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Book review: danah boyd, it's complicated: the social lives of networked teens

**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Helsper, Ellen (2014) Book review: danah boyd, it's complicated: the social lives of networked teens. [International Journal of Communication](#), 8 . pp. 2783-2786. ISSN 1932-8036

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2014

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danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014, 281 pp., \$25.00 (hardcover).

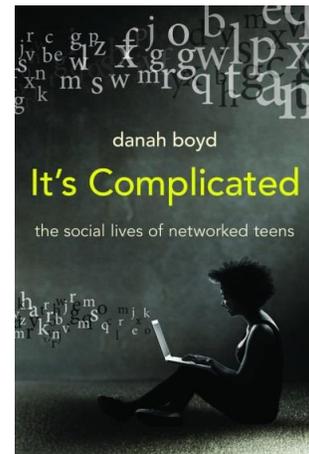
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Objectives

In *It's Complicated*, danah boyd looks at teenagers' use of and experiences with social media. Her primary objective is to disentangle what is truly new in teens' daily lives and what is just the same old thing in a new jacket. The book is clearly more at the social-constructivist than the technodeterminist end of the academic spectrum, and boyd argues that "the 'core activities' [...] chatting and socializing, engaging in self-expression, grappling with privacy, and sharing media and information—are here to stay" (p. 8). Teenagers' current exploration of and struggles with identity, privacy, addiction, bullying, risk taking, literacy, inequalities, and being public (the chapters that make up the book) are similar to the processes that we witnessed before there was digital media. What has changed, according to boyd, are the persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability of our personal lives and relationships. However, the underlying principles remain unchanged even if the tools used and the ways in which these processes take place have shifted.



boyd's book is part of a shift in the debate from what individuals are doing or experiencing in their interactions through and with digital platforms toward what the results of these interactions are in daily lives. Others have argued that we should not focus on risky behavior but on the actual harm that occurs as a result of this behavior (Livingstone et al., 2011). Similarly, in the digital inclusion literature, people are stepping away from focusing on whether someone uses a platform to look at what are the tangible outcomes of this engagement. In relation to teens, this means seeing users as diverse and the use of media as embedded in daily life, as boyd argues: "Rather than assuming that youth have innate technical skills, parents, educators and policymakers must collectively work to support those who come from different backgrounds and have different experiences" (p. 180).

Instead of asking what is new or different, we should look at our concerns and teens' engagement with the digital world as a way to discuss life and its challenges in general:

Through social media, teens reveal their hopes and dreams, struggles and challenges [...] Technology makes the struggles youth face visible but it neither creates nor prevents harmful things from happening even if it can be a tool for both. It simply mirrors and magnifies many aspects of everyday life, good and bad." (p. 212)

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I found five key themes in the book: moral panics, power and control, context and norms, and amplification of social processes.

Moral Panics

Our preoccupation with young people and media is an expression of our fears and hopes for ourselves and society. This happened for television, radio, and computer games, and we can see it recur for social media. In boyd's words: "Adults are bound to project the same fears and anxieties they have about social media onto whatever new technology captures the imagination of future youth" (p. 211). She wants to counter moral panics by urging adults to understand the positive and complex ways in which young people interact with technology.

The related argument about teens' diversity and vulnerability could have been made stronger in the earlier chapters. For example, the addiction chapter would have benefited from a discussion of research showing which teens are likely to encounter more negative outcomes from intense digital engagement (e.g., Smahel et al., 2012). A more thorough discussion of vulnerability and strength and of disadvantage and privilege would have also improved the identity, privacy, and bullying chapters.

Power and Control

A second central issue in the book is teens' general lack of freedom and autonomy and how the emergence of networked publics gives teens more control and power over their identity, privacy and social interactions. Networked publics is simultaneously " [...] (1) the space constructed through networked technologies *and* (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice" (p. 8). boyd argues that in networked publics there is a fundamental "difference between being in public and being public" (p. 57) and that teens are trying to figure out how to be in public while adult concerns focus on them being public.

These ideas about publicness and control are not always backed up by evidence. It would have been helpful to see the statements illustrated with her own or others' research. For example, boyd makes an interesting argument in the bullying chapter about links between microcelebrity culture and bullying, that teens relish attention (i.e., being public) but are also hurt by the pressure that comes with being in public. She indicates that bullying is related to (seeking) popularity in network publics. Evidence of how this takes place and whether this varies among teens is not presented.

Context and Norms

Important in the struggles over how to be public and being in public is the concept of context collapse: "[being] forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses" (p. 31). She discusses this in the privacy and identity chapters by showing how it is often unclear what or who is public, or when and how others interpret what we do as public.

Teens, according to boyd, are trying to move from seeing technological restrictions as the solution to identity and privacy management back to the more traditional idea that social norms are the solution. She sees teens as pioneers in developing contextual norms that go against the dichotomous and stable perception that many adults have of privacy and identity by assuming that these are not fixed and require constant work. Here, boyd should have referred to new developments in thinking about digital skills, where communication skills and social literacy have recently become central to the debate (Van Dijk & Van Deursen, 2014). References to social psychological research would also have been useful; SIDE theory in particular (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998) would have offered an understanding of how our behavior and identity are shaped by how we imagine others and our relationship to them, that is, the social context.

Amplification of Social Processes

To counter moral panics, the author points out repeatedly how digital tools do not create new social processes but, instead, amplify existing relationships and, subsequently, inequalities. She mostly discusses the replication of racial and cultural inequalities and spends little time on Bourdieu's (1986) other types of capital. This underplays the multifarious nature of digital inequality and its relationship to a complex interweaving of social, cultural, economic, political, and personal factors. The inequalities and literacy chapters would have been perfect for a broader discussion of the constant tension between agency and structural power by introducing theories such as the Matthew Effect and Corresponding Fields frameworks (Helsper, 2012).

The Audience

It's Complicated tries to strike a balance between showing the sophistication of teens and their vulnerability. It looks at diversity among young people and argues for a measured approach of understanding and support rather than of panic and alienating concern. This is not a radically new approach. However, the point about seeing technology not as a standalone solution or threat to social issues, but as embedded in everyday life and shaped by existing social structures is important and cannot be made often enough to as broad an audience as possible.

The introductory chapter summarizes the key ideas in the book and on its own would be a great addition to any reading list. The rest of the chapters discuss in detail the specific topic areas and could be read in isolation. However, this would be a disservice to the book. It really should be read cover to cover, because in the later chapters her argument is more nuanced and she asks critical questions about inequality and change.

It's Complicated is a great resource for undergraduate and graduate students in media and communications or youth studies and a good handbook for parents, teachers, and policy makers. Academics will enjoy reading it as long as they accept that its strength lies not in innovative academic theoretical thinking, but in a clear framing of the field of youth and social media studies and in offering a plurality of perspectives between the covers of one insightful book.

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