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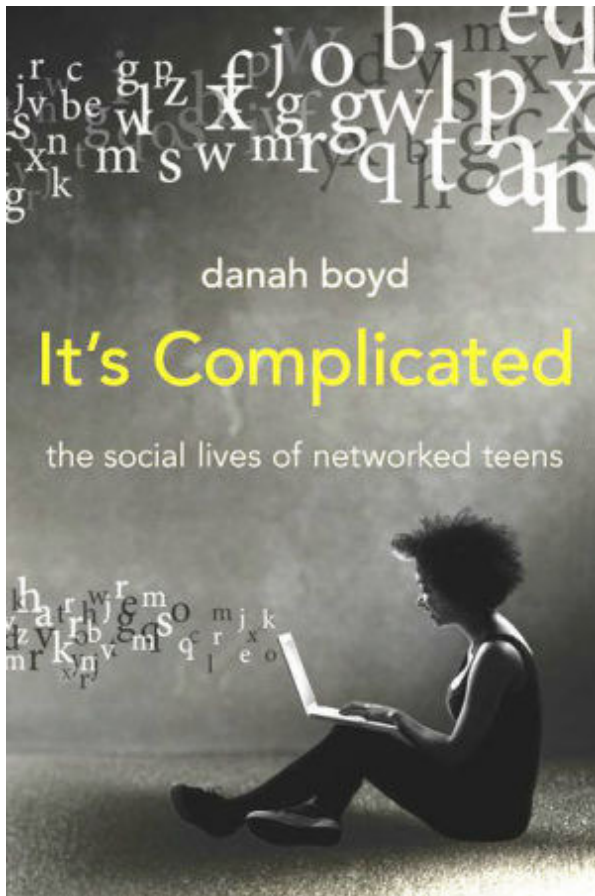
PARK CITY

# DAILY NEWS

## Explores teens' relationship with technology

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*"It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens"* by Danah Boyd. New Haven, CT; Yale University Press, 2014, 281 pages, \$18.20.



"As a researcher passionate about the health and well-being of young people, I wrote this book in an effort to create a nuanced portrait of everyday teen life in an era in which social media has become mainstream," Danah Boyd observes in the introduction to *"It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens,"* her new bestseller.

"Contemporary youth are growing up in a cultural setting in which many aspects of their lives will be mediated by technology and many of their experiences and opportunities will be shaped by their engagement with technology," she continues. "Fear mongering does little to help youth develop the ability to productively engage with reality. As a society, we pay a price for fear mongering and utopian visions that ignore more complex realities."

Many readers are no doubt intimately familiar with the kind of 'fear mongering' Boyd describes so eloquently. Each generation tends to assume it is inherently more enlightened than the one that preceded it, just as each generation tends to be innately suspicious of the generation that follows it. In many respects, these feelings have been amplified

in recent decades due to the introduction of social media and other forms of advanced communication technologies. The machines have fundamentally transformed the way many human beings view the world, and this is especially true for today's teenagers.

Boyd approaches her subject matter from a variety of perspectives, as evidenced by the one-word titles she gives each chapter: Identity, Privacy, Addiction, Danger, Bullying, Inequality, and Literacy. In each of these thought-provoking installments, she works to build a comprehensive portrait of what is going on with today's adolescents and their fascination with social media. She also goes into considerable detail to explain how we should interpret what we are witnessing and, perhaps most importantly, what we should (or should not) be doing about it. What I find refreshing about Boyd's writing is the honesty and realism I sense on almost every page. Here is an author who is going to great lengths – without any preconceptions or a political agenda – to simply clarify the current status of teenage culture and how it is increasingly driven by enhanced communication technologies. At the core of her thesis is a series of misconceptions many adults apparently have

about the motives of adolescents when they interact with their peers through social media. Boyd presents a convincing case that many adults tend to construe what they see happening in the behaviors and attitudes of teenagers in relation to their own worldview and definitions, which sets the stage for miscommunication and conflict. Her remedy is to use these experiences to promote mutual understanding and nurture personal growth.

“The idea that teens share too much – and therefore don’t care about privacy – is now so entrenched in public discourse that research showing that teens do desire privacy and work to get it is often ignored by the media,” Boyd notes in “Privacy: Why Do Youth Share So Publicly?,” the second chapter. “The teens that I met genuinely care about their privacy, but how they understand and enact it may not immediately resonate or appear logical to adults. Teens are not particularly concerned about organizational actors; rather, they wish to avoid paternalistic adults who use safety and protection as an excuse to monitor their everyday sociality.”

Another chapter I found enlightening was “Bullying: Is Social Media Amplifying Meanness and Cruelty?” Here the author attempts to decipher the different meanings adults and teens often ascribe to the same behavior. Obviously, both are approaching the issue, which is an important and potentially devastating concern, from two vastly different perspectives: “While many adults use bullying to mean every form of youth meanness and cruelty, teenagers use the term more conservatively,” Boyd asserts. “Many are quick to say that bullying is not a significant issue in their peer group, and when they give concrete examples of bullying, they describe incidents in which someone is repeatedly tormented for being different. This does not mean that they are oblivious to other forms of meanness and cruelty; they just talk about these issues using different language. Bullying is an important issue to address, but figuring out how to address the wide swath of meanness and cruelty that adults identify as bullying requires looking at the language teens use and the cultural norms that surround them.”

Boyd is a principal researcher at Microsoft as well as an assistant professor at New York University and a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard. She has a doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley and a master’s degree from MIT. The founder and president of the Society and Data Research Institute, Boyd was recently named ‘tech’s most influential woman’ by the Huffington Post. Outside academe, she is active in several non-profits and other social justice projects. For example, she spent five years at V-Day, an organization working to end violence against women and girls worldwide. Although she has authored or co-authored several influential scholarly papers and journal articles, this is her first book. As might be expected, “It’s Complicated” is exceptionally well-researched, with twenty-three pages of source notes and a twenty-two page bibliography at the conclusion of the eight chapters that form the nucleus of the book.

Certainly the book was an eye-opener for me. My youngest son, fifteen, shares many of the characteristics Boyd describes so vividly in this fascinating volume. I believe I now have a better understanding of who he is and how he sees life as a result of reading “It’s Complicated.” My sense is that if you have ever wondered why teenagers are consumed by social media in all its continually evolving forms, you would find this book immensely interesting. I recommend it highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*