

Whether it's bikes or bytes, teens are teens

MCT FORUM

By *danah boyd*

If you're like most middle-class parents, you've probably gotten annoyed with your daughter for constantly checking her Instagram feed or with your son for his two-thumbed texting at the dinner table. But before you rage against technology and start unfavorably comparing your children's lives to your less-wired childhood, ask yourself this: Do you let your 10-year-old roam the neighborhood on her bicycle as long as she's back by dinner? Are you comfortable, for hours at a time, not knowing your teenager's exact whereabouts?

What American children are allowed to do – and what they are not – has shifted significantly over the last 30 years, and the changes go far beyond new technologies.

If you grew up middle-class in America prior to the 1980s, you were probably allowed to walk out your front door alone and – provided it was still light out and you had done your homework – hop on your bike and have adventures your parents knew nothing about. Most kids had some kind of curfew, but a lot of them also snuck out on occasion. And even those who weren't given an allowance had ways to earn spending money – by delivering newspapers, say, or baby-sitting neighborhood children.

All that began to change in the 1980s. In response to anxiety about "latchkey" kids, middle- and upper-class parents started placing their kids in after-school programs and other activities that filled up their lives from morning to night. Working during high school became far less common. Not only did newspaper routes become a thing of the past but parents quit entrusting their children to teenage baby-sitters, and fast-food restaurants shifted to hiring older workers.

Parents are now the primary mode of transportation for teenagers, who are far less likely to walk to school or take the bus than any previous generation. And because most parents work, teens' mobility and ability to get together casually with friends has been severely limited. Even sneaking out is futile, because there's nowhere to go. Curfew, trespassing and loitering laws have restricted teens' presence in public spaces. And even if one teen has been allowed out independently and has the means to do something fun, it's unlikely her friends will be able to join her.

Given the array of restrictions teens face, it's not surprising that they have embraced technology with such enthusiasm. The need to hang out, socialize, gossip and flirt hasn't diminished, even if kids' ability to get together has.

After studying teenagers for a decade, I've come to respect how their creativity, ingenuity and resilience have not been dampened even as they have been misunderstood, underappreciated and reviled. I've watched teenage couples co-create images to produce a portrait of intimacy when they lack the time and place to actually kiss. At a more political level, I've witnessed undocumented youth use social media to rally their peers and personal networks to speak out in favor of the Dream Act, even going so far as to orchestrate school walkouts and local marches.

This does not mean that teens always use the tools around them for productive purposes. Plenty of youth lash out at others, emulating a pervasive culture of meanness and cruelty. Others engage in risky behaviors, seeking attention in deeply problematic ways. Yet, even as those who are

Whether it's bikes or bytes, teens are teens

By *danah boyd*
(continued)

hurting others often make visible their own personal struggles, I've met alienated LGBT youth for whom the Internet has been a lifeline, letting them see that they aren't alone as they struggle to figure out whom to trust.

And I'm on the board of Crisis Text Line, a service that connects thousands of struggling youth with counselors who can help them. Technology can be a lifesaver, but only if we recognize that the Internet makes visible the complex realities of people's lives.

As a society, we both fear teenagers and fear |for them. They bear the burden of our cultural obsession with safety, and they're constantly used as justification for increased restrictions. Yet, at the end of the day, their emotional lives aren't all that different from those of their parents as teenagers. All they're trying to do is find a comfortable space of their own as they work out how they fit into the world and grapple with the enormous pressures they face.

Viewed through that prism, it becomes clear how the widespread embrace of technology and the adoption of social media by kids have more to do with non-technical changes in youth culture than with anything particularly compelling about those tools. Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter and Facebook may be fun, but they're also offering today's teens a relief valve for coping with the increased stress and restrictions they encounter, as well as a way of being with their friends even when their more restrictive lives keep them apart.

The irony of our increasing cultural desire to protect kids is that our efforts may be harming them. In an effort to limit the dangers they encounter, we're not allowing them to develop skills to navigate risk. In our attempts to protect them from harmful people, we're not allowing them to learn to understand, let alone negotiate, public life. It is not possible to produce an informed citizenry if we do not first let people engage in public.

Treating technology as something to block, limit or demonize will not help youth come of age more successfully. If that's the goal, we need to collectively work to undo the culture of fear and support our youth in exploring public life, online and off.

ABOUT THE WRITER

danah boyd is a principal researcher at Microsoft Research; a research assistant professor in media, culture and communication at NYU, and a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center. Her new book is "It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens." She wrote this for the Los Angeles Times

©2014 Los Angeles Times. 4-15-14.

Distributed by MCT Information Services