This paper is forthcoming in Hargittai, E. and Sandvig, C. (Forthcoming). Digital Research Confidential: The Secrets of Studying Behavior Online. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Making Sense of Teen Life: Strategies for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Networked Era[1]

by danah boyd

Keke walked into the room where I was waiting and sat down with a thump, crossing her arms, and keeping a physical and psychological distance. I swallowed, knowing that this interview was going to take serious emotional effort on my part. I had spent the last three weeks at her school, observing the social dynamics unfolding in various classes, in the courtyard, and at lunch. I had gone with some of her classmates to the nearby McDonald's and had hung out with some of them at one of the local malls. I had spent hours browsing the MySpace pages of her classmates, trying to get a sense of the norms and gossip at her school. I had also eaten lunch on multiple occasions in the faculty room, listening to the teachers share their headaches and heartaches. Keke's school often overwhelmed me and I was not always emotionally prepared for what I saw and heard nor did I always know what to say or do. Only a few days before, I had walked in on two of Keke's classmates having sex in the faculty lounge during class; they had been more annoyed with me for interrupting them than ashamed or embarrassed. I was the one who was ashamed and embarrassed. And, as an ethnographer trained to believe that I should not let my own values shape my feelings, I was ashamed and embarrassed by my shame and embarrassment.

I took a deep breath and I started with some small talk, asking Keke why she had agreed to be interviewed for this project. "I need the money," she stated, emotionless. Like many other teens from low-income families that I have interviewed, Keke's only reason for participating was the financial incentive; she was not interested in the research topic and did not see why I – as an adult – cared about what teens were doing with technology. I quickly realized that she was going to answer any question I asked with as few words as possible. So I decided that I needed a different strategy and I asked her to walk me through the previous day, describing what she did from the moment that she woke up through the point at which she went to sleep. As she set about describing her day, I noticed that she was talking about everyone else but herself; she was not personalizing what she did during the day. Whenever she made an "I" statement, it was stated as a neutral fact, but whenever she talked about others, she added adjectives and emotion. As I returned to my core research questions, I shifted from asking her about why she chose to do different things and, instead, asked her to describe what her friends did.

[1] This chapter benefited immensely from Mary Gray and Jordan Kraemer's brilliant suggestions. I am also deeply grateful to Christian Sandvig and Eszter Hargittai for their critical feedback. Finally, I would like to thank Mimi Ito, Jenna Burrell, Cori Hayden, Barrie Thorne, and Peter Lyman for their methodological guidance.

Slowly, Keke started opening up, but she stayed guarded. She was able to talk about others with expressivity, but she kept her own motivations and feelings locked tight. She became animated when she started talking about the drama around her, revealing her love of shopping and boys. I started to sense that something was weighing on her that went beyond the conversation at hand, but I could not put my finger on it. Keke – a 16-year-old black girl living in Los Angeles – dressed well, using clothing to flatter her curves. In listening to her street-slanged speech, I began to see that she was not particularly shy or unemotional by default and that she did not dismiss adults outright. This left me puzzled, unsure of why she seemed distant to me. I realized that I came from a very different cultural backdrop – and that she had every reason to question my sincerity – but that did not seem to be insurmountable in this particular conversation. So I asked about friends and significant others, getting her to detail her social life, gossip between her friends, and the various dramas that were playing out at school. I knew that she was carefully revealing some things while choosing not to reveal others, but I also got the sense that I was not asking the right questions.

I knew that she was getting more comfortable with me when she switched from talking about other people's drug use to telling me a story of getting high herself so I continued down this line of inquiry, making sure to restrain from signaling any judgment. Her comments about drugs prompted me to ask about parties. Much to my surprise, the stone-cold look from earlier returned to her face. Then she said, "I would rather read a book than go to a party" and laughed. And then she got serious again. "We can't have a party without somebody being a Blood or somebody being a Crip and then they get into it and then there's shooting. Then we can't go to my friend's house because it's on the wrong side of [the street]. You know what I'm saying? It's the Mexican side." As Keke started raging against the street gangs in her community, emotions poured out of her. I sat there, making sure that she knew I was listening to everything she had to say, maintaining eye contact, and trying to convey compassion while silently being devastated by all that she told me. As I was using body language to be supportive, she began to describe the racial dimensions of her world, detailing gang fights and describing where she physically could and could not go in her community. I asked how she felt about it and the biggest weight she was carrying became visible: "'Cause we black, we automatically gang bangers. Mexican, you automatically gang bangers. I just hate that stereotype – they killed my brother 'cause they thought he was a gang banger. My brother's not. So it was just another life wasted because [of] what you thought, and I just hate that." As she continued describing the violence and racism in her community, she wove in details about how her brother had accidentally crossed the wrong lines and was shot in front of her. Anger and sadness poured out of her and I sat there, taking it all in, feeling her pain and frustration and confusion and sadness.

When she was done, she looked at me with open eyes and thanked me for listening. I thanked her for sharing her story. As we closed the interview, I told her that there were other people that she could talk to and that I could get her a list of names if she wanted. She dismissed my offer and told me that talking to adults at school always got people into trouble and that it just was not worth it. Besides, she noted, she had her momma. Still,

she smiled at me in a way that conveyed that my listening to her made her feel better. As she walked away, I ducked into the faculty bathroom and cried.

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My research agenda focuses on how technology fits into the everyday lives of teenagers. My goal is to understand and convey the cultural logic that underpins why teens do what they do. I want to uncover and describe how teens see the world and how this shapes their approach to and engagement with technology. I want to see technology from their perspective in order to get at what they take for granted. In order to do this, I incorporate many different ethnographic methods into my research, including online and offline participant-observation, semi-structured ethnographic interviews, content analysis, and a practice of what anthropologist James Clifford referred to as "deep hanging out," where scholars bring theory and reflexivity to bear during any act of interpretation (see: Geertz, 1998).

Although I use research practices and theoretical frameworks well established in anthropology and sociology, my line of inquiry primarily concerns how technology reconfigures everyday practices. Like with many technology-studies scholars, socio-technical issues drive many of my research questions. Yet, this does not mean that I only talk with teens about technology. In describing the emotional tenor of my two-hour interview with Keke above, I did not once mention technology, even though technology was the anchor for our conversation. In most interviews, technology seeps in without me even having to look for it. With Keke, we talked about girls using AOL's instant messenger because they are "boy crazy," how MySpace reveals school cliques that are visible in the schoolyard, and how cell phones are the new Nikes, both in terms of their potential as a status marker and an object to be stolen. Keke described YouTube "hood fight" videos and talked about how she thought teens were "stupid" to put them up online for the police to see. And we talked about how she was really into Harry Potter fan fiction but did not let anyone around her know about it because it was not "cool." All of these technology-centric elements are important, but they make much more sense when understood in context. Wanting to understand the context in which technology operates is what prompted me to start interviewing teenagers in the first place, over six years ago.

I do use social media in my research. I spend countless hours surfing teens' social network site profiles, reading their tweets, and otherwise observing their online traces. I use many online ethnographic techniques developed by previous Internet studies scholars (see: Hine, 1998; Markham & Baym, 2008; Miller & Slater, 2000). Yet, I also purposefully go out and meet with teens face-to-face. Social media certainly make it much easier to peek into people's lives, but it is also quite easy to misinterpret online traces. This became acutely real to me when I received a phone call from an Ivy League college admissions officer in 2005. The college was interested in the application of a young black man from the South Central neighborhood in Los Angeles – a notoriously gang-ridden community. The teen had written a college essay about leaving gangs behind, but the college had found his MySpace profile, which was filled with gang insignia. The admissions officer asked me a simple question that has stuck with me ever

since: "Why would he lie to us in his college essay when we can tell the truth online?" Having spent a lot of time in that part of Los Angeles and analyzing online profiles of teens living there, I offered an alternative explanation. Without knowing the specific boy involved, I surmised that he was probably focused on fitting in, staying safe, or more directly, surviving, in his home environment. Most likely, he felt as though he needed to perform gang affiliation online – especially if he was not affiliated – in order to make certain that he was not physically vulnerable. Although I never got to interview that young man – nor learn if he was admitted to the college – I can not help but wonder how many people wrongly think that they can interpret online content without understanding the context in which it is produced.

My Networked Field site

Ethnographers disagree about whether or not one can study an online community solely by engaging with the community online. Tom Boellstoroff (2008) argues that an online-only ethnography is appropriate in a community like Second Life, where participants primarily interact online, but he is in the minority. Even those who are specifically studying online communities often find value in engaging with participants face-to-face. For example, gaming scholar T. L. Taylor (2006) purposefully attends gatherings of gamers to get a better understanding of their mediated dynamics. Internet-only ethnographic research may have value, but as other scholars have highlighted, recognizing continuities between online and offline contexts and taking context into consideration is essential, even when trying to understand mediated practices (Kendall 2002; Bennett 2004; Miller and Slater 2000).

Although I have done online content analysis for over a decade, I have found that I cannot get a deep understanding of people's mediated practices without engaging with them face-to-face in at least one of the physical environments that they inhabit. Given that most of my work concerns a population whose interactions span multiple modes and media, I find that it is important to try to get at their practices from different angles. I do not traipse across the United States because I need more air miles or enjoy staying in motels; I do so because I have found that it is the only way that I can get a decent picture of teens' lives. When I meet teens face-to-face, they offer depth and context to what I see online. More importantly, they show me where my first impressions were inaccurate or wrong. Thus, I purposefully collect data both online and offline.

Multi-sited fieldwork is quite common in ethnography, including ethnographic studies of mediated interactions (Green 1999; Marcus 1995), but there is no consistent framework for relating the different sites to one another. Some scholars discretely collect and then synthesize online and offline data about individuals (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002; Orgad 2008) while others emphasize interactions or communities and follow the relationships between people and activities as they move between online and offline environments (Hodkinson 2002; Kelty 2008; Wilson 2006). Focusing on the importance of following interactions from online to off and vice-versa, Leander and McKim (2003: 211) argue that "tracing the flows of objects, texts, and bodies" allows ethnographers to

account methodologically for the relationship between online and offline practices. While following people and content as they move between environments is analytically ideal, it is often not practical. And, in my research with teens, I have found it nearly impossible to move seamlessly between different environments in order to get a holistic picture of a particular teen.

In my first two projects on social media, I focused on adult early adopters of social network sites and blogs (Donath and boyd 2004; boyd 2006; boyd 2008). As other scholars had learned (Baym 1993; Rettberg 2008; Taylor 2006), I found it both effective and efficient to identify participants online and reach out to them directly. Although I was not asking research questions that required obtaining a representative sample, having access to a large database of social network site profiles and blogs made finding diverse perspectives simpler than with more traditional recruiting methods. When I approached participants online, the response rate was extraordinarily high and it was easy to start talking with someone online long before I would schedule time to meet face-to-face.

In 2004, I began outlining a research protocol to interrogate teen practices using social media. Like previous scholars (e.g., Richman, 2007), I intended to "lurk" online and observe teens' interactions on MySpace, but I also imagined contacting teens directly through MySpace in order to interview them face-to-face. As I set my research plan into motion, "stranger danger" rhetoric concerning MySpace exploded (Marwick 2008). The news media, safety organizations, police officers, and parents began telling teens that they should not talk to strangers online because any stranger might be a child predator. While I may be unassuming in person, it became quickly apparent that I could not approach teenagers online without violating what they were hearing with respect to "creepy" strangers. It also became clear that teens were less likely to respond to my requests than adult bloggers and social network site users had been. Moving from MySpace to interview proved to be a dead-end.

To address the methodological challenge of doing multi-sited fieldwork without being able to move seamlessly between field sites, I decided to organize my ethnographic project around a set of discrete field sites, linked by the phenomena of social media. To do so, I built on the work of Jenna Burrell (2009), who argued that one could understand a field site as a "network composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects." By integrating different field sites through a common phenomenon, it is then possible to see the phenomenon as a continuous system and capture the coherence and fluidity of the different spaces people occupy, even if they are not explicitly connected. In other words, it is possible to build a networked field site.

My ethnographic study of teens' engagement with social media has had four discrete components: 1) teen pop culture and subculture immersion; 2) participant-observation and content analysis of teens' online traces on social media sites; 3) participant-observation and "deep hanging out" in physical spaces where teens gather; and 4) semi-structured face-to-face ethnographic interviews.

In order to understand cultural references that I encounter, I rabidly consume media that is popular with teens. I watch popular TV shows and movies and read books and magazines that I hear about from teens. I visit popular teen-oriented Web sites, play the most popular games, and try to appreciate the memes that surface. I surf YouTube to listen to bands and musical artists that are popular with teens and I try to keep up with celebrities that they adore. This does not mean that I, myself, am a big fan of Kim Kardashian or Jersey Shore or Jay-Z, but I find that having a baseline knowledge of the cultural references that teens use is essential for building rapport and understanding the context in which they operate. Still, teens regularly use references that completely evade me and I am constantly reminded of just how old they think I am.

Online, I participate in and gather data from MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Xanga, LiveJournal, Formspring, and a host of smaller social media services. I follow teen-oriented "Trending Topics" and download countless profiles to analyze. I have watched teen girls "catfight" on uStream and tracked discussions of proms, SAT tests, and political mobilization over immigration issues. I have read teens' messages to Beyoncé and watched their obsession with Justin Bieber and Lady Gaga grow.

Immersing myself in pop culture and observing teens from the sidelines is a crucial part of my fieldwork, but only in that it gives me a foundation upon which to engage teens. Thus, the most significant part of my research tends to center on my unmediated interactions with teens. Over the six years during which I have worked on this project, I have interviewed, observed, and casually engaged with teens in 21 continental U.S. states and the District of Columbia in a wide array of communities – rich and poor, urban, suburban, and rural, north, south, east, and west. I have attended sports games (including at least 6 Homecoming football games), casually lingered at diners, and loitered in movie theater parking lots; I have hung out in skateboarding parks, cafés, and the International House of Pancakes. I have watched teens socialize with peers at the beach, at all-ages music venues, on buses, in parking lots, and at youth centers. I have visited high schools and after-school programs. Regardless of my personal beliefs, I have respectfully attended a large church in many of the communities that I have visited precisely because religious life plays a key role in the lives of many teens that I meet. I also talk with adults who are involved with teens – parents, teachers, law enforcement officers, social workers, youth ministers, and many others.

While I use varied means of collecting data, conducting ethnographic interviews plays a central role in my research process. In my study of teens' social media practices, I have conducted, recorded, and transcribed interviews with 144 teenagers; my colleague Alice Marwick – who has traveled with me on more recent trips – conducted another 21 interviews with teens using the same interview protocol and a similar approach to interviewing. We have interviewed teens ages 13-19 representing a wide array of racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of the teens that we met came from two-parent households; others lived with a single parent or move between homes; still others lived with relatives, were in foster care, lived in a group home, or were homeless. We have interviewed high school dropouts, homeschooled teens, teens from prestigious magnet or private schools, and teens who attended public schools. We have

interviewed straight and gay teens, conservative and liberal teens, sporty teens, self-identified geeks, teens who are passionate about school, teens who are illiterate, teens on the homecoming court, and teens who have been bullied.

Identifying Teens to Interview

Given the importance of interviewing to my fieldwork – and given the previously-discussed issues involved in identifying teens online – one of my biggest challenges is finding diverse teens to interview. In order to interview teens, I first identify various local "communities" [2] where I believe that I might be able to interview teens. I consciously account for the qualities of that community and the breadth of my local connections. I go out of my way to find diverse communities, but I am also aware of how important it is to have a local informant who can help me navigate the community. Thus, I visit communities where I know someone from that community who can help me identify a cross-section of teens. Over the years, I have worked with educators, librarians, parents, after-school programs, and youth centers. I once used a recruitment firm to identify teens but found that such firms do not have as much breadth as local community members and, more importantly, that teens recruited for marketing research have an amazing penchant for speaking in sound bites in a way that feels outright eerie and utterly unlike the majority of teens that I meet. Given the biases of recruiting firms, I prefer to work with local informants who have direct access to teens because of what they do either professionally or personally. My local informants are typically friends-of-friends, people I have met at conferences, or people that I have met through my blog. I typically identify 3-4 different communities based on connections for every community that I end up visiting.

Every community has its own flavor, biases, and limitations. Thus, in choosing communities to visit, I try to identify communities that are as different from previous communities that I have visited as possible. I have visited low-income communities and wealthy communities, communities where most residents are immigrants, urban and small-town communities, communities shaped by single industries, and communities that reflect varied religious, political, and racial differences.

Once I have identified a community, I start talking to local informants to see if they can help me identify a range of different teens. I try to find local informants who believe in my project and want to help me identify a wide spectrum of teens. I send them a detailed description of what I am looking for, highlighting that my goal is to interview diverse, but "typical" teens that reflect that particular community. I specifically ask them not to identify teens whose parents work in technology or who are academics. I also explain that I am not looking for teens who are especially passionate about technology or those who are particularly exceptional along any traditional axis. It is common for local informants to want to bring out teens that are local stars in academics, sports, music, debate, etc., so I explain that this is not what I want. And then I rely on them to use their

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[2] "Community" is a contested word, both online and off (Joseph, 2002). Lacking a more adequate term, I'm using community to refer to a group of people and a space bounded by physical geography or personal relationships, a particular school or an organization.

best judgment, knowing full well that I will always miss certain aspects of each community.

When I work with local informants to help me identify teens to interview, I know that their view of their community will affect which teens they identify for me to interview. Thus, I try to account for how their biases might affect whom I am meeting. The most common issue that I encounter is that many local informants are determined to make the community look good by only introducing me to teens who are extraordinary. At other times, I sometimes encounter more systemic biases. In one community, the local informant refused to introduce me to any teens of color even though only 47 percent of the teens in the local school were white. When I pushed her into explaining why, she told me that she did not think that I would be safe in those neighborhoods. Like all ethnographers, I struggle with what it means to be an outsider (Geertz, 1973; Harrison, 2008).

In anthropology, there has been a long-standing debate about what it means to generalize from ethnographic data. Some ethnographers argue that generalization simply cannot be achieved through ethnographic analysis and they reject generalization as a goal (Denzin, 1983). Others – sometimes referred to as "post-positivists" – are committed to external validity and believe that it is important for ethnographers to be conscious of sampling in order to achieve generalizability (Schofield, 2002; Hammersley, 1992). Although I can certainly see both sides of this debate, I tend to believe that it is possible to understand a broader population's cultural logic by working conscientiously to hear diverse perspectives. Furthermore, although I recognize that cross-disciplinary work is heretical in some scholarly communities, I am committed to working with quantitative scholars who are trying to understand broader trends. Thus, I go out of my way to map out general practices in order to help quantitative scholars build rigorous instruments to interrogate specific practices. Given this, I work diligently to sample different communities and different types of teens until I feel as though I have reached a saturation point (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In order to be able to make broader claims, I try to understand how the teens that I am meeting fit into the broader picture. In each community, I obtain Census data to understand the demographic makeup. Upon arrival, I use Google Maps to drive to different parts of the town in order to get a feel for the community. I visit the local mall and movie theater to see who is around and I try to attend a school sports event to see which teens show up. I surf Facebook and MySpace to find visible accounts associated with that community. And when I start interviewing teens, I use a technique from Penelope Eckert (1989) and ask teens to map out their school's lunchroom dynamics in order to see which types of teens I am meeting and not meeting. These maps – and the cliques that teens identify – tend to provide valuable insight into the local community. When I know that I am getting a very limited range of teens, I sometimes ask teens to help me meet teens from other groups at school or I try to find additional informants who might be able to help me reach different groups of teens.

Once the local informant has helped me identify teens, I send along a packet of information, including a description of the project, a questionnaire, and a consent/waiver form. Depending on what is appropriate in a particular community, I may send these packets via email, through postal mail, or ask the local informant to hand the packet physically to the teen or their guardian. In some cases, the local informant gives me contact information for the teen or the parent; in other cases, the local informant arranges the interview itself. I give teens the option of meeting me at their homes – provided that a parent or guardian is present – or at a public place of their choosing. I have interviewed teens in schools, libraries, youth centers, fast food establishments, and cafes. I have met them at their parents' place of work and at their grandparents' homes. Once, I even met a teen at a bar; his mother was an alcoholic so the bartender had been looking after him since he was a boy.

Given human subjects requirements, I ask teens who are under the age of 18 to get the permission of a parent or guardian to participate. When teens meet me in public places, they are required to bring their signed consent form with them. In a few cases, the local informant has signed in lieu of the legal guardian. Once, I allowed a 17-year-old homeless teen to sign a separate form indicating that he was in the process of being emancipated. I believe that I have both an ethical and legal responsibility to obtain parental permission, but I have also made a conscious decision to respect teens' agency. While I respect the intentions behind parental consent, I am not convinced that this one-size-fits-all model always makes sense. As previous scholars have noted, relying on parental consent causes unique challenges when children are abused, homeless, or otherwise outside of traditional models of home and family (Vissing, 2007). Thus, I tend to focus on what seems most appropriate given the circumstances.

Confronting Ethical Concerns

When I meet up with teens for an interview, I start by outlining what they can expect from our discussion. I explain that everything they tell me is confidential and will not be shared with their parents. There is one exception to this but I have chosen not to state it clearly during the opening preamble. When underage teens speak of being abused, I am ethically – and, in some cases, legally – required to report this to local authorities. I struggle with this requirement, in part because I spent eight years volunteering for V-Day, an organization that worked to end violence against women and girls. At V-Day, I met numerous abused teens and was involved in a series of interventions. While I am deeply committed to helping teens get out of violent situations, I am also aware that the arrival of social services into the lives of high-school-aged teens is not always helpful. Although I would prefer being able to be open with teens, I have strategically decided to implement a "don't ask, don't tell" policy and try to avoid any conversation that might lead me to learn about abuse when minors are involved. Still, in two cases, I did learn of parental abuse involving minors, but both were already in the process of managing it; one teen was in a group home as a result and the other was living with a different parent because of it. Additionally, I have talked with teens who are over the age of 18 about abuse issues. Two 18-year-olds and one 19-year-old have given me detailed descriptions of the abuse they face at home and their attempts to manage it. When issues of abuse – or

other at-risk issues emerge – I talk with teens about what resources are available to them. On more than one occasion, I have given help lines or local contact numbers to teens who I thought could use support.

In explaining the confidentiality process, I also tell teens that I will never use their real names or any information that might identify them directly. After an interview, I use a baby name Web site to choose a pseudonym and then use this for my notes on that teen (i.e., I chose the name "Keke" to represent the teen discussed above even though that is not her given name). I intentionally forget teens' real names and replace them mentally with the pseudonyms I have chosen. Whenever a teen asks, I tell them what pseudonym I used for them. When I interview teens in a city, I use the city name as the reference but whenever I interview teens outside of a major urban region, I identify them by their state. I change the names of their friends and school and purposely avoid using any specific references that might identify a teen.

I also purposefully obscure data that I collect as part of my online observations and content analysis. I work to scrub identifying information from all digital material. When I use screen shots of profiles in talks or in papers, they are typically heavily modified (using Photoshop) to erase identifying information. I either blur photos or use substitute photos from friends, my childhood, or young adults who have content available through Creative Commons. When I quote text from profiles, I often alter the quotes to maintain the meaning but to make the quote itself unsearchable. Even when online information is "public," I feel as though I have an ethical responsibility not to reveal the identities of the teens that I interview or observe. Just as previous researchers have used photographs but obscured names or images (Goldstein, 2003; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009), I use digital content to convey impressions while not directing attention at specific people.

After explaining how confidentiality works to teens, I next explain how the interview will proceed and clarify that teens may opt not to answer any question that I ask or may quit the interview at any time. I intentionally give them the incentive – typically, cash – up front so that they do not feel pressured to stay to receive the incentive. I also explain that they may choose to ignore any question that I ask and that I would rather that they said "Not gonna answer that" than lie to my face. This usually makes them giggle. I ask them if they have any questions about the protocols. The most common question that I get at this stage is: "What will this be used for?" I explain that my work is academic in nature and that I publish my work in scholarly journals and give public presentations. I explain that my work is sometimes used to shape public policy or to affect how technology is developed.

When I have addressed all questions that teens have, I then proceed to the interview itself. My interviews with teens have lasted between one and four hours, with the vast majority of them taking between 90 minutes and two hours. I audio record the interviews for transcription. While I have a notepad in front of me, I rarely take many notes because I am conscious to keep teens' eyes the entire time. If anything, I write small notes to myself to make sure that I come back to a topic as we veer off in various directions. I

enter into the ethnographic interview with a semi-structured interview protocol but my priority is to make certain that I understand teens' lives so I rarely stay on script.

The Set and Setting of an Interview

Interviewing is first and foremost about set and setting. It requires identifying places where conversing feels natural while also working to create situations in which teens feel comfortable sharing their story. It is about choosing a space where a conversation can take place and then creating the situation in which the teen is most likely to share their story. No setting is perfect and it is important to be able to adjust. For example, I prefer that parents do not overhear the interview, but when I am interviewing in people's homes, I must be prepared that they might, even though I arrange the situation to minimize that. When I am asking teens questions about family life, I actively watch for any signal that they might be uncomfortable and abort if I think that a parent is listening in. In adjusting the interview in response to how a teen reacts to my questions, I create a setting in which teens are able to open up.

The interviews that I conduct with teens are semi-structured and ethnographic in nature. What this means is that, while I enter an interview with an interview protocol, my priority is to get a sense of that teen's life, values, and perspective. Ethnographic interviewing is not just about following a protocol to make certain that each scripted question is answered, but, rather, driven by my interest in trying to understand who this particular teen is and what she or he thinks about the world. It requires reading the situation, interpreting the metacommunication, and reacting to what the teen is saying and implying (Briggs, 1986). Throughout the interview, I work simultaneously to make an informant comfortable and to create openings for them to share their stories (Weiss, 1994). The question that I ask the most often is "why?". While I enter into an interview in order to understand how technology inflects a teen's daily life, I rarely ask any of the questions on my interview protocol; they are more useful as a mental guide to shape what topics I want to make sure that I cover. This is what makes my interviews semi-structured. They are ethnographic because I am trying to understand how people understand their worlds, rather than simply trying to elicit answers to specific questions. Furthermore, they are ethnographic because I am also drawing on participant-observations from my time in their community and situating what I am learning in a theoretical tradition (Spradley, 1979).

I believe that people – including teenagers – make reasonable decisions in response to their environment. Given their situation, values, and knowledge, they engage with technology in ways that make complete sense to them. My goal is to get at their personal logic in order to understand why what they are doing makes sense to them. I then try to situate what I learn in a broader body of data and theory. It is easy to look at Facebook profiles and judge people's decisions; it is a lot harder to understand and respect why someone makes a particular decision and how this decision fits into the cultural setting in which she or he operates. Situating teens' practices is not easy; I regularly have to face my own biases, interpretive limitations, and judgmental tendencies.

Consider what happened when I interviewed Daniela, a 16-year-old Latina girl who had numerous risqué photos on her MySpace profile. When she first showed me her profile, I had to swallow a gasp. While I do not consider myself particularly prudish, I was not prepared to have a minor show me nude photos of herself. Trying not to be judgmental, I asked her cautiously about her choice of photos. She told me that she thought that they made her look "hot." I asked her how she felt about others seeing them and she told me that she hoped that she was going to get picked up by a modeling agency. Because of this, she accepted all friend requests and regularly befriended people on MySpace who she thought might work in the modeling industry. She pointed to other celebrities – like Tila Tequila – to highlight how Internet fame was possible. I did not tell her that Tequila got her "break" when a Playboy scout approached her in a mall. Instead, I asked her if she was concerned that she might lose opportunities because of these photos; she scrunched her face with confusion over my question. I tried to clarify, highlighting that college admissions officers often look at applicants' profiles. As soon as it was out of my mouth, I knew that I was using a bad example. She responded with a snort, explaining that she would never get into college anyhow so why worry about it.

From Daniela's point of view, her body was an asset and her only chance to "get out." Yet, given my personal and professional training, it was hard for me to not see Daniela's photos as illegal child pornography images. Still, who was I to question her dream of fame and fortune and glamour? Who was I to assume that the middle-class ideal of college was an appropriate path? I listened to her talk about her home life and her struggles with school, her fascination with reality TV and her obsession with "self-made" celebrities. She had examples of success stories and she was determined to be one of them. She thought my anxieties were unfounded. Out of a sense of ethical responsibility, I decided to let her know that some might argue that the images she made available could be construed as child pornography and that this might get her into unexpected trouble. She rejected my message with an eye roll and I felt like a prude after all.

In talking with Daniela about her nude images, I was faced with my own subject-position as an adult who represented middle-class adult values and expectations. Not only did I feel uncomfortable just accepting her images at face value, but I also revealed my judgmentalness through the questions that I asked. In the process, I failed to acknowledge her belief that fame was more accessible for her than college. I reproduced a middle-class narrative, effectively obscuring her reality as an undocumented teen who lived through the collapse of the DREAM Act and the increased scrutiny of young immigrants. Not only did Daniela not have the grades to get into most colleges, she was also ineligible for most college financial aid programs. Yet, in blurting out the question about college, I revealed my own culturally-constructed values in a way that showed my biases.

Anthropologists have long argued that ethnographers must be reflexive in their practice, consciously aware of their own biases and how their relationship in the research process affects what they can see (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Strathern, 2004; Haraway, 1991). Yet, this process is often fraught and difficult to manage (Watson, 1987; Behar & Gordon, 1996). For me, reflexivity is both an ideal to which I strive and a process that

shapes how I think about research. I work hard to manage my own interpretive biases and address the affect that I have on the research setting, but that does not mean that I am – or should be – a neutral or objective researcher. I am, always, an outsider (Harrison, 2008; Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). My own subject-position is fundamentally a part of the process and I try to account for this in my analysis. It is impossible to be completely non-judgmental when doing research and, in my conversations with teens, I constantly ask myself what I am inadvertently conveying to them. I try to make sure that the questions that I ask do not have assumptions baked into them, but they inevitably do, and I struggle to account for my biases both during the interview so that I can adjust the conversation and afterwards, as I code my transcripts and reflect on what I have learned.

What researchers wear also affects how they are perceived – and, thus, introduces significant biases and signals (Pascoe, 2007). Although I am typically a fairly flamboyant dresser, I try for a simpler look when I am interviewing teens. Early on, I grew my hair long and removed all of my visible piercings; as I grow older, I just try to dress in jeans and T-shirts. I do not use much makeup or do my hair. I never pass as another teenager, but I try to signal that I am not a parent figure or teacher through my mannerisms and dress. My interviews are most effective when teens see me as someone who shares their values so I try hard to minimize signals that might be off-putting, even though I know that there are certain things that I cannot hide – I am white, female, in my 30s (which makes me old in the eyes of my respondents), and from the North. I am well educated and living an upper middle-class life, although I easily slip into a speaking pattern that reflects the fact that I did not grow up in a privileged community. That said, I purposely try not to reveal my sexuality, religion, or politics.

My queer identity and familiarity and comfort with different religious traditions, political persuasions, and working-class language and cultural norms can be quite beneficial in certain circumstances. Teens who identify with me for one reason or another appear to be much more likely to open up to me, while teens who see me as a complete outsider tend to be wary of my presence and I must work harder to earn their respect. Given this, I do not tend to correct teens when they perceive me to be more like them than I might be. For example, in Atlanta in May 2009, when the issue of Barack Obama's election came up, white teens typically assumed that I was Republican – presumably because, as one teen explicitly told me, I was white – while black teens assumed that I was a Democrat, either because, as one teen told me, I did not dress like the white people they knew or, as another one explained, because I was from "up North." I did not try to counter their perceptions unless they asked, but I did ask them why they perceived me in particular ways.

Balancing insider-outsider status is an ongoing challenge of doing research, but when I succeed, teens stop focusing on my outsider status, even if they do not see me as an insider. When I meet a teen, I try to find common ground as quickly as possible and verbally signal allegiance. When I interview teens, they fill out a simple questionnaire about their media habits, interests, demographics, and tastes before our conversation; I scan this to find connections. I also typically open up the interview by asking them about what they are most passionate about or interested in and hope that I will be able to ask

intelligent questions about whatever topic emerges. I also use references to current events or pop culture as opening topics if I think that the teen I am interviewing might have an opinion on who won the Teen Choice Awards or what happened during the NBA finals.

Creating an environment in which teens feel comfortable opening up about their lives is the hardest part of interviewing teens (Raby, 2007). Once teens are comfortable, they are typically happy to tell their story. The most challenging interviews are inevitably those where the teen that I am talking to is not comfortable with me. When I am lucky, I find an in, but this is not always the case. For example, I met a 16-year-old boy who fabricated stories for over an hour, perhaps unaware that I both recognized the TV shows that contained the storylines he was feeding me and also that I asked him the same question multiple times to assess whether or not he was being inconsistent.

While there are teens who will never open up, most teens are quite willing to engage once they believe that they can trust me. Trust is a crucial part of the ethnographic process (Geertz, 1973). Teens need to trust me to be willing to talk with me about their lives and I need to trust them to be honest. I purposefully introduce particular lines of inquiry to assess their comfort with me. For example, I often use drugs and alcohol as a gage. Early on, I will ask how common drugs and/or alcohol are at their school abstractly. At another point in the interview, when talking about the different cliques at school, I will ask which groups use substances. Depending on the teen, I will ask about drugs and alcohol in relation to parents, parties, and things that get teens into trouble generally. Typically, teens begin by talking in the third person, but as they grow more comfortable, they begin using first person plural ("we") language and, eventually, talk about their own attitudes towards drugs and alcohol. Even when teens are not personally using drugs or alcohol, they always have an opinion on these topics; getting their honest opinion is more important to me than learning whether or not they use substances.

I use many simple stylistic techniques to elicit certain kinds of responses (Weiss, 1994). Catching teens off guard through a surprising question is often the best way to get an emotional reaction instead of a thought-out one; I use this technique when I want to see the immediate reaction. Conversely, when I want to see teens process something slowly, I will actively use silence. If I ask a question and a teen answers, the expectation is that I will then ask another question. If, instead, I stay silent and maintain my gaze, the teen will often repeat their answer with more clarity, providing a more precise explanation to the initial question. I use rapid-fire yes-no questions when I want to draw in a teen's attention and questions that elicit long responses when I want to have a moment to sit back and watch the teens' body language. When I interview teens, I am not only looking for their answers but for their reactions, their metaphors, and their cultural references (Briggs, 1986). I want to understand how they explain themselves just as much as what they say. Thus, I use a variety of different techniques to elicit different kinds of responses, all the meanwhile being conscious of making sure that the teen I am interviewing continues to feel comfortable talking with me.

While some teens approach an interview with suspicion and distrust, many are ecstatic to have someone interested in their lives. These interviews bring new challenges. The moment that 14-year-old Hunter began speaking, I knew that focus was going to be a significant challenge in our conversation. While Hunter had older siblings, they were out of the house and so he lived alone with his mother who worked long hours. I only had to mention the topic of attention for Hunter to describe his struggles with ADHD before bouncing off to talk about how difficult it is not having health insurance since his mother is in the country illegally. Before I could even ask another question, Hunter went off on a tangent about immigration and identity politics, telling me about reading "Ghettonation" and struggling with being the "whitest black guy you'll ever meet" and only wanting to be friends with smart people and deciding that "Outsourced" was a good TV show, because his Indian friends thought it was funny. While everything that came out of Hunter's mouth was fascinating – and it was very clear that he was a precocious teen starved for attention and support in his low-income community – ethnographic interviews are not simply unstructured conversations.

When teens are especially chatty, I sometimes have to interrupt them and structure the interview more intentionally. For example, with teens who have serious attention issues, I find that it is often valuable to switch topics regularly so that they follow my lead rather than going on their own tangents. And when teens start going too far off-topic, I purposefully break the gaze and pretend to look at my list of questions; they typically trail off this way. Occasionally, I have to state explicitly that we need to stay on topic. But such an oppressive statement can destroy the trust that I have built; thus, I only do this when absolutely necessary to get control over the interview.

Interviewing teenagers is exhausting. When I leave an interview, I am completely depleted after having put all of my energy into being fully attentive to the teen. But my job is not done. After an interview, I turn on the recorder and do a brain dump on tape, highlighting what stood out and giving myself notes for what to look for in the transcript. This typically takes an additional 20 or so minutes after an interview. These oral notes serve as the basis for my fieldnotes. Only then do I collapse. I have found that I can meaningfully do two interviews per day and, when absolutely necessary, can stomach three. But four is impossible – I cannot get anything meaningful from doing an interview when completely brain dead. When I need to release my exhaustion or address the emotional pain that I feel after an interview, I drive my car out of earshot of other people and let out a primal scream. I have found that screaming, crying, and jumping around do wonders for helping me work through what I feel after an interview.

Living and Breathing Teen Culture

Getting into the field requires more than just setting up interviews. Even before arriving at a particular field site, I start reading the local paper and surfing Web sites about the community and schools. In doing so, I develop a language for understanding local references so that when a teen talks about "the Tigers," I know that they are talking about their archrival. When I am decompressing from a day of interviewing, I visit local establishments and talk to adults about the community. For example, while in Iowa, I

spent every night at a bar that was clearly popular with locals. The bartender told me countless stories about the different community leaders and the local politics as I downed glass after glass of club soda and tipped him profusely. Upon leaving that town in Iowa, I got pulled over by a police officer for speeding. I decided to use that encounter as an opportunity and for three hours, the cop shared his perspective on life in Iowa (and why California, where I was residing, was the devil's land).

Immersing myself in pop culture, social media, and local communities is all a crucial part of collecting ethnographic data. Yet, while I gain a lot from living and breathing teen culture, interviewing teens directly still plays the most important role in my fieldwork. The data that I collect from interviewing teens – grounded by observational data and situated in cultural theory – helps me understand when and why teens engage with technology and other cultural artifacts, although my processes for analyzing these data to achieve these goals are outside of the scope of this chapter.

Teen life is increasingly intertwined with technology, but the traces that teens leave through technology are not rich enough to convey their practices. Much to the surprise of many adults, teens actually care about privacy (boyd & Hargittai 2010) and take measures to make accessible content meaningless to outside viewers (boyd & Marwick, 2011). Getting at what teens do and why they do it requires triangulation and perseverance. It requires being embedded in teen culture and talking with teens about their practices. Social media may increase the visibility of certain teen practices, but it does not capture the full story. More often than not, getting at the nuances of teen life in a networked era requires going back to foundational practices.

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