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Family Life in the New Media Ecology: Insights from the Digital Youth Project

Thank the Doha Int'l Institute for the opportunity to speak to you today. This afternoon I will be discussing the results of a three year study funded by the MacArthur Foundation that explored the relationship between new media and informal learning.

Young people in the United States today are growing up in a media ecology where digital and networked media are playing an increasingly central role. Even youth who do not possess computers and Internet access in the home are participants in a shared culture where new social media, digital media distribution, and digital media production are commonplace among their peers and in their everyday school contexts.

Families play an important role in structuring kids relationships with new media and technology. Indeed, a large share of young people's engagements with new media—using social network sites, instant messaging, and gaming—occurs in the context of home and family life. This afternoon I will be discussing the ways that the new media ecology shapes family life, how families negotiate, incorporate and manage new media and technology. Specifically, I will be drawing your attention to three broad trends:

(1) the spatial and domestic arrangements that shape new media use in the home
(2) Temporality of new media usage, specifically efforts to limit the amount of time kids spend using computers and the creation of family time mediated by new media
(3) Transformations in the circulation of knowledge in the family
Characteristics of the New Media Ecology

TOOLS	NETWORKS
For	for
Tinkering	Distributing
Making	Sharing
And	and
Remaking	Discussing

But before I begin, I want to flag two significant changes that we see as a fundamental for understanding young people's participation and use of digital media – and why we think there is

something different or distinct about this moment:

1. The first is the increasing accessibility of tools for digital production.
For a significant number of youth now in the US, tools for writing, creating and modifying digital photos and videos, and communicating on the internet are part of their everyday life. The unique capabilities, or affordances, of digital media - to make, remake, modify, mashup, and remix media content – are now taken for granted. Basic tools for digital media creation come prepackaged with a desktop and laptop computers and, increasingly, even the most basic of mobile phones have the capacity to snap photos or record video and audio.

2. The second big factor is that kids are creating and sharing their digital works in public contexts. Not only do they have the ability to create new media works, but they are able to publish, share, and distribute them on the Internet, and have other people view and comment on the work through sites like Facebook, flickr, Deviant Art, Twitter and a range of others. We have been calling these new contexts networked publics.

HOW ARE THESE TOOLS AND NETWORKED PUBLICS

shaping and changing

LEARNING, SOCIALIZING,

AND COMMUNICATION FOR

YOUTH AND FAMILIES?
Networked publics are about the lateral, peer-to-peer and many to many networks of people, media and communication that we are seeing proliferating on the Internet today. This isn't the passive public that we associate with mass media. Rather, this is about active engagement with specialized interests and local practices, that have the capacity to draw upon the global network of media and communications. While kids have always had publics they have engaged in - public spaces in their local community, the publics they encounter through engagements with popular culture, as well as the smaller publics they engage with in a more personal way in the hallways, classrooms and auditoriums of school. Networked publics are an extension of these existing practices, but they do change them in some important ways.

- Digital Youth Ethnography
- 22 Case Studies
- 28 Researchers
- 800 Interviews
- 28 diary studies
- 4,146 questionnaires
- 5000+ Observation Hrs
- 10,468 profiles
- 15 online forums
- 389 videos
- 50 events or gatherings
- Classroom Observations
- Program Observations

Between 2005 and 2008, 28 researchers based at U Southern California and UC Berkeley conducted research understand these changes through what anthropologists often describe as "ethnographic methods". While we used a range of methods (e.g. slide), what this ethnographic perspective really meant was that we had a commitment to understand new media from kids' point of view, with the aim of understanding the motivations and interests they bring to new media when they engage on their own terms.

One of the advantages of this large-scale ethnographic project is the diversity of sites that we have been able to gain access to. Researchers worked in a range of sites including:

(1) rural California among a largely white working and middle class families
(2) middle and working class teenagers living in an ethnically diverse suburban area of the 'San Francisco Bay area
(3) In central Los Angeles in an area characterized by a large Latino population, many of whom are first generation migrants and an area and
(4) in the hub of technology innovation in the US, Silicon Valley, a significant portion that involved mixed marriages between Asian and white couples
(5) urban neighborhoods in New York City, an area that boasts a significant Caribbean, African-American and Latino population.

Note that in half of our site, extended and transnational families played an important role in family life.

Parenting in the New Media Ecology
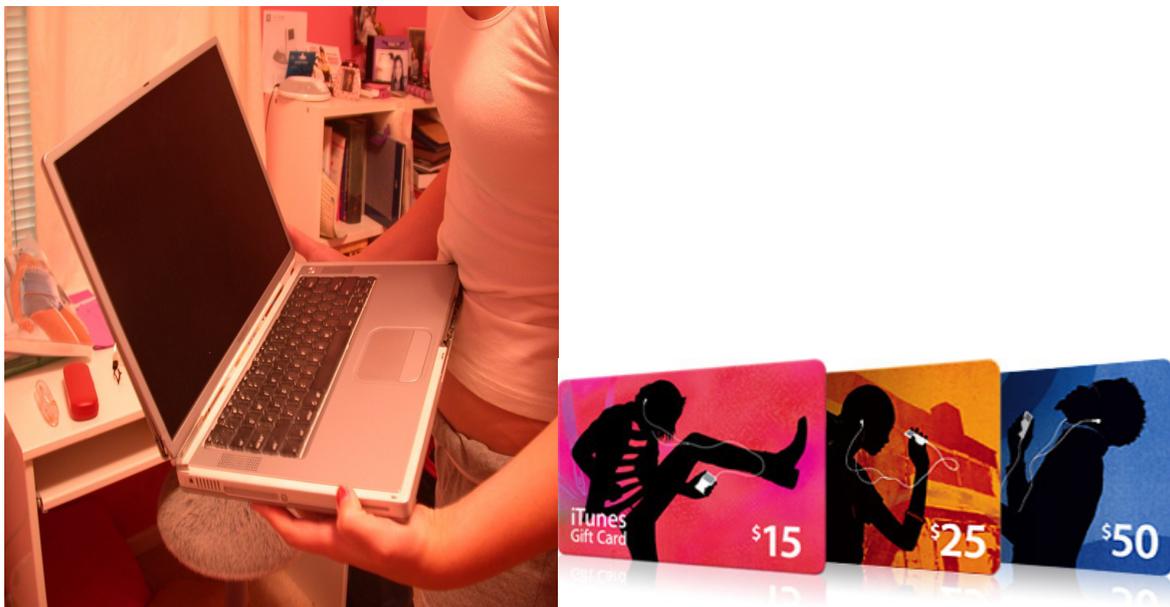
As you can see from just a few of the images of domestic life, American youth live in rich media ecologies that are probably more mediated (or saturated, depending on your perspective), than ever. This creates challenges for parents and families navigating this new media world where the rules of participation and engagements are in continual flux. One of the interesting findings from the research was the recognition that while socioeconomic differences played a role in new media usage in the home, parents and adults' attitudes toward new media reflect their own motivations and beliefs about parenting as well as their personal histories and interests in media. Moreover, parents often frame their purchase of new media in relation to the educational goals

and broader aspirations they hold for their children. From this vantage point, computers, video cameras, and digital cameras purchased on holidays, birthdays and other significant life events, and the related software, education, and training, become meaningful to many families because they represent an investment in their child's future, one that they hope will ensure their children's success in education, work, and income generation.

While parents make efforts to embrace or support their kids' interests in new media and have found media such as mobile phones to be generally beneficial to the micro-coordination of family life, they admit a degree of ambivalence, anxiety and discomfort, which are often tied to what Ellen Seiter (1999b) has referred to as the "lay theory of media effects," or the belief that media cause children to become antisocial, violent, unproductive, and desensitized to a variety of influences, such as commercialization, sex, and violence). During our study moral panics over MySpace and sexual predators were particularly prevalent as were discussions of cyberbullying. Even the most tech-savvy and media-immersed parents in our study grappled with the prominence of new media in their children's lives and their role as parents in influencing their children's participation in these new media worlds.

Organizing and Controlling Space and Time
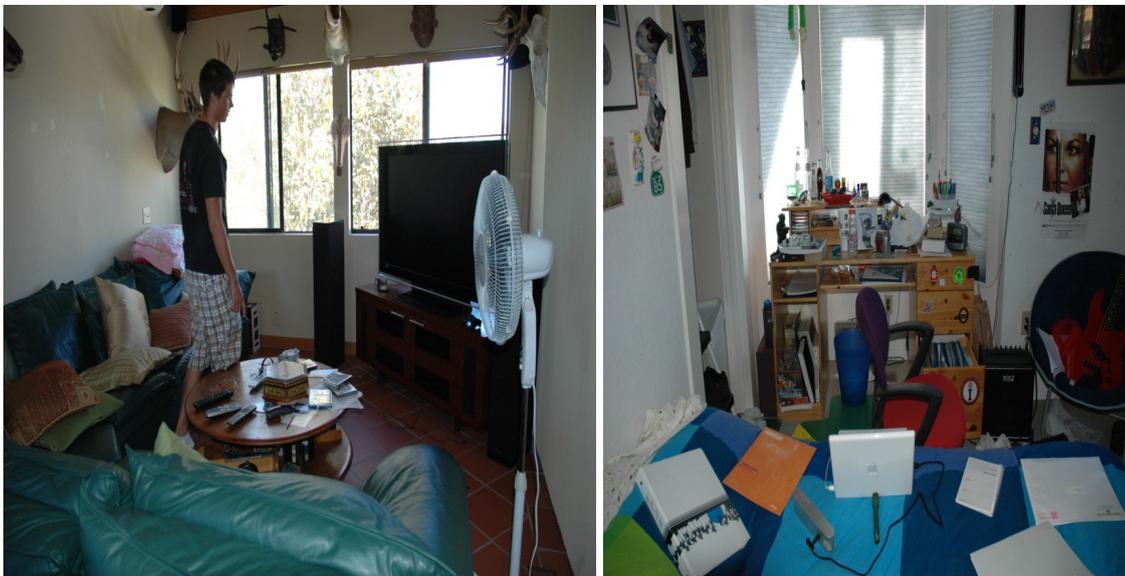
Indeed, the decision to acquire new media means making decisions about where new media will fit within the current domestic ecology of media objects. These decisions may revolve around the affordability of a particular medium, as well as infrastructural issues, such as the potential location of a desktop computer, laptop, or gaming system in the home. Given parents' concerns over the ability to control and monitor their children's media use, many parents elect to place larger media objects, such as desktop computers, in the public spaces of the home such as kitchens, hallways, and other spaces where parents possessed the option to monitor what their kids were doing.

The arrival of relatively affordable portable media presents a few challenges. In particular, it has solidified the importance of the bedroom as a space where it is possible to individually own (or hold primary usage of) new media and assume individual control over one's own media world – something that often begins to occur during the mid-teenaged years when young people have more homework and are exploring their own sense of independence. As Sonia Livingstone and her colleagues have suggested the more "media-rich" bedrooms are, the more likely it is that kids will spend time in their bedrooms using the media, away from the rest of the family and the more public spaces of the home.

Participation in Family Life and the Flows of Information and Knowledge

Alongside spatial and temporal changes in family life, important transformations are also occurring socially in terms of the ways in which information, knowledge and power circulates in contemporary families in ways that temporarily invert the normal power dynamics of everyday family life. Not only do parents impart their knowledge to kids, but we see young people educating and sharing knowledge with their parents. In a number of the professional families in my Silicon Valley study, kids and parents are coming together, collaborating (if you will), to do things like make a video of a family event, build a computer or to create, remix and disseminate music. Siblings, cousins and other 'peers' within the family often share media interests, such as a girl who writes Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan fiction who gets 'tips' on what do do with her latest plots from her sister. Many of the boys I interviewed talked about learning and playing games with their brothers, cousin, uncles and dads. As they become older, they take pleasure in of the competition with their male relatives. From kids perspectives this sense of togetherness, of family, often hinges upon the importance of also asserting themselves autonomous individuals with their own likes, dislikes, opinions and sets of expertise gleaned, at least in part, through their participation in networked public culture.

New Media and the Moral Economy of the Family

In this short presentation, I have focused upon three broad shifts in family life as a result of the new tools and networks available to American youth and families. Our ethnographic perspective – that is, understanding how kids and parents navigate the increasing role of new media in their lives -- enabled us to glean a deeper understanding of families and family life on their own terms. Despite differences in ownership and access to technologies, families develop similar strategies of managing space, time and (arguably) new flows of information and power in this rapidly changing new media ecology. Families sometimes incorporate new media into their lives in ways that can lead to divisiveness – something I have not talked about at length here. We have generally not attempted to be prescriptive in our findings given that each family negotiates their own moral economy around new media based upon their specific family dynamics that are shaped by social and cultural norms within the wider societies with which they are apart. What is clear, even given this broader structural shift towards peers and peer learning, is just how centrally important homes and families continue to be in structuring young people's media worlds.