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DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE GENERATION GAP

Qualitative research on US teens and their parents

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Abstract

In many parts of the developed world, families engage with a wide range of communication media as a part of their daily lives. Parents often express mixed feelings about this engagement on the part of young people, however. Employing Baumberg's narrative-in-interaction analysis to interviews with 55 parents and 125 young people, this article explores both the discursive strategies parents employ when discussing their rules and regulations regarding digital technologies, and the strategies employed by their teenage young people in response. It considers how parents attempt to articulate authority in relation to digital media use among their teenage children, and how the ways in which teens interpret those parental attempts to express authority influence the strategies they themselves embrace regarding digital media. The article argues that although economically disadvantaged families experience the digital generation gap with particular intensity, their strategies reveal that they and their

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Young people | sociology | digital divide | domestication of ICTs | parents | qualitative research

Introduction

For many teens, it is now largely taken for granted that one must be connected and available to peers at all times via cell, instant messaging, and other forms of contact (boyd 2007; Clark 2005; Lenhart et al. 2007; Shade et al. 2005; Stern 2007; Thiel Stern 2007). Even as IMming continues to be popular during homework sessions in front of the computer, cell phones have become a ubiquitous accessory – one that many young people describe as an extension of themselves as they coordinate the activities of their daily lives (Ito et al. 2006; Ling 2008) – many celebrate these practices, and many wonder about them, but few doubt that young people's technological lives have changed significantly in the past few years. And through all of this change, at least one thing seems to remain the same: young people experience the technology in their lives much differently than their parents do, and this can be a source of tension in family life (Cho & Hongsik 2005; Livingstone & Helsper 2007a; Silverstone 1992, 2007).

Media scholars have long been interested in the ways in which parents oversee media use by their children (Clark 2004; Haddon 2006; Hoover et al. 2004; Livingstone 2007; Livingstone & Helsper 2007a; Nathanson 2002). Whereas ‘screen media’ such as television, video games, and movies are viewed with greater suspicion, personal computers are viewed as at least potentially beneficial for educational goals, and cell phone use is seen as necessary for safety and connection, but also a potential nuisance (Clark et al. 2004, 2005; Ling 2008; Livingstone 2007). Socioeconomic background makes a difference in the role that these media play in the lives of family members. As Kvasny (2006) has written of the term ‘digital inequalities’, differences in approaches to these media ‘reflect ongoing social inequalities [such as] poverty, illiteracy, sporadic work, racial and ethnic discrimination’ (p. 161; see also Rice & Haythornthwaite 2006; Van Dijk & Hacker 2000). Kvasny (2006) also points to the ‘knowledge gap’ that exists between those with digital expertise and those who lack it, noting that this gap is often a source of shame. Ribak (2001) similarly identified this kind of shame as a source of

familial tension when it is parents who are less experienced and knowledgeable about digital media than their children.

Parents adopt differing strategies for dealing with this gap in knowledge, and their children, in turn, adopt differing opinions about the gap, developing their own strategies for incorporating digital media into their lives. The discrepancies between parental and teen approaches to digital media are complicated by the fact that parents and young people can interpret interactions with one another in very different ways because they have differing sets of expectations (Larson & Richards 1994).1 Parents think of parental/teen conflicts in relation to moral and social norms, whereas teens think of the same issues as matters of personal choice (Collins 1990; Smetana 1988). A parent might view texting when adults are talking as a sign of disrespect, but the teen might think that whether or not to multitask is an individual preference.

Parents respond to parent/teen conflict in ways that reflect their general orientation to parental authority (Baumrind 1991). Most parents strive to be authoritative (warm, boundary-setting, encouraging of autonomy), but those who engage in authoritarian parenting are less comfortable with and often punish teen autonomy, and those who are permissive (and to some extent those who are neglectful or uninvolved) seek to avoid conflicts between parents and teens (Steinberg 1990).

Parenting styles may also manifest themselves differently within the norms of differing social contexts, as sociologists of the family have observed. In her in-depth study of families from middle- and lower-income backgrounds, sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) characterizes the middle-class approach to parenting as ‘concerted cultivation’ and the working-class and less advantaged approach as ‘natural growth’. Lareau's work suggests that ‘concerted cultivation’ does seem to have positive outcomes that are claimed in relation to authoritative parenting: better outcomes in schooling and in employment prospects, for instance. But she also observes that this parenting style cultivates a heightened sense of individualism that is expressed in entitlement and demands that institutions bend to the individual's expectations. In contrast, ‘natural growth’ parenting may not prepare young people as well to advocate for their own benefit, but it cultivates in young people an ability to manage their own time and a collective sensibility that is often lacking among the middle-class young people she observed.

In media studies, whereas with current research we know a great deal about parents' and teens' practices and views individually, we know relatively little about how young people themselves respond to their parents' strategies regarding digital media, particularly with regard to social network sites, cell phone use, and IMing. This article, therefore, employs narrative-in-interaction analysis of interviews collected among 55 parents of teens and 125 teens themselves, exploring how families discursively negotiate the digital media environment in their home lives. Analyzing three case studies of lower income parents and teens and separate interviews with young people, the article highlights the ways in which parents voice concerns regarding digital media, their strategies for asserting parental authority in relation to digital media use, and the ways in which teens evaluate and respond to their parents' strategies.

Method

Believing, with Bakhtin (1990), that we must locate studies with the specificity of the human body, conversations between researchers and participants become an important point of focus for this study. To explore how families from disadvantaged backgrounds negotiated the introduction of new media into their home lives, this article examines data collected through in-depth interviews with a total of 203 people over the course of seven years (2001–2008).2 Within 37 family groups, my research team and I interviewed 55 parents, 36 teens, and 27 younger or older siblings. We then also conducted nine focus groups with 35 members of the friendship circles of some of the young people from those original family groups, and conducted a final six focus groups in 2007 and early 2008 with 44 additional young people to validate and triangulate findings from the earlier family and peer discussion groups. At the time of the household interviews, 11 of the family groups had annual household incomes that fell below $25,000, 13 of the families had annual household incomes between $25,000 and $48,000, and 13 had annual household incomes above the 2006 US census-determined median household income of $48,201 (US Census Bureau 2007). Twenty of the households interviewed were headed by a single parent. Eighteen of the families described themselves as Anglo-American or Caucasian, 14 as bi or multiracial, and there was one each of families describing themselves as African American, Latino, and Asian.3 The racial/ethnic background of the teens in the discussion groups was 39 Anglo, 17 Latino, six African American, two Asian, and 15 bi or multiracial.4 In the

seeking to gain insights into how new media fit into their everyday lives and how they negotiated conflicts that emerged in relation to these technologies in their family lives. Teen discussion groups spoke of how they utilized digital media in their everyday lives, discussing family policies as well as conflicts about the technology that had occurred.

Interviewees were located through referrals from various ‘gatekeepers’, including educators, workplace associates, and officials who worked in several non-profit agencies focused on helping disadvantaged families. Interviewees were also located through the researchers' acquaintance and friendship networks. Family groups that had been interviewed were asked to assist the researchers in finding additional interviewees. Families were recruited using what Lindlof (1995) has termed ‘maximum variation sampling’, in which each family was expected to add a contrasting element to the overall sample. Data collection took place between January 2001 and May 2008 in urban, suburban, and rural areas near New York City, Washington DC, Cleveland, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. All names of interviewees were changed.

Analysis of the data began immediately after the first family group was interviewed and continued concurrently with data-collection. Topics pertaining to use, rules, and tensions related to new media in the lives of teens and their parents were coded and discussed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The interview data were then analyzed using a social constructionist approach that Baumberg (2004) has termed ‘narratives-in-interaction’. This method of analysis suggests that the researcher should pay attention not only to what is said, but also to what is not said, and why certain statements might have been made in a particular context to elicit a desired response among a specific audience. This approach differs from traditional narrative analysis, as Baumberg writes: ‘Rather than seeing narratives as intrinsically oriented toward coherence and authenticity, and inconsistencies and equivocations as an analytic nuisance, the latter are exactly what is most interesting. They offer a way into examining how storytellers are bringing off and managing their social identities in context’ (p. 222).

There are two levels of analysis in this approach, therefore: first, a consideration of what is said, and second, a consideration of why a particular story or statement might be deployed and how it might then be understood between speaker and audience. Such an approach helpfully leads to a focus on the socially constructed nature of the

those who are interviewing them about their practices in relation to one another (see also Hoover et al. 2004).

Findings

Many of the young people in this study of lower income families made comparatively little use of the Internet, particularly when compared with young people from higher income families, which echoes findings in the UK by Livingstone and Helsper (2007b). Young people in lower income families were more likely than their middle class peers to share a computer and cell phone, to have outdated devices or slow Internet connections, or to have few 'warm experts' in their lives who could guide them through the process of learning new uses for digital technologies (Bakardjieva, 2005; Lenhart et al. 2007; Facer & Furlong 2001; Livingstone et al. 2005).

All of the parents in our study strove to adopt a style of parenting that Baumrind (2005) has identified as authoritative (rather than authoritarian, permissive, or uninvolved). However, the young people in their families did not always interpret their style in the same way that the parents did, and their interpretation of their parents' style influenced the strategies they themselves embraced in response. Two overarching issues emerged for parents and their teens as they discussed their individual and familial strategies regarding digital media use, and as parents attempted to articulate authority discursively. Parents, especially those from lower income families, were concerned with the challenge of maintaining authority about an area (digital media) in which their teens knew more than they did. The challenge for teenage young people in these families was often related: how do you respect your parents' authority and still figure out a way to be a part of the digital environment that your parents don't understand? This next section presents three case studies that illustrate how parents expressed their concerns about the digital media environment, how teens reacted to those concerns, and how the teens' interpretations of their parents' intentions shaped the strategies and responses that the teens themselves then adopted.

Case studies of disadvantage and disconnect

Single parent Libby Odell, a Euro-American in her early 40s, lived near Cleveland, Ohio with her daughter Montana and son Thad, both of whom were biracial.5 A licensed practical nurse by profession, Libby had been unemployed for several years and was recently divorced from her third husband at the time of her interview. Her own father had worked in the once-lucrative rust belt steel industry, and he and Libby's mother had enabled Libby to purchase her own home. Because her extended family lived locally and continued to be a big part of her life, and her work life hadn't demanded it of her, Libby had had little reason to gain experience with computers. Instead, she said she always consulted her 16-year-old daughter Montana about issues related to the computer. As mother Libby related: 'When they first were talking [on the news] about the porn sites popping up for kids, I was just mortified. That makes me so mad. And so I told her what I had seen on TV and asked if there was a problem there.' Sixteen-year-old Montana rolled her eyes, irritated with what she saw as her mother's lack of awareness of the online environment, and she quickly and dismissively said to the interviewer: 'I regulate it. I haven't looked [at porn]. You can block stuff like that.' 'I do trust her', Libby added. 'That is an area I choose to trust her with', she said, to assert that Montana's practices were within her realm of approval.

Later, when speaking with the interviewer on her own, Montana equated her mother's willingness to trust her with her mother's lack of experience online. 'One of my best friends is the same as me. Her parents aren't really – I don't know, they don't use the computer much, I don't think.' She added, 'My mom teaches us what is right and wrong but she doesn't set limits 'cause she trusts us.' Montana's mother focused her attentions more directly on Montana and Thad's television viewing, presumably because that was something more readily available and observable than either their cell phone or online use. Montana took the lead in adopting her own strategies for dealing with the online environment, as will be discussed below.

John Cortez and his wife Luisa Cordova, parents in a Latino family that lived in a low-income area outside of Denver, similarly had found little use for the online environment in their lives. Although they each had cell phones that they said they rarely used, John was uncertain about communication technologies that related to the computer and had been reluctant about getting his 14-year-old daughter Tanya a cell phone. Whereas his reluctance was related to both a limited income and a traditionally-conceived felt need to protect his daughter, his uncertainty about the online realm stemmed from his own lack of experience with computers. 'I've heard so many bad things about the Internet I

online environment. A driver by profession, John had worked odd jobs for most of his professional life and had never been to college. Luisa worked as a supervisor in a commercial laundry facility. John described his work experience as especially frustrating, particularly as he had experienced discrimination for his lack of education and his ethnicity. When their children asked them questions about getting a faster computer or a better cell phone plan, John and Luisa asked for advice from their own brothers and sisters, who were also parents and who lived in the area. Luisa's brother, who lived nearby and worked in heavy equipment sales, had a computer with Internet access in his home. He had volunteered that John and Luisa's children could use his family's computer whenever they needed it. John and Luisa admitted that they knew very little about computers, and with the family's limited income, their plans for getting their own computer remained in the future. As a result, 14-year-old Tanya had gotten in the habit of going online at her uncle's house, or she occasionally used online access at her local library. But at her uncle's house she had to share the computer with her two older female teen cousins, and her online time was limited there, as well as at the public library and at her school. Tanya, a high-achieving student, found it frustrating to encounter such hurdles to her homework. She did not seem to be missing out on much socially, as her friends had cell phones and used those in lieu of online social networking sites such as myspace or Facebook. Still, she argued that she needed both a cell phone and Internet access. Tanya's father John told her that she could have a cell phone when she got a job and paid for it herself, a strategy that, as I will discuss below, promised to bring about a different set of challenges for these already-disadvantaged parents.

The third family was the Richards. ‘We just watch her and hope she'll do okay’, 52-year-old Marvin Richards said of his 13-year-old biracial granddaughter, Gabriela. Marvin, a Euro-American who was disabled and had taken early retirement from a low-paying job, had experienced many upheavals in his family's life. He and his wife, Doreen, lived in a small home in Cleveland, Ohio, and were raising Gabriela as their own because Gabriela's mother, one of five adopted children raised by Doreen and Marvin, was in prison. Doreen, who worked as an LPN in a doctor's office, had suffered from breast cancer and diabetes, and the couple had lost their home and gone bankrupt several years earlier due to their mounting medical expenses and limited income. Their extended family provided a great deal of social connection and support, as the Richards family lived across the street from one of Doreen's sisters and near her mother, father,

because of her personality, not because we have any great parenting skills with her', Doreen said. 'She doesn't do that much where she needs discipline. I mean we've had kids where we have – there is not enough discipline on the face of this earth. But she has not really required discipline yet, although it is coming.' Gabriela didn't spend a great deal of time on the computer or in front of other screens, according to Doreen, because she spent so much time playing or practicing for soccer when she was not at school. 'When I get home I may use the phone for a little bit like 10 minutes and then do homework', Gabriela explained. 'Then I usually have soccer practice so when I go there I see my friends. When I get home it is usually too late to do anything but I might go on the computer for a couple minutes.' Gabriela didn't have her own cell phone, in part because her family believed she didn't need one and of course, in part due to the financial instability of the family. The family's cell phone was usually with Doreen, as she was the one who needed to be reached by other family members at varying times of the day.

Although their financial situation necessitated modest living, Marvin's retirement meant that he had time to transport Gabriela to and from her daily soccer practices and weekend tournaments, and to deal with issues related to Workman's Compensation through the State's online program. He also saw himself as the primary monitor of Gabriela's media use, noting that she was not allowed to purchase music online without first asking for his approval. When she was online, he said that he and Doreen were 'in and out of the room quite a bit', and sometimes checked to see where she had been online. As he noted:

> We talk very openly and honestly as a family about everything, you know, about how it is unfortunate but true today that you hear about these girls being abducted … a lot of it is through connections on the Internet and everything else. We just go back to her and stress to her that she has the option of [making mistakes] but look what the end result is, okay? And we can't – I'm not going to be on her back 24 hours a day. She's old enough to understand the difference between right and wrong.

In an interview apart from her grandparents, Gabriela Richards expressed views that were echoed by Montana Odell, Tanya Cortez, and several other teens from disadvantaged backgrounds regarding their beliefs that their parents' lack of experience with communication technologies made them less capable of understanding

> They are older and they don't know a lot about technology. I think they are worried that if you use it a lot what you are actually doing – They don't know what you are actually doing. I don't think they are as dependent on it as we are now, so they think you don't really need to use it so much.

Several themes emerge in these three case studies. In each case, we see young people who recognized that they were more adept in the uses of communication technologies than their parents were. This lack of expertise, the young people felt, contributed to their parents' reluctance about technologies, and also to their differing views of technology in their individual and family lives. In the case of Tanya Cortez, it seemed that her parents were unable to understand her frustration about her lack of access because they themselves did not feel hindered by their lack of technological engagement. Montana Odell was frustrated that despite what she viewed as her efforts to educate her mother about digital technologies, her mother, in Montana's view, remained anxious about things that seemed far less consequential to Montana than to her mother. Gabriela Richards echoed this awareness of how a parent's lack of experience could contribute to misunderstandings and anxieties that, in turn, could lead to greater restrictions. For each of these teens, their parents' lack of experience contributed to what the young people perceived as a rift in understanding between parents and young people over the role of technology in their lives. This finding echoes the gap of ‘infocomm illiterate’ parents and their more technologically comfortable children in Singapore, according to a study by Lim & Tan (2004).

But the idea of trust between parents and teenage children was another theme that emerged in the conversations with these three families, and among several other families interviewed, as well. Many of the teens interviewed, like Montana Odell, Tanya Cortez, and Gabriela Richards, interpreted their parents' concerns about the digital environment in light of their parents' expression of trust for them. This made a difference in how these and other teens responded to the strategies their parents adopted with regard to digital media use. Montana Odell, Gabriela Richards, and Tanya Cortez sought to address their parents' concerns by sharing their online or text-related practices with them, taking on the role of educating both parents and younger siblings about digital media. Sixteen-year-old Cristina, a lower income biracial young person, related a story that echoed those of Montana, Gabriela, and Tanya. She noted that when her parents saw a television news feature on myspace,

> they freaked out about it. They were like, ‘is [your page] on private? Can they see everything?’ I was like, ‘no, everything's like on confidential’. And sometimes I'm on it and my dad goes into his home office ‘cause that's where the computer is, and I'd be like talking to somebody, and he's like, ‘oh, who's that you're talking to?’ And I'm like, ‘oh, that's my friend so-and-so, and look, he put up a new picture’. And like my parents know my friends on there.

Cristina had calmed her parents' fears about myspace by engaging them in conversation and showing them what she did on her myspace page. Seventeen-year-old Jessica, a Euro-American teen from a lower income background, mentioned that she similarly told her mother who she talked with on myspace, emphasizing to her that she only talked to relatives and to friends she'd known in person.

For other teens, parental anxiety was viewed as an outgrowth of their lack of knowledge and thereby it undermined their authority. Trent, an 18-year-old Latino young man who attended a lower income school in southwest Denver, similarly noted that his mother did not know much about myspace. But rather than attempting to teach her, he dismissed his mother's concerns about myspace: ‘My mom is like all protective, and I just tell her, “times are different now”. My mom lives back in the past’, he said. He and other teens who believed that their parents were attempting to assert authoritarian rules without much knowledge adopted a similar strategy that involved hiding actual heavy use in order to ease (or avoid) parental concerns (Clark forthcoming).

Parents' strategies

Maybe because parents in lower income families often had less experience with communications technologies, a different strategy seemed to emerge more frequently: reliance on family. Parents looked to their own siblings, particularly those who had children older than their own, for guidance on how to deal with the digital generation gap. They also relied on older and more technologically savvy siblings or cousins to look out for younger and less experienced members of the family. And when a technological question arose, they looked to their own children to address it – something that young people sometimes disdained (see Lim & Tan 2004).

It is likely that this reliance upon family speaks to a relationship with ethnic norms as much as (or perhaps more than) lower economic levels, but it is important to note that this strategy of relying upon family for help in the areas of communication technology did not seem nearly as prevalent with the higher income families we interviewed, regardless of their ethnicity.

As was the case in Tanya Cortez's family, extended families were often a source of additional supervision and advice, especially when the young person's parents were less savvy about myspace and cell phone use than their teen children were. ‘My aunt has a myspace’, Sophia said. ‘She tells the grandparents what's going on [with me] … It's not that I don't want them to see, it's just weird to think, “oh man, my aunt's watching”’, she said. We heard similar stories about ‘snooping’ extended family members from young people who lived in higher income neighborhoods. Sixteen-year-old Annabeth noted that her father had looked at her page, although he did not own up to snooping: ‘He pretended it wasn't him. He said that like a friend of his from work looked on it and told him about it.’ And 16-year-old Elizabeth noted that one of her friends had gotten very angry when her mother got access to her myspace page: ‘one of my friends, her uncle was like an FBI agent, and he hacked onto her myspace and found out like a bunch of stuff, so like her mom knew everything, and that was a big deal [because] it was a bunch of really personal stuff that like she didn't want her mom knowing’. Parents and extended family members from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are not the only ones who aren't always sure of appropriate ways to supervise teens in the online environment, of course. But in this realm, they seemed to rely on extended family perhaps more than they otherwise would. And in turn, some extended family members seemed to see themselves as more ‘expert’ than parents, thereby assuming an authoritative role that, in some cases, the young person did not see as appropriate. It seemed to challenge at least two norms: the young person's belief that they should have personal privacy, and their belief that their parents, rather than other relatives, were the ones that they needed to negotiate with to maintain that privacy.

Still, protecting the family was of paramount importance for many young people. Perhaps because parents in less financially advantaged families often lacked knowledge of the online and cell phone practices of their peers, older siblings sometimes took responsibility for younger siblings. As 17-year-old Rosalia noted, when she first learned that her 14-year-old sister had a myspace page

> I got mad. I was frustrated because like, I don't know, I didn't want her talking to some people that she didn't know, and like I looked at her page and I seen her friends and there was guys from [Rosalia's high school] that requested [to be added to her list of friends]. And she would have them as a friend and she's only like an 8th grader. So that made me mad, and I was just going crazy on her. So I told her that if she was going to have a myspace, she could only have people that she knew, she couldn't have people that she didn't know … And like, I made her page private and everything.

Rosalia's younger sister was 'mad' that Rosalia had intervened and had protested that 'it's her page, she could do whatever she wanted'. Her sister was even angrier when Rosalia reported the whole thing to their mother. 'I told my mom to look at the page and look at the guys, how old they were', she said. Then, according to Rosalia, her mother told Rosalia's sister 'that if she didn't delete the guys she had to delete her myspace, so she deleted everybody that she didn't know'. Rosalia continued to check on her sister's page after that incident. About six months later, when she found that her sister had again 'friended' someone Rosalia didn't know, Rosalia got angry with her sister again. 'She goes, "well, all right"', Rosalia reported, and her sister again deleted the stranger from her friends list.

Sixteen-year-old Montana Odell, introduced earlier, was similarly concerned about her younger sibling Thad. In her comments she first focused on the problems of television, especially when it came to how she believed her 11-year-old brother might be influenced by it:

> I worry that he has access to this. Some of the stuff, I feel like I am old enough to know because I made my own decisions about morals and stuff like that. But for someone his age, he is growing up and he is more influenced than I would be. So it bothers me that he has access to a lot of stuff that, I don't know, it should be on late at night or something. If parents don't have a proper block then kids can just have access to it.

She worried that her mother, mentioned earlier, did not have much knowledge of the online environment, and thus she also stepped in there: 'I was telling him before he downloads music that he needs to ask me because a lot of weird stuff comes up sometimes. It's not totally bad but it will be girls in bikinis or something. He doesn't

and also chose to watch what she called ‘wholesome’ television programs with 11-year-old Thad, eschewing programs that might be more enticing for a 16-year-old because, as she noted, her family had a distaste for uncouth language and inappropriate situations and she felt a need to model appropriate media behaviors for him.

Sometimes, parents directly encouraged – or rather, enforced – this kind of ethic of siblings who look out for one another. Seventeen-year-old Violeta, a Latino young woman from a low income neighborhood, related this story:

> Well, there was this case when my sister, she had this boyfriend, and she would be always texting him like at 4 in the morning, she would stay up with him ’til 6. So one day my dad caught her and he got really mad. So me and my sister got our phones taken away, we had to put them in their room, or sometimes in the kitchen overnight. Because if one of us gets in trouble and the other one knows about it and doesn't tell our parents, the other one gets the phone taken away, too. So they punish us both.

Violeta, then, had an incentive to keep her sister from ‘disrespecting the rules’ of the family, as she said. After she had told this story, several of her friends chimed in to note that their parents similarly enforced a rule of siblings looking out for one another, and two of them related this to having to go everywhere with their siblings.

The parental strategy that (largely) backfires

In addition to reliance upon family, there was another parental strategy that came up among teens from economically disadvantaged families that we didn't hear from other teens, and this had to do with cell phone purchases and payment plans. As John Cortez had said to Tanya, it would be up to her to purchase a cell phone and a plan when she could afford it. We found that when teens from disadvantaged as well as more privileged backgrounds did obtain jobs in high school, they used the funds earned to pay for cell phones and cell phone plans (in addition to paying for transportation, when possible). Yet whereas more privileged families saw this primarily as a way of teaching their young people about assuming responsibility, the less advantaged families had the added incentive of facilitating an expense that they themselves might be unable to fulfill due to financial pressures. Yet who owned and oversaw the cell phone when the

teen paid for it served as a point of tension between parents and teens in less advantaged families. Here is an excerpt from an interview with 17-year-old Winona:

> Interviewer: Do your parents pretty much know what's going on with myspace?
> Winona: Nah, 'cause I'm never on the computer.
> Interviewer: So you use the phone more?
> Winona: Yeah.
> Interviewer: And how do they feel about that?
> Winona: They just get mad 'cause I'm on the phone all the time
> Interviewer: So, are there restrictions, then? Like, maybe they say you have to get off the phone during dinnertime?
> Winona: No.
> Interviewer: No? So you can just text and talk all the time?
> Winona: Yeah. 'Cause it's my phone and they can't take it away.

Similarly, when 17-year-old Eduardo was asked if his single parent mother took his cell phone away when he was grounded, he said, 'No, 'cause I pay for my cell phone. [I would tell her] "no, you're not paying for it, I am, so it's mine"'. 'Yeah', his 18-year-old friend Jose agreed. 'I mean, they can't take it away from me. If you pay for it, it's yours.' In contrast, when 16-year-old Cristina mentioned that she was 'supposed to pay half' her cell phone expenses, but hadn't done that in a while, she said that her parents had the right to take her phone away 'when like I'm doing something that I'm not supposed to be, or I talk back, or like I get bad grades or something. I know [getting the phone taken away] is a consequence of not following the rules.' Cesar, who at 17 did not have a job and whose parents paid for his phone, noted that he usually didn't have his phone taken away because 'I don't really do anything bad'. He did sound somewhat embarrassed, however, to be the only male in his nine-person discussion group who didn't have a job and didn't pay for his own phone. Control over the cell phone went hand-in-hand with who paid the bills, and teen males, in particular, seemed eager to engender greater autonomy from parents, symbolized through the oversight of the cell phone that came with an earned income. But of course, this autonomy came with a price for parents: even if it relieved the potential financial pressure of the cell phone bill, it transferred a certain amount of authority to the young people themselves.

Discussion

At the heart of this study is the idea that digital technologies, including cell phones and access to the online environment (sometimes in one device, sometimes in two or more), is increasingly domesticated, as the home context continues to matter a great deal in how people come to experience the digital world (Morley 2006). This article is therefore in keeping with many projects that are attempting to better understand how families, variously defined, are negotiating the online environment and related cell phone technologies in light of various financial, parental, and time-related concerns (see Bakardjieva 2006; Lemor 2006; Lim 2006). Families in the US are subject to the fluctuations of the market to a greater degree than in many European countries, however, in the sense that the traditional 'safety net' of the US welfare state continues to erode and few provisions are available for support for families with children of any age (Hochschild 2003). The frustrations that young people experience in relation to their parents' lack of knowledge and their own lack of regular access to communication technologies should be viewed not in relation to parental failings, therefore, but with regard to the broader issue of digital inclusion and digital exclusion (Warschauer 2003).

In this study, young people adopted different strategies regarding how they and their parents addressed the 'knowledge gap' that existed between their parents' and their own experiences with cell phones and the online environment. Some, like Trent, dismissed their parents' concerns as irrelevant and old-fashioned, particularly when they felt that their parents were attempting to impose authoritarian practices on them without the knowledge that might allow them to operate authoritatively. Others, like Cristina and Tanya Cortez, educated their parents about their online and texting experiences. And many, like Montana Odell, Tanya Cortez, Gabriela Richards, Cristina, Cesar, and others, recognized that their parents wanted to supervise and be involved in their lives, even as their parents' lack of knowledge hampered those efforts.

It is important to point out that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds did not seem embarrassed by their parents' lack of knowledge when it came to the online realm, although sometimes, as was the case with Montana Odell, they expressed embarrassment about the fact that their parents focused on predators and porn, concerns that they viewed as distanced from their real-life experiences of the online environment. This gap between Montana's experience and her mother's familiarity with it was further expressed in Montana's dubious appreciation for her mother's trust. She

teaching her ‘right from wrong’, although she also acknowledged that her mother's trust was rooted more in ignorance than in involvement. Gabriela Richards also appreciated the fact that her grandparents wanted to be supportive of her even as she acknowledged that they did not understand how cell phones and the online environment fit into her everyday life. Moreover, she found it frustrating that their attempts at supervision felt to her like an invasion of privacy. And Tanya Cortez similarly felt that her parents did not appreciate the role of the online environment in her life. At 14, high-achieving Tanya's frustrations were expressed in relation to homework, although this would probably change as she got older and more of her friends had access to a cell phone, if not to a social network account.

In each of these cases, however, these young women and others like them recognized a desire on the part of their parents to be authoritative rather than authoritarian, operating out of assumptions of trusting relationships rather than out of distrust or control. This seemed to influence the ways in which these young people adopted strategies of their own that tended to include efforts at dialogue with parents and care for younger siblings.

A key strategy that parents and teens alike employed in relation to the knowledge gap was a reliance upon family to manage, and in some cases make up for, a parent's perceived lack of experience in relation to these matters. This was evident in Rosalia's monitoring of her younger sister's myspace page, in Montana's oversight of both her younger brother's television viewing and online experiences, and in Violeta's punishment for her sister's violation of the rule against late-night texting with a boyfriend. Whereas ‘snooping’ onto myspace and Facebook pages and reporting to extended family members seemed to transcend different socioeconomic backgrounds, this norm of being ‘my brother's (or sister's) keeper’ in relation to digital media emerged uniquely among the more economically disadvantaged families. Whereas this strategy certainly cannot address the various problems of digital exclusion, it did seem to address the knowledge gap between parents and their teenage children quite well, at least in the cases examined here.

The strategy that seemed to backfire for some parents, however, involved the transfer of responsibility for cell phone and service payments to the young people in their families. Parents of teen girls seem to see the purchase of a cell phone and a cell phone plan as a safety matter, and hence it is increasingly seen as a necessity as teen girls

a cell phone purchase a priority, in spite of the fact that by the time the purchase was made, the cell would be likely used primarily for social rather than academic or purely safety concerns. Or, they could have opted to have her purchase it herself, thereby inadvertently allowing her to gain a measure of autonomy that they might not have considered previously.

Clearly, however, encouraging young people to pay for their own cell phone and plan comes with its own costs. Whereas teens whose parents paid the cell phone bill were seen as well within their rights to restrict or withhold the phone as a form of discipline, those rights then evaporated when young people paid the bill themselves. This had the potential of introducing new tensions, such as when Winona's parents were flummoxed as Winona continued to text and talk on ‘her’ phone at the dinner table, or when Eduardo's mother and Jose's parents experienced the frustration of trying to discipline their sons who would not relinquish ‘their’ phones.

In some cases, parents still exercised authority over the cell even when their teenage children paid, but the issue of payment introduced an additional, competing source of authority into the equation: that of the marketplace and its attendant emphasis on property rights. Once a young person claimed ownership of the cell phone, he or she also claimed the right to exercise authority over the object (in this case the phone) he or she purchased. Therefore, purchasing a cell phone became the equivalent of purchasing autonomy. The parents' concerns that mitigated in favor of a cell phone – especially safety for teen girls, reflecting the values of a society that tends to see young women as vulnerable – thus came into direct conflict with another important parental goal: that of maintaining an authoritative relationship with the young people in their family.

Conclusion

This article has argued that US parents and their teenage children who reside in economically disadvantaged families experience a ‘knowledge gap’ with regard to digital media, especially manifested in reference to the online environment. Parents in these families tended to articulate concerns that their teenage children believed warranted less concern than their parents attached to them. Moreover, teens in these families experienced frustration at their parents' lack of experience and their

as an obstruction to their social and even academic goals. Young people employed differing strategies to address their parents' concerns and lack of experience. Some dismissed those concerns, some hid their actual practices from their parents, and some attempted to educate their parents. In families where parents had less knowledge and comfort with technology than their teenage children, parental strategies involved a secondary and yet equally important strategy that relied upon parents' siblings, extended family members, and their own teenagers' oversight and education with their younger siblings. Whereas some parents intentionally linked siblings, meting out punishment to both when one broke the rules, some teens took it upon themselves to play a parental role with younger siblings with respect to digital media.

Yet for parents to be able to continue to evaluate, establish trust, maintain contact, advise, oversee, and in some cases legislate the mediated activities of their young people, they need to think through the ways in which young people live in a society today that equates ownership with control. Not all parents viewed cell phone payments as a ticket to authority over all technological uses, but this did seem to be the default view on the part of teens. Moreover, establishing a relationship of trust seemed to be important in how some young people responded to their parents and shaped their own strategies regarding digital media use. This article found that even when parents were not knowledgeable about the digital environment, they could retain a positive relationship with, and even an authoritative role in, their teens' lives, when they expressed trust and respect for their teenage children and the ways in which they chose to engage in practices in the digital realm.

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Notes

Usually, married parents share similar parenting orientations, because parents with vastly different orientations are more likely to divorce (Fletcher et al. 1999).

Much of the research for this project was conducted at the University of Colorado as

and the parallel ‘Religion, Meaning & the New Media @ Home’ project, under the direction of Stewart Hoover. Focus groups and interviews conducted in 2007–2008 were under the direction of the author at the University of Denver.

Here is the breakdown of the bi and multiracial families interviewed: five Anglo/Hispanic, four Anglo/Black, one Anglo/Native American, one Anglo/Asian, one African American/Native American, and two Hispanic/Native American/Anglo.

Although we do not know the exact household income of all of the young people who participated in the discussion group interviews, we strove for a breakdown that would be similar to that of the family household income, with five groups from lower income neighborhoods, six from lower middle income, and five from upper middle income.

Researcher Monica Emerich interviewed the Odell family. The two children had different fathers, and hence differing racial/ethnic identifications; Montana was part Native American, and Thad was part African American. Monica Emerich also interviewed the Richards family, and Scott Webber interviewed the Cortez family. Focus group interviews were conducted by Lynn Schofield Clark, Caroline Davidson, Alexis Lynn, and Colette Holst in 2007–2008.

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