**SUMMARY**

**HARVARD’S BERKMAN CENTER FOR INTERNET AND SOCIETY**

***"Empowering Parents and Protecting Children in an Evolving Media Landscape***"

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The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University completed a summary of current research on transformations in media and youth media practices. The paper, entitled ***"Empowering Parents and Protecting Children in an Evolving Media Landscape,***" focuses on the radical transformation in the information technology environment and the ways in which this transformation presents great opportunities for growth as well as complex challenges for parents and children.

The paper focuses on three areas: 1) risky behaviors and online safety; 2) privacy, publicity and reputation; and 3) information dissemination, youth created content and information quality.

The Berkman Center suggests that when the topic of youth and technology is discussed it is fears about the future, rather than opportunities, that dominate public discourse. The Berkman Center reports adults perceive youth as being more likely to use new technologies in ways that are harmful to themselves, their peers, and to society as a whole. Although this fear seems reasonable, the data collected by social scientists about young people (i.e., how they actually use technology and the challenges and opportunities they face) is frequently at odds with public perception.

**Risky behaviors and online safety**

When the topic of youth and media is raised with parents studies show the most common concern is online safety. Parents, teachers, law enforcement, and now politicians fear the worst for youth in the context of networked public spaces. The central fear is environments mediated through technology, where youth can interact with others, ***are inherently less safe than schools, parks, community centers and neighbors*** (including the Internet, mobile phones, and gaming platforms)***.***

Given this fear, researchers at the Berkman Center state that a split has emerged in the debate regarding online safety -- the divide being those who think it is advisable to educate and empower youth about the use and misuse of media versus those who believe the safest course of action is to restrict or eliminate access to new technologies. Those who think it is advisable to restrict or filter access to increase online safety are guided, according to studies, by ***adult centered*** fears rather than the reality of the way youth access and use media. In short, the Berkman Center researchers state that it is fear and not facts that drives public discourse about how youth use technology.

The researchers at the Berkman Center state the public discourse on safety for youth needs to be grounded both in the data about the actual risks that youth confront as well as the potential ***opportunities for enhanced learning, expanding communication models, and creativity that the new technologies offer.*** While adults need to be involved in safety initiatives, the better approach according to the Berkman Center is for youth to learn how to competently handle the complex situations that present themselves online.

**Privacy, publicity, and reputation**

The Berkman Center researchers report adults worry youth share too much information about their personal lives including photos, phone numbers, and home addresses while travelling through cyberspace. Adults report they believe today's youth lack judgment and awareness about protecting their privacy. When interviewed in the context of studies, adults believe young people may be doing themselves irreparable harm by leaving electronic footprints -- footprints that that others can follow online into the unforeseeable future. Research shows that parents are concerned that their children will leave persistent, searchable, and impossible to delete information that later may come back to haunt them in a different ways by potential employers, educational institutions, or other third parties.

The anxiety young people are sharing too much information without any sense limits or boundaries ***is not matched by the data collected by social scientists in the field of media.*** The research suggests something entirely different: most youth do care about privacy and their personal reputations. What is the case youth sometimes do not have sufficient skills and tools to maintain private information from others.

Additionally, what youth want to keep private is often very different from what adults believe they should keep private. As one would anticipate, there is a wide range of opinion among youth about what privacy is, just as there is a wide range of opinion within the adult population. There are substantial numbers of youth who recognize that much can be gained from being within the cyber sphere and these youth address, in their own way, whether or not the opportunities for publicity or personal exposure outweigh potential negative consequences.

When youth are interviewed about privacy they state they care about their privacy and even take active steps to guard their privacy. However their understanding of what privacy means differs from adult views on privacy. The Berkman researchers report there are studies that show teens are often ***more vigilant*** than the adults in their lives in terms of privacy protecting behaviors, (although they are much more likely to engage in unethical approaches like piracy or providing false information).

Young people tend to see the Internet as part of their social environment, whereas their parents or other adults in their lives see the Internet as a place to obtain information or share certain forms of communication. What is also important to understand is the relationships that youth maintain with their peers are not clearly separated between online and off-line. Most youth interact online with people they already know off-line. Youth tend to focus more on the potential benefits of information disclosure than they do on the potential harm. Studies of 12-year-olds and older teens found that youth take a "risk-benefit" approach to sharing information, becoming more willing to disclose personal information if they anticipate benefits from sharing. Obviously, for many young people, being part of a popular online social network sites carries meaningful social benefits.

Another significant difference between youth and adults is youth do not see information as purely public or private. Rather, they appear to distinguish between different levels of privacy, as is evidenced on a social network site like Facebook. On Facebook youth can divide friends into different types of groups which in turn they can grant different levels of access to types of information. Youth may even share passwords with friends for perceived benefits or for the purpose of demonstrating trust. In addition to sharing profile information and passwords, youth also frequently share user-created content like photos, videos, or blog entries.

According to the Berkman researchers parents should be aware discussing media content with youth, during web surfing or afterward, is one of the most effective strategies to reduce the amount of personal information disclosed, more so than simply prohibiting or limiting their access. Research supports parents who take an empowerment approach, who attempt to build skills so that their children/teens can competently and safely navigate the Internet (rather than rely on restriction and surveillance).

**Information dissemination, youth-created content and quality of information**

According to researchers at the Berkman Center adults fear, along with safety and privacy, the effects of widespread copyright violations by youth. This concern is certainly legitimate as young people frequently do not pay for copyrighted materials they utilize and enjoy from online sources. The Berkman Center researchers suggest that although this is a very important topic to be addressed with children and teens, an equally important topic is the ***rights that young people have to re-mix digital cultural objects as part of legitimate, lawful personal and creative expression.*** The copyright “piracy” conversation typically overshadows any discourse about the positive, creative activities that young people engage in when using digital media. Another issue that receives little attention is empowering youth to be able to identify the quality and credibility of information obtained online through teaching media literacy.

**Media use by young people**

The Berkman Center researchers report the use of electronic media has lead to transformations in learning, socializing, and communication practices among youth, many of which they argue are overwhelmingly positive. Most youth use multiple media at the same time, a practice called multitasking or “switch-tasking.” Included in the daily use of media for youth are activities such as remixing, media collaboration, and the sharing of content. According to research many of these activities are "friendship-driven." The majority of youth interact online with peers they already know from their off-line lives, ***therefore using the Internet to maintain existing relationships.*** Other common activities are "interest-driven:” opportunities to develop expertise in specialized skill areas like animation or video production or writing/blogging.

The Berkman Center researchers also report that there is a significant digital “participation gap,” a gap that exists between youth who have liberal access to sophisticated technology from youth who have limited access to all forms of technology.

**Benefits of electronic media for youth**

The Berkman Center researchers report that the full picture of how electronic media is changing the way youth learn, communicate, pay attention, and socialize is only now in the process of emerging. The children/teens who have grown up with electronic communication, social network sites, cell phones, gaming platforms and other technologies (“digital natives”) is only now becoming a clear target for research. With this said, the Berkman Center researchers believe that engagement with electronic media has significant educational potential in the form of highly focused, self-directed, interest-driven study. New technological media experiences can also foster social skills, self-confidence, leadership skills, and the capacity to communicate. The Berkman Center researchers suggest that youth benefit from socializing in a digitally mediated environment because they are learning skills necessary to participate in creative and collaborative technology mediated work environments.

The Berkman researchers report that technology can play an important role in making information more accessible to youth with disabilities. Mobile devices, such as cell phones and smart phones, can facilitate communication between hearing-impaired students and their teachers. Research also suggests that interventions involving computer-mediated communication may be of help to those on the autism spectrum in terms of their ability to learn new social skills.

**The risks of electronic media for children**

The most common and high profile fears related to Internet use include online harassment or bullying, solicitation for sex, and exposure to violent or other problematic content. Despite the high profile nature of sexual predators, including television shows focusing on predatory behavior, ***research studies do not show an increase in overall predatory behavior as a result of the expansion of media use by young people.*** The Berkman researchers point out that although the context for encounters between a predator and a victim has changed as a result of the internet, ***the youth who are most at risk online are those who are most at risk off-line, such as victims of sexual and physical abuse or children from impoverished or unstable homes.***

The popular perception of a predator as an older male who preys on children is not supported by scientific findings. ***Most sexual solicitation of minors is by other minors and young adults.*** According to the Berkman researchers most Internet initiated sex crimes against minors actually involve young adults and minors who mistakenly believe they are able to consent to sex with an adult. According to the Berkman Center, reported cases of Internet initiated sex crimes involving adult strangers are much less common than crimes initiated by family or other familar adults. What is surprising, but supported by research, is only a small percentage of youth are deceived by adult offenders lying about their age. In fact, cyber stalking by adult offenders appears to be quite rare.

Understanding the differences between popular media portrayals of predatory behavior and actual incidents is an important dimension of research in order to create effective intervention.

**“Sexting”**

Another area of concern to adults, whether parents, teachers, or law enforcement, is the practice of youth generated sexual content. The number one issue for most adults is "sexting” – teens sending sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images of themselves to someone else via text message. Teen attitudes about sexting vary considerably. Some teens do not think sexting is an important issue while other teens see the process of sexting as a ***safer alternative*** to sex with a same age partner.

The Berkman researchers report that although parental supervision would seem to reduce the incidence of sexting, studies show parents who look at the content of their teen’s cell phone were no more or less likely to send or receive nude or nearly nude images on their telephones. What did matter with respect to decreasing the process of sexting were restrictions placed by parents on the ***number of text teens had in their mobile phone plans***. The lower the number of texts allowed the lower the incidence rate of sexting.

**“Cyber-Bullying”**

Cyber bullying or online harassment is another area of concern for parents, educators, and mental health professional. Although there have been very high-profile cases where cyber bullying resulted in teen suicide, the research supports that cyber bullying appears very similar in the prevalence rate to off-line bullying.Online bullies, like off-line bullies, are typically the same age as their victims. Another important finding in the current research is that victims of online harassment may also be perpetrators. ***Studies also show that most youth feel as though bullying is more common and more psychologically harmful at school.*** The youth who are most at risk for cyber bullying or other online harm are the same youth that are at risk for off-line harm: children who have experienced trauma, sexual or physical, and those from economically or psychologically impoverished environments.

**Problematic/dangerous content**

Electronic media provide youth of all ages with access to a wide variety of problematic and potentially harmful information, including pornography, violent media, violent video games, racially and ethnically motivated hate speech, religious intolerance and discussions of harmful behaviors such as cutting and drug use. With respect to sexual content, the Internet does increase the risk of unwanted or accidental exposure to sexual material, mainly among older youth.

As parents struggle with the issue of content control they fear their children, if left unattended or without surveillance, will seek out problematic content like pornography. Studies indicate, however, most children do not seek out inappropriate or dangerous content, but are exposed to it in accidental or inadvertent ways. Whether parents are dealing with purposeful behavior or accidental exposure to content the best way to engage in content control is to empower and engage in meaningful discourse about Internet practices, rather than simply clamping down and prohibiting certain kinds of activities online. The fact of the matter is, empowerment strategy incur less resistance and therefore are more effective.

***The key question that research still needs to address is whether the new access to online content, whether it be sexual, violent, or related to dangerous behaviors like drug abuse, promote unhealthy, age inappropriate or illegal behavior. Much is still be learned about the actual interaction between media and the off-line behavior of children and teens.***

**Commentary**

**CHRISTOPHER MULLIGAN**

In reviewing the research by the Berkman Center at Harvard University I was surprised to learn the extent to which there is a disconnect between the fears and concerns adults have regarding youth media practices and the research/science on the consequences of youth media practices.

Overall, the researchers at the Berkman Center have a positive or optimistic view of the future of the relationship between youth and media/technology. The opportunities for the development of skills, both technical and interpersonal, is emphasized throughout the research. Rather than view the Internet and social media as inherently dangerous or inherently useless, the research on youth media patterns and practices suggests otherwise. Research is clear youth are far more interested in creating meaningful content, maintaining privacy, maintaining their own safety on the Internet, and in protecting their reputations.

The differences that exist between youth (or "digital natives") and adults (or "digital immigrants") is significant and constantly changing and evolving. The typical parent/ adult is skeptical and fearful of the transformations in the media landscape. Adults are concerned children and teens are being stalked by cyber predators, are sending personal and confidential information out into cyberspace indiscriminately, and wasting time mindlessly chatting, surfing, and instant messaging and texting.

It is surprising to learn research studies do not show an increase in overall predatory behavior as a result of the expansion of media use by young people. The youth who are most at risk online are those who are most at risk off-line, such as victims of sexual and physical abuse and children from impoverished or unstable homes. Furthermore, youth are far more likely to engage in dangerous or risky behavior ***with other youth*** rather than with predatory adults. Although cyber bullying certainly occurs, youth are far more concerned with bullying that occurs at school and feel that they are more vulnerable to and affected by face to face or three-dimensional bullying that occurs at school or another community setting

The bottom line from the Berkman Center study is the Internet is a safer and has a far more positive influence on youth then adults believe.

With all of this said, there are important issues the Berkman Center study does not address: namely, the way in which new technologies can take over the lives of youth and produce changes in the way youth process information, ***particularly the level at which they can maintain their attention***.

Dalton Conley, a social biologists, is one of many scientists who are concerned about the way in which youth are affected by constant "connectivity" to multiple technologies. Conley suggests, in an article in the February 21, 2011 edition of **Time magazine**, that "scientific evidence increasingly suggests that, amid all the texting, poking and surfing, our children's digital lives are turning them into much different creatures from us-- and not necessarily for the better."

Conley points to the problem of what researchers now refer to as "***continuous partial attention".*** A Kaiser Family Foundation report released in 2010 found that ***on average*** children ages 8 to 18 are spending ***seven hours and 38 minutes a day*** using entertainment media. If each content stream is counted separately, a majority of youths are texting while watching TV, ***they are logging almost 11 hours of media usage per day.***

Conley, citing research from Stanford University, states that one of the concerns about youth involvement in multiple media is that they experience high degrees of pleasure while engaged with media/technology (due to the fact that the brain releases a neurotransmitter that produces pleasurable states referred to as dopamine) which then creates a “forward-feeding cycle” in which youth pay more and more attention to texts, instant messaging, posts on social media sites, etc. ***at the expense of their ability to sustain their focus on writing, reading, or engaging in problem solving that requires sustained attention.***

Conley also points to a problem with the way teens utilize media and electronic communication, and that is they often have access to their smart phones, computers, etc., seven days a week. As a result, many youth do not have any downtime or private time to think and process what occurred during the course of the day. ***The constant connectivity deprives youth of the ability to be alone, to make use of time when they are alone, and to be able to disconnect and digest social experiences.***

Another concern I have with current media practices, including video gaming, is that children and teens that have pre-existing psychiatric conditions or trauma, are far more likely to become ***compulsively*** involved in the use of media. Children and teens who lack age-appropriate social skills, who feel disconnected and alienated from their peer group, who are unable to initiate and sustain relationships, receive very little (or any) meaningful benefit from their relationship to media/technology. In fact, many youth would benefit from being in an environment where they were completely "unplugged" from all and every form of electronic entertainment and media access.

What would be the ideal environment for youth with deficits in social communication and social behavior? A rural environment, a farm, a place where they could exercise, become engaged with maintaining crops and animals, -- an environment in which each day allowed them to develop skills that would enhance the quality of their lives.

As uprooting a child and moving to a rural community is most likely not an option, the next best approach is to dramatically limit or eliminate access to social media and video games while simultaneously increasing physical engagement with the world: biking, swimming, walking, camping, boogie boarding, flying a kite, etc.

Understandably, for many families with children/teens with special needs, the computer, video games, and other technology are perceived as an essential part of their involvement or connection to the world. Although youth with special needs are certainly drawn to media and technology, it is not the case this involvement is essential or important. The problem for many parents is when they consider limiting access to media and technology, they are confronted with a daunting problem: ***what will they do with their child/teen instead?***

There is no question unplugging children/teens from electronic entertainment and social media will result in protests, complaints, and tantrums -- while shifting responsibility to structure and plan leisure and recreation to parents -- which seem to be an impossible challenge to successfully navigate.

However, the conflict and rough terrain that lies ahead for those parents who choose to significantly limit or eliminate access to electronic entertainment and social media is worth the effort, as it provides children/teens with social-emotional deficits to **live in reality** and to become **competent in reality**, instead of living in fantasy.