

## Angles of the Youth Digital Divide

S. Craig Watkins (Ed.) with Andres Lombana-Bermudez, Alexander Cho, Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, Vivian Shaw, and Lauren Weinzimmer, **The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate Digital Inequality**, New York: New York University Press, 2018, 304 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, **Worried About the Wrong Things: Youth, Risk, and Opportunity in the Digital World**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, 360 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

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Black, Brown, and low-income youth endure the U.S.'s digital divide, and S. Craig Watkins and colleagues' *The Digital Edge* and Jacqueline R. Vickery's *Worried About the Wrong Things* elevate the lived realities, resilience, and ingenuity of these understudied adolescents while interrogating the policies, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to their marginalized experiences. Together, these books lay the groundwork for paths forward, both in terms of how we conceptualize digital media inequity and how we might address it.

At a time when few contemporary empirical books pay adequate attention to the intersections of youth, race, ethnicity, and digital media, the present books add critical insight to our understanding of minoritized youth experiences with technology. Drawing from ethnographic data from a lower-income high school in the greater Austin, Texas region, the authors of both texts deliver compelling, harmonizing arguments about the multifaceted nature of the digital divide, highlighting Black and Latinx teens' often unheard stories and remaining needs in a constantly changing digital environment. Although their focus and critique of public education highlight critical areas for interventions, their work ultimately reveals the need for an interdisciplinary and practitioner-inclusive approach that includes—but also extends beyond—school systems.

Watkins and associates present a series of ethnographic accounts about lower-income Black and Latinx adolescents' media access, use, and aspirations. By detailing their digital experiences at school and home, they discuss educational and social ramifications for youth as they navigate what Watkins calls the "digital edge" (p. 2). As Watkins explains, despite the connotation that a "digital edge" might be advantageous, this positionality actually represents intersectional marginalization—from wealth, from tech industries, and from the richest educational opportunities. Watkins' primary argument is that although this reality inspires teens' creativity, it nevertheless perpetuates limited access to opportunity, a reality that schools need to address to adequately prepare youth for their futures.

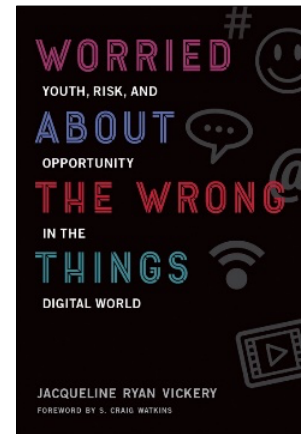


Vickery, a former advisee of Watkins', adds to this conversation with her risk discourse analysis and ethnographic exemplars, arguing that the digital divide includes legal and school-based policies that have unique ramifications for youth who already face disproportionate discrimination. She examines how students and teachers traverse these realities, ultimately making the argument that the digital divide has neither been eradicated nor exclusively what we once thought it to be.

Importantly, as they grapple with a topic characterized by marginalization, both books skillfully reject deficit-based frameworks. While the authors describe in detail the inequitable access that less-resourced youth have to digital media, their work explicitly highlights the adolescents' ingenuity, resourcefulness, and dedication. They demonstrate how, despite prohibitive school policies, students continually gained access to digital media, even going so far as to create peer-lending systems to share scarce personal devices and hack proxy Internet networks. These books showcase teens' aspirations to use digital media for educational purposes, even though adults often misunderstood their intentions. They also highlight how these youth leveraged digital media to build connections, explore identities, navigate social capital, develop new skills, and keep themselves stimulated while family responsibilities required them to be indoors.

Both books also deconstruct mainstream notions of the digital divide. Watkins criticizes digital media rhetoric more broadly, highlighting, for example, that despite little acknowledgement, minoritized youth pioneered handheld Internet with their mobile phones. In addition, as Watkins and colleagues and Vickery describe, instead of being solely about access to devices, the digital divide also encompasses disparities related to participation and encouragement around technology. As they argue, the facts that more teens today have mobile phones than ever before, with no income differences, and that Latinx and Black teens are more likely to use them than White peers actually exacerbate inequities. Watkins meticulously details the inequivalence of broadband Internet and mobile data, illustrating differences in functionality and highlighting hindrances of limited data plans and upgrades. As Watkins describes, increased technology has not erased geographical implications of inequality; unequal access to resources like home-based broadband Internet still loom. Watkins notes how despite having school and library broadband access, students nevertheless remain on the digital periphery. As Watkins argues, when youth are only able to access high-quality Internet in these places, they may lack the time they need to experiment, limiting their potential to develop valuable digital competencies and social capital. Watkins' argument is bolstered by outside work suggesting that youth of color and from lower-income backgrounds are less likely than their White and more socioeconomically privileged peers to visit libraries in the first place (Takeuchi, Vaala, & Ahn, 2019). As Watkins and associates and Vickery argue, such inequities not only risk jeopardizing career opportunities but also unfairly position some youth to be more likely to *consume* media instead of *produce* them.

The authors of both books contend that although schools should be equalizers, restrictive policies and limited curricula can intensify digital divides. As they argue, the school they studied offered youth stable technology access but subpar curricula, insufficient teacher preparation, and policies prevented youth from reaping the full potential of available technology. Vickery critiques school policies with her analysis of the U.S.'s longstanding preoccupation with youth and media risks, making a persuasive argument about how schools'



policies tend to reflect “harm expectations” instead of ones that leverage digital media’s learning potential (p. 8). Vickery largely dismisses concerns for popular fears (e.g., child predators, cyberbullying) based on the infrequent occurrence of these events and society’s reluctance to address the underlying issues that drive them. Instead, she argues that the biggest risk to youth is inequity. Although I argue that not enough research has examined marginalized youths’ media use to understand what true, unique, or disproportionate effects may exist, Vickery’s proposition is compelling. To move forward, Watkins and associates and Vickery argue that increasing access to technology alone is not sufficient; instead, schools should pair technical skills like coding with critical thinking competencies, allow students to earn technology privileges, and help them navigate digital risks, instead of outright restricting access.

Although the books’ focus on schools honors the critical roles that they play in shaping our youths’ futures, the authors’ arguments would have been strengthened by more explicitly acknowledging educators’ contemporary challenges. Too much pressure is often thrust upon schools, and specifically teachers, to solve our nation’s problems, when educators often lack the authority and resources to act alone. Watkins asks why schools prioritize technology acquisition over high-quality curricula, missing the fact that teachers often lack agency over instruction. This is especially true in lower-performing schools in which high-stakes testing performance can determine funding and teacher job security. Vickery also misses opportunities to consider how teachers of vulnerable students, too, may be suffering from panic discourses around standardized testing. Although the authors state their critiques intend no harm, they offer only minimal recognition of teachers’ realities, which threatens the feasibility of their proposals.

Vickery also acknowledges the ways in which policies, governments, and mass media shape youths’ digital experiences, and Watkins briefly mentions the connected learning framework (see Ito et al., 2013), which proposes that connecting learning in places like schools, libraries, and homes leads to more learning. Given the research to support such approaches, the books would have been bolstered by calling more attention to multistakeholder solutions.

These books approach the digital divide from the same field, same data, and same academic circle but offer rich complementary perspectives. Carefully attuned to how youth experience and traverse the multifaceted dimensions of digital inequity, the authors implore us to consider interventions. Although the books target academic audiences, they are enjoyable and approachable. They challenge conventional digital divide notions as well as assumptions about the youth subjected to it. They demonstrate how the digital divide is not only (or even primarily) about device access but also about opportunity, education, discourse, and the ingenuity required to navigate it. Together these authors highlight the important work that remains as we prepare our talented but marginalized youth to excel in a digital world.

### References

- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., ... Watkins, S. Craig (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub. Takeuchi, L., Vaala, S., & Ahn, J. (2019, June 6). *Learning across boundaries: How parents and teachers are bridging learning across settings*. Retrieved from <https://joanganzcooneycenter.org/publication/learning-across-boundaries/>