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ARTICLES

DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE GENERATION GAP

Qualitative research on US teens and their parents

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Keywords:

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 sc rsee media use by t tone 2007; Livingsto ch as televisio sonal compute s, and cell phone u tial nuisance (Clark et ground mak embers. As Kvasny (pproaches to these m sporadic work, ra vaite 2006; Van Dijk that exists betwee gap is often a source 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).

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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 o team and I intervie also conduct ome of the young p ocus groups in 2007 ngulate findings he househo es that fell belo $25,000 and $48,0 -determined median the househo milies describe ial, and there wa Latino, and Asian.3 was 39 Anglo. 1 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 wer berg (2004) has term t the research not said, and why o elicit a desired ditional narrative trinsically oriented ocations as an a ffer a way into ex dentities in context’

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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 e al and familial articulate authorit were concern l media) in which th g people in these fa y and still figure ou on't under w parents expr eacted to those co ns shaped the strat

Case s

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 i n't use the compute t and wrong but she her attentio ably becaus ther their cell pho gies for dealing

John in a low-incom environment in their l used, John was unc uter and had been rel Whereas his reluctan ed felt need to prote m his own

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 w scuss below, promise dvantaged parents.

The third ay', 52-year-old Marv . Marvin, a Euro-Am -paying job, had e n, lived in a smal use Gabriela n, was in prison. D n breast cancer a t several years ea Their extende the Richards family li ther, 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 aski en were 'in and out had been online. A

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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 fortable children

But the i eme that emerged other families Odell, Tanya Cortez, a e digital environn e a diffe arents adopte , and Tanya Cortez s ext-related practices ger siblings about di g person, related a ed that when he

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 a

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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

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> 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
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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.

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In additi t came up among t from other teens, a John Cortez had s when she could ore privilege earned to pay for c ation, when possible of teaching their you ilies had the added in nable to fulfill du 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
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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 exp ent, dismisse rly when they felt es on them without ners, like Cristina xting experier s, Cristina, Cesar, a e involved in their li .

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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 monitori both her younger s punishm th a boyfrien rting to extende ckgrounds, this norr edia emerged Whereas this strat it did seem to add quite well, at least

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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 p… …nt of
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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 relations they expresse h they chose to

Acknow

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Notes

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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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