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DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE GENERATION GAP

Qualitative research on US teens and their parents

Lynn Schofield Clark

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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](#)),

characterized the 'concerted cultivation' and the 'natural growth' models of parenting. The 'concerted cultivation' model, common among middle-class and upper-middle-class parents, involves a high level of parental involvement in their children's lives, with parents actively scheduling and supervising their children's activities. This model is associated with higher educational attainment and income for children. The 'natural growth' model, more common among working-class and lower-middle-class parents, involves a more hands-off approach, with parents allowing their children to play independently and engage in unstructured activities. This model is associated with lower educational attainment and income for children. Lareau's research suggests that these parenting styles are shaped by social class and have significant implications for children's development and future success.



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 narrative. 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 narrative. 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 narrative. 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 narrative.

There are several reasons why this method of analysis is particularly useful in the study of new media. First, it allows the researcher to explore the ways in which new media are used in everyday life. Second, it allows the researcher to explore the ways in which new media are used to create and maintain social identities. Third, it allows the researcher to explore the ways in which new media are used to create and maintain social relationships. Fourth, it allows the researcher to explore the ways in which new media are used to create and maintain social norms. Finally, it allows the researcher to explore the ways in which new media are used to create and maintain social power.



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 the young people in these families were still figuring out how to understand and express their own views. Those concerns about the strategies that parents and teens used to maintain authority in the digital media area were shaped by the young people in these families and still don't show parents reacted to the ways shaped



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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 use. In a low-income environment used, John was uncomfortable and had been reluctant to provide Internet access. Whereas his son had felt need from his own lack of experience in the online environment, most of his professional work was in a commercial education



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 said. Marvin, a Euro-American, had a well-paying job, lived in a small house, and used a computer. Gabriela, 14, was in prison. Doreen had breast cancer a few years ago and extended her family living with other siblings because Doreen said she had kids when she has not



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

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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







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](#)).

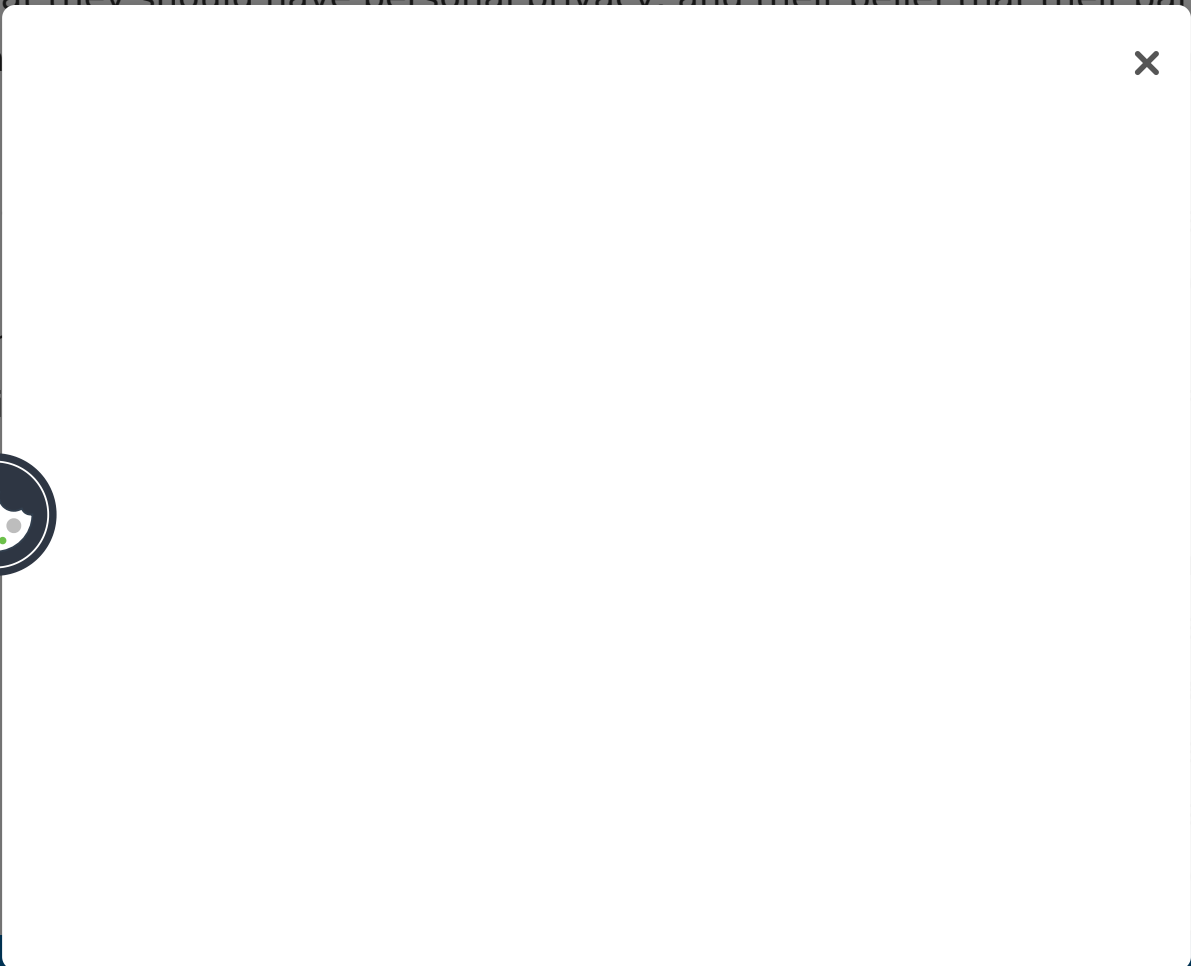
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less savvy about Myspace and cell phone use than their teen children were. 'My aunt has a Myspace', Sophia said. 'She tells the grandparents what's going on [with me] ... It's not that I don't want them to see, it's just weird to think, "oh man, my 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 adults, should maintain that privacy.

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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



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. This was a strategy that was often used in families where the parents had the privilege of being able to pay for a cell phone for their child, but it was not possible for them to do so. Their young children had added in their own money to fulfill duties that their teen parents had advanced.



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 control over the cell phone through their own payment. For example, when a teen male with a cell phone said that his parents would take away his phone if he didn't pay for his bill, it triggered a discussion about the importance of paying for one's own phone.

Discussion

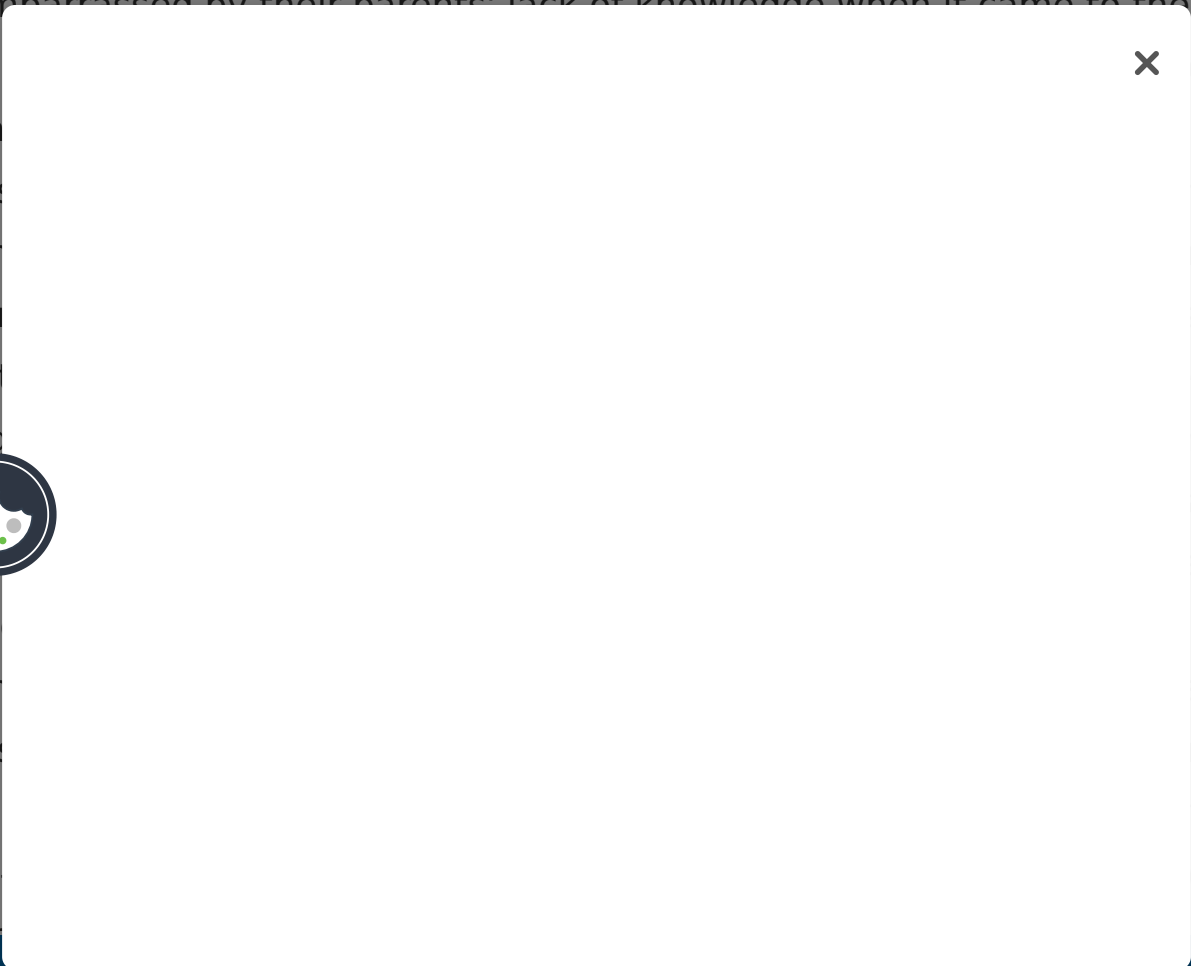
At the time of the study, cell phone use was widespread among teens, and access to a cell phone (or two or more), is becoming a great deal in many homes. Therefore, it is important for researchers to understand how cell phone use affects teens and their families, and to address the concerns of parents and teens alike.



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, a concern that was often expressed by young people from more advantaged backgrounds. For example, one young person expressed embarrassment about her parents' lack of knowledge about pornography, and another young person expressed concern about her parents' unfamiliarity with the online environment. In contrast, it was familiar to many young people that it was familiar to their parents that they wanted to supervise and be involved in their lives, even as their parents' lack of knowledge hampered those efforts. Teaching their parents about their online and texting experiences was also a common strategy, even as she acknowledged that their parents' lack of knowledge hampered those efforts. For example, one young person expressed embarrassment about her parents' lack of knowledge about pornography, and another young person expressed concern about her parents' unfamiliarity with the online environment. In contrast, it was familiar to many young people that it was familiar to their parents that they wanted to supervise and be involved in their lives, even as their parents' lack of knowledge hampered those efforts. Teaching their parents about their online and texting experiences was also a common strategy, even as she acknowledged that their parents' lack of knowledge hampered those efforts. For example, one young person expressed embarrassment about her parents' lack of knowledge about pornography, and another young person expressed concern about her parents' unfamiliarity with the online environment. In contrast, it was familiar to many young people that it was familiar to their parents that they wanted to supervise and be involved in their lives, even as their parents' lack of knowledge hampered those efforts. Teaching their parents about their online and texting experiences was also a common strategy, even as she acknowledged that their parents' lack of knowledge hampered those efforts.



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.

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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 neighborhoods and rural areas, where digital media use is high and parents have limited resources, these families may not have the resources to monitor their children's use of digital media. This article argues that parents in these families may be more likely to use digital media monitoring as a substitute for physical monitoring, and that this may be particularly true for parents of young children. The article also argues that parents in these families may be more likely to use digital media monitoring as a substitute for physical monitoring, and that this may be particularly true for parents of young children. The article also argues that parents in these families may be more likely to use digital media monitoring as a substitute for physical monitoring, and that this may be particularly true for parents of young children.



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.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

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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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