

*Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*, by Mizuko Ito et al. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010. 419 pp., ISBN 978-0-262-01336-9. (Reviewed by Thomas Patrick Huston.)

### **Introduction to Publication's Goals and Format**

*Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out* is a collection of essays and ethnographies on digital culture where the writers of various chapters, with one collective voice, focus on the repercussions of the emerging paradigm shift on learning, friendship, families, intimacy, production, gaming, and work. The title of the book itself contains actual phrases used by youth to define certain “trajectories of participation” with new media, where “their modes of learning and their social networks and focus begin to shift” (Ito et al., 2010, p. 17). “Hanging out” is linked to gaming with friends, “messaging around” is in line with production of media and “interest-driven” activities, and can evolve into “geeking out,” which refers to the “intense commitment or engagement with media or technology,” depending on genre of participation (p. 17, 65).

The book is comprised of various articles by authors who worked together, offering a thread of continuity, regardless of chapter, and communicated with the same goals and terminology. Each author’s work was guided by four central points—“Participation, publics, literacy, and learning”—and two main questions used for research: (1) “How are new media being taken up by youth practices and agendas?” and “How do these practices change the dynamics of youth-adult negotiations over literacy, learning, and authoritative knowledge?” (p. 13). Goals of the publication include addressing the following issues:

- (1) How specific new media practices are embedded in existing (and evolving) social structures and cultural categories
- (2) Documenting youth new media practice in rich, qualitative detail, to provide a picture of how young people are mobilizing these media and technologies in their everyday lives
- (3) How youth are able to negotiate social status among peers
- (4) How youth gain autonomy from parents
- (5) How youth acquire expertise in related domains such as knowledge seeking on the Internet
- (6) How educators, parents, and young adults engage in structuring youth new media practices (pp. 9-12).

### **Terminology**

“Kids” is the term chosen to reference children thirteen years of age or younger. “Teenager” is used for reference of subjects between thirteen and eighteen years of age. Other new terms emerging to define what youth are experiencing in regard to interaction with popular and digital culture can be summed up with the terms “Participatory Media Culture” and “Hypersociality.”

Instead of somewhat commonly used terms like “digital media” and “interactive media,” the authors have chosen to use “new media” (p. 10). The needs of youth have a huge impact on how they engage with new media. Terms like “participation” can also be viewed as “traffic” and youth “production” as “user-generated content” (p. 11).

### **Learning and New Media’s Impact on Education**

The research findings proposed by the authors are interesting, surprising, and at times worrisome. According to the authors, learning happens in informal settings, rather than from explicit instructional agenda. How youth pick up literacy in these informal settings is difficult to reproduce in the contexts of schooling and testing. These findings suggest that in some ways public education is no longer effective to achieve its original goals for youth and learning. The current testing culture obviously could never include the interests of youth, the creativity, and/or the technological platforms and genres, but schools could change their culture when it comes to curricula and methods of delivery that match current student interests. However, because of tests and their importance to teacher jobs, salaries, administrative staff and teachers’ continued employment, it would seem likely that schools will continue to move away from the type of learning and engagement youth are experiencing online. This is a sad commentary and ultimately a paradox, because schools do want youth to learn, yet the opposite is happening, and learning occurs outside of the school building.

Another interesting research finding is that unlike in hierarchical and authoritative relations, youth are constantly contributing, evaluating, affiliating, and competing with peers online. Ito’s book also states that social media allow for youth to discuss intimate matters they normally would not because of embarrassment. Schools that rely heavily on structure, discipline, and top-down instructional strategies offer students the exact opposite of what they find appealing when it comes to working with and assessing peers and their products. The authors also point out that the asynchronous environment of networking has rules and advantages for intimate communication and expectations, along with benefits not found within the traditional classroom setting. The fact that the student “classroom” can extend into synchronous participation would be one of the greatest assets of new media; however, one must question how often participation cultivates actual learning, and whether youth are “hanging out” more than “geeking out.”

The authors do not suggest that youth are going to monopolize these new media, but rather that they are forging their identity through them by simply taking the lead. As a result, they will impact future generations when it comes to how new media is referenced, adopted, and so on. The authors use the example of texting as a recent youth practice that is now considered mainstream on all levels, regardless of age group. This is hopeful in that perhaps traditional schools can adopt new curricula and pedagogical strategies that are more in line with what and how youth currently learn.

One of the more alarming ideas presented via ethnographic observations is that “[y]outh exhibit agency and expertise that often exceeds that of their elders, resulting in intergenerational struggle over authority and control over literacy” (p. 14). Never before has the following quote, made in 1897 by John Dewey, been more important for public education curriculum writers to recognize: “I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (p. 1).

Recent research supports the findings in Ito’s book. According to Joseph Tobin’s article *Ethnographic Studies of Children and Youth and The Media*, “Most engagement of children with popular culture and cutting edge forms of digital technology occurs outside of school” (Levinson et al., 2011, p. 213). Both the Tobin article and the Ito text suggest that youth implement their own learning through participation with new media completely on their own without traditional “teachers,” but they also evolve their knowledge by seeking out peers who have a higher understanding of the subject being investigated, discussed, and produced. This suggests an amazing concept: students define who they are as learners by selecting their own curriculum and instructor, whether the curriculum was purposely written for them or not, and whether or not the information heightening one’s expertise is delivered via a trained instructor or a peer who happens to be an expert. One reason behind why students evolve their knowledge completely on their own is explained by Margaret Eisenhart: “building or claiming an identity for self in a given context is what motivates an individual to become more expert” (Levinson et al., 2000, p. 370). Recent research also shows how new media help students understand each others’ differences. Jan Nesper states, “How kids differentially positioned by language, gender, race, or age use media not only to make meanings, but to articulate interactions among themselves and across those dimensions of difference” (Levinson et al., 2000, p. 346).

Ito’s book discusses how new media have written extremely creative curricula for the engagement of learning *without even trying*. One of the scenarios described a girl typing in various search terms in a photograph-hosting website where each searched term supplied thousands of photographs that users had labeled with the term. Educators can utilize curricula such as these for all kinds of scenarios, from word-picture associations, hypothetical assumptions one makes about these associations, etc. The authors also state that new media aid teens in developing economic and political powers; most schools’ state objectives strive for students to engage and forge identities within these two powers.

### **Conclusions and Questions**

While the majority of observations made in Ito’s book suggest kids are not passive with new media, but are instead involved in an active process on a variety of fronts rather than a mere audience member ingesting what is presented before them, it does not suggest what youth might be *absorbing*, or the potentially negative aspects of an online environment. Social etiquette and ethics, with regard to new

media, are two largely ignored themes in the book. Many questions posed in the following paragraphs are ideas for research and exploration.

New questions should be explored as research in youth and new media evolves. How do youth, or adults for that matter, engage, honor, or observe online social etiquette? Ito's book suggests certain online boundaries are honored by youth. It will be interesting to see if these boundaries can survive over time, especially if adults do not eventually become literate in new media. Because social status is such an important factor in how students engage with and develop their identity through social media, I'm wondering about those things that go unsaid or unnoticed by ethnographers. For instance—and this is glossed over in the intimacy chapter in Ito's text—how much do kids take a role in the “art of not appearing” that they are online? That is, how many hours might be wasted online only to appear as if one isn't? After all, social status is all about looking important and busy, and social networking and its place have evolved and are still evolving with their *own* identity as an entity unto itself.

What about online safety? In many ways, social networking, or one's profile, regardless of platform, is like opening the curtains and even the front door of one's house, and possibly offering a microphone as to a person's actions. How is privacy defined? Because of all the options one has for dialogue, and the permanence new media gives to thoughts, ideas, and actions via text and multiple media production, and terms such as “Did you Google him?”, it makes one wonder how youth, or adults for that matter, engage in the act of stalking or information seeking, where ethics might play a role in the matter, and if the social etiquette being observed and taken for granted is enough for the important boundaries mentioned in multiple chapters to survive over time.

What about ethics? YouTube is littered with thousands of short instructional videos on how to hack private accounts or ideas for cheating on tests, and youth are also the only ones who might understand the methods and processes for implementing or finding this type of information. If educators are ignorant of what, how, and where kids gain meaning and learning, how in the world will they know where negative actions might take place? And who is there to teach youth right from wrong once they arrive at a place where an ethical decision is at hand? YouTube videos also offer “playgrounds” for user comments where thousands engage in abusive and threatening language often filled with racism, hatred, homophobic and political rants, and all these types of comments are usually done under the guise of anonymous usernames.

Other examples have surfaced in the news within the past two years, showing how the absence of ethics in new media and youth is a bad mix. One example would be sexting. A girl committed suicide after a nude photo of her surfaced and was digitally passed around her high school. Another story involved a group of sixth-grade girls who made a cartoon video with images of them beating up another girl, and they sent the video to the girl via e-mail.

What is normalcy in new media? It appears hacking people's credit card information or posting private photographs online without one's permission is slowly arriving at normalcy, and that has to make one wonder about how to implement a discussion of ethics into new media dialogue. Online anonymity can be a catalyst for the continued dualistic, argumentative culture in America. Civil dialogue and acceptance of opposing views will never evolve if there are not models somewhere from which to learn. And how large of a role does online mimicking play when it comes to reproducing these negative behaviors in social networking?

What about online addiction? How has the act of being online "too much" come into play in youth involvement with social networking or gaming? China has opened numerous facilities designed specifically for online and gaming addictions (one such facility recently involved a youth suicide), and one has to wonder how and where psychology plays a role, and how large, in new media. Virtual connectivity can help salvage education and society, but at the same time, it can distract people from the true connectivity found within actual physical space via environment, nature, and humanity.

Ito's book does not explore commercial media's role too deeply either. What impact does advertising, if any, have on youth culture? How is online advertising evolving online, and how might this affect student participation? If youth seek everything that is involved with the learning process on their own, again, who is there to tell them that a value put forth by an advertiser is wrong or not good?

Dialogue is necessary for everyone to fully understand new media and its implications. There are many more questions to ask as this dialogue gets underway. Is it possible for new media to be a distraction from the more important things in life? Is it ethical for society to allow for Facebook updates while thousands of people are homeless and/or starving? Does any new media focus on the digital divide at hand? Does new media allow for youth to question their own ideology surrounding power structures and new media's role? Countless investigations suggest connectivity is a large part of something that can salvage education and our society, and although connectivity exists within a virtual framework, we must remember that at the same time it distracts us from true connectivity with physical space, nature and humanity. Does new media actually make us more alone?

Ito's book is an important and overdue analysis of the results of America's challenges from the paradigm shift our culture is experiencing. It is a book everyone should read—not just educators, but parents too. The most important point to consider when reading about new media is that it is constantly changing, along with youth's interactions within it. Unlike television and youth, there are constant evolutions every month in how and where youth interact online. Newer popular platforms like Pinterest and Instagram didn't exist when this book was written, while Myspace is now a ghost town and Apple's social networking site Ping has simply disappeared. Future ethnographers need to remember that youth are still youth, impressionable and naive, and if they are jumping into an endless virtual well of information and values not recognized by educators, parents, or adults, then

public education needs to get on board now more than ever to aid in this incredible new media learning frontier.

### **References**

Levinson, B. A. U. & Pollack, M. (eds.). (2011). *A Companion to the Anthropology of Education*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.

Dewey, J. (1897). My pedagogic creed. *School Journal*, 54, 77-80.

Ito, Mizuko, et al. (2010). *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Levinson, B., et al. (2000). *Schooling the symbolic animal: Social and cultural dimensions of education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.