Book Review

Snippets of the Daily Lives of Teens

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It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens

Danah Boyd

2014, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 281 pages

This is a complicated book by Danah Boyd, asocial media scholar, youth researcher, and an advocate working in the New York University Media, Culture, and Communications Department. The book is based on a comprehensive fieldwork describing eight years of research on teens and their extended life on social media. As a Yale University publication, one might expect a book designed to be read mainly by academicians. However, it is written with a broad audience in mind: scholars, students, parents, educators, and anyone who has contact with teens.

Although Boyd describes the dynamics of American youth at a particular time, notably defined by the widespread adoption of social media, she suggests that underlying issues that they face are by no means new. In using teen engagement with social media to address various sociotechnical dynamics, she says that her goal "is to shed light on broader cultural constructs and values that we take for granted."

The book is comprehensive in that it encompasses qualitative and ethnographic material from 2003 to 2012 and data from interviews conducted during 2007–2010. There are striking examples from newspapers, magazines, and television that illustrate issues addressed in each chapter. This is a gripping book, and its narrative gives the feeling of a direct chat with the writer. The book consists of eight chapters, each

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of which is dedicated to a different issue that affects youth engagement with social media. In each chapter, Boyd offers a grounded way of looking at a particular issue. In an effort to create a nuanced portrait of everyday teen life in an era in which social media has become mainstream, she asks simple questions as follows:

What is new about how teens communicate through social media?

What do social media add to the quality of teens' social lives?

What does it take away?

When do we as a society not like the outcomes of technology?

The introductory chapter summarizes key topics and main points of the book, and the writer expresses her goal "to describe and explain the networked lives of teens to the people who worry about them—parents, teachers, policy makers, journalists, sometimes even other teens."

In Chapter 1 entitled "Identity," Boyd asks why teens seem strange online. Teens commonly search online for identity and create alternative online identities. According to Boyd, teens' need to find their identity is not new; it is just that now, they do it online, where it is relatively easier to hide their activities from their parents.

Chapter 2 entitled "Privacy" complements the first chapter by examining why youth share so much private information with public. She explores what privacy means to teens, if anything. The author provides examples to help readers understand teens' desire for their version of privacy and their adaptations to living under constant surveillance, a way of hiding in plain sight known asocial steganography.

In Chapter 3 entitled "Addiction," Boyd discusses social media as an addiction according to parents and other adults, whereas teens claim that the excessive use of social media is a necessity. In Chapter 4 entitled "Danger," the book highlights safety issues related to social media such as whether sexual predators really do lurk everywhere, and Boyd expresses her objections to blaming technology for escalating society's sense of risk. She claims that "the risks that youth face online are not evenly distributed. Teens who are most at risk online are often struggling everywhere" because of certain factors such as unfavorable social conditions and unstable families. Some readers might feel that new types of exposures to risk such as chat rooms where predators deceive unsuspecting teens are overlooked or downplayed, especially because this is the sort of instance that a teen not on social media would never encounter in everyday life.

In Chapter 5 entitled "Bullying," Boyd deals with whether social media amplifies the meanness and cruelty of bullying among teens. Boyd draws attention to the visibility of bullying through technology but recommends parents not to intervene

very much. "When adults reframe every interpersonal conflict in terms of bullying or focus on determining who's at fault and punishing that person, they also lose a valuable opportunity to help teens navigate the complicated interpersonal dynamics and social challenges that they face." While this may be a valid advice in some cases, the extent and gravity of bullying in today's society have escalated to the point where it takes the mature intervention of a parent or other adult to protect naive and immature teens from very real danger from this type of behavior.

In Chapter 6 entitled "Inequality," the author asks a question: Can social media resolve social divisions? The writer reflects on stubborn societal problems such as racial tensions and uses examples from teen interviews about their experiences to reveal how these problems are replicated in the online world. This may be because regardless of age, gender, and race, people bring their culture and biases with them to their online interactions. Skipping to Chapter 8 entitled "Searching for a public of their own" for more on this topic, Boyd claims that teens search for "freedom" in a public of their own. "Teens find social media appealing because it allows them access to their friends and provides an opportunity to be a part of a broader public world while still situated physically in their bedrooms." Unfortunately, Boyd seems to turn a blind eye to the fact that what she is saying also supports the way that teens are prone to living in cliques that rarely encourage much in the way of diversity.

Stepping back to Chapter 7 entitled "Literacy," which addresses digital literacy and explores terms such as "digital native and digital immigrant," Boyd uses Google and Wikipedia as examples of how social media promotes universal digital literacy for everyone. Accordingly, she is of the opinion that "both adults and youth need to develop media literacy and technological skills to be active participants in our information society. Learning is a lifelong process."

Overall, Boyd's book on the perspective of social media through the eyes of teens and parents is likely to be an interesting resource for parents and educators. Her attempt to combine snippets of the daily lives of teens with social development theories may attract the attention of media academics or anyone concerned with how teens and social media are combining to build relationships of the next generation.