# A Life in Bits and Bytes: A Portrait of a College Student and Her Life With Digital Media

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**Background/Context:** *Digital media seem to pervade all aspects of American youth's lives, from communicating with friends and family to learning about the world around them. Many educators and scholars celebrate the new opportunities for learning that Web 2.0 tools present, and empirical evidence suggests that computer-mediated communication positively influences the quality of adolescents' friendships. Yet, adults are also mindful of the risks associated with youth's digital media activities, including the negative effects of multitasking and the implications for identity development of being perpetually "tethered" to one's friends and family.*

**Focus of Study:** *Because widespread Internet and mobile phone use are still relatively new phenomena, further research is needed to investigate their effects on young people. Existing research indicates that the effects are unlikely to be wholly positive or negative. In this article, the author explores the tension between the promises and perils associated with digital media in the context of one college student's daily experiences.*

**Research Design:** *Using the qualitative method of portraiture, the author examined how one college student uses digital media in her everyday life; her motivations and goals for using various media; and the opportunities and drawbacks she perceives in her daily media use.*

**Conclusions:** *This student's experiences illuminate the always-connected, always-connecting quality of life for today's young people. Her experiences also reveal the complexity of life with digital media, because media both support her connections to people and ideas and give rise to feelings of disconnection and fragmentation. Finally, this portrait highlights the need for and value of nurturing youth's reflective practices and providing them with spaces to engage in sustained reflection.*

Today's young people are growing up immersed in digital media. In the United States, fully 93% of teens aged 12 -17 and 90% of young adults aged 18 -29 are online, compared to 84% of 30-49 year-olds, 70% of 50-64 year-olds, and 40% of adults aged 65 and older (Purcell, 2011). Social network sites, particularly Facebook, represent a favored online destination among youth. Indeed, teens and young adults represent the heaviest demographic of social network users; nearly three-quarters (73%) of teens with Internet access and 82% of young adults use social network sites (Purcell, 2011). These percentages are considerably higher than the 64% of 30-49 year-olds, 47% of 50-64 year-olds, and 25% of adults aged 65 and older who use social network sites. Increasingly, youth access social network sites and other online destinations via their mobile phones, a trend that is unsurprising in light of the fact that 75% of teens and 93% of young adults now own a cell phone (Lenhart, 2011). Young people use cell phones primarily to send and receive text messages. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that text messaging has become the dominant form of communication among teen friends (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). When asked what method they use regularly to contact their friends outside of school, 54% of teens reported using text messaging, compared to just 33% of teens who reported engaging in daily face-to-face interactions.

Adults, including parents, educators, and scholars, recognize both opportunities and risks in young people's digital media use. For instance, many educators and scholars celebrate the new opportunities for learning that digital media present (Gee, 2003; Gee & Levine, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Shaffer, 2006). They observe that the Internet provides instant access to vast amounts of information, and Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, wikis, and podcasts, expand the ways in which youth engage with ideas and each other. Digital media also have the potential to play a positive role in youth's social development, a key aspect of which involves exploring one's identity in the context of close interpersonal relationships (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Sullivan, 1953; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). According to Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal communication theory, computer-mediated communication (CMC) encourages people to self-disclose and interact in a more intimate way than they otherwise would in a face-to-face context. The empirical evidence accumulated over the last decade indicates that CMC-facilitated self-disclosure positively influences the quality of adolescents' friendships. Valkenburg and Peter (2009) drew on this evidence to propose the Internet-enhanced self-disclosure hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the heightened self-disclosure associated with adolescents' digital media use enhances the closeness and quality of their friendships.

Improved relationship quality, in turn, positively influences adolescent well-being.

Yet, adults are also mindful of the risks associated with youth's digital media activities. Although most of us can likely recall instances of juggling multiple activities at once, young people are particularly avid multitaskers (Bauerlein, 2008; Carrier, Cheever, Rosen, Benitez, & Chang, 2009). Digital media play a central role in youth's multitasking behavior, allowing them simultaneously to conduct multiple conversations through instant messaging, surf the Web, talk or text on their cell phone, and listen to music on just about any of their electronic devices. Parents and educators worry that learning is compromised when young people's attention is so divided, and empirical evidence appears to justify this concern (cf. Gasser & Palfrey, 2009). Further, Sherry Turkle (2011) cautioned that important developmental tasks of adolescence, such as the achievement of autonomy, intimacy, and a sense of identity, may be undermined by youth's digital media use. She suggested that maintaining a constant connection to others poses a challenge to achieving a sense of personal autonomy, and genuine intimacy may be difficult to attain without the risks involved in confronting others face-to-face. With respect to identity development, Turkle recalled Erikson's (1968) observation that youth require stillness for self-reflection. She noted that the "always on" nature of digital media makes finding such stillness extremely difficult.

Because widespread Internet and mobile phone use are still relatively new phenomena, further research is needed to explore their effects on young people. Existing research indicates that the effects are unlikely to be wholly positive or negative. Moreover, the rapidly changing nature of digital media technologies suggests that different technologies will influence youth in different ways. Although large-scale surveys are a useful way to detect general patterns of media use and their relationship to certain outcomes like friendship quality and self-esteem, they are limited in their ability to reflect the full complexity of life with digital media. To uncover this complexity, many scholars have adopted qualitative approaches, such as interviewing and participant observation. Their work has yielded valuable insights into the ways youth use digital media to engage with their world (e.g. boyd, 2008; Ito et al., 2009; Stern, 2007). The current study contributes to this rich line of inquiry with its in-depth examination of the role that digital media play in the life of one young person. In this article, the author presents a portrait of one emerging adult attending college in the Northeast United States to explore the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How does Anna,[1] an emerging adult in her second year of college, use digital media in her everyday life?

Research Question 2: How does she describe her motivations and goals for using various digital media?

Research Question 3: What opportunities and drawbacks does she perceive in her daily media use?

## METHOD

To investigate these research questions, the author employed the methodology of portraiture. Portraiture draws from the same methods of data collection as other qualitative approaches. For this portrait, the author conducted two hour-long interviews during the summer of 2007 and three interviews of the same length during the fall of 2008. The first two interviews focused primarily on biographical information and Anna's experiences maintaining a blog on LiveJournal, a popular online journaling community. The three later interviews focused more broadly on Anna's use of various digital media and her reflections on their role in her life. Between each of these later interviews, the author asked Anna to keep a daily log of her digital media use. This log was used as a basis of discussion in the two final interviews. By engaging in an extensive process of data collection that drew on multiple sources of data, the author was able to produce a "thick description" of Anna's experiences with digital media (Geertz, 1973).

Echoing the words of Eudora Welty, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) explained that the portraitist's job is to listen *for* a story rather than *to* a story. In this way, portraiture requires the researcher to engage in an active process of narrative construction. The author approached the process of narrative construction by creating matrices that juxtaposed emergent themes in the data with the study's research questions and theoretical concepts from the literature on adolescent development and digital media (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These matrices were used to construct a narrative that both illuminates central aspects of Anna's digital media experiences and addresses the broader public discourse on the role of digital media in young people's lives.

In contrast to other qualitative approaches, which seek to establish validity, portraiture's standard is authenticity (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Through careful observation and documentation, on the one hand, and thoughtful, active interpretation on the other, the portraitist attempts to capture the essence of the participant's experience.

The standard of authenticity requires the researcher to reveal her relationship to the participant, because it is in the context of this relationship that the researcher observes, documents, and interprets meaning. Indeed, researcher and participant co-construct meaning as they interact with each other. Thus, the researcher places herself as a central actor in the portrait to illuminate her relationship with the participant and reveal her distinct perspective. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis explained, "A reader who knows where the portraitist is coming from can more comfortably enter the piece, scrutinize the data, and form independent interpretations" (p. 96).

A central theme of this portrait is the tension between the opportunities and drawbacks associated with the pervasiveness of digital media in Anna's life. In the discussion, the author addresses this tension and considers the developmental and social implications of growing up in a digital era, as well as opportunities for educational intervention.

## A PORTRAIT OF ANNA'S DIGITAL LIFE

### DIGITAL BEGINNINGS . . . AND INTERRUPTIONS

Anna walks quickly along Commerce Avenue toward Around-the-World News, the landmark newsstand that has sat at the heart of Regent Square for over 50 years. She doesn't know yet that the operator plans not to renew its lease at the end of the year. City officials will try to replace it with another newsstand, but they know it won't be easy. Selling newspapers and magazines from around the world no longer holds the same allure now that every personal computer with an Internet connection—and many phones—can do the same, and for free.

Anna looks up at the giant digital clock that rises above Milton Savings Bank. This clock has become a landmark in its own right during the nearly 10 years since it assumed its perch atop the brick building. Its bright yellow digits may offend the neoclassical pilasters and cornice below, but busy passersby have come to rely on it to tell them if they are late for their next class, meeting, or campus tour.

The clock says 2:46. Sixteen minutes late. Anna realizes now that she's not sure where she's going. She pulls her phone out of her backpack, and a few moments later, I jump at the sound of my office phone ringing.

The sound of the phone plucks me out of cyberspace, where I had been weeding through the morning's unopened e-mails. I wait my customary three rings before answering, "Hello?" Anna gets straight to the point. "Hi, it's Anna. I'm on my way, sorry I'm late." She's breathing heavily, unconsciously, as she walks and talks together. "I'm in Regent Square,

about to cross over towards Baxter Street, but I've forgotten where your office is." With those bearings, I'm able to direct her along Baxter Street, past the florist, the dry cleaner's, the new pizza shop, and then right onto my street. "Oh right! I remember now. Okay, I'll be there in a couple of minutes." I start to respond, "Great, I'll see you soon. Goodbye," but Anna has already put her phone away. I wonder if I'll ever get used to the idea that not all phone conversations require a beginning, middle, and end.

I haven't seen Anna for over a year. She is one of 20 girls I interviewed last summer as part of a study exploring girls' online journaling (see Davis, 2010). Most of the girls, including Anna, had been blogging throughout their teenage years. Although a sizable number of young people have tried blogging at one time or another, far fewer have maintained their writing with the same consistency as the girls in my study. It was fascinating for me to listen to them talk about how they had used their blogs over the years to share their ideas, explore their identities, and keep in touch with friends. Although the girls' blogging experiences certainly set them apart from most teens, their immersion in the digital world did not. Inevitably, our conversations drifted to other types of new media activities, and it quickly became clear that blogging was just one small part of their digital lives.

In many ways, I recognize myself in the girls who participated in my study. My laptop and cell phone are never far away, I rarely go more than a few hours without checking my e-mail, and I can be seen sporting the iconic white earbuds as I listen to my iPhone on walks to work. Yet, although it's hard for me to imagine my life without digital media technologies, it's not impossible. I don't breathe these technologies as the girls I interviewed do. As a scholar of adolescent development, I wonder how they may be affecting their development.

I'm not alone. Educators, parents, researchers, and policy makers are asking the same question. So far, the answers typically follow one of two narratives. In the first—a favorite among the mainstream media and many policy makers—the digital media are gradually causing young people to become antisocial, solipsistic, and illiterate individuals who are easily victimized by "cyberstalkers." Proponents of the second narrative—many of them media studies scholars—argue that youth's media use opens up an exciting world in which to explore new ideas and learn about themselves and other people.

In my conversations with the bloggers, I formed the impression that the interaction between development and digital media is far more complex than a simple matter of good or evil. Recalling my engaging conversations with Anna last summer, as well as her thoughtful introspection

and insightful comments, I knew that she would be the perfect person to help me make sense of this complicated interaction. I was encouraged when she agreed to muse with me about her digital life. She replied quickly to my electronic invitation: *Katie, That sounds great! It was interesting for me to participate in the study in the first place, and I would be happy to come back again. When were you thinking of having the interview(s)? – Anna.*

My office door is ajar, and Anna, pushing it wider, walks in and greets me as if we had not stopped talking since she phoned from Regent Square. "Hi! Sorry again for being late. It's been *such* a crazy day!" Although we haven't seen each other in over a year, I feel a sense of familiarity in Anna's presence. Her broad smile and unceremonious entrance suggest to me that she feels the same. Anna is dressed, as I am, in casual college attire, wearing a purple knit sweater and blue jeans. Her thick, curly brown hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail that allows several rogue curls to escape and form an accidental frame around her face. She discards her heavy backpack and plops down in the comfy chair that I sit in when I've sat too long in front of my computer. She's telling me about her outstandingly busy day, which seems to amuse her as it overwhelms me. She was up late last night studying for her molecular biology midterm. "I think it went pretty well," she says breezily. As soon as the exam was over, she turned her attention to the organic chemistry problem set that is due at 5:00 p.m. She's not done yet, but she assures me it won't be hard to finish it off right after our conversation. Later this evening, she's scheduled to perform in a concert with her Jewish a cappella group, followed by a birthday celebration for a high school friend who is visiting for the weekend. Now several years into my graduate studies, I have encountered many people with schedules as busy as the one Anna describes to me. And yet, although these people seem perpetually harried and overwhelmed by their days, the lightness in Anna's voice suggests that she rarely feels defeated by her busy schedule. Quite the opposite, in fact; she sounds charged by the myriad activities that fill her days.

Our conversation continues in this way, meandering down the different tributaries of her daily experiences. Most of the time, Anna's speech is unhurried, her tone calm. However, when we talk about memorable classes (expository writing, international relations, human rights), extracurricular activities (philosophy club, Model U.N., engineering club), or influential teachers (ninth-grade biology teacher, AP Physics teacher, several English teachers), the sparkle in her eyes returns and her voice quickens. She starts to tell me about her plans to spend next summer in Chile, but stops abruptly at the sound of her cell phone ringing.

Anna's attention shifts before I can register the source of the interruption. "Where are you? At the Science Center?" She stands up, and I'm not

sure where to look or what to do while she's talking. "Have you finished the problem set? I still have a couple of questions left." She picks up her bag and I realize that our conversation is over, stopped in mid-sentence, just as it had started. "I'm just finishing up with something, and then I'll meet you there." Feeling like an intruder in this conversation that intruded into ours, I try to busy myself by rearranging the day's strewn papers on my desk, putting the caps back on my pens, and throwing away used Post-It notes.

It takes me a moment to realize that Anna has put her phone away and is talking now to me. She asks me to send her an e-mail about our next conversation. I agree and wish her luck on her problem set, and she's gone. Just like that, as quickly as she came.

DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

I glance at the clock on my laptop and realize that Anna should be here by now. This will be our second conversation this month, and I'm excited to see what she brings with her. I asked her last week to keep a daily record of her new media activities. As I wait for her arrival, I try to guess what her digital log will look like. My imaginings are cut short by a muffled voice outside my door that says, "Mom, I have to go, I'll call you later."

Anna enters with a smile and hands me a sheet of loose-leaf paper before I say a word. As we take our seats and catch up on the week's happenings, I steal a quick glance at the pencil jottings that run down both sides of the paper. My eyes are drawn immediately to the words *Internet* and *Phone* that seem to dominate the page. This alternating pattern is occasionally disrupted by the words *Gmail*, *Facebook*, and *Homework*. Anna tells me she didn't realize how much time she was spending on the Internet! I receive her exclamation as an invitation to look more closely at the log. It starts at 11:35 a.m. on Saturday with *Internet, looking up location of wedding*. It ends this afternoon at 2:27 p.m. with *Phone (boyfriend)*, recorded just a few minutes ago. Forty-four entries appear in between, organized by day and time. It's my turn to exclaim when I notice the late nights logged on the Internet: 1:43 a.m. on Saturday, 3 a.m. on Sunday, 1:45 a.m. on Monday. Morning Internet checks aren't as early as mine tend to be (but early enough considering the nights that precede them): 9:17 a.m. on Sunday, 8:31 a.m. on Monday, 8:49 a.m. on Tuesday. As I study the page, the arc of Anna's days seems to emerge from this record of her digital media use.

"As you can probably see on the log, it [new media use] is sort of all throughout the day." She points to specific entries on her log and

explains the purpose of each activity and the context surrounding it. Her first recorded activity, *Saturday, 11:35-11:37 a.m.: Internet, looking up location of wedding*, involved checking her e-mail for the invitation to a wedding she attended last weekend. She used the address provided on the electronic invitation to look up directions on Google Maps. Anna's finger continues down the page and stops at two short phone calls she placed the next day: *Sunday, 3:44-3:47 p.m.: Phone (meeting for wedding), 4:35-4:45 p.m.: Phone (directions for wedding)*. She explains, "I was sharing a car with some friends, so I was just trying to figure out where we were meeting and what was going on with that." We spend most of the afternoon in this way, discussing specific entries and fitting them into the broader context of Anna's life.

Her media use spans the entire course of her day, however, Anna notes that it is most heavily concentrated at night. I see evidence of this pattern on the log. Morning and afternoon entries are minutes in length, whereas entries recorded in the evening are measured in hours. Sunday night starts with two consecutive phone calls at 10:15 p.m. and 10:40 p.m., followed by time on the Internet from 11:40 p.m. to 12:47 a.m., and again from 1:14 to 3:00 a.m. Anna explains that she keeps the Internet open on her laptop as she works on her homework. Her most common Internet haunts are Gmail, which she uses for e-mail and instant messaging, and Facebook.

I notice that most of Anna's digital activities involve communicating with other people, and I ask her how she chooses between different modes of communication. "I have different dynamics with different people," she explains. Her brother, a senior in high school, doesn't like to talk on the phone, so they use IM to chat in the evenings. Anna reflects that without online tools like IM, most of their conversations would likely take place during visits home. Because her mother and brother live in a nearby suburb, these visits occur regularly. Even so, she acknowledges that conversations with her brother would occur less frequently without IM. The same is true for her friends from high school, as well as the friends she made during her year abroad in Paris. She explains, "That's really the only way that I am going to communicate with them, so that's good. And sometimes we end up having good conversations through IM." She also uses IM occasionally to communicate with college friends. "It's a way to talk about random things late at night." In contrast, Anna talks on the phone with her boyfriend and mother nearly every day. If she wants to reach out to a friend she hasn't spoken with in some time, she might leave a short message on Facebook saying, "Hi, I haven't talked to you in a while." For more in-depth updates, e-mail is better because it allows for longer messages.

Sometimes Anna uses her blog to update an entire group of friends at once. I recall our conversations the previous summer about the various ways she uses her blog to connect with others. Since eighth grade, Anna has maintained a blog on the popular online journaling community, LiveJournal. Begun in 1999, LiveJournal is a virtual community that hosts several million personal blogs. As with social network sites like Facebook and MySpace, users create personal profiles and link them to the profiles of other users through a process of "friending." Whereas some people have never met their LiveJournal friends in person, Anna came to know all her LiveJournal friends initially in an offline context before they extended their friendship online. In fact, the original group of friends whom she started blogging with in eighth grade still comprise the foundation of her friends list. Anna thinks that LiveJournal has been a great way to stay in touch with her high school friends.

In addition to using LiveJournal to stay in touch with friends, the blogging format gives Anna a new lens through which to look at them. She explains that often in daily encounters, "people are a lot more light and on the surface with each other." I think about the quick "Hi, how are you?" exchanges I have with students, professors, and even friends throughout the day as we all hurry to the next meeting, the next class, the next doctor's appointment. We're all "Fine, thanks" in those brief moments, but I sense that we'd be so much more if we stretched the moments into minutes. In contrast, blog posts can be as detailed and reflective as the writer chooses. The commenting system, which lets LiveJournal users comment on each other's entries, makes it possible to hold a conversation over the course of several days. Anna reflects, "I mean, I have had really great conversations with people about, you know, who we want to be and stuff like that. But that doesn't usually happen offline." Anna believes that her extended conversations on LiveJournal have enriched not just her understanding of her friends, but also her understanding of the world.

> I think it's really interesting to see people's opinions. I definitely was shaped a lot by one of my friends, who is a real Obama supporter. She started talking about him a lot, even in 2004. She was a volunteer at the Democratic National Convention. So, it's been interesting to hear her talk about her experiences. I have another friend at the University of Chicago who has some really interesting opinions. I've gotten to see a more feminist side of things by reading her blog. These are people who I might keep in good touch with, but it's a different way of seeing what they think.

It strikes me that Anna's reflections are inconsistent with popular depictions of teenagers' digital communications. In contrast to the image of vacuous conversations carried on in "Internet speak," Anna is describing digital communications that support meaningful connection.

Realizing that we haven't talked much about e-mail, I ask Anna how it fits into her day, curious to know if she's as dependent on this form of digital communication as I have become. My curiosity is instantly sated when she tells me she receives about one e-mail every 15 minutes. "When I don't check my e-mail for a day, which is pretty rare, then usually there's 100 new messages. Not all of them will be important, but I would say probably about 40 or 50 of them will be something that I probably should look at." She explains that e-mail is the dominant mode of communication for making plans with people in the various student groups she belongs to, like her a cappella group. Professors and college administrators also use e-mail to send out class announcements or notifications about campus events. Other messages are less vital. "You also get the really cluttery e-mails saying, 'I want to borrow a hair dryer, mine just broke,' or something like that. Or people saying, 'This is such a funny video, you should look at it.' And then I'll end up looking at the video." We both laugh in mutual recognition.

As we make our way through her log, Anna talks about the many additional ways she uses the Internet besides personal communication.

> I look at *The New York Times* probably once or twice a day. And I end up reading all their 'Most E-mailed' articles. I visit a couple of Web comics. I'd say I'm on top of three, so I'll check those every day, or as often as they're updated. Lately, I've been looking at *The Huffington Post,* and then 538.com, which is an electoral college Web site, just to see what's going on with that.

Anna explains that course Web sites give her access to syllabi, handouts, lecture videos and slides, and feedback forms. A student myself, I nod in recognition of the central role that Web sites now play in the day-to-day management of a course. She adds,

> In the past, I've been burned for not checking the course Web sites enough. Science courses are supposed to post their problem sets a week before they're due, but there have been cases where they've posted them only three or four days before they're due. It's happened that I've checked the Web site a week before and assumed there wasn't a problem set that week. Later I find out by

talking to other people, who say, "Have you done the problem set yet?" So then I had to do it in like a day instead of having more time.

I shake my head in a gesture of sympathy, even as I register the matter-of-fact tone that Anna uses to recount her story of being "burned" by the moment's-notice quality of the new digital media.

Curious to hear more about how she handles the expectation of constant connectivity, I ask Anna if she can recall the longest stretch of time that she's spent without the Internet. She hesitates, and her face takes on a more serious expression as she searches for an answer. After several seconds, during which I try unsuccessfully to think of a recent Internet-free day of my own, she springs forward in her chair and declares, "Columbus Day weekend! I went hiking with my boyfriend and didn't check my e-mail for three days! I had a lot of e-mails when I got back, but it was nice to take a break." I ask Anna how she felt during that time, feeling slightly uneasy myself at the thought of three days of unopened e-mail. "Actually, I felt a little bit anxious. I was just hoping that nothing too important came up. But, you know, it was a three-day weekend anyway, so I was thinking that people would probably understand."

"Oh wait, somebody just texted me. Let me see what's up. I think I might need to meet somebody soon." Anna pulls her cell phone out of her backpack and continues to talk as she reads the text message and types her response. "We didn't really talk about texting much today," I note as she carries on her silent phone conversation. "This is actually from my boyfriend," she answers. "I mostly just text with him. We're going to meet up soon to do some Halloween stuff. I told him earlier that I would be busy now, so that's why he texted me." As we start to discuss plans for our final interview, I watch Anna move seamlessly between the conversation on the screen of her cell phone and the one we are having in my office. I try to detect a disruption in either one, but she seems in control of both. Her thumbs move effortlessly over the keys of her phone as she maintains eye contact with me. I marvel at this ability, particularly when I consider how often I've tripped while trying to walk and talk on my cell phone at the same time. Her texting ended, Anna stuffs her phone back in her bag, takes out her laptop, and opens her calendar so that it fills the screen. "Okay, so from 2:30 to 3:30 I have a meeting next week, but I could come by at 4:00 or something like that." I swivel around in my chair to face my computer, wiggle the red TrackPoint in the center of its keyboard, and click on my own calendar. "Next Friday at 4:00 looks good for me, too."

"BEEN EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE"

It's only 3:40 p.m. Anna isn't due to arrive for another 20 minutes, so I'm surprised when my phone rings and I hear her voice. She asks if she can come over now instead of waiting the 20 minutes until 4:00 p.m. Sure thing, I say, come on over, and I remember to let our conversation end without a goodbye. I've been thinking all week about the immediate, contingent, "always-on" quality of Anna's digital life, and of my own. I want to focus today's conversation on this aspect of the new media, because I'm not sure if the ambivalence I sensed in Anna's comments last week is a true representation of her feelings or a reflection of my own digital experiences.

   Anna takes her seat quickly when she enters my office a few minutes later. She is ready for our final piece of work together. I glance down at her digital media log and open our conversation with an observation. "Last time you told me that after you looked at all the times you were using the Internet, you almost thought you were on there too much."

> Well, I think that it's really bad if I'm not on top of my e-mail, and it's really bad if I'm not up to date on the class stuff that I have to do on the Internet. I also definitely value keeping in touch with friends. So all those are things that I really like to be able to do. But it's tough, because it becomes a real time trade-off. Often when I do those things, I end up going to other places on the Internet that aren't so valuable to me.

   I hear Anna's words as a description of my own experience. Like her, I value the ease of maintaining connections with friends and family members, many of whom are scattered across several countries. I find myself nodding in agreement as she continues, "It's great if I get to catch up with a friend that I haven't seen in a while. I don't think of things like IM necessarily as a waste of time, because I think it's really important to keep up to date with my friends."

   At the same time, Anna admits that she prefers face-to-face exchanges with friends. "I feel like I get a lot more out of the conversations that I have with people in person." She feels sometimes as though her digital media use detracts from these valued interchanges.

> There have been times when I have an afternoon free, and I have a certain number of things to do. So, say I have 3 hours of home-work and I have 5 hours of time. I'll end up spending 3 hours on

the Internet and then 2 hours on my homework, and then I have to catch up with that hour somewhere else. So, I'll end up eating dinner in my room or something like that. Or getting an hour less sleep, in which case I need to go back and take a nap the next day instead of hanging out with people. So it just ends up pushing into other things.

I wonder aloud, "Do you think your friendships at college would be any different without the Internet?" Anna pauses for a moment, looking past me at the books that line the wall adjacent to my desk. "I think it would probably be a lot more focused on who I actually saw every day. I think I would probably see a smaller group of people more, as opposed to seeing a larger group of people less frequently." She offers her high school friends and the friends she made in France as an example of the types of people who belong to this larger group. I think of the friends I have listed on Facebook, many of whom I met in high school or earlier and haven't seen for several years. They surely belong to the larger group that Anna describes. What would my friendship patterns be like if the last decade had not been marked by the infusion of new media tools into everyday life?

My attention snaps back into the room with the sound of Anna's phone ringing. She unzips her backpack, pulls out her phone, and looks down at its screen. "It's no one," she says dismissively, returning the phone to her bag. "Somebody always calls me by mistake, because my name's at the top of the alphabet."

Not sure where to focus my eyes during Anna's phone administrations, I look down at her digital media log, which is still resting in my lap. As I scan the page, I take in the flurry of activity that runs across it. When Anna's gaze rejoins mine, I muse out loud, "You've got lots of things going on, which has really come through in this log and in our conversations. Look at all the different things you're doing!"

Anna chuckles and replies, "Oh, yeah, it's sort of the way I like to live, though." Her voice is casual and light, but sincere. "For me, there are a lot of benefits to having the constant stream of information on the Internet. I think it's changed the way that I live to some degree. It makes it easier for me to be really overcommitted and easier for me to juggle a lot of things, which is good. . ." She pauses for a moment, and I detect the same ambivalence I noted last week. "But maybe it's also not so good, because if it weren't possible for me to do this much, then I wouldn't be doing this much!" Another pause, and again she continues, "I am getting a lot out of doing this much . . . but it really does make my life a little bit more fragmented." She shrugs and says finally, "I guess it's a tradeoff."

Anna spoke about this juggling act last week as well. She described what

typically happens in the evening as she sits down to do her homework. To spare herself the expense of a printed course pack, Anna opted at the beginning of the semester to download the readings for her global health class directly to her computer. Although this arrangement is cheap and convenient, it comes with distinct drawbacks, because it allows her to listen to music and keep a constant eye on her e-mail account. As a result, her reading "ends up taking twice as long." She runs into a similar problem on Tuesdays and Thursdays when she brings her laptop to class. Although she can take faster notes on the computer, she often finds herself checking e-mail at the same time.

> Using the Internet teaches one kind of skill, which is really being able to observe a lot of different types of information at the same time and do a lot of different things at once. I really appreciate being able to do that, because that way I can keep in touch with friends and learn about the world and do the stuff I need to do on e-mail at the same time as doing the other things I need to do. But sometimes I feel at the end of the day like I've been everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Anna laughs at this idea. Her laugh settles quickly into a smile, and I ask her to say more. She pauses briefly, then starts to talk about the difference between reading a printed book and skimming articles on *The New York Times* Web site:

> Even last year I actually was reading a book most of the time, or at least I was in the middle of something. Right now, I'm not really in the middle of anything. That makes me sad, but I just end up turning to the Internet instead of a book. It's a lot more manageable. It's there, it's easy, you can finish an article and move on to something else. If somebody interrupts you on the phone or something, it's easy to get off of it. Whereas, once I actually start reading I want to be reading for a period of time. I just want to be curled up in the book and not a part of everything else. It's hard to do that when everything is so permeated by communication.

Digital media allow Anna to go anywhere at anytime, indeed, at the *same* time. Anna identifies the paradoxical effect of feeling as though she's never fully anywhere. In contrast, the act of reading a book keeps her grounded in one place. As she reads, she is "not a part of everything else," but she somehow feels more wholly part of the moment. An avid reader

myself, I know well the feeling of focusing, laserlike, on the singular pur-
suit of a story's destination. I experience a similar sensation when I com-
pose a journal entry, an activity I maintained with greater frequency in my
adolescence. It strikes me that Anna's online journal might serve a similar
purpose. Although its pixilated form bears little resemblance to my ink-
smudged notebooks, Anna's blog nevertheless offers space for reflection.
I wonder if she accepts its offer. Does her blog serve as an antidote to the
"been everywhere and nowhere" feeling of most new-media activities?

FOR THE RECORD

Not quite. When I ask Anna for an update on her blogging activities, she
tells me that she writes far less frequently now that she's so busy in col-
lege. She used to update her blog on a weekly basis, but now she writes
"maybe once every 2 weeks." Last summer, she classified her entries into
three different categories. Factual entries documented her daily actions;
political entries chronicled her evolving political opinions; and introspec-
tive entries provided an opportunity to "contemplate the type of person
I am." Since college, her entries "have gotten really short and not very
self-reflective." Summers are now the only opportunity she finds for more
introspective writing, "but during the year, I'll write: *I'm taking these classes
and this is what I think about them.*" She explains, "I would write more, it's
just that I don't feel like I have the energy."

   Still, Anna continues to write. Periodically, she rereads her old entries,
an activity that all the girls I spoke with last summer said they enjoy. In
fact, Anna feels that having access to this record of her life is one of the
most important aspects of LiveJournal. This sentiment may explain why
she rarely deletes an entry, preferring instead to change the privacy set-
ting so that only she can see it. "I like going back through my old posts. I
think it's fun. It's cool to see when things happened in which order, and
just to see what I thought about things." Anna doesn't go back often,
"maybe once a year. I went back over the summer and it was really inter-
esting to see the contrast between 15-year-old me and 20-year-old me."
She's not sure what it is that makes her return to old entries.

   If I'm, I don't know, feeling out of inspiration or feeling like I'd
   like to see how I've changed. It's interesting to see what I was
   thinking about back then. It's hard to remember things from a
   while ago without thinking, "Oh well, I can't believe I did *that*!"
   because you don't remember the whole cause and effect chain
   that led up to whatever you decided to do. With LiveJournal, I
   can read more of the reasoning behind what was going on, or my

impressions of things that later developed into larger parts of my life or smaller parts of my life. It's interesting, because it helps me keep a longer view of what's going on.

This longer view contrasts with the fragmented feeling that Anna often experiences as she moves through her days. She may not have time to use her blog as a space for uninterrupted reflection, but LiveJournal appears to serve her well as a tool for concrete self-documentation. In this way, blogging may be one digital media activity that allows Anna to look back and realize that she has been somewhere after all.

FROM "ONLY CONNECT" TO "ALWAYS CONNECTED"

In his epigraph to the 1910 novel *Howard's End*, E. M. Forster wrote, "Only connect." If Forster were alive today, I wonder what he would say about the multitude of connections made possible by digital media technologies. Is the "always connected" lifestyle that Anna and so many of us lead now what he had in mind? Certainly, Anna reaps many rewards from her digital connections. They satisfy her desire to learn about the world, and they allow her to nurture a wide range of relationships, from close friendships and family ties to more distant acquaintances and professional contacts. These connections, to ideas and to people, are made possible by the flexibility, immediacy, and ease of digital technologies. And yet, these very qualities give rise to the fragmentation that Anna feels when she spends an evening listening to music, checking e-mail, and trying to complete her homework. At the end of the day, she often feels as if she's "been everywhere and nowhere at the same time." Blogging may be one way for her to counteract the fragmentation of digital life. Anna describes the enjoyment she receives when she revisits old blog entries and examines the record of her former thoughts and experiences. This record imparts a certain concreteness and coherence to a life lived in bits and bytes.

DISCUSSION

Through its in-depth look into the media use of one college student, this portrait highlights the always-connected, always-connecting quality of life for today's young people. In contrast to the "cell phone-less," "Facebook-less" environment the author experienced in high school and college, Anna's school environment is infused with, and in many ways depends on, such digital technologies. She is never far away from her laptop or cell phone, a state of affairs that enables her to connect with a wide range of people and ideas instantly and effortlessly. At the same time, the

author observed many similarities in the ways in which she and Anna use digital media, suggesting that this wired way of life is by no means unique to youth. To be sure, Anna and the author are not too far removed in age—she was born in 1988, the author in 1978—so it may not be surprising to find some common digital media practices. In fact, this 10-year age difference is small enough to place both Anna and the author in Generation Y (albeit at opposite ends of the age range), given that the Pew Research Center defines Generation Y as individuals born between 1977 and 1990 (Jones & Fox, 2009). Yet, it is not just this shared demographic category that accounts for the observed similarities, for older generations such as Generation X and Baby Boomers have also become increasingly enthusiastic digital media users. Older adults are just as likely, and in some cases more likely, as teens and young adults to use e-mail and search engines and to go online to research products and read the news (Jones & Fox). Thus, it is likely that readers of this portrait, no matter what generation they call theirs, can recognize themselves in Anna. "Digital immigrants" may marvel at the ease with which "digital natives" move between virtual and real-life worlds and juggle multiple conversations and activities at once, but when they look at themselves, the parallels are easy enough to find.

This portrait also illuminates the many rewards that Anna reaps from her digital media use. The ability to connect with friends and family serves as Anna's major motivation for texting, blogging, e-mailing, and online social networking. The benefits she describes are consistent with existing empirical evidence, which indicates a positive relationship between online communication and the quality of youth's friendships (Lee, 2009; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). By looking deeply into the experiences of one young person, this portrait illuminates the processes associated with this positive relationship. Anna values the ability to stay in touch with a broad group of friends, despite their geographic separation. Reading the blogs of her friends from high school allows her to stay connected to the rhythm of their daily lives. She suspects that without online tools like blogs and social network sites, she would have lost touch with several of them. Even regarding the people she encounters regularly offline, Anna believes that communicating through a different medium allows her to see these friends in a different light, offering her unique insight into their inner lives.

One of portraiture's strengths lies in its ability to reveal the complexity of its subject matter (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In this portrait, complexity manifests in the alternating expressions of appreciation and regret that interweave the narrative. These expressions—sometimes Anna's, sometimes the author's—mirror the ambivalence that can be

found in the scholarship on youth's digital media use. For although many positive effects have been documented, some scholars express concern about the impact of technology on youth's social and cognitive development (Bauerlein, 2008; Turkle, 2011). For instance, Anna's anxiety during a recent weekend without an Internet connection recalls Turkle's (2008) concept of "tethering" and the dangers she associated with it. According to Turkle, youth's ability to be connected constantly to parents and friends makes it difficult for them to achieve autonomy. This state of affairs is problematic because attaining a sense of personal autonomy represents an important developmental task of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Blos, 1967; Marcia, 1980). Anna presented herself to the author as a confident, self-sufficient young woman. Yet, her frequently vibrating cell phone revealed that she is never quite alone. Her boyfriend is always a text message away, her mother a phone call removed. This portrait cannot answer how this tether has influenced, or continues to influence, Anna's development of personal autonomy. It does suggest, however, that the interplay between digital media and this critical developmental task merits further investigation.

Intimacy represents another developmental task of adolescence and emerging adulthood that may be changing as a result of youth's media use. Through intimate exchanges with their close friends, young people learn about who they are in relation to others (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Sullivan, 1953). Josselson (1988) explained that intimacy and autonomy are complementary processes. Through their intimate relationships, individuals discover what they share with others and what makes them unique. Anna's experiences highlight a distinction between intimacy and connection. She certainly has access and is accessible to a broad range of people on a constant basis. In many cases, her mediated communications with others take on an intimate quality. It is true, for instance, that digital media have helped her maintain a sense of intimacy with her high school friends. However, Anna surmises that without digital media, she would likely spend more time with fewer people, rather than a small amount of time with many people. Spreading oneself so thin makes building intimacy difficult. Furthermore, Turkle (2011) observed that intimacy between two people involves a degree of risk associated with sharing one's inner thoughts and feelings. She argued that mediated communication diminishes this risk, because it is not necessary to confront the person to whom one is self-disclosing. Thus, constant connectivity ensures that Anna is never alone, but it does not ensure that she is connecting with others in an intimate way.

Many of Anna's digital connections occur simultaneously, giving rise to a sense of fragmentation. Like so many of today's youth, multitasking

seems to be a way of life for her. Without the ability to juggle multiple tasks at once, Anna imagines that she would not be involved in so many activities. She enjoys her activities and would not want to abandon any of them. At the same time, she recognizes the drawbacks of multitasking. Scrolling between her global health reading and e-mail extends the length of time she spends on homework. Bouncing from Web site to Web site exposes her to a broad range of information but makes it difficult to process any of it in a meaningful way. Scholars investigating youth's multitasking habits have identified similar drawbacks (cf. Gasser & Palfrey, 2009). Were he alive today, Dewey (1933) would probably not be surprised. According to Dewey, learning does not occur through exposure to bits and pieces of uncoordinated information. Although he may have celebrated the spirit of inquiry that the Internet supports, he would likely have argued that such inquiry must be followed by an extended period of deliberate reflection. Merely gathering information is not sufficient; one must act on it by forming connections among different sources of information and considering how they relate to what one already knows. Gardner (2006) argued that today's complex, media-saturated environment has made such acts of synthesis more important than ever. More important, maybe, but Anna's experiences suggest that this environment has also made finding the time and inclination for synthesis particularly challenging.

Multitasking does not only affect Anna's ability to learn; it also gives rise to a personal sense of fragmentation. As Anna noted, she often feels at the end of the day as though she has been everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This sense of fragmentation is concerning, because adolescence and emerging adulthood represent critical periods of identity development (Arnett, 2004; Erikson, 1968). During adolescence, individuals begin to revisit their childhood identifications in light of the values, norms, and roles in the broader society. As they transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood, self-exploration gives way to a consolidation of commitments (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Cote, 2009). According to Erikson, the ability to synthesize aspects of the self into a coherent identity constitutes a critical component of healthy psychological functioning.

Turkle (1995) observed that digital media pose certain challenges to self-synthesis, because it is possible to represent oneself in many different ways, often simultaneously. Although she recognized in multiplicity opportunities for self-growth, she nevertheless cautioned that "without any principle of coherence, the self spins off in all directions. Multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate" (p. 258). In an earlier study of girls' online journaling, the author found evidence to suggest that girls use their blogs to achieve a sense of personal coherence (Davis, 2010). They view their blog as a personal life

chronicle, much like a handwritten journal, and they enjoy being able to gather their disparate experiences in one place. Rereading old entries proved to be a particularly popular activity among the girls. They said they often reread old entries to remember, reflect on, and make sense of their experiences. Although Anna continues to update her blog, her entries have become shorter, and she writes with less frequency. She still values having the concrete record of her life, but she is too busy to use her blog as a place for extended reflection.

The author is mindful that this study may have served as an intervention of sorts by providing Anna with a space for reflection. The interview process provided Anna the opportunity to pause and consider her digital media use and its effect on the way she lives her life. Levy (2007) observed that opportunities for reflection are noticeably lacking but sorely needed in today's universities. He called on universities to introduce contemplative practices into their curricula in an effort to offset the frenetic, fast-paced quality of life that digital technologies support. Sprenger (2009) urged K–12 educators to do the same. Modeling attentive listening, teaching meditation techniques, and encouraging storytelling are among her suggestions to teachers for developing their students' capacity to connect with others and with themselves. Although some teachers may feel unprepared to address their students' digital media use, regarding themselves as "digital paleoliths" beside their "digital native" students, this portrait highlights the need for and value of nurturing youth's reflective practices and providing them with spaces for sustained reflection and authentic connection.

## CONCLUSION

This portrait has revealed the many ways that one college student uses digital media technologies to connect with others and the world around her. Although Anna recognizes many benefits associated with her digital media use, such as the ability to stay in touch with geographically distant friends, she also perceives several drawbacks. For instance, she suspects that communicating with such a wide variety of people may make it difficult to form a deep relationship with any one person, just as the ability to carry out many activities simultaneously makes it difficult to focus attention on any one activity. Pulled in so many different directions and lacking opportunities to engage in extended reflection, Anna sometimes experiences a sense of personal fragmentation. An important area for future research lies in determining the effects of this sense of personal fragmentation on youth's developing sense of self, interpersonal relationships, and learning processes.

*Note*

1.    The names of people and places have been changed to protect the participant's confidentiality.

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