

SOCIAL MEDIA

Parents' worries misplaced, expert says

Kids congregating on websites for relatively unsupervised activities is the normal stuff of teenage hanging out, Danah Boyd says

PAMELA PAUL

With her co-ordinated zebra-striped scarf, tights and arm warmers (arm warmers?), spiky out-to-there hat and pierced tongue, 34-year-old Danah Boyd provides an electric Gen Y contrast to the staid grey lobby of Microsoft Research in Cambridge, Mass.. In a juxtaposition that causes her no end of mischievous delight, her laptop bears a sticker of Snow White, whose outstretched arm gently cradled the Apple logo.

But Ms. Boyd – a senior researcher at Microsoft, an assistant professor at New York University and a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University – is a widely respected figure in social media research. With a number of influential scholarly papers to her name, she travels relentlessly, tweets under the handle Zephoria and has fans trailing her at TED conferences, at South by Southwest and elsewhere on the high-tech speaking circuit.

She is also a kind of rock-star emissary from the online and offline world of teenagers. The young subjects of her research become her friends on Facebook and subscribe to her Twitter feed.

“The single most important thing about Danah is that she’s the first anthropologist we’ve got who comes from the tribe she’s studying,” said Clay Shirky, a professor in the interactive telecommunications program at NYU and a fellow at the Berkman Center.

There’s no shortage of grown-up distress over the dangers young people face online. Parents, teachers and schools worry about teenagers posting their lives (romantic indiscretions, depressing poetry and all), leaking passwords and generally flouting social conventions as predators, bullies and unsavoury marketers lurk. Endless back-and-forthing over how to respond effectively – shutting websites, regulating online access and otherwise tempering the world of social media for children – dominates the parent-teacher associations and the halls of policy makers.

But as Dr. Boyd sees it, adults are worrying about the wrong things.

Children today, she said, are reacting online largely to social changes that have taken place offline.

“Children’s ability to roam has basically been destroyed ...,” Dr. Boyd said. “Letting your child out to bike around the neighbour-



Children today, Danah Boyd says, are reacting online largely to social changes that have taken place offline. ERIK JACOBS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

hood is seen as terrifying now, even though, by all measures, life is safer for kids today.”

Children naturally congregate on social media sites for the relatively unsupervised conversations, flirtations, immature humour and social exchanges that are the normal stuff of teenage hanging out, she said.

“We need to give kids the freedom to explore and experience things online that might actually help them,” she added. “What scares me is that we don’t want to look at the things that make us uncomfortable. So rather than see what teenagers are showing us online about bullying and suicide and the problems they’re dealing with and using that information to help them, we’re making ourselves blind to it.”

These are issues that Dr. Boyd has lived with and knows well.

“At the age of 16, I thought I’d be dead by 21,” she said. “I lost 13 classmates to drug overdoses, suicides, accidents and a murder. ...

“The Internet was my saving

grace,” she said. “I would spend my teenage nights talking to strangers online, realizing there were other smart kids out there.”

She also often reached out to adults online, many of whom acted as de facto counsellors and mentors. Dr. Boyd’s own positive experience on platforms such as Usenet and Internet Relay Chat fuels her dismay over attempts to restrict children’s use of the Internet today.

Despite her own teenage rebellion or perhaps because of it, Ms. Boyd ended up at Brown University, where she studied computer science, and at the media lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she obtained a master’s degree. She earned her PhD from the school of information at the University of California, Berkeley, working at Google, Yahoo and Tribe at the same time.

In November she was tapped, along with John Palfrey, a director of the Berkman Center, to run the research arm of Lady Gaga’s Born

This Way Foundation, an organization devoted to empowering youth.

Dr. Boyd’s standard mode of research combines traditional quantitative work with deep ethnographic research – embedding herself in youth communities, whether it’s middle-class Muslim gangs in Nashville or Ivy League aspirants who navigate social media with startling sophistication.

One of her most influential and contentious papers showed that when teenagers transitioned from MySpace to Facebook, a kind of “white flight” occurred, in which Facebook became more associated with children who aspire to college.

By focusing on a range of issues – sexual predation, teenage suicide, bullying, sexting, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual trafficking – Ms. Boyd has shown, often to the dismay of those in the tech community who believe that the Internet is the ultimate equalizer, that issues of race, class and gen-

der persist in the virtual world just as in the real world. The children in families characterized by alcohol and drug abuse, financial stress, divorce and sexual abuse reveal their struggles online just as they do off.

“She was the first to say that the teenagers at risk offline are the same ones who are at risk online,” said Alice Marwick, a postdoctoral researcher at Microsoft. “It’s not that the Internet is doing something bad to these kids, it’s that these bad things are in kids’ lives and the Internet is just a component of that.”

Most shocking to adults may be how similar teenagers are to them when it comes to online behaviour.

“Teenagers are not some alien population,” Dr. Boyd said.

“When we see new technologies, we think they make everything different for young people. But they really don’t. Teenagers are the same as they always were.”

New York Times News Service