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Shauna A. Morimoto and Lewis A. Friedland

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# The Lifeworld of Youth in the Information Society

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**Shauna A. Morimoto<sup>1</sup> and Lewis A. Friedland<sup>2</sup>**

## Abstract

Media is now central to how youth form their identities. Media also shapes the cultural background of much of young people's action and decision making and the institutional framework of social interaction. This article explores this mediated "lifeworld" of young people by examining rates of current media use and the infiltration of media into conventional forms of socialization such as schools, family, and peers. The authors argue that increasing media use coincides with a larger structural shift to an information-based society wherein social relationships are constituted and reinforced through a cycle of "networked individualism" and growing "risk" among youth. The authors illustrate the cycle of media use, individualization, and risk by briefly examining (a) rising economic insecurity among all Americans and American youth in particular, and (b) the contradictions minority youth face in navigating structural barriers to achievement. The authors conclude by discussing the implications of their work and suggesting policy directions for youth in a media-saturated society.

## Keywords

media, youth, lifeworld, information society

That young people are immersed in a mediated environment is not news anymore. Political scientists, sociologists, and students of political communication

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have noted the extent to which young people use new media in general and have incorporated how this use shapes political and civic attitudes (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Yet the ways in which media saturates the lives of young people remain oddly separated from an understanding of how media use is changing the *lifeworld* of young people. In the following, we draw on Habermas's concept of the lifeworld as the largely unreflected-upon background—including language, socialization, national, ethnic, and mass culture—in which identities are formed and from which decisions are made.

In this piece, we introduce the idea that this background or lifeworld is now comprised of several deep and important cross-cutting currents that shape each other. First, we examine current data on media use arguing that the sheer depth of media saturation has moved from a “variable” or medium of communication to a form of life itself. Specifically, we suggest that young people's lives are so thoroughly saturated by media use that media cannot be analyzed separately from the larger structure in which young people come of age. Arguing that the youth lifeworld is mediated in this way, we discuss the rise of the information society—a postindustrial social structure, in which relationships are widely dispersed and, in some respects, more egalitarian; but individuals are also more responsible for their own success or failure. We sketch how changes in social structures and forms of interaction are coconstitutive and reinforce an environment of risk and individualization for young people today. Our broad argument is that rapid changes in media forms and increasing media use both contribute to and have implications for individualism and the risk environment for young people in the United States. We illustrate the cycle of media use, individualization, and risk by briefly examining (a) the tensions of rising economic insecurity among all Americans and American youth in particular, and (b) the contradictions minority youth face in navigating structural barriers to achievement.

Ulrich Beck (1992) and Zygmunt Bauman (2007), along with Anthony Giddens (1990), discuss similar changes in the environment that characterizes the United Kingdom more generally. As primarily scholars of the United States, we are not making claims about the extent to which these broad changes have taken root globally; we recognize that distinct economic, political, and cultural history shapes the degree to which the framework we are proposing here is applicable to individual nations. But we do believe that, to some extent, the driving forces of media saturation and growing risk will characterize the lives of most young people in a globalizing world, albeit in very different ways and to different degrees.

## Media Saturation and the Lifeworld of Youth

### Contemporary Media

In discussing media, we are considering the full range of computer, Internet, and mobile phone technology available today. Accordingly, we use “media” to refer generically to everything from television and personal computers to web-based and personal communication technology and the numerous (and ever-increasing) ways to go online and/or access these technologies. Thus, we refer broadly to smart phones, web-TV, e-mail, blogs, Skype, Facebook, and so on, all under the broad umbrella of “media.”

### Youth and Media Saturation

Everyday life is increasingly intertwined with media and in ways that cannot be neatly separated. This is particularly so with young people who are on the vanguard of adopting and adapting to new technology. The use of media among American youth has grown at an astounding rate. For example, between 2004 and 2006, online use in the United States increased from 77% to 88% for the highest-use group, those aged 18 to 24 (Madden, 2006). In 2010, however, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that media use among 8- to 18-year-olds has shattered previous records. Specifically, in 2005, this age cohort spent almost 6.5 hr a day with all media, packing 8.5 hr of media use into that time by simultaneously using more than one medium. By 2010, use time had increased by 1 hr and 17 min to 7.38 hr a day with *10 hr and 45 min packed into that time*. In other words, young people in the United States use media the equivalent of an entire *waking day, 7 days a week*. This represents a 2.25-hr increase in media use in 5 years (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Breaking down the use of each medium, the Kaiser report shows that, in 2009, 4.5 hr were spent watching TV, 2.5 hr were spent listening to music, computer use and video game playing each accounted for approximately 1.5 hr a day, and 56 min went to print and movies. Twenty-nine percent of time was spent using more than one medium. In addition, although 20% of media consumption is now on mobile devices, these figures do not account for time spent on the cellphone, which arguably would extend time spent with media even further (Rideout et al., 2010). In 2009, 58% of American 12-year-olds and 83% of 17-year-olds owned cell phones.

We argue that these data on media use show that we have reached a tipping point: The mediated environment of young people has developed so quickly and to such an extent that we can no longer understand the lifeworld

of young people as *separate* from media. As form, media—particularly social media but also the products of mass media—are now central to all kinds of social interaction (Zhao, 2006). To make sense of this degree of media saturation, we draw on the concept of the lifeworld, arguing that media constitute significant segments of the lifeworld of young people.

### *The Concept of the Lifeworld*

The idea of a lifeworld is rooted in the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz (Schutz, 1972). The lifeworld for Schutz consisted of the multitude of elements of subjective knowledge that individual actors use to make meaning in the world. Taken together, this knowledge forms “types” or patterns. Social actors then use these meanings and type patterns as guides to action. At the same time, the social world also “yields up” types and patterns in systematic ways that structure and constrain the range of possible meaning, thought, and action in everyday life.

Habermas extended the concept of the lifeworld in his theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1981). To Habermas, the lifeworld is defined as the *background* of all communication. Indeed, it is what makes communication possible: the resources, systems of meaning, institutional frameworks, and personality structures of everyday life. Applying Habermas’s conception of the lifeworld to contemporary youth culture thus acknowledges media as partly constitutive of that lifeworld. Rather than a means of communication or a variable of interaction, media shapes young people’s daily activities and social relationships. In Habermas’s framework, media is part of the “system”—alongside politics and economics—which operates “above the heads” of actors in the lifeworld. But at the same time, media is that part of the system that most overlaps with the lifeworld, dependent on the cultural meanings and interpretations that actors themselves provide. Conventional agents of youth socialization, such as family, schools, and peers, retain their importance but are increasingly filtered by and through the media.

### **Family, School, Peers, and the Media as Agents of Socialization**

In the context of the family, for example, children consider themselves the household computer experts, whereas their parents lag behind in web use (Livingstone, 2001). The result is a “digital generation gap,” with young people often explaining Internet use to older generations (Livingstone, 2003). At

the same time, youth lack skills with respect to online research, navigation, and evaluation of web-based material (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). Accordingly, although young people remain the household computer “experts,” their interpretation of mediated information lags behind adults’. This is particularly important because the web is increasingly a site of both the reception *and generation* of information in the home (Livingstone, 2003). As home life in general becomes increasingly media saturated, young people become the masters of a culture that even their parents now depend on for information, jobs, and social opportunities.

Similar issues arise in the context of schools as socializing agents. Because media comprises important aspects of the lifeworld of youth, educators debate the ways and extent to which media can and should be “harnessed” as an educational tool (Kellner, 2002). Although young people are more comfortable and confident with technology and online media use than adults, they may not possess adequate critical thinking and research skills to guide their web use. This creates a dilemma for schools and teachers. On the one hand, there is strong concern over the dangers associated with young people’s unregulated and unfettered use of the Internet and new media technology (Livingstone, 2003). On the other hand, explosive opportunities for accessing information, networking, and participation make technological ignorance equally threatening (Livingstone, 2003). Yet regardless of educators’ role in using media in the classroom, youth use media and adopt new technology quickly.

For example, with respect to peer relationships, a 2009 survey by the Pew Center on the Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, 2009) found that 8% of 17-year-olds with cell phones have sent and 30% received “sexts,” nude, or nearly nude images on their cell phones. This suggests both a high degree of autonomy of technology use by teens (indeed, those most likely to “sext” are those who pay their own cell phone bills) and an increase of pressure to participate in what has now emerged as a new sexual ritual, at least among a significant minority of more adventurous teens.

Whether within the confines of the home or school, or as a way to interact with friends, media is central to the lives of young people. Media saturation is so extensive and integral to daily life that media itself shapes the lifeworld or cultural background in which young people form their identities and make decisions. Rather than thinking of physical locations and interpersonal interactions as “real life” and mediated contacts as “virtual,” the lifeworld of young people spans physical and virtual interactions fluidly. Adopting and integrating new technology thus represents a cultural shift, with new innovations quickly being incorporated into daily routines.

## Individualism and Risk: The Structural Underpinnings of the Information Society

Beyond the cultural implications of media saturation, Beck (1992) and Wellman (2001, 2002) point out that a mediated environment is indicative of larger changes in the structure of society. This shift is broadly understood to represent a shift to a society with an economy based on information rather than industry (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). In the information society, where media is integral to the lifeworld, patterns of interaction and organization shift, making *networks of aggregated individuals* rather than groups central to both identity and social action. In what follows, we discuss the rise of what Wellman terms “networked individualism” as it relates to media saturation. Next, we consider Beck’s concepts of individualization and risk within the framework of the information society.

### *Networked Individualism*

Closely related to the increasing integration of mediated life and conventional forms of socialization is the broader social shift in the United States (and we believe elsewhere) to what Barry Wellman has called “networked individualism” (Wellman, 2001, 2002). The center of this idea is that increasingly individuals no longer live their lives in traditional embedded communities of place in which they are constrained by groups and group habits of family, religion, and community. Rather, individuals are embedded in networks of personal relationships that are relatively loose, more flexible, and portable. That is to say that though individuals still have relationships with family, neighbors, and religious and association comembers, they are not as constrained by physical space. The networks that individuals build extend beyond geographic boundaries and operate as new forms of community. Although this was true according to both Wellman (2001, 2002) and Fischer (1992) well before the birth of the mass Internet,<sup>1</sup> the advent of life online makes networked individualism, or the centrality of personal networks, even more salient for 18- to 24-year-olds and younger generations.

For young people, networked individualism is apparent in the explosion of peer networks and online communities. As Bennett points out, a short visit to MySpace or Facebook makes it readily apparent that social sites revolve around sharing music, photos, and, most importantly, extending friendship networks. Such friendships, however, are loosely connected and frequently based on finding a common shared taste or “denominator” across a wide range of interest areas. Thus, rather than seeing place-based markers such as

school, religion, and political institutions as the chief source of identity formation, young people increasingly draw on a vast array of both virtual and conventional markers. This allows youth to be expressive and creative in networked spaces, giving them the freedom to make their own choices and form identities by and through such connections. At the same time, however, it also makes conventional sites of identity and community less relevant to them (Bennett, 2008).

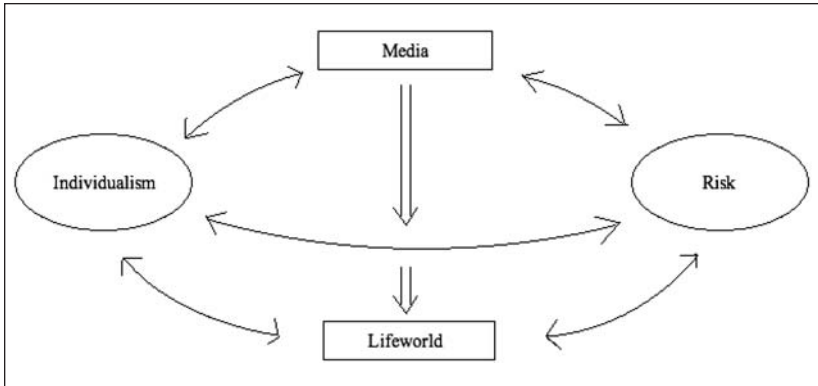
As Wellman explains, “In networked societies, boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, interactions switch between multiple networks and hierarchies are both flatter and more complexly structured” (Wellman, 2002, p. 22). Individual people pursue specialized networks; move in, out, and through those networks quickly and fluidly; and—through virtual contact—select which aspects of their identity to reveal to like-minded others in the network. Although this allows people to easily move from one position to another and makes hierarchies “flatter” or less rigidly structured, it also makes navigating structures much more complex. Lines of relationships and sites of power may be easier to get to, but they are also harder to identify and take more nuanced skills to navigate. These factors make loosely based and networked community structures emphasize individuals and their networks, rather than racial, religious, or conventional group-based identities.

### *Individualism and Risk*

Wellman’s (2001, 2002) concept of networked individualism complements Beck’s understanding of increasing individualization in the information society. According to Beck (1992), individualization and risk are mutually constitutive. He argues that individuals are increasingly responsible for the trajectory of their own lives, whether they want to be or not. Social actors have to understand and interpret information from multiple sources and make decisions from a vast array of options. More important, this occurs in a society where conventional structural paths that guided decision-making processes are less clearly delineated and harder to access. Constructing identity through networks, therefore, increases opportunities and freedoms, but also puts individuals at increased risk.

From Beck’s point of view, risk—as with Wellman’s networked individualism—is a byproduct of technological advances. Hazards and insecurities arise unexpectedly in conjunction with the advances of modernization: As individuals try to control the world around them, they inadvertently also generate risks. For example, social problems such as food shortages can





**Figure 1.** The information society

be avoided through research and innovation in food production and preservation. However, new risks, such as environmental degradation and the adverse impact of chemically treated food, emerge as the unintended consequence of technological advances that increase food production. Individuals must, therefore, educate themselves about food policy, distribution, and processing to feel secure about what they eat. Yet because individuals have the ability to obtain information about food on their own, they withdraw their support from institutions—such as the federal government—which oversee food safety issues. Although individuals are knowledgeable, the government is weaker, and individuals have more risks to learn about and navigate. More important, these risks are distributed down the socioeconomic ladder as those with lower levels of education have less ability to obtain information about risks.

Of course, risks do not arise wholesale; they are a result of the technological advances that frequently have substantial social benefits. Risk is cyclical and iterative: Increasing knowledge and security on the one hand generates unexpected risks on the other.

### **Mediated Lifeworld, Individualism, and Risk in the Information Society**

The implications of a media saturated lifeworld, together with the structural changes of networked individualism and increasing risk, form the basic social structure of the information society in which young people live. As illustrated in Figure 1, these aspects of the information society are mutually constitutive and reinforcing: Media are both the means and methods by

which young people navigate the information society. Specifically, as discussed previously, young people are more likely to navigate society as individuals in social networks and less likely to rely on conventional forms of social and structural support. Through life increasingly mediated and lived online, the pressures of a risk society lead young people to attempt to mitigate their risk. Accordingly, young people individually seek increased information in ever faster cycles, with steadily decreasing structural support from government *and* social support through traditional groupings of family and friends.<sup>2</sup> This shapes the lifeworld of youth, that is, the overall cultural and political environment for youth not just in the United States but also increasingly globally. Moreover, this generates a cycle where networked life makes individual resources and information increasingly important, and navigating this lifeworld individually means increasing exposure to risk of all sorts. These forces emerge in tension creating an important paradox: the simultaneous risk of too much information (overload) and too little information (fragmented or incomplete information).

This cycle drives the dual dynamic of a flattening-out of the conventional hierarchies that have shaped U.S. economic and political life together with a ramping-up of access to information and the speed with which we must process and understand that information (for this phenomenon of “acceleration” see, Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009). In what follows, we briefly illustrate these processes in the United States, first by considering economic vulnerability in the lives of young people. Next, we consider race relationships in the United States, examining specifically how more networked and loosely based ties inform cultural shifts. Both of these examples demonstrate the processes of individualization and risk that make young people particularly vulnerable.

## **Living Risk: Negotiating Economic Risk and Race Relationships in the Information Society**

### *Economic Risk in the United States*

Drawing on Beck’s (1992) concept of risk society, Joseph Hacker shows how risk has increased in the United States by focusing on the retrenchment of the U.S. welfare state. Hacker surveys the broad structural and institutional changes in pensions, health care, employment, and other social policies that have increased risk for all U.S. citizens. He finds that risk has been increasingly privatized over the past 30 years in the United States, leaving individuals and families vulnerable and left to handle risk on their own. His longitudinal analysis of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics demonstrates

that—along with growing inequality since the 1970s—the United States is also facing rapidly growing economic insecurity, especially with respect to wealth. According to Hacker, this increased stress from risk is particularly great on young workers and families. Specifically, in 1984 the wealth gap between older families (heads of household, aged 55-64 years) was 4.5 times that of young families (heads of household, aged 25-34 years). By 2003 the gap had risen to 13.5 times (Hacker, 2004).

At the same time, young people increasingly need higher levels of education to compete in the global economy (Fischer & Hout, 2006; Powell & Snellman, 2004), whereas the cost of education continues to rise (College Board, 2006; Fischer & Hout, 2006). Between the 1986-1987 school year and 2006, tuition, fees, and room and board at 4-year colleges rose *at least* 60% in constant 2006 US dollars (College Board, 2006). The number of students enrolled in college grew by 44% between 1977 and 2003, whereas student loan volume rose to a staggering 833%, leading to the “debt-for-diploma” system (Draut, 2006). For young people, therefore, though education becomes more and more critical to their chances for advancement, it offers diminishing returns at a higher cost (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Specifically, families’ ability to assist their college-bound children is in sharp decline (Draut, 2006; Hacker, 2004).

Hacker’s findings, of course, preceded the current worldwide economic crisis beginning in 2008. The precipitous downturn in the stock market, followed by bank failures, record-high home foreclosures, the tightening of lending, and the highest rate of unemployment in the United States since the 1930s has led to the worst economic outlook in the United States since the Great Depression. In a global and finance-based economy (Krippner, 2003), this foretells a precarious future for young people across national boundaries.

### *Economic Risk in the Information Society*

In an economy that is increasingly based on computer skills, young people need the ability to navigate new media to succeed (Powell & Snellman, 2004). Media use is also implicated in the weak social safety net and increasing socioeconomic disparities. Specifically, research on the “digital divide” suggests that social, cultural, and economic inequalities are exacerbated by the use of new media, so youth have to be digitally savvy to ensure economic success (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). A “second-level digital divide” (Hargittai, 2002) examines the ways that disparate levels of competence with new media forms can benefit or hinder different segments of the population (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Standsbury, 2003). For example, with regard to

increasing individuals' life chances or "capital-enhancing" web use, Hargittai and Hinnant find that more educated people and young men are better able to use online resources. Young people's media use is thus critically connected to their increasing need for higher education discussed earlier. For youth, therefore, media competence and navigation of networked communities are crucial to higher achievement and mitigating risk.

Paradoxically, however, media use also *increases risk*. Specifically, people's expertise in navigating new information technology has to be weighed against the potential for them losing traditional skills and abilities (Buckingham, Scanlon, & Sefton-Green, 2001). Recent studies suggest that, despite claims of technology corporations, technologists, and young people themselves, "multitasking" is actually a form of distraction that interferes with cognitive development. This has been demonstrated in the laboratory (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009) and more generally in the Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout et al., 2010) study discussed earlier. Furthermore, the Kaiser authors found significant correlations between heavy media use and lower grades and lower levels of personal contentment (Rideout et al., 2010).

For young people seeking economic independence and success, media use represents the ongoing tension of the information society. Competent media use is central to economic success; young people must adopt it and tap networks for knowledge and information. Yet media also exposes youth to risks as young people turn their attention away from school and other conventional forms of education and knowledge production. As an example of the cycle of risk and individualism, this emergent tension gets reinforced and shapes the background from which young people make decisions and take action.

### *Race and Risk in the Information Society*

Growing up in the information society means young people are coming of age in an era where structural barriers continue to inhibit social mobility (Fischer & Mattson, 2009), but interpersonal relationships are wider, more diverse, and more accepting (Wellman, 2001). For example, structural, racial, ethnic, and religious divisions generally do not conform to young people's values of peace and equality (Levine, 2007). On the national stage, racial divisions appear to be breaking down, but structural inequalities remain intact (Fischer & Mattson, 2009). The disjunction between individual values and achievements and larger social trends puts pressure on individual young people to navigate unequal racial structures that are at once made less visible by historic events while at the same time affirmed by longstanding inequalities.

In the United States, the contours of this culture are most apparent in the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. Hailed by some pundits as the dawning of a new “postracial” era, Obama’s election offered new hope to young African Americans that they could, in fact, reach the highest levels of power in the United States and the world (Carter, 2009). This historic event represented a watershed moment not only for the black community but also for American politics and equality (Henry, 2009). More broadly there is evidence of decreases in residential racial segregation (Logan, Stults, & Farley, 2004), economic disparities (Fischer & Hout, 2006), and other indicators of racial divisions. Data also indicate that the emergence of middle-class black and Latino families has helped to narrow racial wealth gaps (Fischer & Hout, 2006; Fischer & Mattson, 2009).

At the same time, attitudes of inclusion, diversity, and heightened sensitivity continue to expand (Levine, 2007). Indeed, Obama’s political persona hinges on his ability to build consensus, represent “change,” and usher in an era of cooperation (Sinclair-Chapman & Price, 2008). Both symbolically and strategically, Obama’s election signals a shift from previous generations of partisan politics and identity-based policy to flatter relationships that work on building consensus.

Despite these changes, however, U.S. trends continue to show significant and deep structural socioeconomic inequalities that correlate highly with race. Disparate rates of incarceration, educational achievement, and unemployment illustrate the systematic difficulties that young African Americans and Latinos face (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Carter, 2009; Krysan & Bader, 2007). Wealth inequality continues to rise, and African Americans in particular tend to occupy the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder (Fischer & Mattson, 2009; Hacker, 2004).

We do not attempt to adjudicate the importance of race versus socioeconomic status in determining the relative cohesion or segmenting of American society or predicting expected educational, occupational, and health outcomes for young people. What we find noteworthy is the existence of the “race-class” debate itself (Fischer & Mattson, 2009) in illustrating the forces of individualization and risk for young people. The attenuation of racist and racialist attitudes, and the “declining significance” of race with respect to social segmentation—though important social achievements—also push young people, particularly racial and ethnic minorities, to confront new burdens of navigating racial and economic structures as individuals through their own choices and identities. Because youth are networked, structural barriers seem less constraining and communities are formed more fluidly. At the same time, however, young people (of all races) are less likely to engage in

conventional political causes, promote social change, or join social movement organizations (Levine, 2007). This leaves young people to forge their own opportunities within networks where obstacles are difficult to see.

Opportunities for socioeconomic success are available, but achieving that success involves navigating networked communities in which the hierarchies and power bases are not always clearly delimited (Wellman, 2002). For young people, therefore, navigating the politics of race exemplifies the great and increasing need for information, high levels of achievement, and intense pressure to make the right choices.

Furthermore, the tensions of the information society that funnel youth into increased media use also emerge as risks for youth. This is exacerbated with youth of color. Specifically, the highest levels of media use were among “tweens,” or 11- to 14-year-olds, and all black and Hispanic young people (controlling for wealth and income demographics). Indeed, black and Hispanic youth spend about *13 hr a day* using media. This suggests that increased technology use is being disproportionately distributed to the least advantaged segments of the U.S. youth population (Rideout et al., 2010). Thus, tensions emerge between individual choices and structural forces that foster or hinder advancement. Youth must rely on media to gather information to mitigate their risk and develop broad and often mediated networks. Doing so, however, reinforces the cycle of information, risk, and individualism. Moreover, as discussed earlier, less educated youth are less able to navigate media information and less able to use technology to increase their opportunities (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008).

## Conclusion

We have made two major arguments. First, that the increase of media use among young people has reached a tipping point, such that we can no longer speak of a lifeworld of young people that is separated from media in all of its forms. Both the sheer volume of media use and its centrality to youth socialization and interaction now place media at the center of young people’s lives. From forming identities, to the cultural background for their action and decision making, and the institutional framework of social interaction, young people’s lives are mediated. Although youth still live in communities of place, and are brought up in “nonmedia” institutions (family, school), these are, at least in the United States, filtered through a media lens for most young people, most of the time.

Second, we have argued that this increase in media use feeds and is fed by a cycle of risk and individualism. In the information society, individuals have

to be self-reliant in navigating complex networks and flatter hierarchies. Young people form their identities as they are both freed from traditional constraints and increasingly fending for themselves in a world characterized by constant flows of information that are too fast and too large to find meaningful patterns of action within them. We illustrated these concepts by looking at the risk and individualism among young people inherent in the economy and race relationships in the United States.

In concluding, we want to emphasize that elements of the youth-media-risk and individualism relationship are paradoxical, rather than *either* dysfunctional or a social panacea. Access to media, as we have suggested, does raise both young people's sense of autonomy *and* their real ability to navigate complex information, find answers to questions, and, at least online, to participate in news and discussion in ways that were not available only a short time ago. These are real gains in autonomy and self-reliance. Although risk throws individuals back on their own decisions, the information society gives them tools and content to make new forms of social inquiry and social media with which to form new, more extended, and, possibly, more diverse networks to make those decisions. Networked individualism *may*, on balance, open up new horizons of autonomy in culture, social choice, and even economic possibilities. In the following, we discuss the implications of our research and offer some directions for educators and policy makers that we believe will help facilitate positive directions for youth in the information society. Specifically, we address overcoming the digital divide and warding off the polarization that appears to accompany media saturation in an effort to bridge social and economic divisions.

One central implication of our work is that digital media can reinforce polarization, which is a structural consequence of both the web and human tendencies to seek communities of like-minded others. Therefore, it is important to find new ways to bridge communities in the digital world. Those concerned with youth have a special interest in finding and stimulating new modes of developing boundary-spanning behavior on the web. In part, this means using social networking capabilities, like Facebook, MySpace, and others that will undoubtedly develop in their wake, to begin to develop boundary-crossing activity. Although how this is best achieved is not yet clear, one promising experiment is the BLINK project in Boston, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service and developed by the Center for Information and Research on Service Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. BLINK develops a social network platform, integrated with Facebook, to allow college students in the Boston area to share their civic and volunteer work with each other, recruit other

students, and post information. (Coauthor Friedland is a codeveloper of the platform.) Undoubtedly other more informal uses of social media will be needed, and the development of mechanisms for boundary crossing is a critical policy goal.

Since risk and individualism are in a nearly constant process of contestation,<sup>3</sup> meeting the challenges of the information society is possible. Indeed, in the information society, reforms are imaginable that would counter the digital divide and encourage boundary crossing. Such policies include increasing civic and media participation for large parts of society and may include the following objectives:

- A universal broadband fund that would bring broadband at low or subsidized costs to rural and underserved urban areas.
- Policies to encourage the training of young people as community information assets. For example, the development of a Community Information Corps as a part of Americorps would allow youth to build community-wide information, learn new skills and tools, and help others to get online and be trained.
- Policies to develop local civic communication commons, including the leveraging of existing public investments in radio and television, to help make a broad, youth-led community information domain.
- The adoption of school-based curricula in which youth learn not only media skills but civic media skills, including the integrated teaching of civic and media literacy.
- Social alliances with media and software companies and hardware manufacturers to expand youth access to advanced software and creative platforms and to encourage creative production that crosses the boundaries of income, gender, race, and age.

These policies and others like them will not, of course, radically alter the overall direction of development of the information society. But they will offer policy entry points for those who want to expand youth participation and leadership in the information fields, educate youth about both the possibilities and dangers of the new media world, and engage young people as active creators of culture and civic life.

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## Notes

1. Initially, this process was driven by urban and suburban dispersion and the need to maintain ties extended over ever-broader metropolitan regions and maintained primarily via telephone (Fischer, 1992; Fischer & Hout, 2006; Fischer & Mattson, 2009).
2. Interestingly, recent evidence indicates that people are more likely to seek help online than they are offline (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Raine, 2006). This finding, however, does not contradict the basic premise that online support is sought out and navigated on an individual basis.
3. To take one example, the recent passage of health care reform in the United States greatly lowers the risk of untreated illness, early death, and early bankruptcy for all citizens, not least young people, and it disproportionately aids those of lower income. A large-scale political mobilization was necessary to achieve even this modest reform, but, with it, risk is lowered society wide.

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