doi:10.7551/mitpress/8520.001.0001

Introduction

When *Time* magazine declared its 2006 person of the year to be "You" (Grossman 2006), the magazine was pointing to an undeniable reality: anyone with an Internet connection can be a reporter, political commentator, cultural critic, or media producer. Around the same time, media scholar H. Jenkins and colleagues (2006) published a white paper extolling the "participatory cultures" of creation and sharing, mentorship, and civic engagement that were emerging online, especially among teens. Although *Time* did not explicitly frame participation in the new media as a youth phenomenon, most of the fifteen "citizens of digital democracy" who were featured in its December 13 article (Grossman 2006) were under the age of thirty-five. And Jenkins et al. (2006) strongly suggest that young people are especially well-poised to take full advantage of Web 2.0. Indeed, many young people are using the digital media in impressive and socially responsible ways. Consider the following examples.

TVNewser

In 2004, Brian Stelter, then a sophomore communications major at Towson University, started a blog called "TVNewser" that provides an

ongoing, detailed record of ratings, gossip, and events in the news media industry. Over the past three years, "TVNewser" has become a chief source of information for news industry executives. In fact, Stelter receives frequent calls from people like Jonathan Klein, president of CNN's national news division. His youth and lack of credentials notwithstanding, Stelter is considered an extremely credible source (Bosman 2006). After graduating from college, Stelter was hired as a media reporter for the *New York Times*.

Global Kids

Global Kids (http://www.globalkids.org) is a New York–based organization that is "committed to transforming urban youth into successful students as well as global and community leaders." In 2000, Global Kids launched an Online Leadership Program (OLP) through which youth simultaneously build technical, new media literacy, leadership, and civic engagement skills. Youth participants engage in online dialogues about civic issues, regularly post comments on a blog, learn to design educational games and digital films, and play an active role in Teen Second Life, including its youth summer camp, which brings them together online to educate one another about global issues, such as child sex trafficking.

Yet for every digital superkid and for every example of good citizenship online, there seem to be many more examples of (intentional or naïve) misuses—or at least ethically ambiguous uses—of digital media. Consider these examples.

Lonelygirl15

In June 2006, a series of video blogs posted on YouTube by a teenager called Lonelygirl15 began to capture a wide audience ("Lonelygirl15"

2007). The videos depicted a sixteen-year-old girl named Bree talking about her day-to-day existence, including her experiences being home-schooled and raised by strict, religious parents. After several months, Bree was revealed to be Jessica Rose, a twenty-something actress who was working with several filmmaker friends to produce the video series (Heffernan and Zeller 2006).

The Digital Public

Aleksey Vayner, a senior at Yale University in 2006, became infamous after he submitted a résumé to the investment bank USB. Included with the résumé was his online, self-made video titled "Impossible Is Nothing," which appeared to be a record of Vayner's diverse talents and depicted him performing a variety of skills such as ballroom dancing and extreme weightlifting. The video link was circulated by email within the bank and soon beyond it. After it began making headlines in the blogosphere and in major newspapers, questions were raised about the authenticity of some of the footage. Vayner subsequently sought legal advice for what he considered to be an invasion of privacy (de la Merced 2006).

Speech in the Blogosphere

On April 6, 2007, a technical writer and prominent blogger, Kathy Sierra, published an entry on her blog entitled "Death Threats against Bloggers Are NOT 'Protected Speech.'" For several weeks, Sierra had received anonymous violent comments and death threats on her own blog and on two other blogs. Following Sierra's alarming post, a heated controversy about the ethics of speech unfolded in the blogosphere. Calls for a blogger's code of conduct were met with angry protests that indicated how deeply many participants cherish the openness and freedoms of cyberspace (Pilkington 2007).

Ever since digital technologies were made widely available, scholars, educators, policymakers, and parents have been debating their implications for young people's literacy, attention spans, social tolerance, and propensity for aggression. Considerable strides are now being made in scholarship in many of these areas. The educational benefits of video games, for example, are being convincingly documented by scholars such as Gee (2003), Johnson (2005), and Shaffer (2006). At the same time, debates persist about the relationship between video games and violence (Anderson et al. 2004; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, and Walsh 2004).

Concerns about ethical issues in the new media have also been expressed by journalists, politicians, ideologues, and educators but have received less attention from scholars. In response to concerns about online predators, illegal downloading, and imprudent posting of content online, a number of cybersafety initiatives have emerged online and in schools around the country. The Ad Council's YouTube videos entitled "Think before You Post" seek to "to make teen girls aware of the potential dangers of sharing and posting personal information online and of communicating with unfamiliar people to help reduce their risk of sexual victimization and abduction" (Ad Council 2007). Youth-driven outreach groups and anticyberbullying campaigns, such as Teenangels and StandUp!, are making their way into schools. Somewhat surprisingly though, objective, research-based accounts of the ethical issues raised by the new digital media are scarce.[1] This report attempts to fill this gap.

Some of the digital media's ethical fault lines that we have scrutinized are the nature of personal identities that are being formed online; the fate of personal privacy in an environment

where diverse types of information can be gleaned and disseminated; the meaning of authorship in spaces where multiple, anonymous contributors produce knowledge; the status of intellectual and other forms of property that are easily accessible by a broad public; the ways in which individuals (both known and anonymous) interact and treat one another in cyberspace; and the credibility and trustworthiness of individuals, organizations, and causes that are regularly trafficking on the Internet. We believe that five core issues are salient in the new media—identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation. These issues have long been considered important offline as well. Yet in digital spaces, these issues may carry new or at least distinct ethical stakes. It thus seems critical to ask whether the new digital media are giving rise to new mental models—new "ethical minds"—with respect to identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation and whether the new digital media require a reconceptualization of these issues and the ethical potentials they carry. As a starting point for considering these questions, we explore emerging data regarding how young people manage these five issues as they participate in virtual spaces. Our account considers the unique affordances inherent in the new digital media, and associated promises and perils are illustrated through each section's vignettes. The five themes explored here are ethically significant in the digital age, but they are not necessarily the final defining ethical fault lines of this age. We expect that our subsequent empirical work will turn up new ethical issues and perhaps suggest different ways of understanding these themes and the relationships among them.

A note about terminology: in this report, we use the term *new digital media* (NDM) or simply *new media* to refer to the actual technologies that people use to connect with one another—including mobile phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), game consoles, and computers connected to the Internet. Through these technologies, young people are participating in a range of activities, including social networking, blogging, vlogging, gaming, instant messaging, downloading music and other content, uploading and sharing their creations, and collaborating with others in various ways (see appendix A for a detailed overview of youth involvement in specific digital activities). Of principal interest to us are those activities that are interactive (such as multiplayer as opposed single-player games), dialogical (online deliberation on Gather.com, for example), and participatory (user-contributed content, such as videos posted on YouTube). We use the terms *cyberspace*, *the Internet*, or simply *online* to denote the virtual realm in which such interactive activities are taking place. We also use the term *Web 2.0*, which refers to the second-generation Internet technologies that permit, indeed invite, people to create, share, and modify online content (O'Reilly 2005).

New Digital Frontiers

The new digital media have ushered in a new and essentially unlimited set of frontiers (Gardner 2007b). Frontiers are open spaces: they often lack comprehensive and well-enforced rules and regulations and thus harbor both tremendous promises and significant perils. On the promising side, the new digital media

permit and encourage "participatory cultures." As Henry Jenkins and colleagues define it, "a participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (Jenkins et al. 2006, 3).

Time's 2006 person of the year points to the power of Jenkins's concept and suggests that the potential of the new media to empower ordinary citizens and consumers is being realized. Many cultural critics and social scientists (Jenkins among them) have argued that audiences of traditional media have never been passive (Lembo 2000; Radway 1985). Yet the new media invite a different level of agency. Blogs allow people to speak out about issues they care about, massive multiplayer online games invite players to modify them as they play, and social networking sites permit participants to forge new connections with people beyond their real-world cliques, schools, communities, and even countries. In the most idealistic terms, the new digital media hold great potential for facilitating civil society, civic engagement, and democratic participation (Ito 2004; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins et al. 2006; Moore 2003; Pettingill 2007). If leveraged properly, the Internet can be a powerful tool for promoting social responsibility. At the same time, technologies themselves may be used for a range of purposes. The new media's capacities to promote evil might be in equal proportion

to their capacities to promote good (Williams 1974). Indeed, the frontierlike quality of the new digital media means that opportunities for ethical lapses abound. There are innumerable ways—some barely conceivable—for the dishonest to perpetrate harms and, in turn, for the innocent to be victimized.

The potentials and perils of the new digital media are reflected in opposing discourses described as "digital faith" and "moral panics" (Green and Hannon 2007). Optimist Moore (2003) points to the "worldwide peace campaign" of millions of interconnected people who are working for social issues and human rights as a "beautiful" example of "emergent democracy" in cyberspace, while skeptic Keen describes the Internet as "a chaotic human arrangement with few, if any, formal social pacts. Today's Internet resembles a state of nature—Hobbes' dystopia rather than Rousseau's idyll" (2007, 2). These disputes echo those that have raged for decades (if not longer) about traditional media, especially with respect to effects on children (Buckingham 2000). Yet the new media may pose qualitatively different risks and opportunities. The reality is that most online situations are rich with promises and risks, both of which often carry ethical consequences.

Like all frontiers, cyberspace will eventually be regulated in some fashion, but it is unclear how regulation will occur and who will gain and who will lose from the regulation. The Blogger's Code of Conduct (2007) and the Deleting Online Predators Act (2006) are recent efforts in the direction of regulation that take two different tacks. The former, created by bloggers themselves, establishes guidelines for conduct; the latter, a bill introduced by legislators, restricts young people's access to social

networking and other interactive sites. Moreover, because commercial interests have an ever-growing presence in digital spaces, the extent to which market forces will have a hand in regulation and the ethical implications of their involvement need to be considered. Now is the time to ask what a regulated World Wide Web would look like and how we can retain the openness and socially positive potentials of the new digital media while restraining unethical conduct. We believe that such a balance cannot be struck without a nuanced understanding of the distinct ethical fault lines in these rapidly evolving frontiers. Yet understanding is but a first step. Ultimately, for the promises of the new digital media to be positively realized, supports for ethical participation—indeed for the creation of "ethical minds" (Gardner 2007a)—must emerge.

In late 2006, our research team at Harvard Project Zero launched a three-year project funded by the MacArthur Foundation. The goals of the GoodPlay Project are twofold—(1) to investigate the ethical contours of the new digital media and (2) to create interventions to promote ethical thinking and conduct. In the first year of the project, we conducted background research to determine the state of knowledge about digital ethics and youth and to prepare ourselves for our empirical study. This report describes our thinking in advance of beginning our empirical work. We expect to revisit the framework and arguments presented here after our empirical study is complete.

Again, our objective in this report is to provide an overview of what is known about ethical issues that are raised by the new digital media, especially with respect to young people. We are motivated in our project by our concerns about the prevalence

of ideologically driven (as opposed to empirically based) accounts of youth's online activities. Therefore, we strive to provide a balanced account that counters both disempowering skepticism of the new media and its opposite—uncritical celebration or "digital faith" (Green and Hannon 2007). In writing this report, we have three further goals—(1) to stimulate conversations with informed readers, scholars, and other critical thinkers about digital media; (2) to establish a research agenda to help confirm, reject, or revise the understandings and hypotheses presented here; (3) to provide hints about the kinds of supports needed (that is, the key ingredients for successful outreach efforts) so that young people can reflect on the ethical implications of their online activities and ultimately engage in "good play."

Note

1. Exceptions include UNESCO's 2007 report, *Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies* (Rundle and Conley 2007). The report presents the potential positive and negative effects of technologies such as the semantic Web, digital identity management, biometrics, radio frequency identification, grid computing, and other technologies that are now being developed or adopted. By contrast, this report explores the broad issues that are suggested by the activities occurring through media technologies that are widely available and frequently used, particularly by young people. See also the Vatican's 2002 report on ethics and the Internet title "Ethics in Internet": http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html.

This is a section of doi:10.7551/mitpress/8520.001.0001

Young People, Ethics, and the New Digital Media

A Synthesis from the GoodPlay Project

By: Carrie James

Citation:
Young People, Ethics, and the New Digital Media: A Synthesis from the GoodPlay Project
By: Carrie James
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/8520.001.0001
ISBN (electronic): 9780262258944
Publisher: The MIT Press
Published: 2009

The MIT Press

For information about special quantity discounts, please email special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by the MIT Press.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

James, Carrie.
Young people, ethics, and the new digital media : a synthesis from the goodplay project / Carrie James ; with Katie Davis . . . [et al.].
p. cm.—(The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation reports on digital media and learning)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-262-51363-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Information society—Moral and ethical aspects. 2. Digital media—Moral and ethical aspects. I. Title.
HM851.J36 2009 302.23'10835—dc22 2009014658

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1