Parents' and Teens' Perspectives on Privacy In a Technology-Filled World

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Motivation

- Parents are raising teens in a world very different from the one they grew up in

- Teens are more likely than parents to understand and use popular technologies
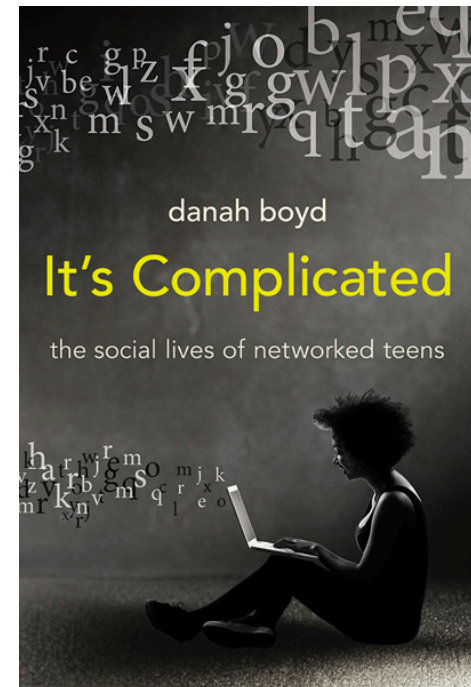
Research Questions

1. From teens' and parents' perspectives, what are the **bounds of teens' right to privacy** from their parents?

2. How do **parents decide** how much privacy teens should have when they use new technologies and services?

3. How do parents use **parental controls**, monitoring software, and ad-hoc approaches regarding teen privacy?

4. How do parents' approaches to privacy in the **digital world** compare to those in the **physical world**?

Background

- Surprising dearth of research around parents-teen relationships and privacy

  – (Marwick et al. 2010, Rode 2009, Yardi and Bruckman 2011)

- boyd (2014) contributes years of interviews with teens about technology, often touching on privacy, but focuses primarily on teen subjects

Interviews

- Hour-long one-on-one interviews with 20 participants (10 teens, 10 parents)
  - Parents and teens drawn from different families
  - Participants compensated with $30 Amazon gift card

- Participants recruited from the Pittsburgh, PA area using flyers, Craigslist, and word of mouth
  - Advertisements for the study mention teen privacy

Analysis

- Interviews recorded and transcribed for coding

- Final codebook had 106 codes in 20 categories

- Two coders independently coded each interview, met and reached consensus on all codes

Demographics

- 10 parents, 6 female, 4 male

- 10 teens, 6 female, 4 male, ages 14-18

- Participants from diverse households and educational backgrounds

Results Overview

1. Teens' right to privacy from their parents

   – Teens have a right to privacy, with many caveats

2. Privacy in the physical world

   – Parents will go into teens' bedrooms

3. Privacy in the digital world

   – Parents using digital technologies to monitor teens

4. Privacy decision making

   – Parents make decisions based on flawed understanding of teens' technology use

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- Privacy is a human right

  - P5: "Teenagers are people and everybody has the right to privacy. And just because I gave birth to them and parent them and am responsible for them, doesn't mean that I get to control everything about their lives."

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- Parents have a right to know about their teens

  – P8: "Teens do not have a right to privacy [because] parents are still responsible for their children."
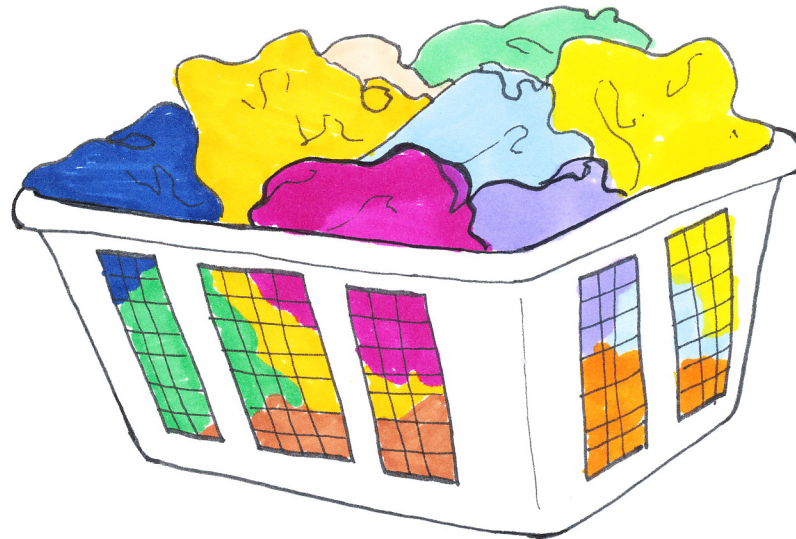
Boundaries

- P6: "I will do my very best to honor [my son's] privacy, but if at the end of the day I need to do something that violates [his] privacy because I feel like it's the right thing to do…then I will violate the shit out of his privacy…That's my responsibility as a parent."

Entering empty bedrooms

- Tensions between snooping and beneficial parental services in bedrooms

  - T7's parents may enter his room "to get my laundry. That's pretty much it. Or make my bed."
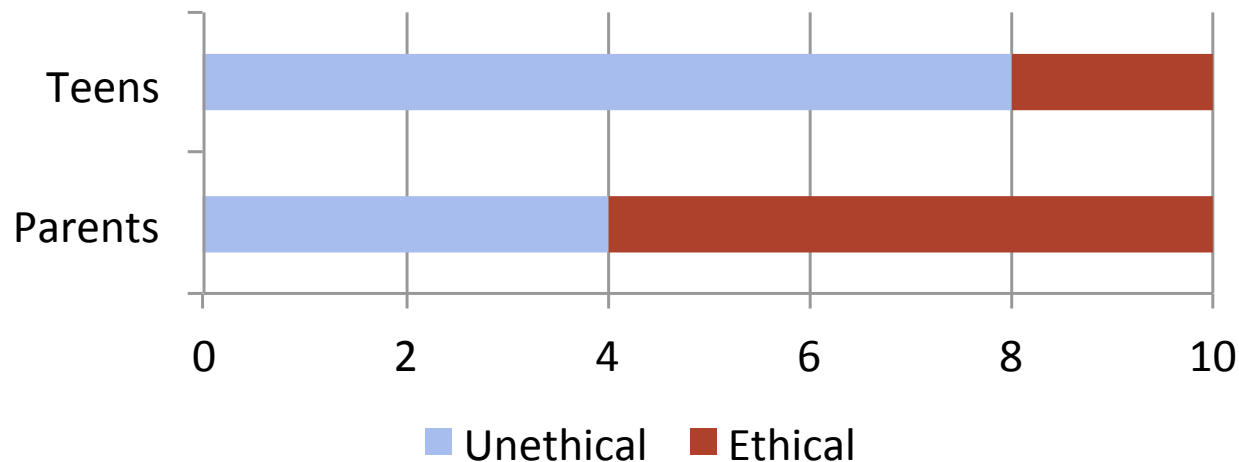
Entering occupied bedrooms

- P3: "Mom reserves the right to check on any of her children at any time."

- P5: "Since the door is closed, there are potential things I could be walking in on that neither of us want to know about."

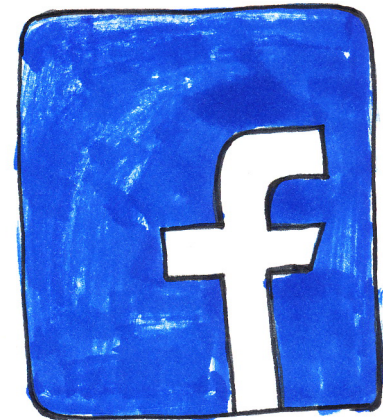# Parents aren't using parental control software

Ethics of reading text messages

- Twice as many teens as parents view reading teens' texts as unethical.

  – T10: "Texts are more private because that's where I talk to my friends."

  – P10 would prefer to be "checking [texts] more consistently."

Teens are shifting away from SNSs in response to parents

- T3: "I don't really do anything on Facebook besides just like, checking every once in awhile."

- P8, on signing up for Facebook: "if you have a Facebook account, you friend your parents."

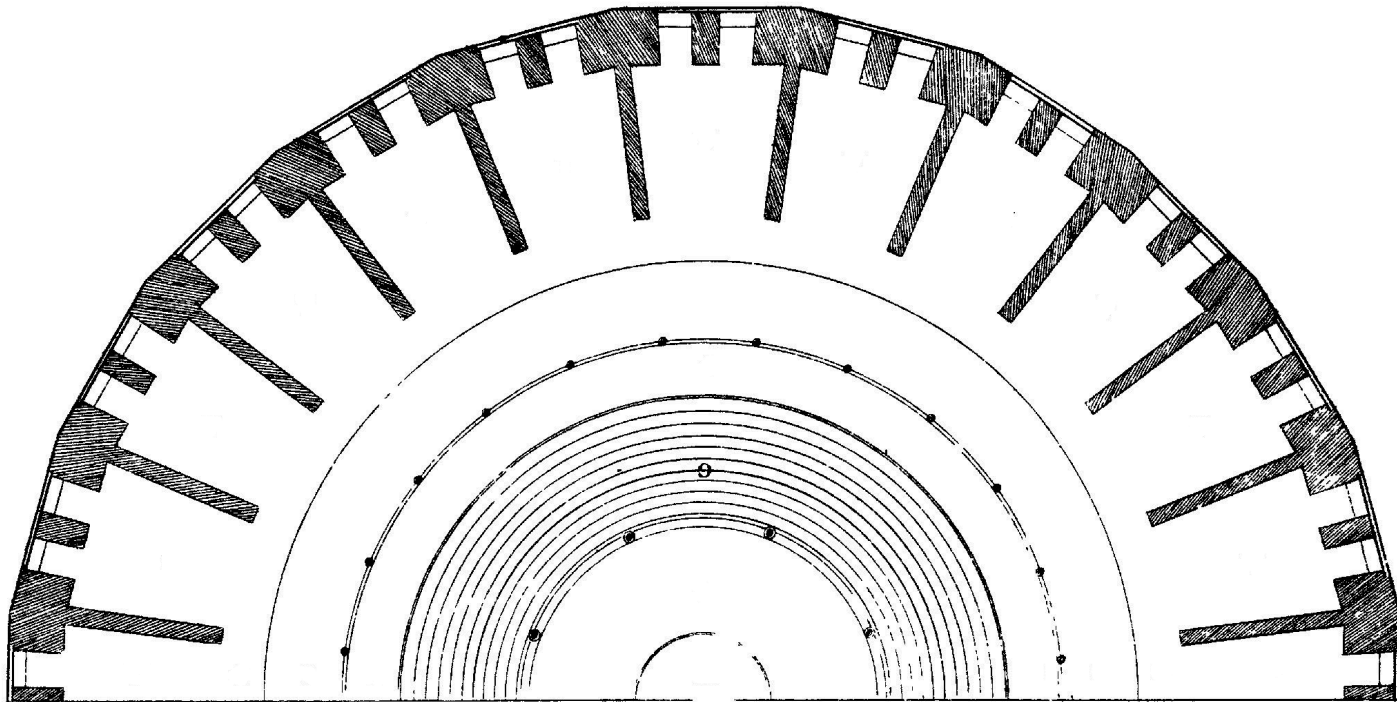# Parental restrictions on technology use were often non-technical

- P9: "[I] will take the phones away when I feel they're acting disrespectful."

- T6: "[My parents] don't usually let us have laptops in our rooms."

Technology allows for constant contact, so parents expect it

- P4: "I have to know where he's at. If I call him he has to answer."

- T5: "There comes a lot with a cellphone, in the sense that you can be reached at any time. Or be bothered."

Panopticon

- Parents use technology as a means of control
  - P6: "Thank God for technology...I do look at his grades and his missing assignments...It's kind of like that whole panopticon thing."

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- Technology fills time that parents' generations would have used for other activities

  - P9: "I worked from age 12 because life was boring... [Now] I feel like we can do so much with a phone: we can look up, we can research, we can read books, we can talk to people."

Parents view online as riskier than physical world

- P7: "your stuff is available or reachable by a much bigger context. So if you publish something, it's not just your circle of friends or family, it can really go to the world. So the impact is ten times, one hundred times bigger."
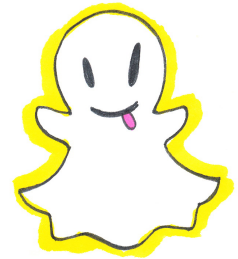
Teens view physical world as riskier than online

- T8: "[in the] physical world, the majority of the people I see are strangers, so I don't really worry about them thinking about what I'm doing. But online, like the people that follow me, I know them personally. So I think what I do will kind of affect them more in how they see me."

Teens' communication is misunderstood

- Teens felt parents did not understand their communication methods

  – T6: "They think that you're behind a screen, so you're cutting yourself off from the world. But I don't think that. I think you're talking to people."

- Parents don't feel teens' digital communication is private

  – P10 defines private communication: "a written note [or] getting alone with them [in a] room…the old fashioned ways."

Teens flock to technologies that parents are not aware of

- T10: "I don't even know if my mom knows what Snapchat or Instagram is."

- Parents are struggling with parenting decisions in unfamiliar contexts

  – P4: "It's overwhelming for me...It's so different from when I grew up...I don't know if I'm too strict or too loose."

Discussion

- Disconnect between parents' understanding of popular technologies and teens' use

- Parents adopt policies that are directly opposed to their goals

- Improve the discourse by shifting away from worst-case scenarios

Opportunities for new tools

- Few parents use parental controls, difficult

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Thank you!

- Questions?

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