

## Resource and Risk: Youth Sexuality and New Media Use

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**Abstract** Some contemporary moral panics orbit around youth sexuality and new media use. This article addresses those moral panics by investigating teenagers' practices regarding new media and sexuality. New media technologies are central parts of young people's social, romantic, and sexual lives. These communication technologies are important in their practices of meeting, dating, and breaking up. New media technologies also provide important resources about sexual health and identities. However, these informational and relational resources are not equally available to all young people. Indeed use and access to new media technologies often mirrors the contemporary ordering of economic, racialized, and gendered power. Additionally, while youth are aware of online safety practices, some youth are more vulnerable to online risks than others.

**Keywords** Youth · Sexuality · Technology · New media · Adolescence · Gender

Cautionary tales about young people's sexuality and their new media use permeate the daily news cycle. These stories feature teens meeting strangers online for sexual adventures, posting risqué pictures of themselves on their social network sites, and sending semi-nude self-portraits via their cell phones, inspiring parental fear about seemingly permanent digital footprints and social repercussions. The

story of Jesse Logan emblemizes these cautionary tales. Jesse, a high school student from Cincinnati, Ohio sent nude photos of herself to her boyfriend via her cell phone. After they broke up, he forwarded the stored photos to other girls at their high school. These girls relentlessly harassed Jesse, and eventually she was so distraught she committed suicide (Celizic 2010). Stories like this one and countless others about teens meeting older adults for sexual liaisons, the presence of on-line sex predators, and accounts of cyberbullying reinforce messages directed at adults (and teens) that adolescents are out of control, making poor decisions about their bodies, and that new media and teen sexuality are a combustible and dangerous mix.

During the 2 years I researched youth use of new media, I rarely heard stories from youth themselves that resembled these cautionary tales. Instead the young people with whom I spoke frequently shared stories like the following. Seventeen-year-old Josh said as soon as he gets out of the shower in the morning, he turns on his "PC, log[s] on to MSN,<sup>1</sup> and talk[s] to Alice," his girlfriend of 1 year. After logging off instant messaging, the couple frequently talk on their mobile phones as they commute to school. During the school day, they trade text messages such as "Im in da band room" about their whereabouts and plans. They use the phone to coordinate their activities and sometimes to arrange a private space away from adult supervision to "hook up." One text message interchange read as follows:

Josh: I dunno if ne thing could happen my bro is going to be home. ;\_;

Alice: I have a car. We can go somewhere

Josh: Sure.

Alice: You choose destination. 123 not it!

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<sup>1</sup> MSN is an instant messaging service.

Josh: What time should I get there?

Josh: I'm walking home now.

Josh: Should I walk to ur house?

Several hours after he sent that final question, Josh wrote, referring to their meeting, "That was so good." After school Alice might join Josh at his house, completing her homework while he plays his favorite video game, *Final Fantasy*, or they might continue to communicate by sending messages such as "I'll be here for a while, go to sleep, I love you." While sexuality is part of their daily technology practices in that they seek out private spaces for physical intimacy, Josh and Alice's story sounds relatively tame compared to the ominous tales repeated by news outlets about teenagers, sexuality, and new media. Alice and Josh do text about sex (a practice some might consider "sexting"), but this sex takes place in the confines of a committed relationship. Both are highly concerned about safer sex practices. The background on Josh's computer even sports a large cartoon condom advocating these practices. This story and others like it provide a counterpoint to the parade of dangerous and irresponsible practices regularly featured in media releases about adolescence, sexuality, and new media use.

These stories represent two schools of thought regarding young people and new media. Policy makers, scholars, and pundits tend to cluster into two camps about youth technology use: boosters and detractors (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Thurlow and McKay 2003). Boosters tend to hype the educational (and economic) possibilities of increased media literacy, claiming that new media helps youth learn, makes them responsible citizens, and augments their social lives (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Livingstone 2002). Detractors are usually concerned about the same level of knowledge and use, arguing that new media renders young people more vulnerable to predators, leads to social isolation, ruins concentration, and exposes youth to adult themes at early ages (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Livingstone 2002; Osgerby 2004; Thurlow and McKay 2003). Both factions highlight very real possibilities of new media. It is a tool to allow youth to access information and craft social worlds in previously unknown ways. But the permanence and replicability of new media subjects young people to new risks for which both adults and youth are not yet fully prepared. Importantly, both of these approaches may overlook the situatedness of youth new media use. As Thurlow and Bell (2009) argues, "Whether young people are being lauded as 'wired whizzes' or pilloried as 'techno-slaves,' invariably overlooked is the situated, meaningful, and creative nature of their communicative practices." In other words, amidst the fervent claims, what is it that youth are actually doing in mediated environments and what role do these practices play in their daily social, romantic and sexual lives?

This paper address Thurlow's concern about the situatedness of youth new media practices. Looking at youth new media use in their social, romantic, and sexual lives indicates that new media technologies offer resources *and* pose risks for teens in their romance and sexuality practices. New media provide communication resources with which to seek out, build, and end intimate relationships. Online venues also provide important resources for information about issues of gender, sexuality, and relationships. That said, the online world is not without its dangers. Often these dangers are framed as issues of sexting or unwanted sexual attention from unfamiliar adults. However, this paper makes the case that it is necessary to pay attention to other, less sensational risks, in the ways that offline inequalities might be replicated in online environments. That is, inequalities in access and use might shape youth's sexual and social experiences as online venues and access to them might reflect offline inequalities in gender, sexuality, and class.

## Methods

The data in this paper are drawn from a multi-year, multi-site, collaborative ethnographic research project examining youth and new media use across a range of ages and locations. It comprised 28 researchers and research associates conducting 23 case studies. For a further description of the larger research project and approach, please see *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out* (Ito et al. 2009).

This paper draws from interviews, diary studies, and ethnography with youth between the ages of 15 and 19 from across the USA. The research for this project included on- and off-line research. I conducted 40 interviews, 33 of which were performed in person and seven of which were conducted online. In these interviews, I asked respondents to discuss their regular new media use; examined their cell phones for calls, text messages, and pictures; visited their favorite web pages; and discussed their social network site profiles and other digital creations.

I also conducted nine diary studies with a subset of the interview subjects in which they were asked to keep track of their daily new media use. These diary studies consisted of youth taking pictures of technology every time they used it and then sending me an SMS message about what they were doing, who they were doing it with, and the length of time they engaged in that activity. They completed this diary study over the course of 48 hours. I then interviewed them about the contents of their diary. Because some new media use occurs when youth are alone, this approach helped to provide access to those more private realms of technological practice.

I recruited participants through online social networks, offline social circles, email lists, snowball sampling, and through classes at two northern California high schools. I

also conducted 6 months of observation at the California Digital Arts School, often “hanging out” with respondents in non-school settings during this time, doing things like playing miniature golf and video games.

The research population was made up of teenagers from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Sixteen of them resided in suburban and 24 resided in urban settings. Eighteen of the respondents identified as female, 20 as male, one as gender neutral, and one as transgendered. Twenty-two of the respondents identified as white or Caucasian, six as Latino, five as Asian, two as of both Latino and white heritage, one of both Native American and white heritage, one of Asian and white descent, one of African-American and white heritage, and one of Persian descent. One youth declined to state his racial ethnic heritage.

### Youth New Media Use

As American social life becomes increasingly wired, so too do contemporary youth cultures (Ito 2005; Montgomery 2000). Young people’s daily activities and social worlds now orbit around new media such as cell phones and social network sites as well as new media practices such as instant messaging, and posting and watching online content (Miller et al. 2009; Rideout et al. 2005). By 2008, 93% of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 were online (Jones and Fox 2009). In fact, youth spend more time with media than any single other activity besides sleeping (Roberts and Foehr 2008). With the personalization of media as well as its miniaturization, youth can stay continually plugged in as computers, cell phones, and handheld devices become basic equipment (Roberts and Foehr 2008). Seventy-five percent of teenagers own cell phones (Lenhart et al. 2010). Seventy-three percent of wired teenagers are on social networking websites (Lenhart et al. 2010). In short, youth live in a mediated world. The ways in which their worlds are mediated depends upon the quality of their access to new media, a point I will address below. This generation of youth is more likely to engage with new media than are their parents, often integrating new media devices and practices into their social worlds in ways which are invisible to adults (Oksman and Turtaianen 2004). Part of the goal of this article is to make the invisible visible, to illuminate exactly what it is youth are doing with new media.

For most young people, digital environments are not alternative worlds, virtual realities, or technological subcultures (Abbott 1998). Online communication is simply another way for them to connect with their friends and peers in a way that seems seamless with their offline life (Osgerby 2004). Social network sites play an important role in these social connections. Over half of those between the

ages of 12 and 17 who go online have created profiles on these sites and prefer to communicate via these sites rather than email (something they see as a more formal communication mechanism) (Lenhart et al. 2007).<sup>2</sup>

While popular media outlets regularly air stories about youth logging on to these sites to meet strangers, young people typically use these sites to stay in contact with friends they already have and to make plans to hang out (Lampe et al. 2007; Lenhart and Madden 2007). These online practices augment youths’ already existing social ties more than they extend them to unknown people. That said, digital technology provides the possibility of extending youths’ domestic spaces and engenders a sense of freedom, much like the car used to do (Laegran 2002; Maczewski 2002). The online world has broadened young people’s social horizons allowing youth to meet, stay in touch with, and make plans with others, both globally and locally (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Laegran 2002; Osgerby 2004). Thus, new media has the potential to reconfigure youths’ social networks.

The quick incorporation of new media into youth culture has both alarmed and excited adults. Adults are profoundly anxious about what teens are doing online and these fears about the online world have dominated policy and popular culture discussions since the middle of the 1990s (Soderlund 2008). Like youth new media use, youth sexuality is often the focus of contemporary “moral panics” (Cohen 2002; Thompson 1998). These moral panics often establish a discourse about certain groups that ostensibly cause moral decline (Cohen 2002; Thompson 1998). Like youth internet use, youth sexuality is framed as a personal and social problem in need of social control (Russell 2005). Thus, fears about new technology are compounded when looking at the intersection of youth sexuality and new media practices. Rather than fanning the flames of moral panics around young people’s sexuality and new media use, this paper explores the intersection of sexual identities, practices, and new media use, by looking at technology’s role young peoples relationships, the resources available to them online, and the risks posed by the increasing role of communication technologies in young people’s lives.

### Resources

#### Relationships

The primary foci of youth culture are love, romance, and sexuality (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008). Indeed

<sup>2</sup> Between 2004 and 2008, the percentage of teens who said they use email declined from 89% to 73% (Jones and Fox 2009).

teenagers report that their strongest emotion is that of being in love (Miller and Benson 1999). Thus, it is of little surprise that themes of dating and romance dominate young people's new media practices (Lenhart and Madden 2007; Oksman and Turtainen 2004). Youth meet others, flirt, maintain relationships, and break up in these "networked publics" (Ito et al. 2009). These communication technologies mesh seamlessly with the fundamentally social nature of young people's romantic relationships (Brown 1999). Friends and social circles provide "opportunities to meet and interact with romantic partners, to initiate and recover from such relationships, and to learn from one's romantic experiences" (Collins and Sroufe 1999), activities that are even more viable with the explosion of online social networks and the possibility of continuous contact afforded by new media. New media technologies such as cell phones, instant messaging, text messaging, and social network sites allow youth to communicate with their friends (and sometimes strangers) out of the purview of their parents and other authority figures. Thus, these technologies provide a wider private sphere for youth dating practices, while also leaving digital footprints open to adult examination.

Contemporary youth romance culture is a primarily informal one (Bogle 2008; Modell 1989). This informality is reflected in young people's language, which frequently lacks a clear vocabulary to define relationship status or practices. Terms like "hanging out," "going out," and "talkin' to" have replaced terms like "courtship" or "dating" (Miller and Benson 1999). An informal culture, however, is not the same as an unstructured one. Youth have a, mostly, shared "media ideology" (Gershon 2010) about the role of technology in their relationships. They tend to meet people offline and then pursue the relationship online; a couple should proceed slowly as they correspond online using the appropriate communication tool; and when breaking up, they should do so in person, or at least over the phone (Ito et al. 2009).

In examining romantic breakups among college students, Ilana Gershon (2010) found that people's ideologies about media largely govern the role they think media should play in relationships, specifically their demise. She makes the case that people are still figuring out how to use new media in relationships. This process is a fundamentally social one as "people figure out together how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other" (Gershon 2010). People's media ideologies shape how they interpret the messages they receive. So rules about the relationship between intimacy and mediated practices are not necessarily about the message itself or the technology itself, but about the ideology. "Because these are new media, people haven't had time to develop a widespread consensus about how to use a medium, especially for

relatively rare communicative tasks such as breaking up" (Gershon 2010). The youth in this study are going through this process as they establish norms about new media use in intimate relationships.

Liz and Grady exemplify the way in which some young people negotiate on and offline interactions when beginning a relationship. Grady shared with me that while he had known Liz since their freshman year he developed a crush on her only recently. They "didn't really talk" so flirting with her in person felt intimidating. Fortunately, Liz "had him on my Friend list from freshman year" on her MySpace page, though she only knew him casually through mutual friends. Grady took advantage of this casual "friendship" to initiate a relationship: "When I had a crush on her, I made sure I talked to her first in class before I sent her a comment on MySpace." Grady planned an offhand initial comment to introduce himself, writing, "Oh, wow, I didn't know we were Friends on MySpace," knowing of course that they were. Their process is paradigmatic of young people's contemporary meeting, flirting, and dating practices. Mediated venues play a central role in moving casual offline acquaintances to more intimate ones.

In the initial "getting to know you" part of a romantic relationship, the asynchronous nature of written communication (private messages and comments on social network sites and text messaging) allows for both continuous contact and the ability to save face (Goffman 1959) in potentially vulnerable situations. Alissa shared with me that "text messages" were "how I talked to Lisa (her girlfriend) a lot in the beginning." Alissa said that through text messages she could be "flirty in constant communication. [It was] easy to get messages across without having to phrase it perfectly." Boys seem particularly fond of using digital communications technologies for romance, meeting new girls and flirting (Lenhart and Madden 2007). As Grady said "really, that's the only reason to IM and stuff, girls, you know? I don't really talk to my guy friends that much. I just talk to girls." He explained that it is "easier to talk to them (girls) there" than in person. The control over presentation of self afforded by new media helps to manage a profoundly unmasculine display of vulnerability by teenage boys often required by the process of flirting and getting to know someone. Indeed as Carter shared, "it's easier to message them than talk to them in the real world...because in the real world they're always with their friends or always in a group." This type of communication feels private, even if it may potentially be shared with exactly that group Carter finds so intimidating. Gershon (2010) notes that some of her respondents shared text messages with their friends in order to discuss intimate relationships.

Contrary to the implications of popular media stories, logging online to meet strangers for dating, romance or

sexual liaisons is not a normative practice among the youth I studied. For the most part, these teens prefer to talk with people online that they or their friends know in an offline context. Teens often reported that meeting people only online was “weird,” “unnatural,” “geeky,” or “scary.” As Grady said, “I’m not going to start a conversation with a girl on MySpace or text messaging. I’m going to start in person first.” In other words, Grady thought it was weird or geeky to start a conversation with a girl he liked online, rather than offline. Young people’s social networks provide a sort of background check for new potential romantic interests. Even if two particular teens have not met offline, they may be connected through overlapping social networks. As Lanie shared, her now ex-boyfriend had seen her “icon” on a friend’s social network profile site and “he asked his friend who it was and asked him to introduce us.” They met in person and then “he added me as a friend.” Through these offline conversations and “friend checks,” new media serves as a resource in moving general relationships to more intimate ones.

Most youth in this study express hesitation about meeting people for the first time in an online environment, but this reluctance is not true of all youth. For marginalized young people, the internet allows them to meet other people like themselves who might not be immediately available in their local social circles (Holloway and Valentine 2003). This is true of racial minority and sexual minority youth, both of whom may face limited pools of potential dating partners in offline environments (Diamond et al. 1999). Best friends Gabbie and Cathy, both racial minorities (Chinese-American and Persian-American, respectively) in their primarily white high school, had used the internet for this purpose. Cathy had looked for Persian-American boyfriends on sites directed toward Persian-American communities. Similarly, Gabbie had logged onto Asian-town.net a social networking site directed at Asian-Americans to meet boys whom she could potentially date. Importantly, neither expressed hesitancy about meeting boys online before they met in person.

LGBT youth in this study (even those who lived in cities with large LGBT populations) also noted the relationship resources available in mediated environments. Mary Gray (2009b), for instance, elegantly notes the varied ways rural GLBTQ youth use new media to explore identities and practice coming out. Others use new media technologies to facilitate relationships. These communication technologies facilitate spaces where sexual minority teens can meet others for dating or for support and allows them to hide these relationships from their parents (Hillier and Harrison 2007). Jessica told me that one of her good gay male friends felt “very uncomfortable trying to pursue someone” at school so “he meets guys through MySpace because it’s his opportunity.” Robert, a gay teen, employed a similar

strategy, having become frustrated about not finding other boys to date through his offline friendship circles. He wrote a Facebook “note” about his difficulties dating as a gay teen:

Every time I have a crush or something, it doesn’t work out (he’s not gay, not enough time, etc.). I’m not a downer, but I’m just realizing that if a straight person’s chance of compatibility is 1 in 100. AND only about 3 in 100 are gay, and the compatibility is still 2%, then my prospect is .03 in 100, or 3 in 10,000. That is not very encouraging!

Robert said that a friend set him up on a blind date as a direct result of the announcement he placed on Facebook. Unlike straight youth, he expressed little hesitancy about meeting someone to date online.

The independence digital communication affords allows youth to form romantic relationships which, in many ways, transcend adult control and geography. New media allows youth who are dating to maintain a digital co-presence, to be connected in a way that they cannot necessarily achieve in the physical world. These technologies also free youth from limiting their dating circles to those in their immediate vicinity. Multiple young people told me that they were involved with someone who lived over an hour away. Aldo, in fact, met his girlfriend through a party at his cousin’s house (located in a distant city) and now they keep in touch by cell phone about four times a week. They text, however, every day. Similarly, because they live over an hour apart, Missy told me that she is often on AIM with her boyfriend Dustin since they only see each other once a week or every 2 weeks.

This co-presence allows youth to maintain more control over their environment than they are often allowed at a life phase in which adults often circumscribe their movements. Almost a quarter of teens have communicated with a significant other between midnight and 5 AM via text or a cell phone and one in six communicated more than ten times per hour throughout the night this way, a practice many adults presumably would not approve of (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008).

This private sphere is especially important for youth whose parents have specific expectations of their dating partners. Indeed multiple young people (straight identified and LGBT) talked to me about how they carried on relationships outside of the purview of their parents. Lana and her girlfriend would talk multiple times a day, though, as Lana said, “my parents don’t know about her.” They had met at camp and started to date about a year later, maintaining a long distance relationship between Washington and New Hampshire. Outside of parental eyes, they were making plans to go to college together. Similarly, Missy’s parents forbade her to have boyfriends, though that edict did not seem to

significantly affect her relationship with her boyfriend, Dustin. Her parents frequently entered her room without knocking while she talked on the phone with Dustin. She would quickly tell Dustin “hold on, hold on” and place her phone under the pillow so that “Dustin can hear me and my mom talking.” Missy also hid the online evidence of her relationship by listing her online status as “‘single’ because I keep him a secret. Well, not a secret. But I’m not allowed to have a boyfriend.” When her parents call her while she is spending time with Dustin and ask “Where are you? Most of the time I’ll tell the truth, but sometimes I can’t because they can’t handle the truth.”

Many of the youth I spoke with describe themselves as more tech savvy than their parents, so this sort of private sphere is fairly simple to maintain. Alice, whose immigrant parents forbade her from dating non-Chinese boys, told me that she set “all the administrator settings” on her family network. As such, according to her, her parents actually knew very little about her computer use. Given her secret relationship with Josh, this level of technological knowledge was actually quite important for her.

In addition to using new media to carve out these spheres of privacy, many youth also do the public performative work of a relationship through these technologies. Young people in relationships expect that these relationships will be publicly acknowledged through digital media. They expect significant others, for instance, to feature them in their MySpace “top eight.”<sup>3</sup> Aldo, for instance, shared with me his surprise that he was not listed in his girlfriend’s “top eight.” “She used to have me in her top eight, but she took me off. I don’t know why and I talked to her. I was like, ‘how come I wasn’t on?’” Similarly Josh and Alice bickered in front of me as Josh said, “Alice was not my original top one” on his MySpace site. Alice chimed in “I was like number 12 or something.” Josh responded “Does it really matter? You know, does it really matter what your placement is really?” Alice answered, sarcastically, “Like he’s not number one on my MySpace account.” While this may seem like a relatively minor relationship imbalance, it illustrates the centrality of the importance of mediated performances of relationship.

Youth also display tokens of affection on their social network pages. Aldo for instance, displayed a countdown to “me and my girlfriend’s 1 year anniversary” which he said he put up there “so people will know” when it was. Youth in relationships also facilitate intimacy by sharing passwords. As Carissa told me when we logged on to her MySpace site, “She (her girlfriend) went into mine ‘cause

she knows my passwords and everything. And so she did all the colors and changed it.” Alice and Josh also shared their passwords (though Josh cannot remember Alice’s). Similarly, Carissa and her girlfriend share a LiveJournal on which they write back and forth and comment on each other’s journal entries.

Not surprisingly, given the extent of the incorporation of new media in their relationships, youth also now experience mediated breakups. The media that some youth laud as a comfortable way to meet and get to know a romantic interest are viewed as a poor way to end a relationship with an intimate. Billy, for instance felt bad about encouraging a friend to break up with his girlfriend over text message as Billy and the friend spoke over IM. The friend took Billy’s advice seriously and immediately broke up with his girlfriend via text message. Billy, who told me that he had not actually been serious about this advice, “that was bad.” Grady describes breaking up with someone on a social network site, the “lowest of the low” and Liz said “that’s probably the worst one.” Indeed, Grady said that most of his friends do not do this, though he had a friend who did. He:

broke up with his girlfriend over a text message...He just sent her a text and was like...they hadn’t talked in a while and they were fighting and everything. He called and she didn’t answer, so he was just like, I’m going to end it now. I was over at his house and everything. He said I’m just going to end it. He sent her a text, ‘we haven’t talked in a while and it’s not going well and I think we should just stop seeing each other.’

Grady said, however, “if you want to be respectful, you do it in person.” In the same way that young people use the mitigation of vulnerability by new media to engage in flirtatious interchanges, it seems that they think that such vulnerability is appropriate in the end stages of a relationship. In fact, when Gershon (2010) initially asked her students to describe a “bad” breakup, they immediately discussed any breakup that was mediated. It was the venue in other words, not the content that made the breakup problematic.

Sweeping up digital detritus of these relationships may have supplanted or at least now exists alongside time honored traditions of ridding one’s room of relationship memorabilia. Gary, for instance, was left with a MySpace address that read “Sarah will always love Gary,” after he broke up with his girlfriend, Sarah. He laughed sheepishly as he explained that he created the site with his now ex-girlfriend and could not change the title. Youth remove online pictures, make decisions about de-friending, and change shared passwords that had been indicative of their intimacy. Additionally, when youth break up, youth can

<sup>3</sup> While youth have largely moved to Facebook from MySpace, when youth were on MySpace, one’s location in another’s “top eight” friends signified the importance and seriousness of their friendship or romantic relationship.

keep closer tabs on each other than they could historically. Gabbie told me about her friend, Jason, who “had an ex who would check his MySpace and then Cathy would comment flirty comments, and then she (the ex) would be like—who is she? Why are you talking to him?” Some youth monitor those with whom they were previously intimate both for closure and for information about their current dating lives.

Mediated venues, as detailed in this section, serve as resources for youth to begin, maintain, and, less frequently, end intimate relationships. The same resources that make the internet attractive for forming relationships—privacy, lack of adults, protection from vulnerability, the ability to reach beyond geographic constraints, and the “always on” (Baron 2008) possibilities are also those facets that make the internet a uniquely suitable place for information about sexual health to be conveyed to young people.

### Gender and Sexuality Information

While youth are busy using new media as resources for their practices of romance and sexuality, they are receiving less and less information from their schools about these same topics. As a culture, we have a difficult time treating sex as a normal, healthy part of adolescence (Schalet 2000). This view is reflected in sexual education curricula which have grown increasingly sex negative (Bay-Cheng 2005). In fact, only 14% of schools nationwide offer comprehensive sex education in which abstinence is taught as one option among other safer sex practices, a phenomenon that has in large part been encouraged by federal funding policies (Guttmacher Institute 2006).<sup>4</sup> The number of young people receiving comprehensive sex education is on the decline while those receiving information focused on abstinence has increased (Guttmacher Institute 2006; Kantor et al. 2008). As in other facets of adolescent life, LGBT youth are marginalized in sex education curricula that privilege heterosexuality and maintain raced, gendered, classed, and sexual inequalities (Connell 2009; Elia and Eliason 2010; Garcia 2009). This lack of education provides the backdrop for contemporary teen sexual practices in which sexually active teens in the USA are less likely to use safer sex methods than are their peers in other developed countries (Guttmacher Institute 2006). This lack of protection is important because US teens have shorter relationships and, consequently, more sexual partners over time (Guttmacher Institute 2006). Despite the decline of teenage pregnancy rates since 1990, the USA continues to have one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the developed world as

<sup>4</sup> These policies recently changed under the administration of Barack Obama. Government funding is no longer limited to those programs which promote abstinence (Rabin 2010).

well as high rates of sexually transmitted infections (Guttmacher Institute 2006).

Not surprisingly, given the lack of comprehensive sex education in schools and the intense use of new media in intimate relationships, the internet may be emerging as a prime resource for youth on issues of sexuality (Bay-Cheng 2005; Isaacson 2010; Levine 2003). The internet offers privacy, access to information, and has become a multifaceted source of sex education (Bay-Cheng 2005). Indeed information about sex and sexuality may be easier to obtain online than comprehensive formal sex education is in many schools. However, these online resources are not equally available to all youth, a topic that will be addressed in the next section.

Young people use new media to gather information about sexuality because the information is always available, the information seekers can be anonymous, and the amount of information is seemingly endless (Gray et al. 2005; Harvey et al. 2008). Youth often feel uncomfortable consulting physicians, peers, or other adults for information about sexuality because of concerns about confidentiality (Rideout et al. 2005; Suzuki and Calzo 2004). Bulletin boards, cell phones, social network sites, and static web sites are all venues through which youth can gather information about sexual health, puberty, sexual identity, and safer sex practices. Youth use the internet to find information on a range of health topics (Gray and Klein 2006). In fact, 25% of adolescents acquire some or a lot of sexual health information online (Tolani and Yen 2009). Some young people rely on new media to get information about intimate questions pertaining to gender, sexuality, and relationships. This reliance is especially true of youth who cannot get information elsewhere, such as school.

Bulletin boards allow young people to post questions and replies about sensitive topics (Suzuki and Calzo 2004). On these boards, youth can ask questions that may have been potentially embarrassing in face-to-face settings such as, “I have a hooked penis, do you know how to fix this?!?! PLEASE HELP ME!!!”, “After having an orgasm is it normal to have white discharge looking stuff,” or “Is it normal to kiss someone with your mouth open but no tongue?” (Suzuki and Calzo 2004). When Adam was coming out, he frequented a bulletin board on <http://www.teenhelp.org> to learn about being gay, developing relationships and sexual desire, eventually leaving the site because it was turned over to someone he described as a less responsible owner.

Some sex educators are looking to use new media to bypass school’s control over the types of sex education available to young people. The BrdsNBz Text Message Warm Line<sup>5</sup> has marshaled the power of text messages to

<sup>5</sup> The BrdsNBz Text Message Warm Line can be found here: <http://appenc.org/brdsnbz-text-message-warm-line>.

communicate with teens about sex and sexuality. Youth can text questions they have about sex and within 24 hours they can receive a response from the organization. Not surprisingly, social network sites also represent a fertile ground for sex education. Based on the knowledge that peers who have friends (either through social network sites or in “real life”) who use condoms are more likely to use condoms themselves, two University of Southern California scholars, Eric Rice and Eve Tulbert, are designing an HIV prevention campaign using social network sites and viral video specifically aimed at homeless youth. Similarly, discussion venues on social network sites are important spaces for sexual minority young people to share their experiences (Crowley 2010; Dennis 2010).

Static sites which impart information can also be useful to teens. Informative sites include <http://www.isis-inc.org>, <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu>, <http://www.youngwomenshealth.org>, <http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/>, <http://www.teenwire.com>, <http://www.sexetc.org>, and <http://www.gsanetwork.org>. Alissa told me that some of the sites she visited daily contained information about sex and sexuality such as “dykestowatchoutfor.com, queerty.com and a handful of sexuality resources.” Similarly, Devin visited a variety of sites when learning about being transgendered. He searched for “binders” online, where he also learned about testosterone access and dosages. Youth with whom I spoke relied on sites like these to build identity and culture, not just for information.

New media is a particularly salient resource because of the anonymity it affords, the confidentiality it promises, and the peer-to-peer nature of some of the bulletin boards and viral media. In other words, new media can be a fertile ground for both social and informational resources, connecting youth to communities and information that might not be available elsewhere. However, as Thurlow and Bell (2009) argues, more work needs to be done to see what youth are actually doing with the resources on line and how youth are actually using them.

## Risks

While youth use new media in their sexual and romantic practices and they can find sexual resources online, none of this is to say that there are not risks online for which youth are both prepared and unprepared. Importantly, not all of the risks related to new media and youth sexuality are those around which contemporary moral panics revolve. Most of these risks are as much about gendered, classed, and raced inequalities as they are about online “predators.” Thinking and policy making about these risks thus needs to include attention to young people’s actual experiences of technology use and the replication of offline inequalities in online

spaces. While new technologies provide a way for young people to come together and to create new cultures, their experiences of the internet and other new media also reflect the dominant ordering of power (Durham 2001). Gender, economic, race, and class inequality are implicated in who has access to and how people use technology. Additionally, not all information online is verifiably accurate. Offline gender and sexual inequalities which exist offline may be reflected and take different forms online. Finally, especially given the use of new media for relationships and information seeking, some youth who seek information and community, in this study at least, might be subjected to unwanted sexual content in mediated spaces.

## Information Quality and Accessibility

Though youth culture is quickly becoming digitized, not all are able to access technology or participate in digital culture to the same extent. Inequalities are reproduced through gradations in access to the digital world (DiMaggio et al. 2004). Variations in the technical means available to people to get online, the extent of autonomy people exercise in mediated spaces, the differing skill levels people bring to bear in media use, the social support upon which they can draw, and the purposes for which people use technology all shape and are shaped by people’s social positionings (DiMaggio et al. 2004). In other words, one’s ability to take advantage of opportunities posed by new media is shaped, much like other social and economic opportunities, by their family’s socioeconomic status, their cohort, their education, income, gender, race, occupation, industry, region, and rural or urban home (DiMaggio et al. 2004).

One’s economic positioning shapes one’s experiences of and interactions with new media. The likelihood of a teen living in a house with a computer is strongly related to income (Eamon 2004; Lee 2008; Livingstone 2002; Roberts and Foehr 2008). Though families with children are more likely have computers and internet access (Wang et al. 2005), poor youth are roughly two thirds less likely to own a home computer (Eamon 2004). Fewer than 60% of homes with incomes under 20,000 dollars a year have computers, as opposed to 90% of those earning 60,000 dollars a year or more (Roberts and Foehr 2008). Similarly, internet access only exists in 29% of homes with earnings under 15,000 dollars a year as opposed to 90% of those over 75,000 dollars a year (Roberts and Foehr 2008).

Of the 13% of American teenagers who do not use the internet, non-white youth are overrepresented: 87% of white teens go online, 89% of Latino teens do, while only 77% of African-American teens do (Lenhart et al. 2005). Similarly, 80% of all youth have access to the internet at home but only 61% of African-American youth do (Rideout et al. 2005). Ninety percent of white teens have

personal computers, 80% of Latino teens do, and 78% of African-American teens do (Roberts and Foehr 2008). Cell phone use reflects a similar divide: 72% of white teens have cell phones, 71% of Latino teens do, and 65% of African-American teens have cell phones (Lenhart et al. 2008). This inequality of access affects youths' ability to participate in cultures of dating and romance as well as their information-gathering capabilities. This access also has much to do with rural versus urban access. Limited access and limited reliable access in rural communities compromises the availability of online information about sexuality (Gray 2009a).

Class does not just affect the ability to get information through new media, but the way youth live out sexual and romantic relationships. What I came to think of as the "minutes violation" might be considered a new rite of passage for many young people, a rite of passage that reflects class-based economic realities. A minutes violation entails going over the free amount of minutes as determined by one's wireless carrier. Many a young person told me as we chatted about the first time they "went over" their minutes and suffered the consequences—being put on phone restriction, working extra hours to pay for the exorbitant fees (some youth reported \$800 bills), or receiving a stern talking to by their parents. Alice, for instance, told me that when she first got her cell phone, she and her sister "shot up our bills. It went up like \$200. It was hecka bad. So they (her parents) cut off both our text messaging." As such, Alice was one of the few respondents with whom I spoke that did not have text messaging at the time of our interview. Working class youth felt the "minutes violation" and the financial weight of their transgressions more intensely. Indeed, many working class youth actually told me that they plan their phone usage around financial concerns. As Missy said, she talks to her boyfriend Dustin "only when it's free because I really watch my minutes."

While schools are increasingly wired, with 93% of schools reporting internet access (Roberts and Foehr 2008), class inequality still shapes access at these schools. Schools with the highest poverty concentrations have higher student-to-computer ratios (Roberts and Foehr 2008). In working class schools, internet access is more likely to be limited to structured class time, as opposed to middle class schools in which out of class technology access is more common (Lee 2008). This educational inequality is important because some young people might avoid searching for certain types of information at home, under fear of parental oversight, leaving schools and libraries as crucial access sites.

Some schools regularly censor the sort of information students can access by blocking sites they determine to be harmful (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008). These schools might ban access to social network sites, instant messenger software, and sites containing "adult content"

(which, at some schools, means websites or searches including words like gay, lesbian, or breast). Elena argued that "it's even hard to do a research paper, because if it's a disease that just has the word 'sexuality' in there or something it's blocked. We had to do a physio project about disease and it was so hard." Eventually, Elena used her math teacher's computer to do the research because teachers' computers were not blocked. Multiple LGBT youth have reported to me that LGBT content is blocked at their school. The ACLU recently sued Knox County Schools and Metropolitan Nashville Schools in Tennessee for blocking access to this content. The schools, tellingly, did allow sites focusing on "reparative therapy" or "ex-gay" ministries (Kennedy 2009). Students from low income backgrounds who may not have regular internet access at homes may also find themselves in schools that have the least access as well.

Like the reparative therapy websites, the information that youth do access online is not necessarily accurate. This misinformation can build on myths about sexuality and reproduction that are widespread among adolescents (Tolani and Yen 2009). In general, online information about sexually transmitted infections is fairly accurate, but information about emergency conception (such as pharmacy availability), adolescent use of IUDs, and recommended age of first pap smear are often inaccurate (Tolani and Yen 2009). Thus, information about sexuality needs to be available and accurate, something that does not seem to be the case in the current distribution of new media resources and access.

### Sexuality and Gender

Adults are profoundly concerned about the sexual victimization of children online. This concern is not unfounded. Some youth in this study reported to me that they had received unwanted sexual attention online. However, what might get overlooked in the focus on unwanted sexual attention to youth online is the more mundane and pervasive way in which offline harassment around issues of gender and sexuality replicate themselves online, not in terms of sexual predators, but in terms of peer to peer interactions.

Several youth told me stories of being approached by strangers online, but they were by far in the minority of youth I interviewed. Elena said that the one time she went in a chat room the first question she was asked was "Where do you live? What's your phone number?" Elena and her friend Brett said that they had "heard a couple of things about sex predators being on MySpace" and in response, cancelled their accounts. Even though Elena only added people that she knew she said that she would occasionally receive "disgusting chat things" and "bad pictures" from people she did not know.

Some youth have a sophisticated sense of the “safety” of different online spaces. Many of the youth I spoke with said they could avoid undesired sexual content by making particular choices, such as avoiding chat rooms, only friending people they knew offline on social network sites, or choosing certain social network sites over others. For instance, Robert told me “MySpace vs. Facebook—stalker/creepy old men vs. your friends!” When crafting an online presence, some young people keep safety and privacy in mind and do not post an inordinate amount of personal information online (Hinduja and Patchin 2008). In fact, between 40% and 66% of youth who have a social network site have limited access to their profiles (Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Lenhart and Madden 2007; Patchin and Hinduja 2010).

Other young people also shared with me their strategies for avoiding unwanted content and contact. Aldo told me, if he did not know someone, “I won’t add them and stuff. Like I’ll just deny them as friends. Alice said that when “random guys” message on her Xanga blog saying “hey, you’re cute,” she responds with “yeah, I’m a stalker and I happen to be an ax murderer too. Would you like to talk to me still?” Kevin exhibited perhaps the most concern about vulnerability resulting from his online participation. He claimed he was “super cyber-safe” and would not post his picture online, instead using an animal as an avatar. He told me “If you were approached by a cyberstalker, it’s not because you were on the internet minding your own business, it’s because you were adding friends that you didn’t know that well, or because you were in public chat rooms. Why are you in a public chatroom and talking to people you don’t know?” Kevin claimed that due to avoiding these practices “Nobody has ever approached me on MySpace. If somebody adds me and I don’t know them and I can tell that I have no clue who they are, I’m not going to add them.”

There are several traits and activities that are more likely to put one in an uncomfortable online situation (Smith 2007). Those likely to be contacted by strangers about sexual topics are girls, those who have created a social network profile, and those who have posted pictures online (Smith 2007). Youth who receive sexual solicitations were also more likely to report experiencing offline physical abuse, sexual abuse, and alienation from their parents (Wells and Mitchell 2008). LGBT young people fit the profile of those more likely to receive unwanted sexual contact online as they are often marginalized, harassed, and isolated in high school settings (Pascoe 2007) and might not have the family support that non-sexual minority youth do.

Given that queer young people experience some of the risk factors that render them vulnerable to sexual contact by strangers, it is little surprise that I heard the following story from one of my respondents, Robert:

So a couple times a week, after my parents went to bed, I visited some internet sites...., then after a while, I found a chat room web site, a gay teen chat room. I chatted with a lot of guys, eventually I started to talk to people outside of the chat room, on MSN messenger. There were people who wanted to do things with cameras and pictures, and for a while I went along with some of it, not really doing too much. Then one day, it wasn’t a teenager who sent me their pic, but an old fat man, I was disgusted, beyond words. I smashed my computer camera, deleted my MSN, and barred any memory from those times out of existence until I recollect now. Today I have lots of friends, and am secure with my sexual identity, and don’t ever go on chat rooms. *Anyways*, yeah, I am completely disgusted with myself that I ever did any of that, not that I ever did much, but that I had “IM sex,” totally totally creepy.

To be fair, Robert willingly participated in an online environment where he seemed fine with some types of sexual contact. For space-deprived youth, new media might provide spaces where they can engage in some of the same sexual and emotional exploration other youth engage in offline. Like youth who explore offline, Robert seems to be exploring boundaries and figuring out what is pleasurable and what is not. However, online relationships often bear the taint of “creepiness” and inauthenticity. Thus, it is not that surprising that Robert expresses shame and disgust not only for his encounter with an older man he found unattractive (and who seems to have initially misrepresented his age) but with other age equal partners as well. Rather than reading this example as solely one about predatory behavior, it might be beneficial to see it as an example of the need for sexual and digital literacy skills which help youth, especially sexual minority youth, navigate the uncharted and unfamiliar waters of online intimacy so that they can practice sexual subjectivity both online and off. The internet might be a lifeline for disenfranchised youth, but disenfranchised young people might also be at more risk for uncomfortable sexual contact for which they may not have fully developed a coping strategy.

More frequently than stories of sexual solicitation, youth I spoke with shared stories about patterns of offline gender and sexual harassment moving online. In online environments, the types of policing gender and sexuality that typically occur offline can be executed not only with a larger audience but also with more lasting digital footprints. For instance, in offline environments, boys shore up masculine identities through teasing other boys for being too romantic, or letting their girlfriends control them (Pascoe 2007). New media technologies are now being

put to use in those same gender practices. Trevor, for instance, told me the story of a friend of his, Brad, who he described as “pussy-whipped” with a MySpace page devoted to his girlfriend, which is entitled “Jenny is awesome.” On their way to a concert as part of the school band, Brad showed Trevor a picture of him and his girlfriend at prom. On the back Trevor read the inscription, “I love you Pookie.” Trevor explained that he and his friends took a picture of this inscription and sent “it to everyone Brad knows. And we all call him Pookie now. He gets so much flack for this. We were all laughing so hard.” What might have once been a joke between friends about Brad’s masculinity (or lack thereof) was spread across the school using the affordances of digital technology.

Additionally, the homophobic harassment that is so common offline among teenage boys (Pascoe 2007) has moved online. In one video Craig showed me, his friend Kevin sits at an IHOP, short money for dinner. Craig agrees to lend him money, but only on the following condition—that Kevin repeat a series of confessional phrases which Craig can videotape and place on YouTube. Kevin buries his head in his hands asking, “You’re going to take a video of this and post it on YouTube aren’t you?!” Craig ignores Kevin’s plea saying, “Anyway, repeat after me. I Kevin James Wong.”

Kevin: I, Kevin James Wong

Craig: 17 years old

Kevin (who at this point starts to giggle embarrassedly):  
17 years old.

Craig: Senior at Valley High School.

Kevin: Senior at Valley High School.

Craig: In Santa Clarita.

Kevin: In Santa Clarita.

Craig: Am now confessing.

Kevin: Am now confessing.

Craig: That I, Kevin Wong.

Kevin: That I, Kevin Wong.

Craig: Am a homosexual male.

Kevin: Am a homosexual male.

They devolved into laughter as their friend Jesse jumps into the frame behind Kevin. Craig posted the video on YouTube and eagerly showed it to me as I interviewed him in a local Starbucks. He and his friends giggled as they continued to show me other YouTube videos, one of which featured them imitating men engaging in anal intercourse and then bursting into fits of laughter. While there is little new about this type of homophobic harassment between boys (Kimmel 2001; Pascoe 2007), the ability to do it with so wide an audience and the attendant potential for widespread humiliation is.

This sort of harassment is not limited to boys. Gender practices framing girls as sexual objects also take place in

online environments. Aldo’s MySpace page, for instance, features a Mario brother cartoon in which Mario looks like he is having sex with the princess as she is bent over in front of him. As Aldo told me “he’s one upping her,” or giving her more power in the world of the Mario Brothers games. Other boys displayed to me proudly the “models” they had as friends. By featuring the “models,” such as Tila Tequila, as friends on their MySpace or Facebook pages, boys engaged in a masculinizing discourse that promotes women as sexual objects.

While mediated environments may open avenues for learning about issues of gender and sexuality, they also pose risks. Mediated gender practices look a lot like non-mediated gender practices in the objectification of women and definitions of masculinity as homophobic and dominant. As well, online environments can pose risks of unwanted sexual attention for some young people.

## Conclusion

This article looked to put into context stories like Jessie Logan’s by exploring the relationships between young people’s sexuality and new media use in their daily lives. These practices indicate that youth, in this study, are not necessarily meeting older adults for sexual liaisons, being traumatized by online predators, or experiencing cyberbullying that is quantifiably more common than the offline bullying they may experience. In fact, their online experiences are much more complex than that.

Youth have quickly put new media to use in their intimate relationships. The sexual practices in which young people engage take place in the context of these social relationships. The private, peer-oriented, and sometimes anonymous forums offered by new media help to manage the vulnerability inherent in such relationships. As such, new media are an ideal venue for conveying information about sensitive and potentially embarrassing topics like sex and sexuality.

Youth are eager to receive information about sexuality and relationships information and, statistically, are not likely receiving it elsewhere. They are turning to websites, discussion boards, and text messages to learn about their own sexuality, their bodies, and safer sex practices. They are also turning to each other through mediated means. By publicizing these resources and ensuring the information is both available and accurate, health practitioners can circumvent some of the restrictions educators experience when it comes to the topic of sex and intimate relationships.

However, not all youth have equal access to new media, so when interventions are designed to bring information to young people about sexual health, we need to keep in mind the audience a given intervention might reach. Racial and

class disparities still exist, both in terms of access and participation. Similarly, some sexual minority, homeless and other disenfranchised youth most in need of information about sexual health, may also experience online venues as riskier spaces to the extent they have access to them.

This article highlights the fact that the booster/detractor divide misses nuance in terms of the risks and resources afforded by new media, from the everyday love notes between Alice and Josh to the more problematic harassment of Jesse, to the myriad possibilities for informal learning outside of a formal institution (such as sex education outside of a school setting). In sum, new media provide a previously unavailable, direct line to many young people, a line of communication that might, for better or worse, evade adult monitoring and provide much needed information to youth about their bodies, their lives, and their sexual health.

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