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Should Teenagers Expect Privacy On the Internet?

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on April 28, 2013 7:16 AM

Schools should not change the child; instead they need to change the environment that helps educate that child.

Recently, I attended/presented at the [Tech Forum 2013](#) in Boston. It was by far one of the best conferences I have been to in a very long time. All of the presenters had a gift for using technology. Many had great videos, Flickr images, introduced us to new apps and found numerous other ways to engage us.

A few presenters, including my co-presenters Patrick Larkin ([Burlington MA Assistant Superintendent](#)) and Andrew Wallace ([South Portland, ME Director of Technology](#)), provided us with a better understanding of our technological world. Thankfully I had my iPad to search for the definitions when they used acronyms and vocabulary that was unfamiliar.

The truth is that I am still negotiating my way through technology. I love it but I proceed with caution. I guess I'm still searching for privacy during a time when there seems not to be any. Like many adults, my worlds have always been compartmentalized, and I get nervous when those boundaries get blurred. I think twice before accepting someone as a friend on Facebook and I typically un-tag myself when someone tags me in a photo.

As educators, privacy weighs heavily on our minds. We attend fundraisers or receptions and someone takes a photo of us as we sip on a glass of wine. We go to a party where we have a glass of wine and friends embrace their inner paparazzi and take our photos. Those photos end up on Facebook, because let's face it, most photos end up there. In every one of them we are holding a glass of wine. As much as we are over 21, we also understand how that "looks" to some people who are critical.

Technology, and the issues it can cause, are in the back of our minds when we pose for pics. Believe it or not, many of our students feel the same way. However, adults do not expect privacy online and teenagers do. Doesn't that seem crazy? Teenagers expect privacy in our social networking world?

Technology and social networking are a natural part of their lives. Sometimes we feel fortunate to have them look up from their screen so we can see their faces. As much as it may be easy for us to criticize them for multi-tasking, we did the same thing when we were their age. It's just that we were using the rotary telephone on the wall and were given time limits because we had siblings and one phone to share.

The increase in the usage of technology stirs a lot of emotion from people. Some educators believe it does not have a place in schools. Educators on the other end of the spectrum believe technology should invade every space at every moment. I'm somewhere in the middle. I need a break from it but I'm fascinated by it as well.

How young people understand privacy

The keynote speaker at Tech Forum 2013 was [Danah Boyd](#). Danah has done a great deal of research in the area of technology, privacy and what it all means to teenagers. Not only was she an engaging presenter; she provided common sense insight into the teenage world. It was the first time, in a long time, that a presenter captured my

attention for more than an hour.

As you can imagine, teenagers growing up in this very technological age have a different view of technology. What's interesting is that it is not unlike our views from when we were younger. Teenagers are constantly searching for privacy so they can explore their worlds without the watchful eye of a parent or teacher.

Unfortunately for them, their world is much more connected and the images they use and the words they write to express themselves are seen, and sometimes misunderstood, by the adults around them. Boyd spoke at length about the fact that we are all living in a time of "*network publics*." Network Publics are the spaces people come together. The most popular, at least to a 42 year-old, are Twitter and Facebook. However, teenagers are moving away from Facebook because we "old folks" have infiltrated it.

It doesn't matter what social network they use, privacy is still an issue. Boyd delved into four different categories when it comes to privacy in the social media age.

They are:

- **Persistence** - Online expressions are recorded and archived. Those of us who grew up in a time when Pong was considered technologically advanced didn't have to worry about our every move being recorded or our every word being misunderstood when it is in its written form. Teenagers do. Everything is recorded and archived and can come back to haunt them at any time.
- **Replicability** - You can copy and paste things from one format to another. Has it been modified? Has it been duplicated? It brings up interesting arguments about what is fair use. It also can blur the lines of plagiarism.
- **Search-ability** - The potential visibility of content. Clearly, the power to search for anything is right at our fingertips. We don't have to wait until our memory kicks in! However, refer back to the idea of persistence, because everything we do online is searchable.
- **Scalability** - The sheer magnitude of content that can be found, and the audience it can reach, is infinite. Unfortunately, it does seem as though gossip travels a lot faster than anything more worthwhile. However, is that really all that different than when we were younger? Gossip always travelled faster. Using social media, we can all reach a much wider audience.

Given that social media blurs the lines between what is public and what is private creates a conundrum for teenagers and adults. However, that line has always been a bit blurred. In Boyd's research, she found that many teenagers believe that their home is not private because their parents always want to know what they are doing and that the mall is private because they do not stick out as much. They can have private conversations without being questioned.

Boyd says, "*Privacy is not just about controlling content but also controlling social situations. The internet is Public by default and private by effort. Teenagers choose what they need to privatize rather what they want to publicize.*" They do that by choosing their words carefully. Perhaps they can say something a friend would understand and a parent wouldn't. We all have ways to get our messages across.

In the End

Danah Boyd researches the social-emotional and social justice issues around technology, which is important because if teachers and administrators want to understand the students they see every day, they need to respect

the world of the teenagers. Schools should not change the child; instead they need to change the environment that helps educate that child, which begins with an understanding of the way they think and feel.

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