



TEENS, TRIBUNES, AND TRIBULATIONS

Representations of Youth and Technology in Mass Media

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“If it bleeds, it leads.” This proverbial couplet refers in a literal sense to common criticisms of media sensationalism, selection bias, and obsession with graphic content. Yet it is also relevant in a metaphorical sense: research shows that media sources will select and sensationalize perceived threats to cherished norms and values of dominant groups.

This essay will identify, explore, and analyze one such menacingly portrayed phenomenon: the interactions of contemporary youth and new technologies.¹ I argue that today’s breathless media diatribes are hardly new and only understood fully in the context of an essentialist construction of youth that consistently exploits youths to serve adult interests. A similarly essentialist, deterministic, and exotic construction of technology, meanwhile, acts as a vehicle for exploitive adult beliefs and a vessel for endemic adult fears relating to power, control, and norm preservation. These constructions contribute to the disenfranchisement and social isolation of youth while encouraging estrangement between youths and adults.

Although these conclusions have achieved considerable support in academic literature, their prevalence in public discourses is minimal; as such, I will also consider a number of solutions for achieving public awareness and mitigating these adverse effects.

To many, the problem of media representations of youth and technology may seem as compelling as the problem of unicorns and leprechauns. Technology has irrefutably enabled harmful events that might not have otherwise occurred; media coverage of these incidents, even

¹ “Youth” or “youths” are defined in academic literature as consisting of those roughly between the ages of 12 and 24. (Mazzarella 2003). Strictly defined, “teens” or “adolescents” are a subset of this category, although adolescence and youth are frequently conflated in public discourses. I will refer to youth or youths except in instances when the literature refers specifically to adolescents.

if excessive or exaggerated, may provide timely warning to unsuspecting adults. Moreover, there are many reasons why adults may resist the suggestion that youths are marginalized, oppressed, or persecuted. Parents, teachers, and taxpayers possess an acute understanding of the financial investments, personal sacrifices, and occupational hazards of child rearing. Their personal experiences may collude with media narratives to generate a limitless legion of conclusions undermining the supposition that youths are marginalized. A closer examination of these conclusions, however, reveals a thornier picture in which the leafy overgrowth of logical leaps, unsubstantiated assumptions, and spurious conclusions have sprouted, strangled, and obscured the kernels of fact in which these judgments are rooted.

One widespread error is the inappropriate generalization of individual or subcultural attributes to youths as a whole. Conclusions generated from personal experience with tens or hundreds of youths may well describe that particular subset, but cannot be reliably applied to a group of tens of millions. The odds of exposure to a representative sample of youths in daily life is negligible when one considers the enormous variability of race, gender, age, socioeconomic origin, academic performance, geographic location, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and many other relevant social, cultural, and demographic variables. The inverse of this hasty generalization—inferring characteristics of individuals from characteristics of a group to which they belong—is equally fallacious. We can know the youths we know, in other words, but we can't know “youth” without sources beyond our personal experiences, nor can we know particular youths simply by knowing the characteristics of youth as a group.

A related and especially problematic endeavor is to engage in a comparative exercise between impressions of one's self or cohort during youth and one's impressions of youths today. This construction compounds the generalization error by applying assumptions of homogeneity

to two groups instead of one, and introducing the considerable probabilities of transcription, recall, or revisionism errors associated with memories. Even more significantly, these relative analyses suppose a homogeneity of youth across time in which socialization experiences are identical, social categories are immutable, social forces are constant, and intervening social changes simply do not exist.

Ideally, then, media representations of youth would function as a critical resource for those who do not simply derive impressions of youth from personal experience. Media sources have the potential to present the most salient information regarding contemporary youths to adult audiences, present more objective analyses of young cohorts, and correct the fallacies of limited experience.

In fact, however, media sources are susceptible to their own fallacies, a conclusion acknowledged by publics and academics alike. Criticisms common to both groups include the assertion that the pursuit of maximum revenue and viewership frequently interferes with objective presentation, such that “the facts” are not permitted to “get in the way of a good story.” Conflict theorists have also argued that media sources, financed and administered by privileged members of society, are far from independent voices and instead act as important enablers and legitimators of hegemonic interests. Another sociological perspective has emphasized the “professional subculture” of the journalist, a collection of norms and conventions such as verifying sources and generating human interest. These attributes may or may not impede objective presentation: the norm of presenting both sides of an argument, for example, may obfuscate the degree of consensus among scholars in a story of scientific findings.

As a result, many consumers of media are skeptical and discriminate. Far from the passive, pliable consumers youths are frequently supposed to be, media consumers of all ages

select their sources, articulate personalities whom they “trust,” and question the accuracy of reports that contradict their preexisting beliefs. Conversely, just as personal experiences provide a lens through which to interpret media content, media content provides a lens through which to interpret personal experiences. Media content imposes a terminology and framework in which to define experiences, as well as a form of social legitimation when one’s personal experiences are perceived as concordant with media narratives. Although individuals retain the ability to resist this reciprocal relationship, personal experiences and media narratives are indelibly linked in the social construction of youth and other groups: each shapes and is shaped by the other.

To the extent that consumers accept media narratives of youth, then, they remain susceptible to the biases of media production; to the extent that they reject these narratives, they remain susceptible to the biases of personal experiences; to the extent that personal experiences coincide with media narratives, consumers are susceptible to a coincidence of both biases, buttressed by the perceived substantiation of unrepresentative experiences. The quixotic promise of media as a corrective panacea remains unfulfilled.

Scientific inquiry presents an alternate solution. Although academic studies are hardly infallible, the aggregation of thousands of independent studies employing diverse, rigorous, and systematic modes of data collection, coupled with the practices of peer review and replication, pose a robust check against the biases of individual researchers. Although researchers are no more able to reach tens of millions of youths than members of the public, they are able to reach many thousands through observations, interviews, and surveys, ensure that these samples are representative, and situate their findings in the context of thousands of other studies. As a result, they are well positioned to correct for the biases of personal experience, and their compendium

of results allows an informed assessment of the extent to which media content adheres to the scientific data.

And in fact, scholars who examine contemporary media portrayals of youth have been almost unanimously critical (Mazzarella 2003). Cultural scholar Henry Giroux, in *The Abandoned Generation* (2003: xvi-xvii), argues that the media is “at war with young people...No longer seen as a crucial social investment for the future of a democratic society, youth are now demonized in the popular media and derided by politicians looking for quick-fix solutions.” Sociologist Mike Males, in *The Scapegoat Generation* (1996: 27), concludes that “the popular media seems to see its role as one of uncritically sensationalizing whatever assertions officials utter. Media spokespersons have uncorked their own fury at adolescents, revealing that anti-youth media distortions may not stem from poor journalism alone, but a large dose of personal hostility.” Criminologist Todd Krohn (2009) has bluntly declared: “[Youths] are the last marginalized group out there for which it’s safe for the media, politicians, and adults to beat up with impunity.”

Research has also found that media representations of technology are similarly distorted. Technological advances inspire strong reactions ranging from wonder to trepidation, and as such are featured prominently in media discourses. Most academic reviews conclude that media narratives adopt a simplistic and extreme position regarding technology, situating advances, products, and consequences as either an unadulterated boon or unadulterated threat to society (Buckingham 2008). When technology is addressed in the context of youth, however, media narratives emphasize the negative far more frequently than the positive. Linguist Crispin Thurlow, in his study of media representations of computer-mediated discourse among youths (2006), argues that “language and technology are (once again) not only being poorly represented,

but also scapegoated for a range of adult anxieties about newness, change, and perceived threats to the status quo.” Information scientist Susan Herring, citing the work of Thurlow and others (2008: 71), contends that “mainstream media commentators interpret new technologies and youth practices in normative, moral terms, a process that reinscribes youth as ‘other.’” My current project analyzing newspaper representations of teens and cell phones shows that over 90 percent of articles adopt an overtly negative perspective of youths’ use of cell phones, with over 80 percent of articles in the past twelve months focused on two topics: the perils of text messaging while driving, and the perils of “sexting,” the dissemination of sexually explicit images of teens using cell phone cameras and multimedia message technology. Media scholar Henry Jenkins sums up this perfect storm of panic: “We are afraid of our children. We are afraid of their reactions to digital media.” And with the visibility of youth culture and rapid pace of technological change, “we suddenly can’t avoid either” (Mazzarella 2003: 232).

The remainder of this essay presents a sociological analysis of the existence and perpetuation of endemic negative depictions of youth and technology in mass media. I will situate these misleading media representations in broader historical and social contexts, tracing their causes to an increasingly self-serving social construction of adolescence by adults to legitimate oppressive behaviors, an overly deterministic and exotic view of technology as an impetus for social change, and deep, recurring adult fears regarding the direction and outcome of the society in which they find themselves.

Although adolescence is doubtlessly a period of biological change, it is not at all clear that it must be a period of psychological or cultural change. Comparative studies have yielded the inevitable conclusion that many societies construct childhood and adolescence differently

than ours. One review of anthropological literature, for example, found that only 40 percent of 186 preindustrial societies studied by anthropologists had a word for adolescence (Schlegel and Barry 1991). The authors also found that these societies were characterized by significantly less pathological, aggressive, and antisocial behavior than their contemporary industrial or postindustrial counterparts. Many of these cultures employ a dualistic framework of child or adult, marked by one or more rites of passage by which a child is immediately rendered an adult with equal rights, responsibilities, and privileges.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, even industrial America did not conceive of adolescence as a time of significant turmoil. After a brief period of nurturance, older children worked side by side with postpubescents in farms and factories as “miniature adults” who often married and established independent households shortly after puberty (Hine 2000). Here, too, a “continuum” of childhood to adulthood was constructed without the assumption of a stressful and suffering adolescence; once upon the continuum, these miniature adults were evaluated by the same standards of competency as biologically mature adults (Epstein 2007).

Several social and political developments at the turn of the twentieth century conspired to inaugurate a radical shift in perceptions of childhood and adolescence. Rapid urbanization and immigration fueled fears of delinquent children causing crime on city streets, resulting in the widespread passage of curfews and other laws restricting the civil liberties of youths. As adults increasingly feared African-American, impoverished, and immigrant youths, they increasingly sought to protect their “own” (white, middle-class, second-generation or greater) youths from corruptive influences or hazardous environments. In 1848, Pennsylvania passed the first child labor law, initiating a century of local and state laws restricting youth activity in labor as adults fretted about industrialist exploitation of youths in the workplace (Epstein 2007; Hine 2000).

The fall of child labor coincided neatly with the rise of public education. This practice, considered essential to the function of a healthy democracy, was elevated to the status of an inalienable right as labor laws displaced children from the workplace and created a pressing need for a safe environment to nurture white, middle-class Anglo-Saxon youths and rehabilitate (or confine) youths belonging to outgroups. The pace of compulsory education was even more rapid than that of child labor restrictions: less than seventy years after Massachusetts passed the first law mandating youth education, every state had established minimum standards for the education of youths by 1918 (Epstein 2007; Hine 2000).

These early classrooms were inspired by industrialist methods, emphasizing a linear assembly-line production of education ignorant of individual learning styles, cultural disparities, multiple modes of intelligence, the social environment of the classroom, and the difficulties of objectively evaluating academic performance. As such, education was increasingly constructed as a credentializing institution endowed with considerable power and a supposed ability to separate the wheat from the chaff: if a youth could not succeed educationally, the fault lay not within the structural prejudices of the system, but the inherent qualities of the youth. Failed youths, then, deserved the subordinate adult status resulting from his or her unsatisfactory performance. Privileged youths succeeded in this environment tailored to the socialization and values of their class position, while few marginalized youths successfully navigated this foreign environment. These differential successes reinforced existing racist, sexist, classist, and nativist stereotypes (Epstein 2007).

The tropes of protecting-our-children and demonizing-their-children, therefore, had gained considerable social currency by the turn of the twentieth century. Reformers such as Jane Addams, skeptical of other prevailing stereotypes in her time, increasingly posited the problem

in terms of the vulnerability of youth. By constructing youths as imperfect moral characters more susceptible to the dangers of society than experienced adults, she effectively sought to displace prejudicial policies toward impoverished and immigrant populations by advocating a more active role among social institutions in the ministry of youth. If impressionable youths lacking the developed moral fiber to resist the lures of prostitution and other deviant behaviors are placed in disreputable social and financial situations by virtue of their birth, she argues, are we surprised to learn that they will succumb with frightening frequency? And are we not negligent as a society if we fail to protect these passive, suggestible moral characters so susceptible to sin? (Addams 2002).

When G. Stanley Hall, a scholar from the nascent field of psychology, first articulated in 1904 a theory of adolescence as a life stage existing within neither childhood nor adulthood, characterized by transitional “storm and stress” (Hall 2008), his theories resonated with a public whose policies increasingly characterized pubescent youths as less-than-adult: at worst beyond redemption, at best requiring a period of extended childhood until their moral and intellectual faculties were fully developed. Hall’s writings seem hopelessly dated and discriminatory by current standards: heavily influenced by racial eugenics, social Darwinism, and anti-individualism, he advocated an authoritarian brand of “muscular Christianity” emphasizing piety, patriotism, physical activity, and unquestioning submission to adult authority (Lesko 2001).

Though his theories have since foundered on the rocks of individual and cultural variations, they established an essentialist foundation that persists to this day. Academic legitimization further fueled the perceived need for the postponement of entrance into adult spheres. As compulsory education gained momentum in the early years of the twentieth century, the forced daily segregation of youths from adults created the conditions for the first youth

culture in the 1920s. Paradoxically, as adults sought to control youths by separating them from the adult world, the opposite result occurred: warehoused in distinct domains policed by but a few adult teachers, youths contested adult constructions by creating their own cultural and normative priorities. Adults who had outsourced their authority to educational proxies increasingly found themselves in a position of reduced influence.

Instead of reversing course and reintegrating youths into adult spheres, however, policymakers and social institutions deepened the age divide throughout the twentieth century. During the Great Depression, as youths were perceived to compete for a dearth of available jobs, labor interests allied with educational reformers to pass federal laws mandating compulsory schooling until the age of 16 (boyd 2008). New generations of youth became increasingly alienated from adult models of adolescence as a benevolent extension of childhood, rejecting “cute” constructions in favor of a self-determined construction of “cool” (Cross 2004). Although adolescents no longer possessed property rights, middle-class youths were granted disposable income by adults, and business interests began to target this nascent market by creating cultural products oriented in accordance with youth constructions (boyd 2008).

Meanwhile, ethnocentric developmental psychologists, ignorant of the social developments manufacturing and encouraging this separate youth culture, continued to confuse a social phenomenon with developmental inevitability. Influential academics such as Erik Erikson (1994) integrated adolescence into their models of the life course, while authors of popular psychological works such as *Reviving Ophelia* characterized adolescents as bobbing dangerously in a sea of infested waters, clinging desperately to their friends for life and support (Pipher 1995). Today, the dominant paradigm of adolescence is one of “raging hormones” in which middle-class youths are at the mercy of impulsive urges, sexual insatiability, delusions of

invincibility, seductive market forces, and peer pressures. Always one lapse from irreversible corruption, youths' normative differences are equated with a developmental lack of self-regulatory skills. The only solution, it seems to adults, is to fight an eternal struggle against the inherent biological inertia of these almost-deviants, only relaxing when they emerge in their twenties and thirties as functional adults. In such a perilous period, the luxury of accounting for adolescents as they succumb to the more important consideration of who they become. For adults, adolescence has become a period to be traversed with tough love, denial of experience, and crossed fingers.

The partial abdication of adult autonomy, meanwhile, has contributed to heightened attention on the perceived deficiencies of education. Yet educational solutions are often proposed without challenging the limitations of the underlying system: more tests, more teachers, more training, more elbow grease and can-do American spirit are the panacea to these endemic problems. Undersupported and underfunded teachers respond by highlighting the cultural and intellectual disparities of their students and logistic complications of supervising and regulating the moral and intellectual development of hundreds of students at a time. Sociologist James Coleman (1987) argues that there exists a crisis in the "locus of dependency" of youths, in which parents and teachers lack a consensual understanding of the roles each is to play in the development of adolescents. Similarly burdened by increasing demands, yet ignorant of the demands imposed upon the other group, each endlessly accuses the other of failing to uphold their role.

The obsolete assembly-line method of education, now belied by research into learning styles and cultural disparities, continues to reproduce class divisions. Meanwhile, the credential inflation of the past thirty years compels youths to continue to college if possible, contributing to

the further extension of childhood and increased parental pressure as middle-class adults impose marketable niches and activities upon their children—for which many of these compliant students are rewarded with substantial financial debt at the moment of entrance into the adult world. As a result, adolescence has become an obsolete category: when “thirty is the new twenty,” even twentysomethings are segmented as separate from adult societies.

According to psychologist Robert Epstein in *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen* (2007), the average age at which a youth is considered an adult is now 26. Teens have ten times as many legal restrictions on their behavior than adults and twice as many as incarcerated felons and active-duty Marines. American teens today are in contact with their peers for 65 hours per week, whereas teens in preindustrial societies—who spend the majority of their time with same-sex adults—are in contact with their peers for an average of 4 hours per week. Epstein and Diane Dumas have further found that the amount of restrictions imposed upon youths is significantly correlated with psychopathology, and the cognitive abilities of adolescents are not significantly different than those of adults. Their research measured teens in relation to adults in fourteen areas of competency, finding that youths performed as well or nearly as well as adults in all categories. Adults, meanwhile, drastically underestimated teen performance in all areas.

The role of technology and the media in this artificial extension of separation from adult spheres is significant. The sociological term “moral panic” was coined in 1972 to describe social perceptions that drastically overestimated the dangers of particular practices (Cohen 2002). Media sources have always been complicit in the exaggeration of moral panics, and many of these moral panics have centered on youth behaviors as a result of the increasing segregation of youths and emergence of youth cultures.

Blame for moral panics has varied depending upon the particular youth audiences involved: marijuana, for example, was demonized in the 1930s due to perceived popularity among Mexican immigrants. Similarly, rock and roll in the 1950s and 1960s was linked to African-American cultures, while punk rock in the 1970s was linked to lower-class cultures. Association with outgroups, however, is not always possible. And in the context of panics relating to middle-class youths, a contradiction emerges: without a convenient cultural scapegoat, adults must find a way to attribute the perceived harm to a source external to their beloved, “special” progeny (Binder 1993).

This contradiction is particularly salient in panics surrounding technology. Middle-class youths are often the first to adopt new technologies due to their privileged position and greater disposable income. As such, the technology itself becomes endowed with the inherent ability to corrupt. The rapid pace of technological change and faster adoption of new technologies by youths than adults, moreover, fuels an adult-centric construction of technology as an exotic, bewildering, and (most importantly) unregulated frontier. This construction is particularly applicable to today’s technologies: the flexibility of information technologies allow youths to engage in unsupervised behavior with peers or other corruptive actors even when physically situated in supervised spaces. Adults are unable or unwilling to follow with the same alacrity at which youths adopt the technologies, and if adults succeed in infiltrating digital spaces occupied by youths, youths simply move to another digital space (Herring 2008). Panics of youths and technology, then, are panics of control and supervision, dependent upon a demeaning construction of youths’ self-regulation.

Moral panics of youths and technology have dated to the creation of the first youth culture in the 1920s. One significant early sociological study in 1925 found the adults of

“Middletown” bemoaning the enabling qualities of automobiles: they were scorned as “beds on wheels” and blamed for allowing youths to escape direct adult supervision (Lynd and Lynd 1959). Since then, analogous panics have accompanied the widespread introduction of radio, telephones, television, and many other technologies.

The actual consequences of these technologies have yet to justify the degree of adult hyperventilation. Kim Herring concludes in her examination of the effects of television (2008:85): “What does the history of the television tell us about the likely future of the Internet and other digital media...Societal transformation will be less radical than predicted, and children will not change fundamentally as social or thinking beings. The human race will not become smarter, kinder, or more just overall...nor will it become dumber, more violent, or less moral.”

Nevertheless, media sources continue to assert that such effects are likely without adult intervention. A New York Times article from May 25, 2009, “Texting May Be Taking a Toll” (Hafner 2009), is an instructive case study. The title situates a youth-dominated activity in a menacing framework, with the addition of a qualifier to preserve a presentation of objectivity. This veneer is betrayed, however, by a first paragraph evocative of ominous soundtracks on tabloid news shows: “They do it late at night when their parents are asleep. They do it in restaurants and while crossing busy streets. They do it in the classroom with their hands behind their back. They do it so much their thumbs hurt.”

The reader then learns that texting is “beginning to worry physicians and psychologists, who say it is leading to anxiety, distraction in school, falling grades, repetitive stress injury and sleep deprivation.” Again, a veneer of objectivity is presented: it’s not the author, you see, who believes that texting will afflict youths with every malady short of terminal cancer—it’s the experts, and the truth demands presentation.

In this case, however, presentation is supplanted by suppositions and unsubstantiated judgments amidst weasel words and vague descriptors. The cast of experts expounds unrepresentative data (one quizzed her own students; another incredibly supported his conclusion that parents are ignorant of the problem by asserting, “I talk to parents in the office now”) and generalizing assumptions. (“Among the jobs of adolescence [is] to find the peace and quiet to become the person you decide you want to be.” “The fantasy of every adolescent is that the parent is there, waiting, expectant, completely there for them.”)

On rare occasions when statistical evidence is presented over anecdotal, it is applied inappropriately, as in the invocation of the mean of a non-normal distribution doubtlessly skewed by outliers (“American teenagers sent and received an average of 2,272 text messages per month in the fourth quarter of 2008.”) A social control agent—in this case, a high school teacher—testifies to texting’s unchecked proliferation and her powerlessness to stop it. The millions of teens texting this “average” amount with no side effects are not represented: instead, we meet a “ninth grade honor student” with cramped thumbs and a thirteen year old who “racked up 14,528 texts in one month.”

Of course, parental intervention is the answer to protect the broadly smiling, blond haired, blue eyed, simply adorable white female teen proudly holding up her cell phone in the image accompanying the article. Unsurprisingly, the aforementioned obsessive teen’s grades responded positively to temporary deprivation, followed by a strict monthly limit of 5,000 texts per month and a weekday cell phone curfew. It should not be surprising if many adults respond to this uplifting story of restored order and hundreds of other parables in thousands of other similarly constructed reports by imposing similar draconian measures on their own teens who text harmlessly without side effects (Lynn 2009).

Although the scope of this problem is structural, many possible courses of action exist to mitigate the negative effects of media representations of youths and technology.

A first step is to challenge the notion that youths are not oppressed. The data suggests otherwise. Yet youth marginalization is ignored for many reasons. First, youths do not exist as youths forever: no matter how interminable the postponement of participation in the adult world, it eventually ends. It is constructed “for their own good,” and youths themselves may be persuaded to keep their heads down, accept the status quo, and wait out their extended childhood without jeopardizing their promised status in adult society. Second, the notion that youths (particularly white middle-class youths) are oppressed is anathematic to adults who readily identify more established axes of oppression, who reach into their own mythologized memories of adolescence as a basis of comparison, or who identify political and social power by such incomplete standards as the technological savvy of their toys. Third, powerful interests exist with a social or financial stake in current constructions of adolescence: parents still require youths to be somewhere safe between 8 and 5; teachers and administrators still require jobs; politicians still require handy talking points to illustrate their toughness; media sources do not want to contradict their previous narratives for fear of losing consumers.

Perhaps most importantly, the kernels of truth residing at the heart of these elaborate social constructions remain relevant. Adults do commit considerable amounts of time, effort, and patience toward the emergence of functional youths; youths do exhibit cruel, spoiled, and ungrateful behaviors at times; youths do require some social investment to contest the misguided norms they may embrace; youths do appropriate technologies to injure themselves and others;

adults do need to be aware of these misuses; and even one instance of sexual predation or other malicious act is one too many.

Each of these reasons for ignoring youth oppression may be challenged. The limited duration of oppression is not a justification of oppression, nor is the presence of conflicting self-interests. Millions of sons, daughters, and grandchildren enter into this oppressive construction each year. Tax dollars are wasted on policies that are as much to their detriment than “for their own good.” The existence of race, gender, and class discrimination is not incompatible with age discrimination—in fact, these prejudices are often cumulative. The dated standards of previous adolescences are ignorant of social and normative changes and susceptible to interpretative biases. Disposable income granted to adolescents does not equate to power or freedom, particularly when legal, institutional, and parental restrictions conspire to displace youths from the adult world to which they are destined. And the mere existence of committed adults or cruel teens does not negate the structural deficiencies of the current system.

A second step is to challenge the notion that technology possesses inherent powers leading to the corruption of youth. To paraphrase a slogan from an unrelated political debate: technology doesn’t harm people—people harm people. Some amount of regulation to curtail the most egregious excesses, such as child pornography or sexual predation, is certainly merited, and some teens cannot be trusted with technology. Yet the fact that some teens should not be trusted does not mean that all teens should not be trusted: to suggest otherwise or organize a systematic campaign of restrictions extending beyond education of the potential dangers of technology use is to systematically oppress youths. The reality is that most teens use technology for mundane, innocuous ends, yet those uses are very important to them. Misguided media narratives,

however, suggest the opportunities of technology and motives of raging hormones render every youth a suspect.

These dual concepts are normative and easily implemented on an individual level. Adopting a more humane outlook toward the youths in one's own life, considering their particular struggles in a broader context of disempowerment and societal pressures, scrutinizing adult and media narratives for self-serving interests, trusting youths who have proved trustworthy in offline settings to remain trustworthy in an online setting, and not automatically dismissing youth opinions and outlooks merely by virtue of their location in an unfamiliar culture will go a long way toward mending age-disparate relationships in one's life, especially if accompanied by patience and acceptance of youth skepticism toward seemingly well-intentioned adults. A simple shift toward acknowledging youths as they are, and not merely who they will become, encompasses many of the above orientations.

These individual changes must be accompanied by institutional changes. The ubiquity of misguided media narratives renders this endeavor difficult, but this fact is inadequate justification for allowing those narratives to proliferate unchecked. Challenging media narratives when espoused by other adults in one's social life, taking ten minutes to compose a letter to an editor or a political representative, or advocating against discriminatory practices at school board or local government meetings are as easily accomplished as adopting a more nuanced normative perspective.

Ultimately, however, media sources and adults will continue to belittle youths and their use of technology until youths are permitted greater participation in adult spheres. This does not entail permitting youths to enter the workplace at thirteen or abolishing compulsory education, but it does require a radical revision of the role of education in the lives of youths and adults.

Segregating youths in schools to socialize exclusively among peers and learn outdated curricula from overworked and underpaid adult proxies in a society in which the pace of relevant knowledge does not remain static from adolescence to retirement is ludicrous when the intent is for youths to emerge as functional and capable adults, and this practice is legitimated only by a hundred years' history of this obsolete construction.

Education must integrate itself into other social institutions, providing youths opportunities to spend more time with adults. Youths must be permitted to act in adult spheres according to the same standards of competency by which adults are evaluated. At the very least, youths should possess an appropriate amount of power over the educational institution itself beyond the token figureheads of most student councils. Youth representatives, for example, should be accorded full participatory powers in the policy deliberations of school or district boards. In rare instances in which this has been tried, youths have acquitted themselves admirably in spite of adult attempts at disenfranchisement and overt adult discrimination (Goldman et al. 2008).

Media narratives would no doubt prophecy the destructive outcome of such widespread social change—after all, youths would inevitably be too busy texting on their phones and listening to their iPods to take their responsibilities seriously. To argue as such is as discriminatory as arguing that women or minorities should be excluded from these participatory processes, as misguided as equating all cars with beds on wheels, and as unsubstantiated as unicorns and leprechauns.

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