

Preface

Digital media, such as computers, the Internet, video games, and mobile phones, have come to occupy a central place in the lives of today's youth. For those of us in contact with them – parents, teachers, physicians, researchers, and others – evidence of this is plentiful. Consider the teen doing homework while instant messaging several friends at the same time or one furiously texting during a family outing, in bed, or even at school. Such scenarios are becoming commonplace and many parents and teachers have encountered them at one point or another. Remarkably, most young people use interactive technologies and seem to be living their lives online.

It is important to consider the implications of young people's online living, especially for their development and well-being. In 2006, the journal *Developmental Psychology* published a special section on children, adolescents, and the Internet. It was one of the first attempts to bring together high-quality developmental research to understand youth and their digital worlds and a new field of inquiry was born. Since that special section was published, the digital landscape has changed dramatically. Chat rooms were joined by instant messaging and then social networking sites. Computers became sleeker and portable, and mobile phones took on the capabilities of computers as they got smaller and smaller. Not surprisingly, as the technologies changed, so did their use by youth.

As research in this new line of study began to accumulate, we felt that the time was ripe to write a book that would present a nuanced account of adolescents and their digital worlds. Much of the public discourse about media and youth has taken a more fearful perspective – Do new media make youth lonelier and more depressed? Does stranger contact put them at risk? Do online peer interactions weaken family relationships? Although we had no doubt that interactions with new media carried some risks for youth, we also wanted to highlight the more positive aspects of new technologies. We also felt that it was important to use a developmental approach and connect adolescents' media use to key developmental processes in order to understand their digital worlds.

Thus began our journey in early 2008. Being the neophyte authors that we were, we had no idea how much time and effort it would involve. Complicating matters, new online environments appeared, technologies such as mobile phone and text messaging came to the fore, and new research results emerged during the time

that it took us to write and polish the book. In January 2010, as we finally finished and were writing this preface prior to sending the manuscript to the publishers, the latest Kaiser report on media in the lives of 8- to 18-year-olds was released. We also came across more recent studies on youth and mobile phones, and we seriously pondered whether we should go back to our manuscript and incorporate the results and issues that they raised. But any book, if it is to be published, must eventually be concluded. We had to accept that digital media will keep changing and that we would not be able to include all the research on this topic. However, we are optimistic that our developmental approach is timeless and will enable readers to connect adolescents' online behavior to offline themes, even as their online behaviors change with the technology. Our goal was to help researchers, as well as graduate and undergraduate students, formulate a better understanding of digital youth and their online worlds. We are also hopeful that this book will be useful for parents, teachers, school psychologists/counselors, physicians, and anyone working with youth as they seek to promote safe digital worlds for them.

Digital Youth

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Subrahmanyam, K.; Smahel, D.

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