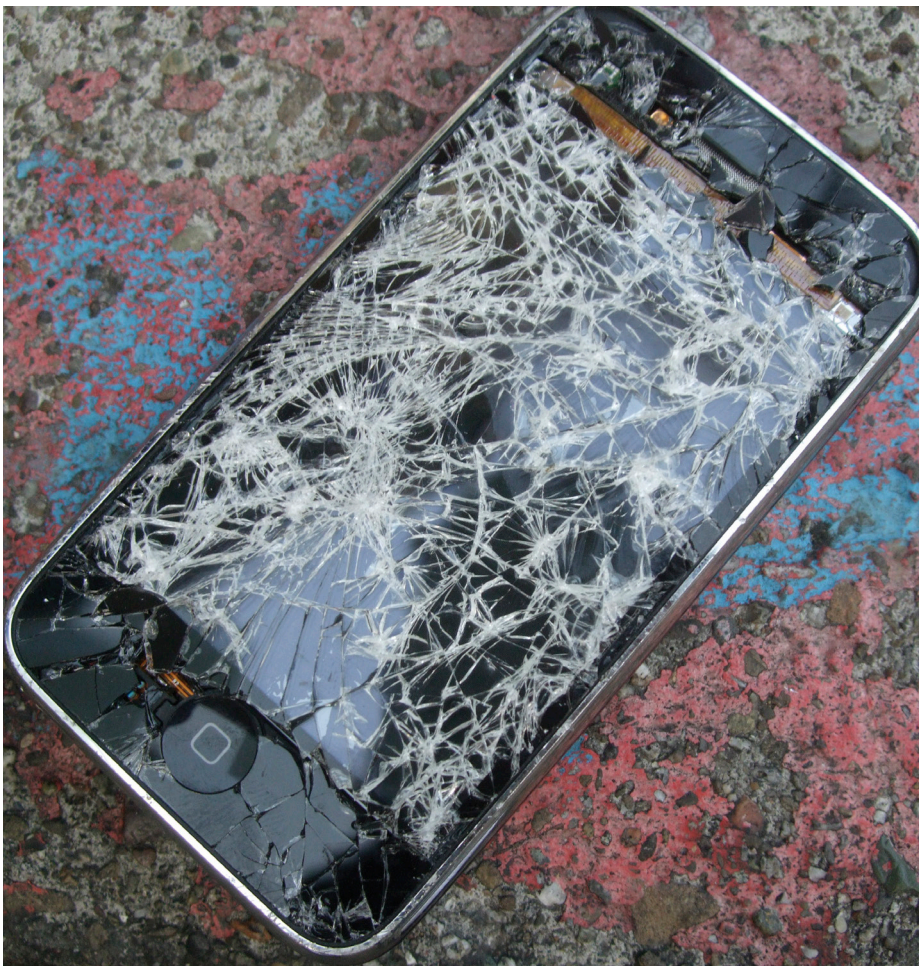


# The good, the bad, the hopeful? Social media, the internet and young people

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It seems that the popular media is filled with examples of the internet and social media's insidious influence on society, and particularly young people. There have been examples showing how young people are becoming increasingly sexualised at a young age due to the prevalence of on-line pornography, and others that show

that young people are being exposed to radicalising and terrorism-related materials via the internet. The internet has also been blamed for young people not reading texts in the same way as in the past, and their lack of ability to focus on one particular activity for any length of time. Young people have also been found to be susceptible to fake news, and they have

also been accused of not engaging with social movements and political action like previous generations, instead opting for a minimal form of activism that has been called 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' instead.

This is a far cry from the early days of internet and social media, where there were great hopes that the internet might be a new public sphere that would encourage more discussion, more opportunity for democratic discourse and debate, and a wider opportunity for all to participate in shaping the public sphere. The hopes of these techno-optimists have, by and large, been replaced by pessimism related to the fractured, irrational and aggressive nature of social media. Finding any kind of reality amidst this panic is a difficult task for an educator, and it is even more of a challenge to determine in what ways educators might engage with social media – if at all – and how we might encourage and teach young people to think carefully and responsibly about the way they use the digital tools at their disposal.

Many schools have adopted digital citizenship programs, with various degrees of success, but these programs are somewhat of a misnomer. They do not actually encourage a form of digital citizenship so much as stipulate a code of practice for safe online behaviour – don't share your password with other people, think about your digital footprint, keep your profile secure and so on. While there is nothing wrong with such an approach, I am concerned that it fails to address the larger concerns relating to how we as educators might teach young people to be active and informed citizens, as required by the Melbourne Declaration, in the

digital world. It would be my contention that such an approach requires not just rules about staying safe online, but also a focus on both critical digital literacy and advocacy for social and systemic change.

Before determining what such a program might look like, it is worth considering what some of the research tells us about the way that young people use social media. As Danah Boyd has suggested, the reality is far more complex and challenging than we might expect. While young people use social media for purposes that might be familiar to us – after all, it is very human desire to seek out and socialize with peers – the way that they use it differs significantly to more traditional forms of communication. Boyd has identified that there are specific technical properties of the internet that shape our interaction in online networks. These properties include persistence – the idea that, for example, an image posted online doesn't disappear, but can exist for a long time, even when the poster might have thought it was deleted – and scalability – the fact that materials posted on the internet can rapidly spread beyond a small group of peers to a much wider audience. Another challenge is related to what Boyd has called context collapse. It is a normal human activity to modulate the way we talk and act depending upon the audience and the context in which we are acting; thus, a teenager would speak differently, and about different things, to his or her peers than he or she would to adults. However, a challenge arises in social media when two or more of these contexts mesh or collapse into one. Thus, a selfie posted by a teenager on Facebook, for instance, might be intended for a teenager's friends but is seen by the teenager's parents, perhaps causing a great deal of angst! It is for this reason, Boyd argues, that young people often make use of different platforms for different audiences; this approach suggests a level of sophistication in their use of social media that is often absent from the pessimistic narratives outlined earlier.

However, a more germane question for educators is, what does this mean for me? Is the solution to ban technology being used at school, as some educators have suggested? Such an approach might garner headlines but it has limited efficacy considering the ubiquity of young peo-

**Cybernastiness**

**25%** have had cyberbullying happen **more than** once

**70%** of students report seeing frequent **bullying** online

**80%** of teens use a cell phone regularly, making it the **most common** medium for **cyber bullying**. 68% of teens agree that **cyber bullying** is a serious problem

**14%** or more **high school students** have considered suicide

**7%** have **attempted** suicide

ple's adoption of mobile phones and widespread access to data networks. Instead, I propose a much more comprehensive approach to digital citizenship needs to be explicitly taught to students while they are at school. Such an approach fits well with the commitments expressed by the Australian Curriculum and the Melbourne Declaration to develop in Australian students 'active and informed' citizenship, and would also make sure that the teaching of digital citizenship is both linked to the idea of citizenship in a democratic nation more fully, and is also more than just a list of rules to be obeyed or followed.

One example of such an approach is *Justice Citizens*, a participatory action research project delivered to students in Year 9 in a western Sydney school. *Justice Citizens* required students to engage with topics that they felt related to justice (teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, the treatment of refugees, child abuse),

to investigate the matters and then make films about these issues with the aim of engaging in public discussion. *Justice Citizens* emphasizes two key aspects of digital citizenship that are often overlooked by schools: critical literacy and advocacy for systemic change within the public sphere.

Critical literacy is based on the idea that young people need to develop the skills to 'read' the web in a way that allows them to firstly recognise and then challenge the dominant power structures and inequalities that are present across this digital terrain. *Justice Citizens* sought to model and develop a level of critical literacy with the students by encouraging them to confront both the prejudices present within online material and also their own prejudices about specific topics that they encountered. This was a part of *Justice Citizens* that was confronting for many of the students who participated in it. In particular, some of the students began, through an analysis of different forms of media that they consumed, to consider the way the media presented women, or the lack of Indigenous representation online, and were concerned at the limited opportunities afforded to them.

However, critical literacy by itself is not sufficient to encourage active and digital citizenship. Instead, there needs to be an effort to develop in students the ability to engage in advocacy for systemic change. In *Justice Citizens*, there was a limited attempt to explore what such an approach might look like. The students' films were all published on YouTube, and shared widely from both the students' accounts and also from the school's social media accounts. While none of the films went viral, there can be no denying that, through the use of social media, students' films were exposed to a wider audience than they would otherwise have had the chance. As of October 2017, the total number of views of all the films was more than 1000. This means that students' films were part of a wider discussion – both locally and globally – about injustices within communities. In effect, young people, through the mechanism of making a film and sharing it widely, were using their voices to be part of the broader public debates regarding issues in their community – and isn't that what democracy is all about?