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what makes teens obsessed with social media?

In a 2009 *New York Times* article, “To Deal with Obsession, Some Defriend Facebook,” psychologist Kimberly Young, director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, describes dozens of teenagers she’s met who tried to quit Facebook. “It’s just like any other addiction,” Young says. “It’s hard to wean yourself.”¹

I also came across several teens who, because of limited time, challenging social dynamics, or a need to disengage, decided to quit different social media sites.² Andrew, a white high school senior in Nashville, made a pact with a friend to leave Facebook, or to commit “Facebook suicide,” because he felt “addicted” to it. He found that he’d login at night, stay on the site until two o’clock in the morning, and then be frustrated with himself for not getting any sleep. He recounted telling himself, “This is stupid and it’s having control of my life and I don’t want that with anything.” Andrew and his friend deactivated their profiles within minutes of each other, using the same computer.

Andrew’s decision had consequences. He said that not having an account cramped his social life. He had more trouble finding out about social activities, and he found negotiating interpersonal relationships more challenging. He explained not being able to look up

or “stalk” new friends as one example. To justify his decision, he thought about how older generations managed to get by without Facebook and decided that he was both willing to make and capable of making the sacrifice. “I just kind of remind myself that it’s a social networking site,” he said, “which is kind of a smart and dumb idea at the same time to me.” Then he added, “Not really. It’s a smart idea, but . . . I should be more mature and get off Facebook.” Thinking of his relationship to Facebook as an addiction allowed him to question what had become normative. By dismissing Facebook as insignificant and his frequent participation as immature, Andrew felt that he gained control over his relationship to the site and all that the relationship signaled.

Although teens often use the word *addiction* in passing reference to their online activities, media coverage of teens’ use of social media amplifies the notion that the current generation of youth is uncontrollably hooked on these new technologies and unable to control their lives. Fear mongering stories often point to accounts of internet addiction boot camps in China and South Korea, where the compulsion allegedly rivals alcoholism, drug addiction, and gambling.³ In the United States, media coverage frequently portrays American youth in dark bedrooms with only the glow of the screen illuminating their faces, implying that there’s a generation of zombified social media addicts who are unable to tear themselves away from the streams of content from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This media-driven image of social media addiction looks nothing like the dynamic that Andrew was describing when he used the same term.

There is no doubt that some youth develop an unhealthy relationship with technology. For some, an obsession with gaming or social media can wreak havoc on their lives, affecting school performance and stunting emotional development. However, the language of addiction sensationalizes teens’ engagement with technology and suggests that mere participation leads to pathology. This language also suggests that technologies alone will determine social outcomes. The overarching media narrative is that teens lack the capacity to

maintain a healthy relationship with social media. It depicts passionate engagement with technology as an illness that society must address. It is easier for adults to blame technology for undesirable outcomes than to consider other social, cultural, and personal factors that may be at play.

When talking about teens' engagement with social media, many adults use the concept of addiction to suggest that teens lack control. Some even cite their own obsession with social media as evidence to support this perspective. Anxieties about teens' engagement with technology aren't new, but few ask why teens embrace each new social technology with such fervor. The pictures of teens' faces illuminated by computer screens mirror earlier images of televisions' entertaining glow luring in teenagers.⁴ Parents in previous generations fretted about the hours teens whiled away hanging out or chatting on the phone. Today's teens aren't spending hours on landlines, but they *are* still conversing—updating others on social network sites, posting pictures and videos, and sending text messages to friends. Both entertainment and sociality are key reasons why teens invest so much energy in their online activities.

Although teens complain about how time drags when they must do things that they do not find enjoyable, time seems to slip away when in mediated environments with their peers. This can be disorienting and a source of guilt. It is also the root of anxiety about social media addiction. Consider the following conversation that took place when I was interviewing a pair of white sophomores and best friends in Kansas at the height of MySpace's popularity:

Lilly: It's really awful with MySpace that I'll click on somebody who's sent a comment to me and I'll look at somebody else, 'cause they have a "Top 10 Friends" and I'll click on one of them, and then I'll end up looking at people's MySpaces in Tennessee and I started back with my neighbor.

Melanie: And it's five hours later and you're like, "Oh my God. Where have I been?"

Lilly: Yeah. You just get sucked in. I don't know who the genius was that thought it up because it really sucks you in.

Addiction is one way to understand the dynamic that Lilly and Melanie are describing, but another is what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow.” For Csikszentmihalyi, flow is the state of complete and utter absorption. It's the same sense that's colloquially described it as being “in the zone.” Time disappears, attention focuses, and people feel euphorically engaged. This is the ideal state for creativity and artistry; athletes, musicians, and actors try to harness this mindset before they perform. It is critical to leadership, writing, software development, and education. Yet people also experience this state when they gamble and play video games, two activities that society often associates with compulsion or addiction.⁶ Deep engagement does not seem to be a problem in and of itself, unless coupled with a practice that is socially unacceptable, physically damaging, or financially costly.

Unlike most compulsions, teens are not less social when they engage deeply with social media. On the contrary, their participation in social media is typically highly social. Listening to teens talk about social media addiction reveals an interest not in features of their computers, smartphones, or even particular social media sites but in each other.⁷ Teen “addiction” to social media is a new extension of typical human engagement. Their use of social media as their primary site of sociality is most often a byproduct of cultural dynamics that have nothing to do with technology, including parental restrictions and highly scheduled lives. Teens turn to, and are obsessed with, whichever environment allows them to connect to friends. Most teens aren't addicted to social media; if anything, they're addicted to each other.

The Addiction Narrative

Addiction is a relatively modern concept. Although references to people being “addicted to the bottle” date back centuries, it wasn't until the early twentieth century that both medical professionals and

the public consistently used the term *addiction* to refer to substance abuse.⁸ Before that, the term referred to a strong interest in or devotion to a particular pursuit such as gardening or reading.⁹ As concerns about addiction took hold in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, addiction became a medical concern. Medical practitioners consistently blamed the substance, even while having conflicted feelings about how responsible an individual was for the problem. As the *Journal of the American Medical Association* opined in 1906, “It matters little whether one speaks of the opium habit, the opium disease, or the opium addiction.”¹⁰

As the twentieth century progressed, the public joined medical practitioners in taking addiction seriously, and the term *addiction* gained traction in popular discourse. Alcoholics Anonymous coalesced from a community of compulsive drinkers in 1935 to a national organization, structured to help those struggling to get sober. In 1949, the World Health Organization convened a committee to consider “drugs liable to produce addiction.”¹¹

Addiction initially referred only to drug and alcohol abuse, but as it entered popular parlance, the term came to mean behavioral compulsions as well, including gambling, overeating, self-injury, and sex. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the American Psychiatric Association’s classification of mental disorders, differentiates chemical dependence as *substance disorders* and behavioral compulsions as *impulse-control disorders*. Over the past twenty years, excessive use of information and communication technologies has become part of the addiction narrative, often under the umbrella of an impulse-control disorder.

In 1995, psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg coined the term *internet addiction disorder*. He wrote a satirical essay about “people abandoning their family obligations to sit gazing into their computer monitor as they surfed the Internet.” Intending to parody society’s obsession with pathologizing everyday behaviors, he inadvertently advanced the idea. Goldberg responded critically when academics began discussing internet addiction as a legitimate disorder: “I don’t think

Internet addiction disorder exists any more than tennis addictive disorder, bingo addictive disorder, and TV addictive disorder exist. People can overdo anything. To call it a disorder is an error.¹²

Although Goldberg rejects the notion of internet addiction, other practitioners and researchers have called for labeling compulsive internet usage a disorder.¹³ Most of the clinical discussion around internet addiction focuses on whether “overuse” or “misuse” of the internet constitutes a disorder—as opposed to an obsession or compulsion. Experts also debate whether problematic engagement is simply a manifestation of depression, anxiety, or other disorders. Although some individuals’ unhealthy relationships with the internet seem to impede their ability to lead active lives, it is not clear that the internet is the source of the problem. But addiction is an easy and familiar trope.

Addiction is often represented in the media as a problem with youth culture. In 1938, the film *Reefer Madness* started a mass frenzy, depicting marijuana as a “killer weed” turning vulnerable young people into addicts. Rising heroin use in the late 1950s and 1960s heightened popular concern, amplified by the drug-related deaths of rock idols Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison at the start of the 1970s. Then, in 1971, an anonymously authored book brought the issue of addiction into direct contact with childhood, magnifying already widespread anxiety among parents. *Go Ask Alice*, purportedly the diary of a teenage girl, documents descent into addiction, ending with what the prologue indicates as an eventual overdose. Although some parents and educators want the book banned for describing drug use, others tout the book’s stark portrayal of substance abuse as proof of the dangers of drugs.¹⁴ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, popular media simultaneously valorized and demonized substance abuse, with young addicts taking center stage in movies like *Trainspotting*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, and *The Basketball Diaries*. This practice continues into the twenty-first century with TV shows like *Skins* and *Celebrity Rehab*.

Public discussions of addiction introduce conflicting sentiments. On one hand, American society takes medical and mental health

concerns more seriously. On the other, celebrities often celebrate—and are still celebrated for—their out-of-control substance use. When Amy Winehouse, a beloved blues singer with a bad girl reputation, died in 2011, the media broadly discussed her death in terms of addiction. News reports detailed her struggles with alcohol and drugs, often referencing the lyrics of her signature song “Rehab,” which focus on her refusal to go to a drug rehabilitation clinic. Meanwhile, upon hearing of her death, many young people used a Twitter hashtag to celebrate her membership in #27club, a collection of famous musicians, including Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain, whose drug and alcohol abuse contributed to early deaths at the age of twenty-seven.

The problem with popular discussions about addiction is that it doesn't matter whether people are chemically or psychologically dependent on a substance or behavior. Anyone who engages in a practice in ways that society sees as putting more socially acceptable aspects of their lives in jeopardy are seen as addicted. When teenagers choose to use the internet for social or entertainment purposes instead of doing homework, parents are suspicious. When socializing or play results in less sleep or poorer grades, parents blame the technology. Of course, it is easy to imagine that teens may prefer to socialize with friends or relax instead of doing homework, even if these activities are not societally sanctioned. Instead of acknowledging this, many adults project their priorities onto teens and pathologize their children's interactions with technology.

There are teens who do struggle significantly with impulse control, and we should not ignore the difficulties they face in managing their priorities. But instead of prompting a productive conversation, addiction rhetoric positions new technologies as devilish and teenagers as constitutionally incapable of having agency in response to the temptations that surround them.

Many adults believe that they have a sense of what's “good” for teens—school, homework, focus, attention, and early bedtime—and many teens are acutely aware of how much society values such

adult-oriented pursuits. But many adults are unaware of how social their everyday experiences are and how desperate teens are to have access to a social world like that which adults take for granted.

Although a century's worth of research on chemical addiction, compulsion, and flow has offered tremendous insights into human psychology, not everyone is powerless in relation to the world around them. Teenagers may seem like a uniquely vulnerable population, but nothing is gained from framing their social media interactions in terms of a disease. Teens, like adults, are deeply social. But unlike adults, teens often have little freedom to connect with others on their own terms, and they clamor for sociality in ways that may look foreign to adults.

Growing Up with Limited Freedom

Reflecting on her love for Facebook, Tara, a Vietnamese American sixteen-year-old from Michigan, explains that her use of the site “is kinda like an addiction.” She laughs as she says this, noting, “It’s like everyone says all these bad things about it. It does take up your time. It does, but you can’t help it.” Tara likes Facebook because it allows her to connect with her friends. Like many of her peers, Tara spends hours each week viewing her friends’ photos and updates, writing comments, and reading comments left by others. For Tara, participating on Facebook is a social necessity, a crucial component of her social life. This is not to say that it is the only part of that life, or even her preferred way of being with friends. When I tried to ask Tara why she spent so much time on Facebook instead of connecting offline, she cut me off, explaining that she would much prefer to hang out with her friends face to face but finds it impossible. At that point, her eighteen-year-old sister Lila jumped in to explain, “If you don’t have the option [of getting together in person], then you can just go online.”

Both girls made very clear that what mattered to them was hanging out with friends, and they were happy to use any means necessary to do so. In using the term *addiction* to describe their extensive use of Facebook, both Tara and Lila acknowledged that their parents didn’t

approve of the amount of time they spent on the site. But their parents also forbade them from socializing out of the home as often as they would like. They struggled to find a term to express the gap between their perspective towards Facebook and their parents' attitudes, particularly because they felt that it was easier to sneak in time on Facebook than to sneak out of the house. They nonchalantly referred to their extensive time online through the lens of addiction to highlight that they felt as though participation was central to their lives because their friends and peers really mattered to them. For them, Facebook was the only way to stay connected.

To many parents, the amount of time that teens spend on social media is evidence of addiction in a negative sense. These parents often believe that the technologies are in and of themselves the draw for their children. Such parents often go to great lengths to get their children off of social media, particularly when they're concerned about how often or in what ways their children are using these sites. In Boston, a father paid his fourteen-year-old daughter two hundred dollars to deactivate her Facebook account for five months.¹⁵ After a teen girl in North Carolina used Facebook to complain about her father, her father responded by posting an irate video on YouTube in which he reads a letter he wrote to his daughter and then fires a gun at his daughter's laptop.¹⁶ These are admittedly extreme responses—and there is a lot more to question in these cases than teens' supposed addiction to social media—but these parents' drastic measures reveal the frustration parents have with the technological artifacts themselves.

I often heard parents complain that their children preferred computers to “real” people. Meanwhile, the teens I met repeatedly indicated that they would much rather get together with friends in person. A gap in perspective exists because teens and parents have different ideas of what sociality should look like. Whereas parents often highlighted the classroom, after-school activities, and prearranged in-home visits as opportunities for teens to gather with friends, teens were more interested in informal gatherings with broader groups of

peers, free from adult surveillance. Many parents felt as though teens had plenty of social opportunities whereas the teens I met felt the opposite.

Today's teenagers have less freedom to wander than any previous generation.¹⁷ Many middle-class teenagers once grew up with the option to "do whatever you please, but be home by dark." While race, socioeconomic class, and urban and suburban localities shaped particular dynamics of childhood, walking or bicycling to school was ordinary, and gathering with friends in public or commercial places—parks, malls, diners, parking lots, and so on—was commonplace. Until fears about "latchkey kids" emerged in the 1980s, it was normal for children, tweens, and teenagers to be alone. It was also common for youth in their preteen and early teenage years to take care of younger siblings and to earn their own money through paper routes, babysitting, and odd jobs before they could find work in more formal settings. Sneaking out of the house at night was not sanctioned, but it wasn't rare either.

Childhood has changed. As a result of attending schools outside their neighborhoods, many teens know few youth their age who live in walking distance. Fear often dictates the edges of mobility. Even in suburban enclaves where crimes are rare, teens are warned of the riskiness of wandering outside. In countless communities I visited, families saw biking around the neighborhood as inherently unsafe. Many of the teens I met believed that danger lurked everywhere. They often echoed concerns presented by their parents. For example, Jordan, a fifteen-year-old living in a suburb in Austin, told me that she is not allowed to be outside without adult supervision. Although her father was born into a white middle-class family in the United States, her foreign mother's fear shaped her childhood. "My mom's from Mexico . . . and she thinks I'll get kidnapped," she said. Jordan felt as though getting kidnapped was unlikely, but she wasn't interested in tempting fate to find out. She too was scared of going to the neighborhood park because strangers lurked there, but she wished her mom would let her rollerblade on the street in front of the house.

In many communities, parenting norms focus on limiting children's access to public places, keeping an eye on their activities, and providing extensive structure. Many parents—especially those from wealthier and less crime-ridden communities—know that they have restricted their children's mobility more than their parents restricted theirs. They argue that these restrictions are necessary in an increasingly dangerous society, even though the data suggest that contemporary youth face fewer dangers than they did twenty years ago.¹⁸

Parents aren't the only ones limiting teens' mobility. Teens often self-restrict either to appease parents or because they believe that there are significant risks. Teens regularly echoed parental fears, also arguing that today's world is much more unsafe than it previously was. Natalie, a white fifteen-year-old in Seattle, told me that she understands why her parents do not allow her to walk anywhere, but she wishes that the world were not so dangerous. She genuinely believes that the risks that her peers face are unprecedented.

The public and commercial spaces that I grew up with are now often seen as off-limits by both parents and teens.¹⁹ Policymakers have implemented countless curfew and loitering laws to address gangs, delinquency, and teen violence, thereby limiting teens' access to public places.²⁰ Even when parents don't object and there are no legal restrictions involved, many food, shopping, and entertainment venues limit teens explicitly or implicitly, banning all teens or groups of teens. Some venues have even installed a new sound technology to ward off teens through a high-pitched sound that only children and adolescents can hear.²¹ If teens have the freedom and a place to go, they encounter new struggles when they try to get there. Limited access to cars was a regular refrain among teens I interviewed. In towns where public transit is an option, independent travel is often forbidden by parents. Even in cities, many teens never ride public transit alone except to take a school bus to and from school.

A study of how children get to school reveals the stark changes in mobility that have taken place over four decades. In 1969, 48 percent of children in grades kindergarten through eighth grade walked or

biked to school compared to 12 percent who were driven by a family member. By 2009, those numbers had reversed; 13 percent walked or bicycled while 45 percent were driven.²² In a safety-obsessed society, parents continue to drop off and pick up students well into high school. Although studies that focus on the decline of biking and walking usually address the implications for childhood obesity, this shift also has significant social implications. For many youth, walking or biking to school historically provided unstructured time with friends and peers. Even when teens commuted alone, they often arrived early enough to hang out near their lockers before school or stayed late enough to get some time with friends before heading home. This is no longer the case in many of the schools I observed.

On top of fear, restrictions, and limited mobility, the issue of time often arises as a key factor in limiting teens' opportunities to socialize. Many teens have limited free time, due to afterschool activities, jobs, religious services, and family expectations. Nicholas, a white sixteen-year-old from Kansas, told me that he lacked free time because sports took up time after school and on weekends. On the rare occasions when he had downtime, his options for socializing were limited. His parents expected him to attend sports events if he was participating in the sport, but his parents would not take him to other school sports events just to hang out. If he had free time outside of his activities, they told him to focus on schoolwork, community service, or other approved activities. Hanging out with friends was viewed as a waste of time. His parents felt that he had plenty of opportunities to socialize during the group activities he was involved in. Nicholas disagreed.

Many parents believe that keeping their children busy can keep them out of trouble. After I blogged about the restrictions on teenagers' mobility, I received an email from Enrique, a parent in Austin. In it, he explained:

Bottom line is that we live in a society of fear; it is unfortunate but true. As a parent, I will admit that I protect my daughter

immensely, and I don't let my daughter go out to areas I can't see her. Much different when I was a kid. Am I being over protective? Maybe. But it is the way it is. Is it depressing? No it is not as we keep her busy very busy w/o making it depressing :-).

Rather than enacting physical restrictions, Enrique focused on structuring his daughter's time to limit the likelihood that she would get into trouble, without making her feel overly constrained.

The decision to introduce programmed activities and limit unstructured time is not unwarranted; research has shown a correlation between boredom and deviance.²³ In response to reports of such studies, many parents have gone into overdrive so that their children are never bored. As a result, many teens from middle- and upper-class backgrounds spend most of their days and nights in highly structured activities—sports, clubs, music lessons, and so on. This leaves little downtime for teens to reflect, play, socialize, or relax.

My interview with Myra, a middle-class white fifteen-year-old from Iowa, turned funny and sad when “lack of time” became a verbal tick in response to every question I asked her about connecting with friends. From learning Czech to track, from orchestra to work in a nursery, she told me that her mother organized “98%” of her daily routine. Myra did not like all of these activities, but her mother thought they were important. She was resigned to them. Lack of freedom and control over her schedule was a sore topic for Myra. At one point, she noted with an exasperated tone that weekends were no freer than weekdays: “Usually my mom will have things scheduled for me to do. So I really don't have much choice in what I'm doing Friday nights. . . . I haven't had a free weekend in so long. I cannot even remember the last time I got to choose what I wanted to do over the weekend.” Myra noted that her mother meant well, but she was exhausted and felt socially disconnected because she did not have time to connect with friends outside of classes. The activities she participated in were quite formal, leaving little room for casual interactions as she raced from one pursuit to the next. In between, Myra

would jump on the computer in the hopes of chatting with a friend. Friendship and sociality—always mediated but still important—filled the interstices of her life.

From wealthy suburbs to small towns, teenagers reported that parental fear, lack of transportation options, and heavily structured lives restricted their ability to meet and hang out with their friends face to face. Even in urban environments, where public transportation presumably affords more freedom, teens talked about how their parents often forbade them from riding subways and buses out of fear. At home, teens grappled with lurking parents. The formal activities teens described were often so highly structured that they allowed little room for casual sociality. And even when parents gave teens some freedom, they found that their friends' mobility was stifled by their parents. While parental restrictions and pressures are often well intended, they obliterate unstructured time and unintentionally position teen sociality as abnormal. This prompts teens to desperately—and, in some cases, sneakily—seek it out. As a result, many teens turn to what they see as the least common denominator: asynchronous social media, texting, and other mediated interactions.

Reclaiming Sociality

Amy, a biracial sixteen-year-old from Seattle, used MySpace to socialize because her mobility was curtailed. Every day, after school she immediately goes home, where she feeds her younger sister, helps her with her homework, and does household chores. Occasionally, her parents allow her to go out on weekends, but when I asked her how often, her friend James responded by saying, “Slim to none.” Amy just shrugged in agreement. I asked her what she needed to do for her parents to allow her to go out. She spoke of the need to make sure the house was clean, while James rolled his eyes and said, “Your mom being in a good mood.” I asked her how she got permission to come to the interview with me, and she told me that her mom saw it as equivalent to a job because I was offering money for teens' time. Amy told me that she was excited for the opportunity to hang out

with her friends at the interview. After we finished, I got the sense that they were intending to tell her parents that the interview ran long just to buy more time.

Amy made it very clear that she didn't prefer hanging out with friends online but felt that technology provided a rare opportunity to connect even when she couldn't leave the house. When I asked her what she'd rather do, she explained, "Just go anywhere. I don't care where, just not home. Somewhere with my friends, just out hanging out." Resigned that this was not feasible, she spent as much time online as possible. As she explained, "My mom doesn't let me out of the house very often, so that's pretty much all I do, is I sit on MySpace and talk to people and text and talk on the phone, 'cause my mom's always got some crazy reason to keep me in the house."

Looking just at her participation on MySpace, an outsider might argue that Amy appears to be addicted to social media. Talking with her, it's clear that she craves time with friends and uses any excuse to go online to do so. She is responding to the structural restrictions that make it difficult for her to achieve an age-old teen goal: get together with friends and hang out. Social media has become a place where teens can hold court. Their desire to connect, gossip, and hang out online makes sense in response to the highly organized and restricted lives that many teens lead.

Social media introduces new opportunities for housebound teens to socialize and people-watch, but it also provides an opportunity to relax. Serious and diligent students like friends Sasha and Bianca, white sixteen-year-olds from Michigan, often emphasized the need for social downtime. Sasha described her daily schedule this way: "I'll study for a couple of hours and then I'll talk to my friends for a couple of hours or whatever, and that just helps refocus my mind and helps me absorb the information more than just constantly studying." Then Bianca chimed in. "My brain has to stop taking in all the information." She needed time to just "relax for a while." Both of these teens were diligent students, and they saw socializing as an important complement to their hard work, a mechanism of rejuvenation.

When I asked what they gained from these online interactions, Bianca defended socializing using adult-oriented language. She highlighted the opportunity to learn “social skills” and clarified by stating, “You learn how to deal with different situations and different people, and just to work with people that you don’t like so much. So it just helps you.” This language is not how most teens explain their practice, but it is a spot-on assessment. When teens interact with others, they engage in tremendous informal learning, developing a sense of who they are in relation to others while building a holistic understanding of the social world. Teens may clamor to get access to social media simply to hang out, but there they gain access to a rich learning environment.

Being “addicted” to information and people is part of the human condition: it arises from a healthy desire to be aware of surroundings and to connect to society. The more opportunities there are to access information and connect to people, the more people embrace those situations. Whereas the colloquial term *news junkie* refers to people who rabidly consume journalistic coverage, I’ve never met a parent who worried that their child read the newspaper too often. Parents sometimes tease their children for being “bookworms,” but they don’t fret about their mental health. But when teens spend hours surfing the web, jumping from website to website, this often prompts concern. Parents lament their own busy schedules and lack of free time but dismiss similar sentiments from their children.

Unfortunately, when teens turn to social media for sociality and information, adults often see something wrong, and they blame the technology for the outcomes. For example, in *The Shallows*, technology critic Nicholas Carr denounces the internet as insidious. He argues that the internet radically reworks our brains, destroying our ability to focus by distracting us with irrelevant information. There is little doubt that teens’ brains are being rewired through their mediated interactions. As cognitive scientist Steven Pinker points out, stimuli have *always* reworked, and are continuously reworking, our brains. Challenging Carr, Pinker argues that, “far from making us stupid, these technologies are the only things that will keep us

smart.”²⁴ Popular science writer Steven Johnson makes a similar point in *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, pointing out that engaging with the increasingly sophisticated world of media sharpens our brains. The limitation of Carr’s argument stems from his assumption that technology alone does cultural work and that resultant outcomes lead to change that is inevitably bad. This logic, rooted in technological determinism, fails to recognize the sociocultural context in which technology is situated.

I have little doubt that socializing online is rewiring teens’ brains. Through their engagement with social media, teens are learning to understand a deeply networked and intertwined world. Yet unlike Carr, I do not think that the sky is falling. My views are closer to those of scholar Cathy Davidson, who, in *Now You See It*, argues that children embrace new technologies to learn. This results in changes to learning that often confound adults who relish the environments with which they are familiar and in which they had opportunities to learn. When teens engage with networked media, they’re trying to take control of their lives and their relationship to society. In doing so, they begin to understand how people relate to one another and how information flows between people. They learn about the social world, and as Bianca points out, they develop social skills.

What’s at stake is not whether teens’ brains are changing—they are always changing—but what growing up with mediated sociality means for teens and for society generally. Teenagers may not yet be experts on navigating a world drowning in information and flush with opportunities for social interaction, but there is no reason to believe that they won’t develop those skills as they continue to engage with social media. There’s also no reason to think that digital celibacy will help them be healthier, happier, and more capable adults.

Coming of Age Without Agency

Around the turn of the twentieth century, at the same time that the conception of addiction was emerging, psychologist G. Stanley Hall embarked on a mission to define adolescence in order to give

youth space to come of age without having to take on the full responsibilities of adulthood.²⁵ He used data about behavioral differences to make an argument about maturation and cognition. Hall argued that children were savages incapable of reasoning and that adolescence marked a developmental stage in which young people began to recognize morality. He believed that it was important to protect youth during this stage and worked with moral reformers to put limitations on child labor, to mandate compulsory education, and to introduce a notion of juvenile justice. His work set in motion a shift that resulted in American society understanding adolescents simultaneously as a vulnerable population that needed protection and as a potentially delinquent population that had not yet matured.

Hall was part of the significant social transformation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries known as the Progressive Era.²⁶ This period in American history was a source of social activism and political reform affecting a wide array of issues. Alongside emerging concerns about addiction was a rise in interest about the well-being of children that led to the curtailment of child labor and the creation of compulsory high school education.²⁷ Hall played a central role in helping define what childhood and adolescence should look like, using protectionist rhetoric to insulate children as vulnerable populations that resembled the language being used by political reformers seeking to outlaw alcohol. Although the attitudes and beliefs professed by these moral reformers were not widespread during the Progressive Era, they are now nearly universal in contemporary discourse about childhood.

A century later, the frame of vulnerable children that Hall and his cohort popularized is still pervasive, and child protection has gone far beyond Hall's initial prescriptions. Protecting children from forced labor, providing opportunities for education, and treating youth differently in criminal justice are all beneficial mainstays from Hall's endeavors, but contemporary youth also face state-imposed curfews, experience limitations on where they can gather, and must get parental approval before they engage in a host of activities. By

imagining teens as balls of uncontrollable hormones, society has systematically taken agency away from youth over the past century.²⁸ This hampers their maturation, while the resultant restrictions prompt youth to either submit to or resist adult authority.

Although child protective services is another productive output of this movement, the current state of foster care and mental health infrastructure is so fractured that it often results in children being doubly oppressed. Most adults are well meaning and supportive, but the same system that empowers parents also forces some youth to face abuse. Meanwhile, many teenagers see education no longer as an opportunity but as a requirement; rather than having the space to mature, teens must inhabit a highly structured environment that is supposedly for their own good. For many teens, learning is not relished but despised, even as they engage in accidental learning whenever they interact with others.

As the outcome of Hall's movement unfolded over the twentieth century, the period between childhood and adulthood widened, and twenty-first-century American youth spend an extended period in a liminal stage with restricted opportunities and rights. In buying into adolescence, what we've created is a pressure cooker. Teens are desperate to achieve the full rights of adulthood, even if they don't understand the responsibilities that this may entail. They are stuck in a system in which adults restrict, protect, and pressure them to achieve adult-defined measures of success. It's a testament to the strength of teens that so many have developed strong coping mechanisms to manage the awkwardness of this liminal stage. Social media—far from being the seductive Trojan horse—is a release valve, allowing youth to reclaim meaningful sociality as a tool for managing the pressures and limitations around them.

As they make their way toward adulthood, teens need to learn how to engage in crucial aspects of maturation: self-presentation, managing social relationships, and developing an understanding of the world around them. The structured and restrictive conditions that comprise the lives of many teens provides little room for them to

explore these issues, but social media gives them a platform and a space where they can make up for what's lost.

Grappling with Restrictions

As teens seek out new spaces where they have agency, adults invent new blockades to restrict youth power. The rhetoric of addiction is one example, a cultural device used to undermine teens' efforts to reclaim a space. Restrictive adults act on their anxieties as well as their desire to protect youth, but in doing so, they perpetuate myths that produce the fears that prompt adults to place restrictions on teens in the first place. But this cycle doesn't just undermine teens' freedoms; it also pulls at the fabric of society more generally.

After reading a news article about my work, Mike, a father in Illinois, emailed me to explain that he is strict with his children because of what he perceives to be a decline in societal values.

The reason my children do not hang out as I used to as a teen is not due to predators necessarily, but due to other teens who have been raised on MTV, lack of parental guidance, and are treated as adults by their parents. . . . I believe MySpace further sends the entire dynamic down the rabbit hole. If parents took more responsibility for instilling values, morals and standards in their children (versus relying on the educational system, television, and the media), I feel that we could reclaim some of this lost teen freedom for our children.

Mike's email highlights a wide array of intertwined issues. He blames technology, institutions, and individuals. Rather than focusing on how he can help his children navigate this ecosystem, he blames other families and implies that the best solution for his children is social isolation.

The concern that we've become disconnected as a society has become a common trope over the past two decades, and both scholars and the media have blamed everything from changes in food acquisition to neighborly isolation.²⁹ Whatever the cause, fear and

distrust of others is palpable and pervasive. Driving around the United States, I was shocked by the skepticism many parents held for other parents. For example, Anindita—a seventeen-year-old of Indian and Pakistani descent living in Los Angeles—told me that she wasn't allowed to spend the night at friends' places because her dad was concerned that other fathers or brothers might get drunk and take advantage of her. Although I initially thought that her experience was unique, I was surprised to find other parents who forbade their children from participating in sleepovers, too.

When parents distrust others or the values of families around them, they often respond by trying to isolate their children. In a different community in Los Angeles, I met a fifteen-year-old boy named Mic whose Egyptian parents didn't want him to socialize with American teens, whom they perceived as upholding unhealthy values learned from American parents. As a result, he was forbidden from making friends at school, talking on the phone, and using social media; he was allowed to socialize only with cousins and trusted friends of the family when his family went to the mosque. To manage this, his father dropped him off at school and made him wait in the car until the bell rang; he picked him up again for lunch and then immediately after school. These restrictions weighed on Mic, and he was regularly seeking out opportunities to connect with others in interstitial times at school, often trying to sneak access to the internet between classes to have some form of social outlet.

Mic's father sent him to school because he believed that this was the only way for Mic to get an education. Unfortunately, Mic's father failed to recognize that his restrictions hindered his son's ability to succeed owing to the heavy emphasis that American educational systems place on collaboration, both in and out of the classroom. As the school began demanding extracurricular coordination through information technologies, Mic floundered, which only resulted in more restrictions at home. Mic's father failed to realize that American educational systems take sociality for granted. Rather than seeing socializing as a distraction from learning, schools are increasingly

integrating learning with social experiences to prepare youth for collaborative, social work environments.

Although many parents have historically worked to minimize their children's exposure to diverse cultural mores, teens' use of social media often subverts the goals sought by moving to gated communities or limiting exposure to broadcast media. By exploring broad networks of people and diverse types of content, teens can easily get access to values and ideas that differ from what their parents try to instill. This is alluring to curious teens and terrifying to protective parents. As with earlier media genres that parents distrusted, many parents have chosen to demonize technologies that allow youth to escape their control. The rhetoric of addiction positions children as vulnerable to the seductiveness of technology, which in turn provides a concrete justification for restricting access and isolating children.

Most youth aren't turning to social media because they can't resist the lure of technology. They're responding to a social world in which adults watch and curtail their practices and activities, justifying their protectionism as being necessary for safety. Social media has become an outlet for many youth, an opportunity to reclaim some sense of agency and have some semblance of social power. It has provided a window into society and an outlet for hanging out that these teens didn't even know they had lost. But teen sociality is fraught and many adults are uncomfortable with teens having access to unstructured time and unmanaged relationships.

The activities at the core of teens' engagement with social media look quite similar to those that took place in shared settings in previous generations—at sock hops, discos, and football game stands. Teens hang out, gossip, flirt, people watch, joke around, and jockey for status. These dynamics are at the heart of teen life, and because they play out in a mediated world, teens relish any opportunity to log in and engage with their peers and the teen-oriented social world that unfolds through networked publics. But this is not comforting to those adults who want their children to spend less time socializing with peers and more time engaging in adult-approved activities.

Teens' engagement with social media—and the hanging out it often entails—can take up a great deal of time. To many adults, these activities can look obsessive and worthless. Media narratives often propagate the notion that engagement with social media is destructive, even as educational environments increasingly assume that teens are networked. Many adults put pressure on teens to devote more time toward adult-prioritized practices and less time socializing, failing to recognize the important types of learning that take place when teens do connect. When teens orient themselves away from adults and toward their peers, parents often grow anxious and worried about their children's future. The answer to the disconnect between parent goals and teen desires is not rhetoric that pathologizes teen practices, nor is it panicked restrictions on teen sociality. Rather, adults must recognize what teens are trying to achieve and work with them to find balance and to help them think about what they are encountering.

23. For a discussion of different privacy practices to manage privacy and publicness, see Lampinen, “Practices of Balancing Privacy and Publicness in Social Network Services.”

24. Privacy is, in many ways, a socioeconomic issue. When the state provides social services, intensive scrutiny and surveillance are often normative. Teens who grow up in households in which parents receive welfare or in which child services are involved are accustomed to invasions of privacy. For a discussion of the socioeconomic issues of privacy, see Gilman, “Class Differential in Privacy Law.” Likewise, data suggests that black youth take many more measures to obscure their identity and provide fake online information. See Madden et al., “Teens, Social Media, and Privacy.”

25. To read more about how different intensive parenting styles intersect with technology, see Nelson, *Parenting Out of Control*; and Clark, *Parent App*.

26. Bernstein and Triger, “Over-Parenting.”

27. See Haddon, “Phone in the Home.”

28. Heather Armstrong quoted in Rosenberg, *Say Everything*, 265.

29. For a full deconstruction of the “nothing to hide” argument, see Solove, “I’ve Got Nothing to Hide.”

30. Political dissidents, in particular, have long used strategies to hide in public. This is exemplified in contemporary China, where government censors restrict the kinds of speech people can use and the topics they can discuss. Because of the nature of the Chinese language, citizens often use words that sound similar to their intended word as a way of routing around the censors. For example, the Chinese word for “river crab” sounds a lot like the word for “harmony” or “harmonize,” which refers to the government’s policy of getting activists to conform. Images are often used instead of text to make it harder for censors to understand what is happening algorithmically. These are just two of the tactics Chinese activists use to counter attempts to control them. An Xiao Mina, an American artist of Chinese descent, has blogged about these practices in “A Curated History of the Grass Mud Horse Song” and “Social Media Street Art.”

Chapter 3. Addiction

1. Hafner, “To Deal with Obsession, Some Defriend Facebook.”

2. In 2013, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that two-thirds of American adults have taken a break from Facebook—or a “Facebook vacation”—because they didn’t have time, were bored with the site, found the content unappealing, or grew tired of the gossip and drama. Notably, 8 percent of adults surveyed suggested that they were previously spending too much time on the site and needed to take a break. See Rainie, Smith, and Duggan, “Coming and Going on Facebook.” Although it’s not clear how common this is among teenagers, many of the teens that I met have similar concerns. Similarly, in her work on media refusal, Laura Portwood-Stacer found that many people

intentionally opt-out of social media. Often, those who decide to quit employ addiction as their frame for describing their decision. See Portwood-Stacer, “Media Refusal and Conspicuous Non-Consumption.”

3. C. Stewart, “Obsessed with the Internet”; Fackler, “In Korea, a Boot Camp Cure for Web Obsession.”

4. Some psychologists and communication scholars have addressed the issue of TV addiction through the lens of “media effects.” This subdiscipline is fraught. For a review on the history of moral panics related to media effects research, see Livingstone, “On the Continuing Problems of Media Effects Research.”

5. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.

6. For an account of how gambling machines are designed to enhance flow, see Schüll, *Addiction by Design*. For a discussion of how video games leverage the state of flow, see Cowley, Charles, Black, and Hickey, “Toward an Understanding of Flow in Video Games.” For a discussion of the connection between flow and addiction, see Chou and Ting, “Role of Flow Experience in Cyber-Game Addiction.”

7. Early in my fieldwork, I asked teenagers whether they ever used a computer that wasn’t connected to the internet. One girl furrowed her brow and asked me what would be the point of such a device. A teen boy explained that his home computer collected dust when his mother forgot to pay the internet bill. The public rhetoric suggests that the problem is the technological artifact, but many teens make it very clear that they have no particular interest in the physical device. They’re only interested in the opportunities to be social.

8. For an early reference to “addicted to the bottle,” see Pittis, *Dr. Radcliffe’s Life and Letters*, 31.

9. Zieger, “Terms to Describe Addiction in the Nineteenth Century.”

10. Quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “addiction.”

11. World Health Organization, Expert Committee on Drugs Liable to Produce Addiction, *Report on the Second Session, Geneva, 9–14 January 1950*. http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_21.pdf.

12. Federwisch, “Internet Addiction?” Like Goldman, the American Medical Association (AMA) is often hesitant to label new compulsions as addictions. In 2007, the AMA declined to label “video game addiction” as a disorder even though many rallied for it to be declared one. Psych Central News Editor, “Video Games No Addiction for Now.”

13. For example, Jerald J. Block’s editorial for the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, titled “Issues for DSM-V: Internet Addiction,” cites a variety of studies, primarily in South Korea.

14. The American Library Association maintains a list of books most frequently challenged or banned by schools. In the 1990s, *Go Ask Alice* was listed as number 25 on the list of top 100 books to be banned. American Library Association, “100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 1990–1999.”

15. Gross, "Dad Pays Daughter \$200 to Quit Facebook."
16. Llorens, "Tommy Jordan, Dad Who Shot Daughter's Laptop, Says He'd Do It Again"; Jordan, "Facebook Parenting."
17. For an analysis of how physical mobility has changed over multiple generations, see Bird, *Natural Thinking*. For a deeper discussion on the decline of children's access to public spaces and nature, see Valentine, *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood*; and Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*.
18. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, violent crime against youth declined 77 percent from 1994 to 2010. <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/press/vcay9410pr.cfm>.
19. For a scholarly discussion of how children have lost access to public spaces, see Valentine, *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood*. For a more popular discussion, see Skenazy, *Free-Range Kids*.
20. Ruefle and Reynolds, "Curfew and Delinquency in Major American Cities."
21. Lyall, "What's the Buzz?"
22. National Center for Safe Routes to School, "How Children Get to School."
23. Mahoney, Larson, and Eccles, *Organized Activities as Contexts of Development*.
24. Pinker, "Mind over Mass Media."
25. Hall, *Adolescence*.
26. For an overview on the Progressive Era, see Pestritto and Atto, *American Progressivism*.
27. For an account of how teenagers were shaped by the various shifts in American policies resulting from Hall's work and adjacent movements, see Hine, *Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*.
28. For an exploration of how the boundaries of various life stages are socially and normatively constructed, see Crawford, *Adult Themes*.
29. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) is a popular scholarly articulation of the fear that American society has become disconnected. In response, Eric Klinenberg's *Going Solo* (2012) highlights how shifts in household configuration and the rise in people choosing to live alone isn't simply a rejection of sociality, but a byproduct of increasingly social work spaces.

Chapter 4. Danger

1. For examples of media coverage of online predators, see Williams, "MySpace, Facebook Attract Online Predators"; and Poulsen, "MySpace Predator Caught by Code."
2. In the 1990s, before internet usage was mainstream among youth, there was considerable news coverage about the dangers of online sexual predators. See, e.g., Elmer-DeWitt, "Online Erotica."