The case for progress
by Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D.

Only Connect
It's Complicated explains why social media has become so important to teens.
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"Only connect!," the English novelist E.M. Forster wrote in 1910. "Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die."

One hundred years later, social media on the Internet offers myriad ways to connect – and to “friend” hundreds and thousands of people. For better and worse these days, Americans are networked. Social media, Danah Boyd, a Principal Researcher at Microsoft, assistant professor at New York University, and a Fellow at Harvard University's Center for Internet and Society, reminds us, has become the go-to-place for teenagers to socialize with their peers.

In It's Complicated, Boyd draws on interviews with 166 pre-college teens to explain why social media has become so important to them and how they use it. She also addresses the anxiety of adults about the online activities of their children. For better and worse these days, Americans are networked. Social media, Danah Boyd, a Principal Researcher at Microsoft, assistant professor at New York University, and a Fellow at Harvard University's Center for Internet and Society, reminds us, has become the go-to-place for teenagers to socialize with their peers.

In It's Complicated, Boyd draws on interviews with 166 pre-college teens to explain why social media has become so important to them and how they use it. She also addresses the anxiety of adults about the online activities of their children. Here to stay, she argues, social media does nothing more or less than mirror, magnify and make more visible “the good, bad and ugly of everyday life.” Scare-mongers and techno-utopians distort the realities of teen practices “and threaten to turn the generation gap into a gaping chasm.” There is no reason, she insists, to conclude that “digital celibacy” will help young people be healthier, happier, and more capable adults.

Informative, sophisticated, and engaging, It's Complicated challenges conventional wisdom about identity, privacy, safety, and bullying. Boyd is especially adept at describing and analyzing the perceptions, motivations, and behaviors of teenagers. Although her efforts to allay the anxieties of adults are not entirely successful, Boyd provides the context for more reasoned, substantive conversations about the digital world inhabited by our kids.

It's Complicated indicates that many myths about online behavior arise from real incidents or data that are blown out of proportion. Engaging, as people always have, in “impression management,” Boyd notes, teenagers may post too much information about themselves but often lie to be playful, to fend off the “prying eyes” of paternalistic adults, and to send signals to friends and acquaintances. And, like adults, they feel they have a right to expect “civil inattention” from those who should not be listening in to their online conversations. Boyd acknowledges that “performative” posts can be unhealthy, but claims that blurring privacy and publicity allow teens to assert agency at a time in which they believe
their power is regularly being undermined.

Boyd demonstrates that sexual solicitation as it is commonly understood is rare online. Many children, she writes, are victimized in bedrooms, “but not because of the computer.” Risky online practices are correlated with pre-existing psychosocial problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor performance in school. Bullying, moreover, is a lot more visible online but may not be nearly as pervasive as adults fear it is. Indeed, Boyd cites one study that found that 9% of youth bully themselves to attract attention, validation, and support.

Some of Boyd’s claims, however, are less persuasive. She seems to take at face value the assertions of teens that they are excessively supervised and constrained by their parents and “institutional forces.” And she endorses the dubious proposition that youngsters turn to the Internet because they have less geographic freedom, fewer public places in which they can socialize with friends, see and be seen, more pressure to stay at home, less free time, and more rules.

Although she does worry that teenagers do not know how to distinguish credible information from crap on the Internet, Boyd does not address concerns that too much time texting, tweeting, and friending reduces already reduced attention spans and eviscerates complexity in the name of brevity. Nor does she weigh in on the degree to which the social media promotes consumerism, conformity, and celebrity culture, rebellious poses and group judgments, faux intimacy and self-absorption, reality as role-playing, and tempts teens to sacrifice precious opportunities to lose themselves in the moment. Young people may well use social media to be part of public life, but technology, it seems clear, can also serve as an alienating force, which, as another observer suggests, renders the home less an oasis for shared activity than an “entangled intersection of data traffic.”

Boyd is surely right to caution us that technology can become “the perfect punching bag.” And to insist, in these early days, that teenagers have been “resilient and creative” in re-purposing social media “to fulfill their desires and goals.”

At the same time, it seems legitimate to wonder and worry about the degree to which 21st century connectivity is, in effect, discouraging young people, and for that matter, almost all people, from taking the time and emotional and intellectual energy to search for themselves (beyond what the historian Christopher Lasch called “the banality of self-awareness”) by looking within, through self-reflection and for self-improvement, and not outside, to the judgment of others.