labour in digital space. To make matters more complicated, this constant transactional online presence can even inform research on the subject matter. This commodification further positions discourse about youth online as a morally weighty matter, as does the very analysis of youth undertaken in these pages,

since instrumentalizing — even exploitation — is always nearby. Thus, a harrowing context is revealed for young online users. They are unwittingly involved in a tête-à-tête match, whereby lab coats, algorithms and ad execs make up the other half of a game designed to perfectly play with the young subject(s) in a way that in and of itself suggests, directs, and even implants codes for moral behaviour — arguably at a point in time during youth development that precedes internal wherewithal.

Such realities are daunting, to say the least. Under these circumstances, where is the room for agency for the child? Where, for that matter, is the room for agency for anyone? When it comes to discourse about youth and social media, alarmist responses and/or positions feel constantly within arm's reach. An alarmist standpoint inhabits much of the same conceptual territory as top-down hierarchal approaches to age — especially within parental and educational frameworks. It is easier to be alarmist when understanding something from the distance maintained by parent/educator-child relationships; no matter how "close" and "in sync" either of the former figures may feel to a child (or vice versa), the hierarchal nature of the relationships resists shared understanding on equal footing, and that lack can easily trigger concern, even alarm. As with most things, this is about power, and as with the power of the gaze, the power of observation, and physical power — all of which are implicit in academic discourses about childhood — cogent analysis is about recognizing and dealing with the inherent power imbalances for both youth and adult, as opposed to trying to do away with, ignore, or sound alarm over them in a way that would be deflationary for the field itself. Seen this way, we have serious doubts that true responsible discourse on the matter of youth and social media can even be alarmist at all. This supposition thwarts the primacy of top-down hierarchal approaches to youth studies.

Consider: When the dynamics and content of digital media is as fluid as it is now, what exactly are we, as adults, protecting youth from? Do we need equally fluid responses to that? Can intersectionality be a partial response to this challenge? Anyone who has spent time raising or studying youth knows the folly in pigeonholing them. Young minds, bodies, behavioural sets, relationships, existences, even, are nascent almost by definition. Of all the gatekeepers online, the utmost ones for most children remains their parent(s), or whichever authority figures stand in as such. This position of power is altogether unavoidable, but it is a complicated one. In terms of childhood experience, parents exercise control of, and police the right to, a child's privileges, and this necessarily includes online space. In this sense, the position of power involved in family hierarchies is a relationship partly defined by patronage. But in order to both more accurately understand children, and to allow them the freedom to be seen under those same

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

Index

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

K

L

M

N

O

P

Q

R

S

T

U

V

W

Y