

# Youth and New Media: Studying Identity and Meaning in an Evolving Media Environment

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## 1. Introduction

The media landscape continues to change rapidly with the evolutions in digital media and online socializing. The fracturing of the very conception of audiences as consumers complicates mass communication research into current media practices and influences. Contemporary media research could benefit from a reconceptualization of the relationship among the media themselves, the consumers and producers of new media, and peoples' engagement with media, particularly for research involving young people.

This review begins by outlining a working definition for the term *new media*, then an outline of historical theorizing about the overlapping nature of subject and cultural construction of identity, the role of media in society, the importance of everyday practices in media research, and ultimately how these relate to new media environments.

The review next presents an overview of media research on influence on society, with a focus on the role of young people in such research. Traditional media research has viewed young people as a special group in need of protection from media and their potentially negative influences. However, research has begun to recognize young people as good subjects for research on media engagement, although the literature remains minimal to date. As early adoptors of new technologies, young people tend to be at the forefront of new media interaction, thus shaping it through their practices. As a result, young people can serve as excellent indicators of future trends in new media. Next, this review considers a body of research on the ways new media transform youth culture in the home and at school. Finally, the review identifies new epistemological frameworks for media research in the digital age. This includes the logic of new media, the participatory practices that define the contemporary users of digital media, and issues surrounding risk and privacy for young people using social networking sites.

### *A. New media: A definition*

The terminology surrounding the social phenomena under study is often vague. Defining on-line media practices using terms like “digital,” “virtual,” and “interactive” tends to delimit the scope of analysis in different ways. “New media” has become something of a catchall term used to describe any and all emerging and evolving digital technologies, mostly the result of the last two decades of innovations in personal computing, the Internet, and cellular telephony (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). This analysis uses the term “new media” to broadly describe “the intersection of traditional media with digital media” (Ito, 2010) and the “remediation” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) that inevitably follows the emergence of each new medium. Remediation describes the process by which a medium “appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of real” (p. 66). This process of remediation has existed as long as media themselves, but digital media greatly accelerates it. Therefore, in this review, the “new” in new media refers to digital communication formats but also to old forms of media reconstituted and redistributed as digital media content over the Internet to personal computer, cellular phones, iPods, and so on.

Moreover, by using the term “new,” we must recognize that media encompassed by this term are currently new, but “always on the verge of growing older” (Ito, 2010). For this discussion, the media under study are new at this historical moment: This discussion describes the social interaction with the new technologies for on-line representation, but without a value judgment about their relative “newness.” Time and posterity may ultimately need to decide how we define and remember the current condition.

## 2. Media and the Construction of Identity

Notions of identity hold a central place in an understanding of the role of media in the everyday lives of contemporary society. Researchers typically view childhood and adolescence as a key period in identity formation (Buckingham, 2008b). Survey-based research offers compelling evidence that new media occupy a pivotal role in the lives of youth. These therefore become a potentially critical element in the construction of identity: 9 out of 10 teens (ages 12-17) are fully wired, compared to 66% of adults (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), and young people embrace multitasking by consuming more media in their daily lives, but not spending more time doing it (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). This generation spends more time with media than with any other activity, except sleeping, putting today's children "in the vanguard of a revolution in both technology and culture" (Heim, Brandtzeig, Kaare, Endestad, & Torgersen, 2007, p. 426).

Therefore, this review begins by tracing the history of subjectification as it has evolved and now applies to Internet-based socializing.

### A. Subjectification

The contemporary roots of subjectification lie in the theorizing of Louis Althusser (1984), who provided an important epistemological "break" from the Marxian theories of cultural identity by placing the individual at the center of that process rather than focusing on how ideology manifests itself within capitalist society (Agger, 1998; Hall, 1985, 1996). Althusser endeavored to develop a systematic theory of how a culture perpetuates itself through its people. Based on Althusser's famous example of "hailing" the subject on the street, "interpellation" defines the process by which a subject is constituted. It takes place through, and is reproduced by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs): family, religion, education, media, art, etc. These IDAs inculcate the subject into the social order. In Althusser's view, the subject remains relatively stable and fixed, once interpellated into existence (Althusser, 1978).

Beginning in the 1970s, poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida (1976, 1978) began to problematize such a strict closure of meaning and argue for more ambiguity in the constitution of the subject

(McKarrow, 1993; Spivak, 1988). Althusser held too simplistic a vision of the subject (Therborn, 1980) while actually reflecting and essentially reproducing capitalism (Laclau, 1977; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). His theories could no longer account for the "diasporic" nature of society at the end of the 20th century (Appadurai, 1996), where the foundations of meaning seem much more contingent and contextual. Contrary to the Althusserian contention that ideology is ahistorical and fixed, history and cultural context are injected into matters of subjectification (Therborn, 1980). Subjectification takes place in an environment of competing interpellations, where the failure of one interpellation normally means the success of another.

Judith Butler builds on Althusser's concept of interpellation, but from another direction. She argues that it does not take into account the importance of the language used to constitute the subject, as in Althusser's act of hailing one into existence. She further argues interpellation can occur by means other than voice: "the subject need not always turn around in order to be constituted as a subject, and the discourse that inaugurates the subject need not take the form of a voice at all" (Butler, 1997, p. 31). Butler claims society constitutes an individual by naming, and that constituted subject could be surprised at the way the "socially constituted self" might look. Indeed, interpellation can occur without the subject being present: The subject need not even know of "being constituted for that constitution to work in an efficacious way" (p. 31). From this philosophical perspective the media take an important and active role in the construction of cultural norms and their relationship to the constitution of personal identity.

By historicizing the construction of subject, it follows that as Edward Said (1983) argues, the contingency and contextuality at the foundation of the meanings of texts also follows. Like social subjects, social texts do not exist in isolation, but must interact with others to have meaning. We must take into account the context in which meaning is constituted, and the multiplicity of contexts available. Thinkers in this tradition use the metaphor of *intertextuality* to conceptualize social texts as transient entities situated within a broader cultural "economy" of textual interaction. Intertextuality refers to the interplay of texts, or the

quality of a text as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette, 1997). New media, in the way they incorporate traditional and digital media texts, must only broaden and accelerate in interaction between both social subjects and texts, making this concept more relevant than ever.

If new media are much more interactive than the traditional media that came before them, then how does injecting interactivity affect assumptions about media and identity? While not definitively pinning down that answer, Slavoj Žižek (1989) offers a very different notion of subject formation, which helps in conceiving identity in new media spaces. Žižek seems to see the subject as imaginary to the extent that it exists only as a “quilting point” or nodal point where many diverse and even competing ideological positions converge (feminism, democracy, etc.). Žižek’s idea of multiple ideologies existing simultaneously at interconnected nodal points mirrors the dispersed but overlapping nature of the Internet, tying the technological practices of the Internet to issues of identity.

**Identity and technology.** With regard to the history of scholarship at the intersection of technology and identity, some of the earliest works focused on the mediated existence of the body and related identity politics, with Donna Haraway’s (1991) “Cyborg Manifesto” providing a notable example. More recent perspectives look at identity from different theoretical and methodological perspectives: the networked society (Castells, 2010), the digitalization of society (Clippinger, 2007), and the psychology of youth (Turkle, 1995)—a seminal work that examines identity from a psychological perspective, focusing primarily on youth. Each in different ways examines fluidity of identities in mediated digital spaces.

**Identity and youth.** The scholarship here points to the relationship between youth and media as closely intertwined with the concept of identity, yet “identity is an ambiguous and slippery term” (Buckingham, 2008a, p. 1). Conceptualizations of identity continue to evolve and transform because psychological, social, cultural, and philosophical scholars posit countless “definitive” theories of identity construction and management.

In a comprehensive survey of the current thinking about youth and identity, Buckingham (2008a) identifies what he sees as the fundamental paradox of identity: The term implies both similarity and difference. People understand identity as something unique about

each individual, something that we own. But identity also implies a connection to a broader social group, such as cultural identity, national identity, and other affiliations of shared interests and values. The common denominator is that a wide range of disciplines and intellectual paradigms often view adolescence as a critical period in identity formation.

Buckingham (2008a) continues by identifying five key approaches to framing identity and the implications for the study of youth and new media. First, he maps out the study of identity as a psychological account of it as a developmental process, citing the work of scholars such as G. Stanley Hall, Erik Erikson, and James Marcia. Second he points out a sociological approach, which he sees as very similar in that sociologists see young people as “a passive recipient of adult influences, a ‘becoming’ rather than a ‘being’ in their own right” (p. 4). He does note a recent trend towards attempts to understand youth cultures on their own terms, rather than from an adult notion of socialization. Buckingham identifies a third more interdisciplinary perspective that focuses on the relationships between individual and group identities. This perspective understands identity as a “fluid, contingent matter” which is “more appropriate to talk about identification rather than identity” (p. 6). Erving Goffman’s work on identity presentation and management occupies a central place in this perspective. Fourth, he describes what he terms “identity politics,” which refers to activist social movements that explicitly question social power in social identity research, resisting repressive construction of identity by others (Butler, 1991, 1997). Fifth, Buckingham contrasts the modern social theory approaches of Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault. Giddens sees identity as a “self-reflexive” malleable project that individuals have to work on. Rather than a liberating process or experience, Foucault would see this as an example of self-monitoring or self-surveillance.

In summary, theorizing about subjectification has evolved from simply “hailing” on the street to language’s constructing the subject without his or her presence or knowledge, which in turn creates the opening for theorizing of mass media as no longer just representing reality, but constituting it. In research of new media environments, long standing theoretical perspectives regarding identity can provide an important lens for examining users in the new media environments: the formation and maintenance of personal and group identities and how that relates to their analog world subject positions. It remains to be seen whether new

conceptualization and theoretical frameworks can build on, or must displace, traditional theorizing about the construction of Self and Other.

### *B. The study of everyday practices*

Pierre Bourdieu set himself the project of bringing social theory and the study of specific practices together. He uses Marxist theory as a departure point, but he focuses on the practices of everyday life more than the individual subject. Marx gave little agency to the subject in society. Bourdieu wants to give more, but also theorizes that agency is reproducible and reproduced through the “structuring structures” of society.

Bourdieu (1980) argues for a “break” from traditional social scientific approaches of analysis and offers his *logic of practice*, which, “aims simply to bring to light the theory of practice which theoretical knowledge implicitly applies and so to make possible a truly scientific knowledge of practice and of the practical mode of knowledge” (p. 27). Bourdieu incorporates the logic of practice into his notion of the *habitus*, “which is constituted in practice and is always oriented

towards practical function” (p. 52). Persons acting on their habitus constitute culture, rather than ideology or some other dominant force.

The principles behind practices often remain hidden from those who practice them and are handed down from one generation to the next, often unquestioned. Bourdieu sees individuals as agents who internalize the habitus, act through it, and (re)produce it primarily in our families, but also in our schools, churches, and other institutions of everyday life. These everyday practices are also adaptable within the structuring structures as “regulated improvisations.” Everyday practices therefore constitute a circular reproductive system that is generative, not fixed. In this way, habitus naturalizes the relationship between everyday practices and society.

The media researcher can benefit from Bourdieu’s theories in our heavily mediated society. Agency manifests itself through these practices, which researchers can study using the dialectical relationship between material practices and the concept of habitus, which guides social practices and which researchers can observe from the outside, and thus describe.

## **3. Media Influence on Society: Old Concerns, New Problems**

Identity intertwines with media and culture; therefore the history of media coincides with decades of research aiming to understand their influence on society. Each new communication medium brings with it great promise for personal expression but also great concerns about perceived negative effects on the mass population. Both perspectives probably tend to the extreme, and the relationship between media and society falls somewhere in between.

### *A. Competing utopian and dystopian paradigms*

The history of media and their relationship to society represents a range of utopian and dystopian traditions. Proponents of the former see opportunities for participation, self-expression, play, learning, and support of democratic values (Giddens, 1991; Goldman, Booker, & McDermott, 2008; Poster, 1997). The latter see an end of innocence, traditional values, and authority. For these, society laments a loss of innocence and tries to recover an imagined time gone by where life contained more certainties (Appadurai, 1996; Shaw &

Chase, 1989); they often assign the blame to media. In the United States academic research that has provided evidence of the potentially negative effects of each new medium—evidence that would seem to support popular fears and concerns (Grimes, Anderson, & Bergen, 2008)—runs parallel to these social anxieties. This results in a long-standing tension between democratic enlightenment and media effects paradigms for media research in the social sciences.

The utopian tradition posits that media represent significant opportunities for democratic participation in the public sphere, and even more so with the advent of the Internet (Dahlberg, 2001). With regard to youth, this tradition sees media education as a central location where society can enhance the role of youth, as critically engaged democratic citizens, most effectively. From this perspective, educators develop students’ capacity for reflection and self-expression through engagement with those power structures that limit such acts (Livingstone, 2004). Often referred to as “media literacy,” the democratic promise evolves from the pro-

ductive tensions that arise from educators' desire to protect and prepare students to live in a media saturated society (Poyntz, 2006).

The opposing paradigm sees media in much more sinister terms, exhibiting a long history of "moral panics" and "social anxieties" about the negative effects of media going back to the VCR, television, radio, comic books (Drotner & Livingstone, 2008; Wartella & Reeves, 1985; D. Williams, 2003), and even as far back as the late 1800s and dime novels (Grimes, et al., 2008). The lengthy list of physical and psychological social ills attributed to media includes addiction, anti-social behavior, violent behavior, sexual deviancy, obesity, and so on. Issues of children's exposure to Internet-based media are "magnified by technological potential to digitize all text, images and sound and, hence, to facilitate convergence across hitherto distinct media platforms and services" (Drotner & Livingstone, 2008, p. 2), making oversight of the perceived influence even more difficult than in the past, which heightens popular fears and anxieties.

### *B. The child as political opportunity and nostalgic fantasy*

In a cultural analysis of media research on violence and aggression in media and society over the last 100 years, Grimes et al. (2008) argue, "we see a body of scientific work whose origin derives less from empirical evidence than it does from political opportunism" (p. 31). Each new form of media is "quickly connected to the ongoing and often intractable problems of that society" (p. 50), and is often used by politicians for political gain. These politicians provide the funding for science to study *the problem*, often framed as the effects of media on society. To continue the funding, science must address *the media problem*.

When looking at the media problem, researchers usually direct attention towards categories of people considered the less educated thus more vulnerable social groups—in other words, subsections of society in need of paternalistic oversight. In the context of this social/scientific construct, Grimes et al. (2008) define the typical object of study as the *Other*, a group whose membership does not include those at the top of the dominant social structure but instead reflects those perceived as "lower on the socio-economic ladder than the population/race/ethnic origin/religion of the dominant population" (p. 50). Research typically relegates children to this "lower" segment of media audiences, no matter what the socio-economic station of their parents, and so often make them the primary focus of

media effects research. In media research, children do not appear as typical audience members, and so become, in effect, separated and differentiated from the general population (Wartella & Reeves, 1985).

The continuing worries over media effects appear to be more complex than simple concern for the child's well-being. Research agendas regarding children tended to reflect and take on the form proposed by public debate, "rather than research shaping public concerns or policy" (Wartella & Reeves, 1985, p. 120). The central question emerges as whether media are good or bad for young people, but such questions inevitably take on an either/or choice frame, with answers presented in totalizing terms that do not appear to have a problem generalizing both *child* and *media* (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003).

Further, Henry Jenkins (1998) argued that the discursive invention of "childhood" has been used for the last 100 years as a potent political metaphor in postwar society. Buckingham (2000) points out that the discursive concept of childhood often represents a nostalgic fantasy of the past, one whose traditional certainties time and culture have eroded and undermined at the end of the 20th century. In these cultural constructions, society and its members perceive children as becoming more violent, antisocial, and sexually active, thus embodying larger social fears for declining social standards and norms.

From this perspective, social concerns about the child and childhood, "have long been established as discursive sites through which adults can conceptualize and (re)construct the past, present, and future aspects of society" (Selwyn, 2003, p. 351). The discursive invention of the child becomes a matter of power, used to exert control over young people, denying them rights as "autonomous and active agents" (Buckingham, 2008b, p. 183), thereby justifying and reinforcing their dependency on adults.

Beginning in the 1990s, the utopian/dystopian debate continues: "Computer technology has ushered in a new era of mass media, bringing with it great promise and great concerns about the effect on children's development and well being" (Wartella & Jennings, 2000, p. 1). The uncertainty may continue but core dynamics have seemed to change. By the beginning of the 21st century, the notion of "child computer user" has the potential to become perhaps even more paradoxical and complex in political, academic, and popular discourses than past notions of the child consumer of media.

Social resistance to recognizing agency for youth in these discourses comes down to a matter of parental, educational, and political control (Livingstone, 2003). In offline life, sources of power and control over discourses are often related to factors such as physical presence of, and inculcation by, Ideological State Apparatuses (IDAs)—Althusser's term for organizations such as the military, police, schools, etc. However, due to the physical structure and protocols of the Internet, attempts

to control or censure communication messages are dealt with as disruptions in the network, and messages are simply rerouted (Castells, 2001). Since there is no center the Internet (nor beginnings or ends for that matter), the concepts of power centers and cultural capital in media, such as broadcast media networks, are disrupted. Thus, these sources of power and control have far less influence over on-line discourses, and that may be seen as a threat to power and control in society.

#### 4. (Re)conceptualizing Child and New Media for Research

Assumptions about the effects of digital media on the child computer user as a social group continue to follow a different logic in academic research and public policy. As noted, past scientific research and popular cultural assumptions about the child and media have not served young people as social beings well, and little direct empirical evidence exists for how youth construct and maintain self and build communities with others in new media spaces.

Internet-based new media, like the media that preceded them, undoubtedly have an influence on society and the children within it, but “if media have changed in the past 50 years, so too have the contexts of childhood, whether this is charted in terms of the social structures of family or community, of consumer and labor market expectations, or of values and identities” (Livingstone, 2002, p. 21). Yet, there is “a serious lack of knowledge in public and academic domains about the social meanings, uses, and consequences of new media” (Livingstone, 2002, p. 2) in the lives of children. Relatively little research has tried to answer basic questions about how and why youth engage and make meaning with new media in the context of their everyday lives. Most research in the field tends to focus on “what the media do to children” as opposed to “what children do with media” (Heim, et al., 2007). By reversing the equation, scholarly research has begun to rethink the tradition of treating youth as special audiences, allowing a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between media, youth, identity, and community to emerge.

Following the generations identified as Silent (1922-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), people have variously described the current generation of young people (born 1981-2000) as

the net-generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Tapscott, 1998), Generation M (for media) (Roberts, et al., 2005), digital kids (Hsi, 2007), Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Lenhart & Madden, 2005), and “digital natives” inhabiting the world along side the “digital immigrants” of past generations (Prensky, 2001). Most research tends to focus on the learning style of this generation (Buckingham, 2003; Dede, 2005; Livingstone, 2004; Poyntz, 2006) and particularly by the informal self-learning practices whereby they build their own *digital fluency*. Sherry Hsi (2007) finds that digitally fluent youth exhibit the following practices:

- Build their own skills and knowledge in new media spaces
- Take on different identities and multiple roles (social and gaming spaces)
- Voluntarily spend time working on a set of technology-based skills
- Co-construct a social reality and establishing norms for participation
- Take ownership of media creations and on-line expression (remix culture, etc.)
- Consume multimedia created by others and created by themselves
- Demonstrate fluency by simultaneously operating and managing multiple devices and media types; multitasking and attention switching is common
- Work on complex problems that require distributed teams to solve (participatory media culture as described below).

At the latter end of the Millennial generation, there appear to be young people with a new set of practices for online interaction. Perhaps it is too early to distinguish them as a new generation (or adding a post-perhaps), but we may reasonably describe them as

“late-Millennials.” Studies indicate that youth less than 18 years of age progressively produce more new media. A Pew study (Lenhart & Madden, 2005) found that “57% of online teens create content for the Internet. That amounts to half of all teens ages 12-17, or about 12 million youth.” These numbers represent a fundamental shift in the basic relationship between media and youth: a breakdown in the producer/consumer dialectic that had remained relatively consistent throughout the prior history of mass media. This generation is steeped in media *and* understands the fundamentals of digital media production and distribution. Teens with access to digital technology and the Internet probably have a very different understanding of media in their lives than any previous generation. This generation not only consumes media as defined in the traditional mass media sense, but also—with the digital media production tools now available at little cost and requiring little training (from digital video cameras to camera cell phones to free video and audio editing software)—can produce media and distribute media via the Internet for consumption on mobile phones and many other digital devices. Rather than mass media consumers, they are the “me media” generation shaping and contributing to the media economy with a potentially global audience.

From these fundamental shifts comes something new for *the media problem*: the growing “digital generation gap” (Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone, 2003), adding fuel to the uncertainty surrounding the notion of childhood in the late modern era. This results in a deepening conflict, if not an outright paradox: the notion of a generation of children having an innate ability to learn and use new technology and perceived as techni-

cally more proficient in its use than adults. At the same time, researchers and politicians continue to construct them as vulnerable, passive subjects who they consider as not competent agents in their use of media. Not only do young people play a key role in the form and content available through new communication, entertainment, and information technologies, other see them as the expert in the use of media technology who can explain the complexities of new media technology and practices to their parents. This creates a paradox of seemingly irreconcilable perceptions about youth and media, and represents a constant struggle to fill the “gap between parental strategies and children’s tactics for media usage” (Press & Livingstone, 2006, p. 190).

Along with a reconceptualization of children as media participants and their relationship to media lies a need to reconceptualize their engagement with media technology itself. Past research of this kind has generally failed to integrate the study of media practices across multiple media channels. Heim et al. (2007) argue, “one cannot simply examine one technology at a time in order to understand the complex patterns of media use among children.” For example, much of the research on youth and individual media technologies focuses on specific technologies such as cellular phones (Kaare, Brandtzege, Heim, & Endestad, 2007; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Ling & Yttri, 2005), a strategy less useful in an age of “media convergence” (Jenkins, 2006). Youth multitask by consuming more media, but not spending less time doing it (Roberts, et al., 2005), which strongly suggests that young people of this generation probably view media use as integrated, if not interchangeable, across multiple digital devices.

## 5. Transformations in Youth Culture

With each evolution in media come changes to social structures of society. A review of the literature marks the transformations society presently undergoes, especially for young people, and the ways new media technologies change our notions of self, family, home, and school.

### A. Transformations of home and family

Parental and political claims of media effects continue to spread beyond the individual child. Growing

social concerns include the transformation of the social constructs of home, school, and community (Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Gergen, 1994). New media play an increasingly significant role in the ongoing changes as media technologies become more mobile and migrate out of the shared family spaces (Drotner, 2008b; Livingstone, 2002). Wireless connectivity enables telephone and Internet access anywhere and on the go.

Livingstone (2002) notes that leisure time became more focused on the home because of media.

Many of the cultural changes in the last 50 years revolve around “doing things as a family,” which has become synonymous with media time. More recently, the location of “screen-based” media such as TVs, VCRs, and computers began to migrate away from the main family space, and towards more individualized spaces, particularly the bedroom or playroom. This results in homes with media-rich environments featuring distinct family (living room) and personal (bedroom) “cultures.”

This trend in youth and leisure time in the home couples with what Livingstone (2002) calls the “social constructions of independence.” The conception of children in home has evolved: children grow up faster, but attain adult status later, giving rise to the class called “adolescence.” She argues, “The dominant narrative of childhood, and hence the relations between parents and children, concerns the balance between dependence and independence” (p. 172). The new family class of adolescence has emerged and “the media are of growing importance to this group in all domains: *identity, culture, education, and consumption*” (p. 173).

Also directly affecting the home culture is the aforementioned “digital generation gap,” the notion of children as having an innate ability to learn and use new technology, playing a key role in acquiring skills of Internet, then explaining to adults. This creates a constant struggle between parental strategies and children’s tactics for media usage (Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone, 2003; Press & Livingstone, 2006).

### *B. Transformations in social practices*

Young people often express the value of having a space in which they can talk without adults’ eavesdropping. Facebook and other social media present youth with a new opportunity to build and maintain social connections that resemble the public acts of “hanging out” at school, in coffee shops, and around shopping malls (Ito, 2010). For several decades, shopping malls were a primary location for building and maintaining social bonds for youth (Crawford, 1992), but now teens are seen as nuisances in public places even as they are targeted as consumers (boyd, 2008b). Add to this the decline of public leisure facilities, after-school activities, and “street corner culture” (Livingstone, 2002), and these changes in teen social geography probably account for the apparent success of SNS channels of communication like Facebook.

Social Networking Sites also provide a forum for social interaction that was not readily available to

young people prior to Internet-based forms of communication. Relationships can be formed and maintained through SNS that bring together “consequential strangers” (Blau & Fingerman, 2009), people who are relative strangers in our lives but who are far more important than we may realize, from a car mechanic to someone we meet while walking the dog. When we have problems, they are more likely to help than close friends and family by providing meaning, comfort, social connections, and expose us to new ideas and perspectives. Two examples of SNS that serve this purpose are Yahoo Answers (answers.yahoo.com) and Formspring (formspring.me). These types of sites typically provide the opportunity for questions to be asked and answered by site participants, usually anonymously, so without fear of embarrassment. In these situations, consequential strangers can provide some of the same benefits as close friends and family, as well as many other potential areas of support, but within the relative safety of online anonymity for the users.

### *C. Transformations in learning practices*

Media access across multiple screens allows young people to develop informal learning practices, because they no longer depend on educational structures as sources of new information (Drotner, 2008a; Gee, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Sefton-Green (2006) points out that in the everyday experiences of youth in contemporary media culture, a blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal learning has occurred, as with the boundaries of public and private. Taking advantage of informal learning practices and other out-of-school daily experiences youth have with new media offers a place where teaching and learning can be enhanced (see Gee, 2004).

Along with the blurring of the lines between formal and informal education comes the concern that if children become active agents in the meaning making process, then direct challenges to traditional educational practices may follow (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003). Once again, media seem to play a significant role. Researchers find it increasingly difficult to “separate assumptions about learning and education from the wider media culture” (Sefton-Green, 2006, p. 283), which leads toward more complex ideas about meaning making by active audiences. More directly, Sefton-Green (2006) makes a direct association between media and learning: If the assumptions about direct media effects no longer hold, can a valid transmission model of pedagogy still remain valid?

Some also express concern about the use of technology in the classroom as well. The discourses that typically surround efforts to integrate technology into the educational environment embody many of the characteristics of *technological determinism* (Bromley, 1997; O'Sullivan, 2000). From this point of view, technology stands as a neutral good for society but has little effect on its users no matter how they use it, nor in what context; technology exists as "an autonomous force that is somehow independent of human society and acts upon it from outside" (Buckingham, 2008a, p. 11). He describes a related discourse in education as "information determinism," where people regard information as a neutral good and that, somehow by providing access, learning will follow. He argues that success will not occur only by providing better access to information; it lies in how that access is integrated into academic thinking and pedagogy, especially as it relates to the every day experiences of today's youth.

#### D. Transformations in media literacy

Most of the discussion about how to integrate media technology with learning practices falls under the rubric of "media literacy" (Buckingham, 2003; Lemke, 1998). Questions about media literacy often embody broad concerns about students and their relative preparation for later success in learning and life (Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). As with media influence in general, the concerns about defining and educating the media-literate young person resurfaces as each new medium emerges (Anderson, 2008).

Livingstone (2003) summarizes current definitions of media literacy in a four-component model. A literate student should know how to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts. This last component—creation—forms the basis

for Voithofer's (2005) definition of new media as combining production as well as reception of educational media. This skills-based approach assumes that people can attain a deeper understanding of media and their conventions and possibilities if they experience the creation of symbolic texts first hand. New media texts are increasingly visual, creating a call for increased visual literacy (Bolter, 1998). What was once limited to television production studios has today become a skills-based approach advocated across many disciplines that have not historically considered production methods beyond writing.

Livingstone (2002) notes that the transformation in the notion of literacy "involves a shift from a rule-based model of education to the more immersive 'learning by doing'" (p. 229). She argues that literacy does not involve "serious" uses of the computer alone, because learning can also come from playing electronic games to generate the skills and competencies that matter most for Internet communication technology (ICT) use (see also Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003). Livingstone later notes, "Interestingly, 'learning by doing' is a model in tune with liberal approaches to early childhood education, but this is generally replaced as children get older with the rules-based approach" (p. 233).

Hsi (2007) offers another way to conceptualize media literacy in the age of the Internet as "digital fluency," as mentioned above. She defines the term to include an understanding of digital tools to gather, design, evaluate, critique, own, synthesize, and develop communication messages, but adds another layer. She argues for the importance of also understanding that the Internet and other forms of electronic expression are not neutral, but implicated in the diffusion of power in society.

## 6. New Conceptualizations for Media Research

The following discussion presents some conceptual frameworks that can help guide research analysis in new media spaces and define the conceptual structures and boundaries in which to situate analysis. At the nexus of competing interpellations, overlapping social structures, new literacies, democratic discourses, and social anxieties, lies a new logic for media. This logic summarizes several key conceptual differences

between an approach to the analysis of *new media* and traditional perspectives on *mass media*. This new logic leads to a new participatory culture and the media practices of new media users that arise from it.

#### A. The logic of new media

The Internet transcends spatial boundaries that structure real life and replaces them with a rhizomatic

connection of computers (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Therefore, the logic of new media lies in a dialectical relationship between media technology and contemporary culture (Manovich, 2001). The new media culture embodied by this logic, and therefore a significant conceptual framework for research, has two distinct but interrelated characteristics: emerging and evolving media technologies in digital form *and* the social practices (communication, entertainment, information) that have emerged from, evolved around, and been enabled by the specific technologies. Despite this distinction, the two inextricably intertwine in new media practices.

To some extent, the idea that Marshall McLuhan (1994) famously postulated many years ago—the medium is the message—may be more appropriate than ever before (Logan, 2010). McLuhan argued that media themselves, not the content they carry, should form the focus of study. In terms of research, common sense might suggest that digital technologies and cultural practices remain separate objects of analysis in many ways. Technologies describe architectural structures comprised of wires, computers, and human interfaces. Social practices are material manifestations of culturally structured symbolic interaction and representation. “Things” in the world comprise one; social practices that construct and are constructed by culture comprise the other.

Despite that, the two domains remain inextricably intertwined. One structures the other in new media environments. This idea does not necessarily present something new: Raymond Williams (1975) made powerful arguments for a dialectical view of television technology as both shaping and shaped by its use and appropriation in society. We can say the same for new media, but the affordances of new media technologies significantly transform the dialectical relationship into something new and unique to new media participation.

Taking this idea of the architecture of social media defining the act of communication, Lev Manovich (2001) suggests that new media, particularly social media in the context of identity and community formation, are a complex negotiation between our multiple selves (on-line and off-line) and the computer structures and operations through which we represent these selves to others.

In other words, in this contemporary moment, “life takes place on screen” (Mirzoeff, 2002). This is the logic of new media, and perhaps what is new about them, as compared to traditional media. As dana boyd (2008b) claims, “Login to Twitter. Login to Facebook. What you see is a world that you’ve con-

structed.” Lev Manovich (2001) sums this up by suggesting, “new media follow the logic of the postindustrial or globalized society whereby every citizen can construct her own custom lifestyle and select her ideology from a large number of choices” (p. 42). This logic explicitly rejects the notion that participants in “networked publics” remain passive agents constituted as subjects through their media consumption. Instead, a key characteristic of new media comes from the recognition of participants as active agents in new media environments and the primary producers of content for those spaces.

Howard Rheingold recently affirmed the view that the networked structure matters in analysis because “the technical architecture effects human communication” (Rheingold, 2009). Rheingold continues by arguing that for the researcher, the level of understanding of the architecture of the site and its human interface has a significant impact on questions of power, control, and freedom of expression. As a source of discursive power, the technical structures of the Internet are much more closely tied to subjects’ abilities to speak and participate, or have a “voice,” a metaphorical construct proposed by Mitra and Watts (2002) for the study of power in networked public spaces. This suggests that the technical architectures of new media, especially in the form of social media, allow the subjects to construct the media to a greater degree than any communication media before them, even as media may attempt to hail them as subjects.

In other words, the relationship between the technical architecture and the participant defines the “place” where the overall experience of participation in social media is constructed. As outlined above, critical theorists have been concerned about the role of media in constructing, or interpellating, the individual as subject. Each social medium has a technical architecture that affords and constrains the various options for the construction of self in different ways, while the participants (understood as producers/consumers), in turn, define the site and its aesthetic through their choices and contributions. Foucault argues that the construction of self is a cycle whereby culture constitutes our identity, but we in turn create that culture through our social practices (Foucault, 1972; 1979). This provides a very useful way of thinking about self in social media.

### *B. New social operating system*

The previous section suggests that new technological innovations deeply intertwine with material

social practices. Social practices construct, and are constructed by, these relationships. We may therefore think of it as a circular process, rather than a linear or hierarchical one. The best opportunities new media spaces can offer for inquiry probably come at the nexus of multiple overlapping social spheres, creating social nodal points most commonly thought of as on-line communities.

The heart of on-line social practices lies in its participatory nature, where socializing takes on the very character of the Internet itself. Barry Wellman (Rainie & Wellman, 2010) suggests the notion of community is moving from groups to social networks, which become a new “social operating system.” This review refers to this new operating system as the process or practice of “online social networking” (OSN). The nodal intersections of OSN activities for socializing are referred to as social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Foursquare, etc. boyd and Ellison (2007) define SNS more thoroughly as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

As the rhetorician James P. Zappen (2005) notes, the dichotomy between mass audience and media producer is replaced by a complex negotiation between on-line and real selves, representations of selves, listeners, and readers, and our many selves and the computer structures and operations through which we represent these selves to others. We have moved away from media understood as consumption of, and audiences interacting with, books, magazines, television, films, and radio, and instead, have begun to understand media as artifacts that not only encompasses the intersection of these older media, re-represented as digital media (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), but also represent widespread *participation* in digital media production (Burgess & Green, 2009; Roberts, et al., 2005) versus simple consumption, and in *networked publics* rather than as audiences (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Russell, Ito, Richmond, & Tuters, 2008).

This *participatory culture* in *networked publics* holds a central place in a reformulation of media research that focuses on the new social operating system.

**Participatory culture.** As already discussed, new media represent artifacts of a culture and society undergoing a major transition in the relationship of media to consumers and producers, which has a particular impact on media studies research (Kellner, 1995). A new conception for the relationship between society and media has emerged: Youth culture has become situated within an interactive “participatory environment” (Jenkins, 2006, 2009), with the primary difference being in form, audience, and distribution of media (Sefton-Green, 2006).

“Participatory culture” describes one with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices (Jenkins, 2009, p. xi). Youth form a core user group in these participatory media cultures, and they increasingly accomplish their social interactions in contemporary culture through networked gaming environments and SNS such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube (boyd, 2008b).

An important characteristic of new media, and specifically OSN, that we must acknowledge is the constitutive role of the users themselves, not just in the consumption, production, and distribution of media content, but in personal voice and sociability (Jenkins, 2009). Henry Jenkins (2006) describes this as “participatory media culture,” which differs sharply from traditional conceptions of audiences as passive media spectatorship, and also conceptually separates these types of social practices from engagement of new media that researchers define more accurately as information gathering and entertainment via the Internet.

**User-generated content (UGC).** SNS in the participatory culture exist almost exclusively to support the interplay of *user-generated content* (Ochoa & Duval, 2008; Thurman, 2008). People of all ages participate, but youth tend to dominate: “All new media are generally produced by youth, for youth, in the youth sphere, not within the constraints of an educational institution” (Sefton-Green, 2006, p. 296).

UGC refers to digital media that has many forms and is shared through many channels, both visual and textual. Each SNS has a unique technical architecture that structures, and is structured by, the content produced and/or provided by its participants. UGC provides an integral element, indeed a necessity, in the social economy circulating in network public spaces

(boyd & Ellison, 2007). On these sites, participants almost entirely produce it, with little or no formal training in the technologies of production and distribution—one of the characteristics of participatory media cultures in Jenkins' definition above. For these reasons, UGC forms a primary cultural artifact for analysis.

**Networked publics.** We can no longer think of participants in OSN as mass audiences of consumers, but now as producers of UGC and distributors of digital media in networked spaces. "Changes in how power and information are distributed across society, geography, and technology" (Russell, et al., 2008, p. 43) have redefined the traditional relationship between cultural production and consumption. People now live, work and play in a number of fragmented, partial, and overlapping *networked publics*, defined by "the rise of many-to-many distribution, aggregation of information and culture, and the growth of peer-to-peer social organization" (p. 43).

The nature of networked publics is strongly influenced by network technologies, the affordances and limitations in architectures, and how communication is structured: "What distinguishes networked publics from nonmediated or broadcast publics is the underlying structure. New forms of media—broadcast or networked—reorganize how information flows and how people interact with information and each other" (boyd, 2008a, p. 23).

boyd (2008a) identifies four technical properties of digital communication, which play a significant role in configuring networked publics: *persistence*, *replicability*, *scalability*, and *searchability*. Because of the four properties, a great deal of information online does not go away, remains infinitely reproducible, and stands in need of structuring and organization, giving rise to new search technologies. These properties are intertwined and codependent, and they help produce three dynamics that shape people's experience with networked publics: *invisible audiences*, *collapsed contexts*, and *the blurring of public and private*. A potentially invisible audience engages with this information, an audience not present in the moment of engagement or present but lurking in the background. Collapsing contexts refers to how "the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts" (boyd, 2008a, p. 34). Without control over context, ideas of public and private as two distinct spheres have become outdated to today's young people, giving new meaning to the concept of privacy online.

**Genres of participation in networked publics.** Ito (2010) employs "the notion of genres of participation" (p. 15) to differentiate between two types of SNS: *friendship-driven* and *interest-driven*. Ito defines friendship-driven web sites as such because they reflect "the dominant and mainstream practices of youth as they go about their day-to-day negotiations with peers and friends" (p. 15-16). They find that for most youth, the sites MySpace and Facebook rest on local networks. These sites have become, "their primary source of affiliation, friendship, and romantic partners, and their lives mirror this local network" (p. 16). In other words, OSN participation and socialization often reflects offline local social networks, especially for youth (boyd, 2008a; Hargittai, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

Practices such as "specialized activities, interests, or niche and marginalized identities" (Ito, 2010, p. 16) as the primary purpose of the sites define interest-driven web sites. Unlike friendship-driven social media sites, participants can easily access most of the content generated by people they do not know offline, and who need not accept them as friends, although users can limit access to some content to a defined subgroup. Using the SNS definition by boyd and Ellison (boyd & Ellison, 2007), participants have the option to construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, but need not connect this profile to offline identities. They may articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, but that does not limit the ability of the participant or others within the system to view and traverse the network. This fundamental architectural difference seems to distinguish the sites defined as "interest-driven." The type and goal of the UGC appears very different, perhaps because of the technical structure as much as the intended audience.

The author suggests a third genre of participation exists somewhat between the previous two and shares some characteristics of each. We might appropriately term these *collaboration-driven* sites. We can conceptualize this genre as a subset of *interest-driven*, but with some fundamental differences in the affordances and limitation of the site architectures. These sites focus on supporting and maintaining "collective intelligence," a term coined by French cybertheorist Pierre Lévy (1997) and used by Jenkins (2006) to help define online participatory culture. In the late 1990s, the "dot.com" bubble expanded in attempts to commercialize the Internet as a profitable digital economy. Lévy (1997) envisioned an alternative future for the

Internet, one with the purpose of learning, playing, and communicating with one another in what amounts to a qualitatively new way of living. Lévy saw a new space of knowledge formed by cyberspace.

In terms of boyd and Ellison's SNS definition (boyd & Ellison, 2007), participants construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, but identity in this profile can remain ambiguous. Rather than a list of other users with whom they share a connection, the connection becomes a shared problem, project, or idea on which participants can collaborate, and collaborators can view and traverse the network freely, but with monitoring by site managers. This genre encompasses communities dedicated to wiki, crowd sourcing, and other such collaborative sites, enabled by new media technologies, which support the construction and contribution of knowledge. Jenkins (2006) described these participants as members of knowledge communities that form around mutual intellectual interests, where no traditional expertise exists, and the pursuit and assessment of knowledge is at once communal and adversarial.

### *C. Privacy and safety in networked publics*

Returning once again to anxieties about media and their effects, we note how traditional social concern focused on protecting youth from the risks and threats to privacy from commercial websites, advertising networks, and online scams (Henke, 1999), but the ambiguity of the concept of privacy has made it difficult for scholars to define, and more so with the fluidity of online activities. Marwick, Diaz, and Palfrey (2010) note that, "definitions have ranged from the famous conception of the 'right to be let alone' (Warren & Brandeis, 1890), to the 'right to control information of oneself'" (Westin, 1967, p. 6).

Research in this area tends to focus on external threats to youth and privacy, such as the collection of personal data by marketing firms and other data-mining companies (Moscardelli & Liston-Heyes, 2004; Xie, Teo, & Wan, 2006). However, anxieties about new media influence have eased somewhat with the understanding that youth today perhaps have more competence with new media technologies and possess more literacy about media in general and marketing practices specifically (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

More recent concerns about privacy arise less from issues of "consumer privacy" and more from the risks to youth and privacy brought on by "public living" in participatory media cultures afforded by

new media sites like Facebook, YouTube, etc. (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Schrock & boyd, 2008; Youn, 2009). At the center of these discourses lie, as boyd (2008a) notes, the blurring of public and private as an important dynamic for shaping experience in networked publics. Some see the disclosure of personal information to companies and to SNS by youth as "risky" behavior leading to violation of privacy (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Fogel & Nehmad, 2008).

Bound up in the social anxieties about young people using the Internet are some very real areas of potential concern. Significant fears exist over "online predators" and pedophiles (Palfrey, Sacco, & boyd, 2008; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008), online harassment and cyberbullying (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Wolak, et al., 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007), and more recently, sexting (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Albury, Funnell, & Noonan, 2010; Judge, 2012), which refers to "sexual communications with content that includes both pictures and text messages, sent using cell phones and other electronic media" (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011, p. 2).

Mobility in online participation has risen, with 75% of teens having a mobile phone (Lenhart, et al., 2010) and one in four teens owning a smartphone (Lenhart, 2012). Cell phone texting and calling "have become indispensable tools in teen communication patterns" (Lenhart, et al., 2010, p. 2). Used primarily for peer-to-peer communication, mobile device usage can be more difficult to regulate and supervise than computers, causing concerns about excessive usage and social isolation (Crawford & Goggin, 2010). Because most of these devices have built-in cameras and access to a network, they often play a role in a perceived increase in sexting (Judge, 2012; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012), in this case defined specifically as the sending and receiving of nude or semi-nude sexually explicit images (Lenhart, 2009). However, the Lenhart study found that very few young people (ages 12-17) have sent sexually explicit messages (4%), but more have received them (15%). Three main reasons or motives for sexting emerge:

1. Exchanges of images solely between two romantic partners;
2. Exchanges between partners that are then shared outside the relationship;
3. Exchanges between people who are not yet in a relationship, but where often one person hopes to be.

Despite the fears and warnings, youth continue to share personal information online. SNS allow young people to connect with close friends, express themselves, and connect with far-away friends (Livingstone, 2008). For young people, the social benefits so prevail in their minds that “the benefits . . . outweigh privacy concerns, even when concrete privacy invasion was experienced” (Debatin, et al., 2009, p. 100). Unfortunately, few studies of the social benefits vs. the risks of OSN for young people exist, with Livingstone (2008; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010) as the notable exceptions.

People may exaggerate the potential danger as well. Research suggests that providing personal information online does not, by itself, increase the risks. For example, while research has linked some sharing to increased sexual solicitation (Wolak, et al., 2008), most youth interact online with people they already know (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Wolak et al. (2008) found that 83% of Internet users, ages 10-17, primarily interact with people they know offline in low-risk situations, although the remaining 17% did receive a “high-risk unrestricted interactors” classification. Sharing personal information with a friend clearly differs from doing so with a stranger (Schrock &

boyd, 2008), so the far larger percentage of youth appear at little personal risk in OSN.

Further, providing personal information does not necessarily suggest a lack of concern for privacy. Livingstone (2006) points out the importance of understanding that children conceive of privacy differently from adults, “Children seek privacy, but as a means to an end, not an end in itself” (p. 132). She argues that privacy in networked publics provides opportunities to act in silly ways, to experiment, to seek advice, to meet new people, but “most of all, to engage in uninterrupted, unobserved immersion in peer communication” (p. 132). Youth may act more openly but they still want to control their actions, information, and choices when sharing personal information and socializing online, and this control “includes privacy *from* adults, especially parents and teachers” (Marwick, Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010, p. 11).

The significance of privacy for youth culture in social media needs to remain an important concern for researchers (Grant, 2006; Ito, 2010). In addition to tensions for youth over who sees what information, the question remains of what kind of personal information should be deemed private for networked publics.

## 7. Conclusion

The mass media culture has become fragmented and dispersed with the wide range of new media channels made available through Internet technologies, which is challenging traditional notions of media research, especially concepts of identity formation, the role of media in society, the media consumer/producer dialectic, and the value of young people as subjects in media research.

One challenge to address is in the relationship between identity and media, where it has long been argued that in contemporary society, identity is largely constructed through media engagement. In new media spaces, the construction of identity is now understood as overlapping and competing interpellations existing simultaneously at interconnected nodal points. Those points are where “networked individuals” are constituted within “networked publics.” This new conception of interpellation has been labeled the “new social operating system” because of the increasing importance of communication technologies in shaping social practices.

Another challenge is that the very nature of the media consumer appears to be changing. Rather than a passive consumer of media, the user is actively engaging media. Key to this conception is recognizing that participants are also becoming active producers of new media and distributing them in global networked publics. Traditional theoretical approaches to media research of “mass media culture” do not seem to adequately describe the current condition. New epistemological frameworks for the digital age may be needed to address the emerging logic of new media, one in which media users in large part define themselves through their choices of media channels and content, but also where media engagement has become situated in a “participatory media culture;” a perspective that is more useful in examining the everyday practices of new media users across the three genres of participation identified.

With the emergence of networked publics made possible by new media technologies, social anxieties

and moral panics over the effects of media are once again heightened. Children continue to be seen as a vulnerable group in need of special protection from media, even as children can be perceived as expert in the technologies of media. Instead, young people should be reconceived as active agents in meaning making through media engagement. They have been shown to be excellent indicators of broader trends in media technology and practice, making them good subjects for study, and social engagement in networked public seem to have a particular appeal to youth culture, more so than older generations. This assertion is born out through both qualitative methods of research (Heim, et al., 2007; Ito, 2010; Livingstone, 2002, 2003, 2007; Sefton-Green, 2006) and quantitative analysis of social media use (Lenhart & Madden, 2005; Lenhart, et al., 2005; Roberts, et al., 2005).

While the impact of social media in terms of identity management, socializing, learning, and literacy remains important to the field, the focus of analysis should be on how young people's "communication, friendship, play, and self-expression are reconfigured through their engagement with new media" (Ito, 2010, p. 1), as much as how to protect them from their own risky behaviors and predatory practices of others.

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This article discusses some aspects of the influence of the media materials and problems on youth. Key words: mass media, internet, communication, effects, influence. What role does mass media play? Legislatures, media executives, local school officials, and sociologists have all debated this controversial question. Media plays an extensive role in an individual's daily life. You are surrounded in a world built just for you by the media. With the advent of advanced technology, there has been a drastic shift from the telegraph, and then the radio, newspapers, magazines and now to the most widely Technology brought about social media which is a valuable tool but is somewhat misused by today's youth. The two main forms that the youth use to access social media are cell phones and the Internet which have brought about major changes in their lifestyle. Children are socializing in a hybrid virtual space, learning in innovative ways, creating a new language and practicing multicultural values (Tappscott, 1998). The main characteristics of the "N-Gen" culture are: independence, emotional and intellectual openness, inclusion, free expression and strong views, innovative, preoccupation with maturity, pleasure by the investigation, immediacy, and sensitivity to corporate interest, authentication, and trust. Youth and New Media: Studying Identity and Meaning in an Evolving. Media Environment David R. Zemmels zemmels@loyno.edu 1. Introduction The media landscape continues to change rapidly with the evolutions in digital media and online socializing. The fracturing of the very conception of audiences as consumers complicates mass communication research into current media practices and influences. Contemporary media research could benefit from a reconceptualization of the relationship among the media themselves, the consumers and producers of new media, and peoples engagement with media, particularly