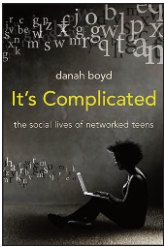# Reviews

It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens. *By danah boyd.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014. 281 pp. ISBN 9780300166316.

The name of Amanda Todd is known to many Canadians because of her suicide, in 2012, which is understood as a consequence of prolonged cyberbullying. These tragedies and others have generated a national conversation generally condemning teens' overuse of online communication and pushing government officials to envision specific legislation against cyberbullying. In *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens,* danah boyd (2014) tackles social anxieties linked to teens' use of social media and focuses on how and why teens have come to reach out online.

Drawing on autobiographical accounts of her own youth and her past online experiences, boyd mostly uses data gathered between 2003 and 2012 from teens across the United States. Her ethnographic and qualitative material includes 166 interviews, focus groups, and observations from visits to teens' social media pages to better understand their online usage and self-presentation. boyd supplements this research with various popular culture examples, news stories, and scholarly work from various disciplines, including communications, law, digital and social media studies, philosophy, and sociology. Through her extensive knowledge of current and classical texts in the field, boyd provides context, definitions, examples, and critical discussions of the topics at hand.

The book focuses on specific concerns that surround teens' online engagement, such as privacy, so-called online addictions, the dangers lurking online (primarily in the form of sexual predators), and bullying, and highlights systemic issues, such as inequalities and media literacy, often sidelined by government and school officials.

The key theoretical contribution that scholars in digital and social media, communications, and other fields will draw from this book is the concept of *networked publics* that "serve as publics that both rely on networked technologies and also network people into meaningful imagined communities in new ways" (p. 201). Journalists, policymakers, and parents will gain a more nuanced and complex understanding of the practices and identities that teens express through social media. This may both reassure readers and expand their perspectives on the challenges that teens and society face.

boyd's analysis is timely and may remain timeless, as she provides cautionary comments pointing out the somewhat ephemeral nature of current online platforms and yet identifies key lessons learned during her fieldwork that may apply to future

developments. For audiences who may not be familiar with the various social media platforms mentioned in this book (Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, to name only a few) or with the specific lexicon used (such as *subtweeting, lolspeak*), this book may first appear opaque, if not inaccessible. However, boyd consistently provides comprehensive definitions, examples, metaphors, and references to other texts for readers who may be new to the field and who want to understand each of these components.

In order to provide both the theoretical and social groundwork for this book, boyd dedicates the first chapter to defining *networked publics, technological determinism* and *context collapse,* key concepts mobilized throughout the book. She also emphasizes how teens now have little access to offline public spaces, such as the mall, which may partly explain why they turn to social media—not because of the technology in and of itself, but because of its facilities, enabling teens to socialize with their peers even when they cannot leave their homes.

The second chapter, dedicated to issues surrounding privacy, points out how teens' definitions of what is private do not necessarily align with generally accepted definitions. In a context where information and profiles are "public-by-default, private-through-effort" (p. 62), teens believe that social norms and etiquette should be sufficient to bar parents or teachers from looking at their profiles despite having technical access.

In Chapter 3, boyd uses numerous media stories to illustrate how teens are portrayed as addicted to social media and underlines how, in comparison to most behaviours that are understood as compulsive, social media use does not cause teens to become less social—quite the contrary. Teens tend to use social media in order to connect and socialize due to their lack of freedom and physical or geographical mobility.

The following chapter addresses worries about the dangers lurking online and discusses how various news stories (sometimes false or unverified) and popular culture productions (such as the television show *To Catch a Predator*) play on the rhetoric of fear and consequently limit teens' online participation. boyd nuances this understanding by providing data demonstrating that the teens "who are most at risk online are often struggling everywhere" (p. 123).

Chapter 5 focuses on bullying and on media stories on the subject. boyd argues that parents' and the media's identification of situations as bullying does not correspond to teens' understanding of the situations, nor to academic definitions that stipulate that bullying is a combination of three factors: "aggression, repetition and imbalance in power" (p. 131). In this chapter, she writes that most situations perceived as bullying by outsiders lack the imbalance of power and are perceived by teen participants or witnesses as "drama" or joking around.

After addressing these matters that worry adults, boyd dedicates the remaining chapters of her book to issues often overlooked by them. Concentrating on issues of inequality in Chapter 6—mostly in relation to race, ethnicity, and class—boyd summarizes utopian and dystopian views of Internet technologies in order to demonstrate how *current* social divisions and inequalities are reproduced online. As such,

underprivileged teens, online, do not benefit from the levelling advantages that techno-utopians see in the development of Internet technologies.

Chapter 7 enables boyd to discuss how popular understandings of teens as "digital natives" disadvantage those who have less Internet access and consequently may develop more limited technical or media literacy skills. By identifying teens as "digital natives," and by obscuring individual differences, we do not properly address issues of access, critical thinking, and media literacy skills that would enable everyone to profit from the offerings of the Internet.

The last chapter enables boyd to once again mobilize the concept of the networked public, emphasizing that a majority of the teens in her study complained about how little free time they had to meet with friends, while social media enabled them to do just that. She underlines how, by engaging with social media, teens not only develop a variety of skills, but also engage in political debate and public life. Though social media and the Internet make negative aspects of teens' lives visible, they also enable teens to showcase more positive presentations. Restricting teens' access to social media does not lessen or eliminate negative experiences, as the Internet only mirrors individuals' offline realities. The solution, then, is perhaps to empower teens to make the best possible use of social media.

Overall, boyd pushes readers to question their concerns surrounding teens' online engagement. Considering that social media provides teens with opportunities to engage in public and *with* various publics, she suggests that this is perhaps the real source of discomfort for many members of non-teen generations.

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