Youth Beyond Borders: Methodological Challenges in Youth Information Interaction

Amanda Waugh
University of Maryland, College Park
awaugh@umd.edu

Rachel M. Magee
Drexel University
rmm348@drexel.edu

Denise E. Agosto
Drexel University
dea22@drexel.edu

June Ahn
University of Maryland, College Park
juneahn@umd.edu

Leanne Bowler
University of Pittsburgh
lbowler@sis.pitt.edu

Mega Subramaniam
University of Maryland, College Park
mmsubram@umd.edu

ABSTRACT

The pace of technological change is rapid and the impact of this acceleration on the information behavior of youth from diverse backgrounds is multifaceted. Most young people have online access in some form, but the uses and quality of access vary tremendously (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi & Gasser, 2013). With the growth and variation of information behaviors among youth in social media and the mobile Web, keeping pace with research methods used to capture these behaviors and phenomena continues to be a discussion among scholars. Adding to the complications of research in this area, youth are increasingly using information and communications technologies (ICT) across platforms for a variety of information behaviors, including academic and social reasons (Agosto & Abbas, 2010). It is often not enough to solely examine a young person's Twitter feed - we need to see how that conversation carries from Twitter, to direct messages, to texting, to a Facebook post and so on. This variation suggests a need for greater nuance in research (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi & Gasser, 2013; Gasser, Cortesi, Malik & Lee, 2012). This panel will bring together several researchers experienced in studying youth information practices to discuss their methodologies and strategies in dealing with these intricate issues. This panel will be conducted in a roundtable style – encouraging deep conversation between the researchers and the audience. This will be followed by a small group discussions with the audience and conclude by sharing back best practices uncovered through the group discussions. Through attending this panel, attendees will engage with current developments in diverse youth, ICT and research methodologies, and identify priorities and approaches for future work in these areas.

Keywords

Research methods, digital youth, teens, ICT, diversity, technology, information behavior.

INTRODUCTION

While work has begun to engage with youth, social media, and diverse populations, it is an ongoing challenge for researchers to keep pace with the evolution and proliferation of devices, platforms and media. Furthermore, as devices, platforms and media proliferate in a seemingly exponential arc, we believe it is often no longer enough to examine engagement in only one setting, as youth now interact across platforms. To capture the complete landscape of their information behaviors, it is essential to examine the entire youth-media landscape. As researchers, we are challenged to explore across boundaries of technology and access, and across boundaries of age, race and socioeconomic status. This panel will explore how some researchers are answering this challenge and pose new questions for the direction of research methods in such landscape.

Teens and Technology

Recent research highlights just how little we know about the details of youth information interaction. Current research indicates that teens are engaged online in greater numbers and formats than ever before. Almost all teens have some form of Internet access, most have cell phones, and a sizeable minority (37%) have smartphones with Internet access. Of that sizeable minority, there are similar rates of smartphone ownership among the wealthiest and the poorest teens, and teen girls are more likely than teen boys to access the Internet through their smartphones (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi & Gasser, 2013). Race/ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status all play a role in how youth use technology to engage with information (Gasser, Cortesi, Malik, & Lee, 2012).

Despite the wide ranging Internet access at their fingertips, youth often turn to other people for information, though frequently mediated through an information and communication technology (ICT) (Myers, Fisher, & Marcoux, 2009). A meta-analysis by Gasser, et al. (2012) notes several large gaps in the research including how youth acquire skills in search, evaluation and content creation across contexts and what role parents or teachers have in imparting these skills.

When considering teens' varying use of technology, it is important to take the context of their information behaviors into account. Many variables come into play within these contexts such as identity, socialization, access, school/home environments, formal/informal environments, and literacy level, etc. Social interaction is a key factor in youth technology use, with teens selecting social media services because their friends are using them (boyd, 2008) and selectively choosing media to address context, audience and the nature of the communication (boyd, 2014). Identity development has long been seen an important factor in youth technology use (Turkle, 1997; boyd, 2008), with social technologies giving teens space to play with the ways they present their identities (Livingstone, 2008). Academic settings also inform and stimulate technology use. Some research has examined the ways youth interact with technology in this context, ranging from a focus on school libraries as locations for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) skill development (Subramaniam, Ahn, Fleischmann, & Druin, 2012) to the ways social media use interacts with social and academic development (Ahn, 2011b). Teens may use digital media and technology while hanging out with friends, or on the other end of the spectrum, can use them to pursue their deeper interests, which has been termed "geeking out" (Ito et al., 2010), and is similar to Gee's affinity spaces (2005). Importantly, while it is crucial to investigate and understand the variety of contexts where youth use technology, it is also key to recognize that contexts often overlap (Agosto, Abbas, & Naughton, 2012), with skills developed in one arena informing practices in others (Gasser, Cortesi, Malik, & Lee, 2012).

Long held beliefs about the "digital divide" are being challenged as we discover that it is more complicated than previously thought. The digital divide is broadly defined as difference in access to online tools and communities based on race, income and education. However, as avenues for access have proliferated, these divides have become more nuanced. The everyday life information seeking (ELIS) needs of young people appear to be similar across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic status (SES) lines, (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005) but the use of social network sites varies. Ahn (2011a) notes that Black and Black-Hispanic teens are just as likely as their White and White-Hispanic peers to be on social networking sites (SNS). Hispanic and young people from other ethnic backgrounds are substantially less likely to be on SNS. Gender is also a predominant predictor of how youth use online media, with girls more frequently engaged in SNS than boys. Girls are also substantially more likely to be cell-mainly Internet users than boys (29% vs 20%) (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi & Gasser, 2013). Interestingly, Ahn's (2011a) analysis notes that youth without computer access at home are still strong users of SNS, a finding that further reinforces the need for nuance in researchers' analyses of youth and online media. In addition, the digital literacy level of these youth also plays a role in the intellectual access to ICTs, with the "haves" continue to get access to better literacy instruction than the "have-nots" (Thompson, Jaeger, Taylor, Subramaniam & Bertot, 2014).

Methodological Challenges

Scholars often begin their training in research reading some of the "classics" of the field. In general, these very worthwhile texts serve as foundational guide, but do not address the challenges posed by research in youth information interaction. Yin's *Case Study Research*, revised and re-released in 2014, spends just a page on social media, in which Yin cautions researchers using sites such as Facebook to be wary about the truthfulness of information presented (p. 129). Creswell (2007), in his chapter on data collection, only notes that interviews and focus groups can also be done via email (p. 130). Creswell does acknowledge that establishing rapport in communities can be challenging even for researchers who are from the community, as well as for researchers from a different community (p. 139).

As noted by boyd and Crawford's (2011) paper, there are also numerous challenges when working with digital traces resulting from social media interactions. They highlight that it remains critical for researchers to consider ethics (just because data is accessible, doesn't mean the author intended for it to be analyzed), audience (for example, understanding exactly who is tweeting is nearly impossible), and research questions, (bigger data is not always better data.)

Other challenges stem from the nature of adult researchers working with diverse youth. This includes the issues associated with the power differences between researchers and participants. As Best (2007) highlights, differences between participants and researchers in terms of gender, education, and SES can have impact on the research process; age can present a particularly difficult power imbalance, as in research with youth there is almost always a significant gap in age, and researchers may imagine that their own experiences as youth have more relevance to their research than is appropriate. In addition, adults and youth often have radically different accepted norms of behavior. Boyd and Marwick (2011) observe that teens are acutely aware of privacy, even as they open post text and images across social networks; however, the social norms that would define and protect privacy differ for teens and adults.

In addition to these issues, there are also open questions about administrative and organizational difficulties in coordinating research with youth. Research with youth is sometimes seen as difficult or hard to conduct. This rises from multiple perceptions, including the potential difficulty of achieving approval to conduct studies with youth (Rode, 2009), or as critiqued by Amato and Ochiltree (1987), the developmental, experiential, or communicative skills of youth participants. Other researchers describe teenagers as "tough" (Bassett, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic, & Chapman, 2008). These works point to challenges in research design: how does the ethics review process limit

our ability to understand a critical population, such as LGBTQ teenagers (Gray, 2009), while providing necessary protections? How can we design studies to balance these competing interests?

PANEL ORGANIZATION

This panel will include an interactive question-and-answer session with the panelists, facilitated by the panel organizers. Discussion will begin with how each panelist has adjusted or adapted his/her methodological approaches to youth research and in particular youth ICT practices, as well as conversation about the future of this kind of work. The second half of the session will transition to a small group breakout session focused on the same themes, and the session will conclude with a final full-group wrap-up to identify best practices and open research opportunities.

Panelists

The panelists include researchers from a variety of backgrounds, each researching different aspects of youth technology use and information practice.

Denise E. Agosto

Denise E. Agosto, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University. Her current research focuses on youths' use of social media and the implications for public and school library services. She is currently PI on two research grants studying teens' use of the social media. "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.

June Ahn

June Ahn, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the College of Information Studies and College of Education, at the University of Maryland, College Park. His research focuses on youth use of new media and its implications for designing enhanced teaching and learning environments. He is the PI of the Sci-Dentity project that explores the use of school libraries, social media, and science fiction as ways to engage under-represented youth in STEM, and Co-PI on two projects that explore the design of open education platforms and alternate reality games for learning. These projects are funded by the National Science Foundation. His studies utilize both design-based research approaches from the learning sciences and qualitative/quantitative methodologies to better understand the sociotechnical systems that arise from the combination of technology,

stakeholders, and educational environments. Dr. Ahn received his PhD in Urban Education from the University of Southern California, MA in Educational Technology from Columbia University, and BA in Educational Technology from Brown University.

Leanne Bowler

Leanne Bowler, PhD, is an associate professor at the School of Information Sciences, University of Pittsburgh. She received her PhD and two master degrees (MLS, MEd) from McGill University, in Montréal, Canada and has worked as an information professional in a variety of settings, including public libraries, hospitals, and literacy organizations. Her research models the relationship between young people's intra-personal knowledge, affect, and the critical creation and use of new media, with the goal of applying empirical models to emerge from her research to the design of new media that scaffolds reflection and self-awareness. To achieve these goals, Dr. Bowler applies a wide range of qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, visual narrative inquiry, discourse analysis in social media, and participatory design. Dr. Bowler, along with her colleagues Eleanor Mattern (Pittsburgh) and Dr. Cory Knobel (UC Irvine), received the Lee Dirks Best Paper Award at the 2014 iConference 2014 for their paper, "Developing Design Interventions for Cyberbullying: A Narrative-Based Participatory Approach".

Mega Subramaniam

Dr. Mega Subramaniam 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. She received her Ph.D in Information Studies from Florida State University and her master's degree in Instructional Systems Technology from Indiana University, Bloomington. Dr. Subramaniam's research focuses on enhancing the role of school libraries in fostering the mastery of information and new media literacy so essential to the learning of science and mathematics among underserved young people. Specifically, she conducts research in creating socio-culturally relevant learning environments that leverage the strengths of school library programs, where the library programs can engage young people in inquiry experiences, utilize technology for effective learning experiences, and make connections to their interests in media, health and the environment. Her approach to research is qualitative, melding ethnography, participatory design and design-based research with a variety of data collection methods, including in-situ observations, self-developed new media literacy assessment instruments, interviews, and focus groups. She serves as the co-editor of the *School Library Research* journal.

Panel Organizers

The panel organizers also research youth technology use and information practice.

Rachel M. Magee

Rachel M. Magee is a doctoral candidate in the College of Computing and Informatics at Drexel University. Magee's research examines teens' everyday life use of technology, with a specific focus on their continuums of technology use, including non-use through temporary, light, moderate, and heavy levels of technology use. In addition to her dissertation work, Magee works with the Youth Online Research Group at Drexel, examining teens' social question asking practices and public and school library social media practices and policies. Prior to pursuing her doctoral work, she received her Masters of Information Resources and Library Science from the University of Arizona and worked as a teen services librarian in a large, urban library system.

Amanda Waugh

Amanda Waugh is a doctoral student in Information Studies at the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland. Prior to entering the doctoral program, Amanda received her MLS from the University of Maryland as well. Amanda's work as a graduate student focuses on libraries and student achievement, primarily the *Sci-Dentity* project (scidentity.umd.edu) which examines the intersection of STEM, storytelling, and an online environment with urban middle school students. She is also examining the nature of school libraries as "third place."

CONCLUSION

This panel will highlight effective research techniques for studying diverse youth, their technology use, and information practice. Participants will hear from established youth scholars and will be able to share their effective approaches for addressing these research challenges.

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FULL CONTACT INFORMATION

Amanda Waugh
University of Maryland, College Park
4117M Hornbake South Wing, College Park, MD 20742
awaugh@umd.edu

June Ahn
University of Maryland, College Park
2117J Hornbake South Wing, College Park, MD 20742
juneahn@umd.edu

Rachel M. Magee
Drexel University
3141 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19130
rmm348@drexel.edu
1-215-895-2474

Leanne Bowler
University of Pittsburgh
611 IS Building
412-624-7679
lbowler@sis.pitt.edu

Denise E. Agosto
Drexel University
3141 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19130
dea22@drexel.edu
1-215-895-1930

Mega Subramaniam
University of Maryland
4121E Hornbake South Wing, College Park, MD 20742
mmsubram@umd.edu
1-301-405-3406