

The Kids Are All Right Online

A WORKING-CLASS BLACK woman lingered after I spoke about youth and digital media last year at Detroit's Wayne State University. She pushed her way through the crowd to ask a simple question: "Will my boy be all right?"

Her adolescent son spent a great deal of time online, talking with friends, building his home page, playing computer games, doing his homework. She had heard conflicting reports—teachers claiming Net access fostered educational growth, and media reformers warning about teens "running amok" on the Net. After the Columbine shootings, the moral panic about "growing up online" and the shooters' hate-spewing Web sites dominated media coverage. And now, like so many other American parents, she was worried that she was wrong to let her son explore cyberspace when she knew so little about computers herself.

As the director of MIT's new Comparative Media Studies Program, I had been called months earlier to testify before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearings on "marketing violence to youth." As the father of a 19-year-old son, I already knew how contemporary adolescents were using digital media to expand their social networks and how important those links could be, especially for outcasts or kids at risk. Trying to better understand youth perspectives, I launched a tour of American high schools and monitored teen Web sites. Those experiences convinced me that many of our kids are going to be all right, not in spite of the fact that they are growing up online but *because* of it.

American adolescence is an emotional battleground: Children struggle to define who they are and how they fit into the adult world, adults struggle between desires to push them from the nest and to clutch them to our breasts. Teens need a safe space to take their first steps toward adulthood, to

find their political voices and to bond with a community beyond the immediate family. For many of our children, the Web has become such a place. The Web hasn't made teens lonely; it offers a way to connect with others like themselves, who share their values and who care about what they have to say. Outcasts need such a space even more than kids who get strokes from their parents, teachers and coaches.

Contrary to the ominous news

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images of teen Web sites, teens themselves often describe the Web as a utopian space, a refuge from divorced parents, economic hardship, crowded classrooms, intolerant teachers and hostile peers. As one raver said of his site, "This place, my little home on the Web, was designed out of the desire to have a place to go when I want to feel like there are no problems, no worries, no stress and no violence in or around my life." Another girl named her Web site "Palisades," explaining the word's relevance: "A strong fence made of stakes driven into the ground for defense. Palisades is a place where I can feel free to express myself without fear of being torn down.... Within the Palisades you will find the real me."

Many kids feel they have little say in their real-world environments, and so they value the Web as their own world—where they set the rules. As one teen explained, "It's the only thing I have total control over, and I love it." For some, the idea of a culture created and defined by adolescents may evoke images straight from *Lord of the Flies*. Indeed, a teen chat room can be as brutal as a high school locker room. Still, the Web offers more places to hide and more places to find yourself than a school's long and lonely hall-

ways. The Internet expands the number of potential social contacts for isolated teens. In a small-town school, there may be only one goth or openly gay student. On the Web, there are thousands, if not millions.

But a kid's ability to find acceptance and affirmation through this social network depends on relatively unfettered Net access. The minute that adults police the Web, teens are back in a realm where self-revelation carries

risks. Many of the filtering programs on school computers, for example, block access to any site referring to homosexuality, whether or not the content of the site is sexually explicit, cutting off a lifeline for gay, lesbian and bisexual teens.

Slashdot columnist Jon Katz has described young people as "ground zero" in the digital revolution, at once the force for cultural transformation and the group in which the defining struggles will take place. Kids know the digital revolution demands a battle against adult attempts to regulate youth expression. The Web has given them a taste of freedom and a glimpse of another world. Their desire to dwell in cyberspace can't be reduced to Internet addiction, emotional withdrawal or any other reformist cliché. If teens would rather be online, maybe it's because their everyday lives suck. If we want to make sure they will be all right, we shouldn't block their access; we should use their online world as a model to reform the real-world institutions that are failing them. ■



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