Editors' Introduction

Youth and Social Media: From Vulnerability to Empowerment and Equality

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Imagine you are turning 12 years old today. Just as you are blowing out a dozen candles on your birthday cake, your 16 year-old sister snaps a photo with her iPhone. Your sister wants to share her #bestbirthdaywishes and she posts the snapshot to Instagram. At age 12, you are not (officially) old enough to create an Instagram account (Instagram, n.d.). Your older sister, however, is deemed capable and responsible, by both the platform and your parents, to manage her online presence. Today on your 12th birthday, you are both datafied and featured on her feed.

This special edited section of *Studies in Social Justice* is inspired in part by the vulnerabilities that are implicit in the age restrictions that are commonplace on social media sites and apps to restrict data collection and processing, and to protect the privacy of young people. Although a birthday snapshot may seem harmless, young people under the age of 13 have been deemed more vulnerable than adults and mature teens. Children may inappropriately share personal information on the internet, not understanding what they are revealing or to whom. Policies that reflect this concern include the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in the United States, which "prevents the collection, use, or disclosure of personal information from visitors who identify themselves as under age 13 without first complying with the notice and parental consent provisions of this part" (Federal Trade Commission, 1998).

Similarly, Article 8 of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), "Conditions applicable to child's consent in relation to information society services," allows member states to set the age of consent between 13 and 16. Recital 38, Special Protection of Children's Personal

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Data, highlights that, "children merit specific protection with regard to their personal data, as they may be less aware of the risks, consequences and safeguards concerned and their rights in relation to the processing of personal data" (*On the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data,* Regulation 2016/679). As researchers interested in youth and digital culture, we have also frequently encountered another boundary line associated with age.

In Canada, the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2) recognizes that "as is the case with women, the inclusion of children in research advances the commitment to justice in research by improving our knowledge of, and ability to respond to, the unique needs of children throughout their development" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018, p. 51). However, since children, "may lack the capacity to decide whether to participate in particular research initiatives" (p. 53) the Tri-Council Policy Statement urges researchers and research ethics boards (REBs) to ascertain the level of risk for such participants along with the direct benefits that may accrue to participants, with participation generally limited to research of "minimal risk" (p. 53). The TCPS2 also states that "some people may be incapable of exercising autonomy [to participate in research] because of [their] youth" (p. 7, Article 1.1). Researchers who want to involve youth as research participants are thus often required to frame youth as vulnerable through a risk matrix when completing ethics review paperwork (e.g., see University of Toronto, Research & Innovation, n.d.).

A risk matrix can be helpful in channeling researchers towards productive strategies like assent and consent protocols involving both young people and their parents/guardians. A risk matrix, however, can also box youth into a category of vulnerability, which produces challenges for researchers who wish to utilize empowerment-oriented research epistemologies with young people. Categorizing youth as vulnerable can thus create a conundrum for scholars who study young people, the internet and social media. Many of the contributors to this edited section have experienced that digital technologies, including social media, may be part of the toolkit diverse young people leverage to achieve greater equality, including the realization of their human rights.

This special edited section explores the tension between vulnerability and empowerment, which young people encounter through their use of social media, and again, which researchers must grapple with to conduct research on and with youth. Like Papacharissi (2015), we identify that there is "a social character of the Internet" and indeed it can even be said that "all media are social" (p. 1). Recognizing this broad definition of social media, this introduction briefly reviews how the United Nations (UN) has positioned the internet in relation to human rights and emerging developments related to the rights of the child. We proceed to outline how the eQuality Project, a seven-year research partnership grant, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in Canada, has fostered opportunities

for the contributions to this thematic edited section. Finally, we consider these contributions against the 3Ps – *protection of children, provision of technology*, and *participation* – identified in the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as detailed by Livingstone and O'Neill (2014) and Livingstone and Bulger (2016). Our consideration of the contributions of the 3Ps will assist us to illustrate the ongoing negotiations between vulnerability and empowerment which are pervasive within research involving youth and social media. The contributions to this section offer insights about how contemporary theoretical perspectives like a feminist ethics of care and data justice, as well as empirical contexts such as archives and art resistance workshops, may contribute to empowerment involving youth and social media through research and outreach.

Background Context

In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution on "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet." Various news outlets and media summarized this resolution to mean that the "UN thinks internet access is a human right" (Sandle, 2016) or that "internet access is now a basic human right" (Shore & Caitlin, 2016), but more accurately, the text of the resolution identified that our human rights are interlinked with access to the internet and other digital technologies. While the UN's resolution positions the internet as a hopefully positive force to potentially empower individuals to experience their human rights and enact social justice, they also identified risks and vulnerabilities. These included potential security issues that may threaten privacy (United Nations General Assembly, 2016, p. 4), possible "intimidation and harassment" related to gender (p. 4), "incitement to discrimination or violence on the Internet" (p. 4) and the potential for the sexual exploitation of children (p. 1).

The 2016 resolution from the UN concerning rights and the internet expresses the importance of closing the digital divide for boys and girls. The practicalities for young people to experience their rights in a digital age, with non-universal access to the internet, remains challenging. Livingstone et al. (2016) state that "an estimated one in three of all Internet users in the world today is below the age 18" and yet "Internet governance has barely recognized the distinctive rights and needs of children as a substantial group of Internet users" (p. 7).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is an international treaty which recognizes that all children have universal human rights. Written in 1989, the CRC was "the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the history of the UN" (Livingstone & Third, 2017, p. 658). Thirty years later, the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child developed a General Comment on Children and the Digital Environment to support states and NGOs to interpret the CRC for the digital age and to account for children's digital

rights including free expression, privacy, intellectual property rights, and access.

In March 2021 the CRC (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989) was updated with a General Comment on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020). Specifically, General Comment 25 was addended, which delineates children's rights in relation to the digital environment, and which explicitly states that children's rights apply to the digital world (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25, 2021). Once the Comment is adopted, all 196 state signatories to the CRC will need to report formally on its provisions, which "clarifies what the digital environment means for children's civil rights and freedoms, their rights to privacy, non-discrimination, protection, education, play and more" (Livingstone, 2021).

From the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the 3Ps of *protection* of children against abuse and online predators, the *provision* of technology for education and leisure, and *participation* through their freedom of expression or consultation online are each applicable to the digital milieu (Livingstone & Bulger, 2016; Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014). The 3Ps related to children's rights can easily be inhibited or come into conflict through everyday scenarios involving technology use. For example, an internet shutdown in an authoritarian country can interrupt the provision of access to learning resources or vital health information. Young people who have their parents, school or nation state monitoring their internet access, may or may not feel free to express themselves politically. Additionally, young people may circumvent the rules associated with internet and social media use which are established to keep them safe. Data from MediaSmarts in Canada in 2013 showed that "one third of students in grades 4-6 have Facebook accounts even though the site's terms of use forbid anyone under the age of 13 from joining the network" (Steeves, 2014, p. 3). The eQuality Project conducted focus groups in 2018 and 2019 with young Canadians, exploring their experiences of online privacy and equality, with few admitting to reading the privacy policies on the social media sites they use (Shade et al., 2020).

Events Building to the Edited Section

This edited section grows out of two events convened by The eQuality Project, a partnership grant co-led by Valerie Steeves and Jane Bailey at the University of Ottawa. The eQuality Project seeks to contribute to digital economy policies through an examination of young people's experiences of privacy and equality in networked environments, with a particular focus on youth from marginalized communities. The potential vulnerability of youth to having their data exploited, or to experience online harassment or

mistreatment, which may relate to their intersectional identities, informs the project (see The eQuality Project, n.d.).

As scholars working with, and studying children and young people, we noted frequent dilemmas and challenges with navigating the research ethics review process, guided by TCPS2, at our academic home institutions. Notably, ethics protocols compel the categorization of youth as vulnerable participants, which can lead to enhanced scrutiny of the research protocol, resulting in a protracted review process. Beyond administrative challenges, however, describing youth as vulnerable may be contradictory or counter-productive when empowerment-oriented epistemologies concerning youth and digital technologies underpin the research (Regan & Steeves, 2010).

To further explore this issue, in Year 3 of the Project (2017), affiliated project researchers, including the co-leads and the co-editors of this edited section, organized a roundtable at the Canadian Communication Association (CCA) Annual Conference in Toronto focused on vulnerability, empowerment, youth and research ethics. The CCA roundtable brought together scholars and community partners to consider the ethical challenges, conundrums and opportunities in conducting research on and with children and youth related to their digitally mediated lives.

The following year (May 2018) a workshop held at the University of Toronto brought together project researchers and scholars working in digital youth studies and social media ethics to further consider these issues. A key social justice value all workshop participants agreed upon is that it is important to always maintain that youth have agency and control in relation to social media and research. The workshop participants were also interested in research approaches which contribute to social justice, including data justice, amidst the dominant, advertising-driven models for profit generation, which underpin the internet.

Description of the Contributions

This special themed section draws from the work of several workshop participants. Consisting of four articles and two dispatches, the articles span the terrain of arts-based research and organizations in young peoples' lives, online discussion forums, and pandemic connectivity, while the dispatches explore critical data studies and the implications of digital archiving of social media in youths' lives.

Our contributors specifically provide a range of examples of the digitally mediated lives of young people from approximately age four (junior kindergarten) to age 30 (graduate students). Through these contributions, we seek to build on children's rights-oriented scholarship for a digital age (e.g., Livingston & Bulger, 2014; Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014; Livingstone & Third, 2017; Lupton & Williamson, 2017) as well as the previous literature where themes of empowerment and vulnerability in youths' digitally

mediated lives are addressed (e.g., Livingstone, 2008; Regan & Steeves, 2010; Smith et al., 2017; Smith & Shade, 2018), as well as youth and research ethics (Kiidenberg, 2020).

The contributions engage with the reality that although social media and digital technologies remain a hopeful tool to instantiate human rights, significant challenges persist. The dominant economic model of the internet involves the disclosure of personal information in exchange for content and services. This dynamic may sometimes allow for youth empowerment, but it can also place young people in situations of vulnerability and accentuate inequalities based on gender, race, ability, sexual orientation or other intersectional dimensions.

Additionally, research activities related to young people or their data online are also complicated in their efforts to instantiate rights and simultaneously uphold ethical standards by researchers. This was noted in General Comment 25, which highlights the importance of data collection and research for understanding the nuanced implications of children's digital lives, and emphasizing that "research conducted with and by children, should inform regulation, policy and practice and should be in the public domain" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, p. 5).

Each of the contributions to this special edited section, addresses issues raised in the recent draft in diverse ways. The General Comment identifies the ubiquity of technology for young people who are "growing up in a digital environment with growing levels of usage of mobile technology, with social/digital media increasingly the primary means through which they communicate and receive, create and disseminate information" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, p. 10).

Breaches of privacy and violence as discussed in the General Comment 25 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020, p. 10; 2021, pp. 11-14) are two of the issues raised which pertain to Chloe Georas, Jane Bailey and Valerie Steeves' article, "Ethical Dilemmas in Resistance Art Workshops with Youth." In this piece the authors share insights derived from the facilitation of transnational resistance art workshops with youth held in both Canada and Puerto Rico. The workshops were designed to empower young people, but especially marginalized youth, to create art that pushed back against surveillance and technology-facilitated violence. The research explicitly acknowledges the tensions and contradictions in the technological milieu that young people encounter in their daily lives and asks them to reflect critically on it. The authors identify three tensions: how best to facilitate workshops that are sensitive to intersectional issues of access and digital literacy; how to invoke critical engagement of youth's experiences of violence, discrimination, or sexually explicit material; and how to protect youth participants from liability for their artistic appropriation and possible illegality of their creative work where copyright, trademarks, defamation, or privacy may be contested.

Building upon the importance of "access to the digital environment" to connect to "culture and the arts" as described in the recent draft of the General Comment (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020, p.10; 2021, pp. 18-19), Stuart Poyntz's article, "Producing Authenticity and Negotiating Trust: Urban Youth Arts, Rogue Archives and Semiotic Negotiation," highlights the internet archives of two youth oriented arts organizations: ReelYouth (in British Columbia) and The Oasis Skateboard Factory (OSF) (in Ontario). Poyntz characterizes both organizations, as well as their online archives, as durable and persistent spaces where young people can gather to express themselves creatively. He notes that paradoxically, while the project goals contribute to their empowerment, youth arts organizations must typically depict young people as vulnerable in order to receive external funding from government and foundations.

Jacquelyn Burkell and Priscilla Regan's article, "Expression in the Virtual Public: Social Justice Considerations in Harvesting Youth Online Discussions for Research Purposes," examines the social justice implications of collecting youths' social media discussion data for research purposes. The article closely pertains to the issue raised in the General Comment that "the Internet provides opportunities for accessing, for example, online health information, protective support, and sources of advice and counselling" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, p. 16). As Burkell and Regan describe, the slippery nature of what can be considered public, versus private, information, and what constitutes consent in online forums, is treated differently across various research ethics boards (REB). Providing an analysis of research the methodologies of which use online discussion forums, and an overview of literature on research ethics and social justice, they note interrelated social justice tensions where more guidance is needed; notably, the issue of representation and respect for youth participant rights and wellbeing. This includes avoidance of covert research, facilitating robust consent and reasonable expectations of privacy, and protection of autonomy and consideration of a "right to be forgotten" for youth content in internet archives.

Karen Smith's article," iPads, Free Data and Young Peoples' Rights: Refractions from a Universal Access Model During the Pandemic," provides a critical analysis of internet access for Ontario K-12 remote learners during the pandemic. The article grapples with the increasing centrality of the internet to learning (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020, p. 10; 2021, p. 17-18). Expanding upon "The Access Rainbow" a socio-technical model of internet access (Clement & Shade, 2000), Smith unpacks the government's provision of free iPads and data plans for students through the interlocking lens of community informatics, privatization and disaster capitalism. She describes how the distributive paradigm, coupled with private interests, structured domestic access. While rendering invisible the key role of crucial community intermediaries such as public libraries, the Ontario government's actions valorized the role of private big tech and

telecom providers. Smith concludes by calling for a robust expansion of tech equity and advocacy efforts to recognize the social justice imperative of providing universal connectivity to the internet as an intrinsic element of children and young people's rights.

This special edited section also includes two dispatches, which orient us towards data justice as a potential response to the realities of digital environments young people encounter. Katie Mackinnon's dispatch, "Ethical Approaches to Youth Data in Historical Web Archives," provides a reflection on the research ethics of her doctoral research, which examines the experiences of young and marginalized people who created websites and online communities on the early web (1994-2004). As she notes, web historiography and web history are an emerging interdisciplinary field, with an aligned attention to the ethical considerations about use of digital archives. Mackinnon highlights how a feminist ethics of care approach is particularly apt for web archives research on young people's creations, and situates this within frameworks of data justice.

Andrea Zeffiro's dispatch, "From Data Ethics to Data Justice in/as Pedagogy," considers how social justice can be better instantiated with internet access, data, and governance of social media. In referring to data justice, Zeffiro draws upon scholarship that considers how societal concerns regarding data can be embedded with ongoing social justice struggles against oppression (Dencik et al., 2019; Taylor, 2017). Identifying a lack of public facing guidance from research ethics boards in Canada regarding the use of social media data in research, Zeffiro contemplates how students can be challenged to develop critical data literacy skills, while also contributing to data justice. Some of the pedagogical strategies that Zeffiro outlines include student reflections through autoethnography as they learn a data analysis tool and the use of speculative design to create terms of service for an alternative social media platform committed to data justice.

Synthesis of Contributions and Conclusion

Each of the contributions to this special edited section point towards the tension between vulnerability and empowerment that is created as youth engage online and through social media. If society strives to support young people to realize their human rights through the 3Ps: *protection, provision,* and *participation*, drawn from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the digital context must be considered. General Comment 25 recognizes that similar to adults, young people rely on digital technologies to experience and realize their human rights. As outlined in the articles and dispatches in this edited section, being online can make youth potentially vulnerable, but digital tools are also critical to youth empowerment and the instantiation of their rights.

Identifying and resisting the vulnerabilities that young people may encounter through the internet and social media can be framed as a kind of feminist ethics of care (Leurs, 2017; Luka & Millette, 2018). In this manner, the articles and dispatches included in this edited section begin to grapple with the long term ethical implications of datafication and research that is relevant to youth, digital culture and their human rights. A number of the pieces included in this edited section, demonstrate how scholars may act as allies of empowered young people when they critically question what internet access and social media are providing for young people, and work towards a better future in collaboration with young people.

Acknowledgements

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