

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Project Probes Digital Media's Effect on Ethics

## Howard Gardner Leads Team Studying Youths' Web Norms

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Cambridge, Mass.

It's a familiar scenario: A teenager snaps a picture of underage classmates drinking alcohol at a party. The photos go up on a social-networking Web site and land on the desk of an athletic coach or a school administrator. The students pictured are suspended from school or booted off their teams.

Researchers here at the Harvard Graduate School of Education say stories like that one illustrate one of the ways new digital media are raising distinct ethical challenges and temptations for young people today.

"Even though many young people may not be ready to participate in the wider communities that digital media open up to them, there is no controlling information about yourself or others that gets posted," said Howard Gardner, the project's co-director. "It's a situation that's foisted upon young persons who are not ready for it."

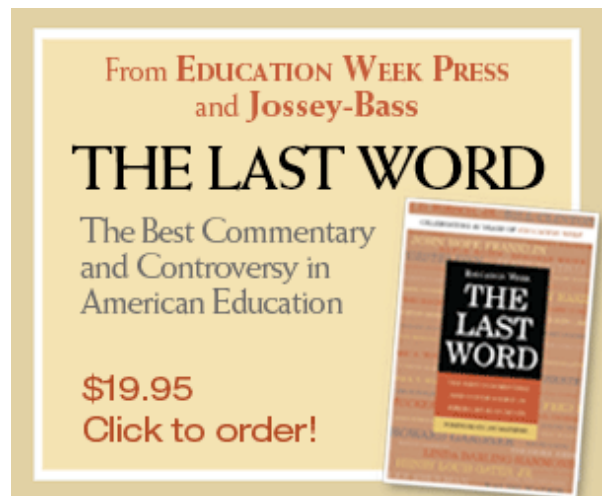
Mr. Gardner, an eminent psychologist best known for his multiple-intelligences theory, is working with a team of researchers at Project Zero, the research center he helped create at the graduate school, to study how students' use of digital media affects the development of their "ethical minds."

Known as the **GoodPlay Project**, the study is being financed with a grant from the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. What researchers hope to do through the project is fill a gap in the burgeoning research literature on young people's use of digital media, including social-networking sites, blogs, online games, Wikipedia, and virtual worlds, such as Second Life.

While most studies are mapping out what young people are learning and doing in their digital lives, the GoodPlay Project is probing the ethical contours of those electronic worlds in an effort to better understand how digital technology shapes young people's character.

"What's interesting about the GoodPlay Project is that, while it is taking a broad look at the

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common fundamental issues that involve youth and digital media, it is also taking a qualitative look at the idea that these young people are actually developing social norms that are quite different from adult values and behavior," said Mimi Ito, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

### From Cronkite to Palin

The Harvard researchers last week shared a first cut at their findings from GoodPlay with *Education Week*, and the results point to a nuanced view of how young people see their role as Internet citizens and technology users.

The researchers are developing their findings from lengthy, one-on-one interviews with 61 "digital natives" from public and private high schools and colleges and some recent college graduates across the Boston area. Just under half—26—were characterized as primarily social networkers because of their heavy use of sites such as MySpace or Facebook. Fourteen were considered "gamers" and the remainder were either "bloggers" or creators of other kinds of online content.

**Howard Gardner, Harvard Graduate School of Education**

In the first series of interviews, the students, all of whom were between ages 15 and 25, related their own digital histories, described how their friends use technology, and talked about online encounters that troubled or excited them. In a second round of sessions, interviewees responded to hypothetical ethical dilemmas involving digital-technology use.

Mr. Gardner said the project grew out of 10 years of work that the research center has done on young people's trust, ethics, and sense of purpose. ("**Majority of Youths Found to Lack a Direction in Life,**" June 11, 2008.)

"The theme throughout all the interviews in those earlier projects was that ethics was kind of optional when you're young, that it's something to attend to when you're older and richer," said Mr. Gardner. "In addition, we think there's been a fundamental shift among young people in how they deal with individuals and institutions, going from a belief in authority and the possibility of objectivity to a belief in authenticity and ideological transparency."

"I like to use the analogy of going from Walter Cronkite to Sarah Palin," he added. "We can't be sure that's due to new digital media but we think new digital media has contributed to it."

To probe such ideas, the researchers identified five fault lines along which ethical issues play out on the Web in distinct ways.

The first is privacy, the issue that rears its head in the teenage-drinking-party scenario, followed by authorship—or ownership of intellectual or creative property—an issue that comes into play when

#### **Ethical Dilemma**

*Researchers in a study of young people and digital media present participants with scenarios designed to show how they respond*

young people share content with others or cut and paste paragraphs into their school work. The other issues are credibility, or how students determine who or what sources to trust online; identity, which refers to how students present themselves to others on the Web; and participation, or how students conduct themselves online and the responsibility they feel to their digital communities.

With regard to privacy, for instance, the interviews suggest a paradox. "Overall, students say privacy is an important aspect of online life," said John M. Francis, a research assistant on the project, "but they do things that undermine that concern. They put information online that we might consider oversharing."

Seventy-five percent of the high school students, for instance, said their privacy was important to them, yet half keep their social-networking profiles open to the public and more than half say they have "nothing to hide."

Part of the problem, the researchers said, is that students often underestimate the size of the communities that have access to their personal information online, or they have difficulty mastering the controls on social-networking sites that prevent unknown visitors from seeing that information.

"We still want to unpack some of the paradoxes that we've uncovered," Mr. Gardner said.

### Keeping It Real

Another one: While students show a healthy distrust of the strangers and the content they find online, they rely on information sources, such as Wikipedia, a Web encyclopedia that allows visitors to add or edit content, in writing academic reports and research papers. Forty-five of 56 subjects interviewed on that topic said they use Wikipedia for school-related research, although 80 percent of that group said Wikipedia was primarily the starting point for their information searches.

"They admit their teachers have told them not to use it but they still use it," said Carrie James, the project's research director. "Some see it as the starting point and the end point for their research, especially if they don't care about the assignment."

*to ethical challenges.*

For the past two weeks, you have been playing an online multiplayer game that has about 30,000 members and takes place in a 3-D world. Just yesterday, you joined a club within the game. Your fellow club members, none of whom you know offline, seem very nice and have already given you lots of game advice as well as some useful equipment for your character. Buying, selling, and trading such equipment with other players is a fun and important part of the game, but there are few rules about trading, and exchanges don't always end well for some players. You've noticed, for example, that many of your club mates brag to each other about taking advantage of new players by selling them worthless green rocks, called pseudogems, for very high prices. After finding some pseudogems while doing a joint quest with two of your club mates, you are invited by one of them to travel to a nearby town to try and sell the pseudogems to inexperienced players for a big profit.

**Opening questions:** Would you go with your club mates to the nearby town to sell the pseudogems? Why or why not?

Source: GoodPlay Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education

### Teens and Social Media

Some **93%** of teens use the Internet, and more of them than ever are treating it as a venue for social interaction. A December 2007 survey found that **64%** of online youths

Likewise, all but five of the students acknowledged they illegally download music online. The exceptions were students who have a personal stake in or some experience with the harmful consequences of Internet piracy—musicians, for example, or students with friends or relatives who've been caught engaging in it. A few students also voiced confusion about what kind of content was legally off-limits, Mr. Francis said.

Also, while the Web and multiplayer computer games afford students opportunities to experiment with new identities in the digital world, most said they portray themselves honestly. "If they do experiment, it's in a low-stakes way," said Ms. James, "Maybe they might be a little more flirtatious."

Students were asked, for example, to imagine that they were an experienced college soccer player participating in an online forum on the sport. If other participants ignored their counsel on diet and training, would they take a friend's advice and portray themselves as an expert trainer? Only two of 24 subjects said they would take that route, project data show.

An accurate self-representation was also important to bloggers, who saw it as key to keeping their semi-professional reputations. Apart from bloggers, though, few students felt a sense of responsibility to the communities they encountered online, the GoodPlay researchers found.

Also, they said students had a harder time naming mentors they had found online than "anti-mentors," users whose negative behaviors served as an example of how not to act in the digital world.

Although the GoodPlay study focused on a small group of Boston-area students, researchers said the findings are consistent with what they're seeing elsewhere.

Ms. Ito, for example, identified similar practices in an ethnographic study involving 800 students, most of whom are from California. That study, which consists of case studies of students' informal learning in 22 kinds of digital activities, is due out Nov. 20.

Both Ms. Ito's study and the GoodPlay Project are part of a \$50 million research effort funded by the MacArthur Foundation that aims to fill gaps in what is known about young people's interactions with digital technology. ("**Projects Probe New Media's Role in Changing the Face of Learning**," Dec. 5, 2007.)

"I think we're arriving at a shared vision," said Henry Jenkins, the co-director of the comparative

ages 12 to 17 have participated in one or more of a wide range of content-creating activities on the Internet.

**39%** of online teens share their own **artistic creations** online, such as artwork, photos, stories, or videos.

**33%** create or work on **Web pages or blogs** for groups they belong to, for friends, for school assignments, or for others.

**28%** have created their own **online journals or blogs**.

**27%** maintain their own **personal Web pages**.

**26% remix content** they find online into their own creations.

In addition to those core elements of content creation, **55%** of online youths ages 12 to 17 have created a profile on a social-networking site such as Facebook or MySpace; **47%** have uploaded photos where others can see them; and **14%** have posted videos online.

Source: The Pew Internet & American Life Project

media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and another researcher in the MacArthur network.

With the Harvard researchers, he and others at MIT's **Project New Media Literacies** are developing multimedia curricular materials and an ethics casebook that educators can use to help students grapple with the ethical issues arising in their digital-media experiences outside the classroom.

The idea, Mr. Jenkins said, is "to force students to think about the choices they make and the consequences of those choices."

The potential application for the lessons could be enormous. Recent surveys by the Pew Internet Project, show, for example, that 97 percent of teenagers nationwide play computer, Web, or video games, 55 percent have created a profile on a social-networking site, and 64 percent have created some sort of online content, such as a music remix or a blog.

"I think educators are aware they can't afford to not pay attention to students' play online," Ms. James said.

Vol. 28, Issue 13, Pages 1,12