Understanding Networked Youth and Online Privacy: Questions, Methods and Implications

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ABSTRACT
Young people’s social practices online and use of digital media have been conceptualized both as an opportunity and a threat to society. While the mass media has often focused on moral panic related to dramatic examples of social media-related harm to young people, research within Library and Information Science has taken multiple methodological approaches to investigate the ways digital youth navigate and negotiate privacy in online spaces. Findings from such studies offer insight into youth cultures and technology design that supports online privacy. This panel will demonstrate a variety of projects and approaches that have been taken to investigate privacy issues related to young people’s online interactions and practices, and the social and design implications of emerging findings for our understanding of young people and online privacy. We will also lead audience members in an interactive brainstorming session centered around various research scenarios, asking participants to consider the strengths and weaknesses of specific research questions and methods in addressing adults’ concerns related to youth and online privacy. We will conclude with an interactive discussion of recommended future research directions for enhancing our understanding of young people’s privacy practices.

Keywords
Youth, tweens, teens, online privacy, online safety, cyber-security, cyber-safety, parents, digital literacy, digital youth

INTRODUCTION
Young people’s social practices online and use of digital media have been conceptualized both as an opportunity and a threat to society. Discourse on youth digital practices has often focused on utopian visions of online spaces as egalitarian playgrounds for democracy, learning, and content creation, with great potential to enrich the minds of young people (e.g., Thomas & Brown, 2009; Prensky, 2001) or, conversely on shadow spaces in which predators lurk, behavior is constantly surveilled, and deviant behavior may flourish (e.g., Cavoukian, 2013; Flanagan, 2007). Gaining a more robust and nuanced understanding of young people’s digital interactions and practices, and the social and design implications thereof, is a key objective within current research on networked youth.

ONLINE THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES
According to Palfrey et al. (2008), there are three types of perceived online threats that can help to understand how the Internet is conceptualized in a negative light: sexual solicitation, online harassment, and problematic content. Since the advent of the open Web, there have been several waves of moral panic over online predation of youth, with mass media news and television shows focusing primarily on adult predation of young people (particularly girls) online (boyd, 2014). Among other concerns regarding the impact of digital devices and social media on contemporary youth are worries about sexual and other victimization (Perreault, 2013; Wolak, Michell, & Finkelhor, 2006). A lesser focus has been on deliberate seeking out and inadvertent exposure to pornography, hate speech, and other content that may be deemed problematic. While much of the focus of worry has been placed on adult men as predators, recent concerns have also turned toward peer bullying of young women or sexual minority youth by way of exploiting sexually explicit digital images shared online.
with or without the consent of the person depicted (e.g., Burleigh, 2013). Concerns over young people’s online safety have led to a variety of efforts to curtail access and manage online spaces geared toward youth. These include school Internet policies and social media site blocking, filtering of public Internet workstations in libraries, and legislation such as the US Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (Federal Trade Commission, 2014). However, such efforts to curtail access are often unsuccessful, and there is little evidence that they increase young people’s safety and privacy as implemented (Kranich, 2004; Matecki, 2010). In a contrasting approach, some adult-run institutions (e.g., libraries, schools, youth centres) have sought to use social media and digital youth spaces as a method of connecting with youth, and sometimes to educate them about privacy practices online, albeit with mixed results (Agosto & Abbas, 2011).  

**RESEARCH INTO PRIVACY AND YOUNG PEOPLE**  
Methods of investigating privacy issues related to young people’s online interactions and practices are varied, ranging from creative and artistic methods to ethnographic approaches to survey methods to mining online user data and metadata. Research on related topics likewise ranges from the theoretical to the highly concrete, contributing various types of knowledge. A challenge of investigating concerns that have only come to the fore in the past couple of decades is the lack of common definitions for even core concepts such as “privacy” (boyd & Marwick, 2011) or distinctions between digital and “real life” interactions. In recent years, scholars within and beyond library and information science (LIS) have developed more nuanced views than those promoted in sensational media headlines and the popular press, probing to better understand the ways youth cultures adapt to online environments (boyd, 2014), ways young people do seek advice and work to manage their privacy online (Smith, 2013; Youn & Hall, 2008; Youn, 2009) and how design practices might provide age-appropriate degrees of safety while still providing the advantages of digital connectivity (Meyers, 2014; Meyers, Nathan, & Unsworth, 2010; Subramaniam, Valdivia, Pellicone and Neigh, 2014). Time-tested research methods are blending with online technologies and novel explorations to generate relevant and meaningful outcomes of new research into  

**PANEL PROPOSAL**  
In this panel, we will demonstrate a variety of approaches that have been taken to investigate privacy issues related to young people’s online interactions and practices. We will discuss:  

- The significance of research questions relating to online privacy and youth,  
- The identification and implementation of appropriate methods for investigating such questions, and  
- Implications of emerging findings for our understanding of young people and online privacy, including social and design practices.

To accomplish this, we will provide an interdisciplinary overview of areas of concern and research regarding young people and online privacy, including specific examples of investigations within and beyond the field of LIS. We will engage audience members in an interactive brainstorming session centered around various research scenarios and asking participants to suggest specific research questions and methods, and explore their strengths and weaknesses in addressing current concerns related to youth and online privacy. We will conclude with comments looking toward future explorations to enhance our understanding of young people’s privacy practices, as well as designing digital technologies to facilitate and enhance young people’s online privacy.  

**PANELISTS**  
Each panelist contributes unique insights and perspective on young people and online privacy, based on research they have conducted. Panelists will describe some of their work investigating young people and online privacy, and discuss implications for our understanding of youth culture, the work of information professionals, and/or systems design.

**Devon Greyson, MLIS,** is an Interdisciplinary Studies doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia, and faculty in Women’s and Gender Studies at Capilano University. Her research focuses on the intersection between information practices and health behavior, particularly related to issues of social and health equity. Greyson’s doctoral research, part of a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of the influence of social context on the experiences of early-age parents, uses a constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate health-related information practices and the experiences of young parents (age 15-24). Online information seeking and sharing was a significant element of these information practices; however, the unique position of youth navigating their digital worlds as parents challenges the common framing of privacy as an issue over which youth and parents are often understood to be at odds with each other. In this panel, Greyson will discuss methodological advantages and challenges of using grounded theory and ethnographic methods to study youth privacy issues, findings related to the ways early-age parents negotiate online privacy, and as the implications of rejecting the “teens versus parents” framing of privacy tensions.

**Denise E. Agosto, Ph.D.,** is an associate professor in the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University. Her research focuses on youths’ use of digital media and the implications for public and school library services. She is currently PI on two research grants studying teens’ use of social media, including understanding privacy perspectives and practices. “Libraries and the Social Web: Developing the Next Generation of Youth Information Services”
(Andrea Forte, Drexel, co-PI) is funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). It examines how teens interact in online social search environments and studies their evolving use of the social web for academic and everyday life purposes. “A New Role for Libraries: Promoting Teens’ Safety and Security in the Digital Age” (June Abbas, University of Oklahoma, co-PI), is funded by OCLC. The project involves collecting data from students in two U.S. high schools to create detailed understandings of their online privacy and safety attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Denise will present preliminary findings from the OCLC study and show how teens’ perceptions of their online privacy are shaped both by personal experience and by the social contexts in which their online interactions take place.

Eric Meyers, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia—The The iSchool@UBC. His teaching and research reside at the intersection of information science, the learning sciences, and new media studies, with an emphasis on how young people seek, make sense of, and use information in social learning contexts. His research in children’s digital media explores how human values (e.g., privacy, autonomy, agency, and sustainability) are reflected and instantiated in children’s immersive technologies and their related textual ecosystems. In doing so, he explores the philosophical middle ground between technological instrumentalism and technological determinism (Borgman, 1987). In this presentation he will draw on a recently completed in-depth analysis of over 100 children’s iPad apps, emphasizing the safety and privacy features of this rapidly developing technology. Over 90% of app revenues in recent months come from in-app purchasing (IAP) (Worstill, 2013); so called “freemium” content apps targeted at children are a new area of concern with direct implications for safety, privacy and the commodification of childhood. The talk will be illustrated with examples and best practices derived from a carefully selected sample of apps, and pilot data from the next phase of the project, which explores personal and institutional app use in context. One of the project goals is to develop design recommendations for the next generation of children’s apps that focus on supporting diverse value propositions and user perspectives.

Mega Subramaniam, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the College of Information Studies, and Associate Director of the Information Policy and Access Center (iPAC) at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research focuses on enhancing the role of cultural institutions (such as libraries and national parks) in fostering the mastery of information and new media literacy among underserved young people. In this panel, she will share her research that was conducted in partnership with the National Park Service (NPS), where her research team developed a preliminary design of a cyber-safety framework that NPS can utilize to allow children and tween participate in their virtual learning space. This study draws intensely from an amalgamation of connected learning models and interest-driven frameworks that value socio-cultural experiences which young people bring to STEM learning. Using bonded inquiry and focus group methods, her research team gathered the needs, concerns, and online practices of tweens and their parents. By challenging the prevalent narrative that young people are incapable of safe practices online without constant adult supervision, her team advocates building a resilient online community of children and tweens, parents, and site developers that balances freedom and protection of children and tweens.

June Abbas, Ph.D., is a Professor in the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) at the University of Oklahoma, Norman campus. Her research focuses on children and teens’ use of information technology, and the intersection between information behavior, information retrieval, and structures for organizing knowledge. She has presented widely and has recently published two books “Structures for Organizing Knowledge: Exploring Taxonomies, Ontologies, and Other Schema” (Neal Schuman) and co-authored with Denise Agosto, “Teens, Libraries and Social Networks: What Librarians Need to Know” (ABC-Clio). She has received several federal and association grants to support her research. She recently received (with Denise Agosto) an ALISE/OCLC Research grant award to study teen’s privacy and security in online social media. She is also currently conducting research on the skills and competencies required for information professionals working in Maker Spaces and Learning Labs.

**STRUCTURE OF THE PANEL**

The proposed structure of the panel is as follows:

- **The Moderator (Agosto)** will introduce the panel and give an overview of key trends in the discourse and study of privacy and networked youth. (10 min)
- Each of the four panelists will provide an overview of research in which they have investigated an aspect of young people and digital privacy. Panelists will describe the rationale and implementation of the approach and research methods they used, and discuss benefits and drawbacks to their chosen methods. Emphasis will be placed on the implications of the study findings. (10 min each)
- Interactive Q&A for the panelists on their research (15 min)
- Small group work: Four groups, facilitated by the panelists, will work collaboratively to explore and develop examples of research projects, including appropriate methods and constraints related to different research scenarios related to young people and digital privacy. Following these smaller-group discussions, we will reunite the audience for a discussion of challenges and solutions related to the various scenarios.
- Concluding wrap-up (5 min)
CONCLUSION
As the web becomes increasingly mobile and integrated into the everyday lives of people of all ages, understanding privacy practices and design implications carries a special urgency when we consider the case of young people. Beyond sensationalized concerns over young people and online exhibitionism and victimization, there are a variety of important research questions to be explored regarding young people and online privacy. Methods must be selected with care, in order to minimize bias and accurately address research questions.

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