



Episode 5: The Digital (Neighbour)hood

How, where, and what kids and teens learn about safe sex, substance use, and other health-related topics is incredibly important. In this episode, Dr. Sara M. Grimes (Director of the KMDI) chats with Dr. Robin Stevens, Associate Professor at University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, and the Director and founder of the Health Equity and Media Collab, about her research on Black, Latinx and LGBTQ+ youth's use of social media, and the implications for their health and well-being.

Dr. Sara Grimes 0:00

How do young people learn about sex? What about drugs and alcohol, or what to do if you think you've caught COVID? They learn from school, from parents and older siblings. And of course, from friends and other peers, but also from the internet.

Since the earliest days of the worldwide web, research on the online activities of children and teens has consistently highlighted the important role the internet has come to play as a source of health information, as well as a source of misinformation and of exposure to not so helpful, or awesome content. How, where, and what kids and teens learn about safe sex, substance use, and other health-related topics is incredibly important, especially for young people who are already dealing with higher risk factors, such as neighborhood poverty and violence in their communities and in their own everyday lives. A disproportionate number of whom are young people of color, specifically Black, Latinx, or indigenous youth. Yet a lot of the mainstream research on kids' online information seeking and exposure to health and risk-related content systematically excludes teens from these very communities. And despite extremely high rates of tech usage, content creation and early adoption of new apps and devices among Black and Latinx youth in the US, they're rarely involved in the design of public health initiatives aimed at reducing risk or promoting healthy choices to young people.

Dr. Robin Stevens is an associate professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, and director and founder of the

Health Equity and Media Collab, where she leads an interdisciplinary team in community-engaged research and outreach aimed at creating youth-centered and youth-informed public health interventions. Dr. Stevens is a public health communications scholar and world-renowned expert on health and wellbeing among youth color with a focus on Black and Latinx youth. Her research focuses on the relationship between social media and digital epidemiology in the areas of sexual health and substance use. She's principal investigator on numerous projects funded by the National Institutes of Health, and has won several awards for her contributions to public health communication and community outreach. Her published work appears in a wide range of top-tier journals across the fields of communication and health research, from Behavioral Health Journal to the Journal of Children and Media.

In two of her most recent articles, Dr. Stevenson and her co-authors introduce a groundbreaking new conceptual framework for understanding how Black and Latinx youth experience their interactions with and within the digital realm called the digital neighborhood or digital hood. They use this term to re-situate academic and public discussions about young people's social media use in geography and in intersectionality. The first entitled, *The Digital Hood: Social Media Use among Youth in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods*, was published in 2017 in *New Media & Society*. The second, *#digital hood: Engagement with Risk Content on Social Media among Black and Hispanic Youth*, was published in the *Journal of Urban Health* in 2019.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Stevens's main co-author and research partner on both of these articles, Dr. Stacia Gilliard-Matthews. Dr. Gilliard-Matthews was a highly respected professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University in Camden. Sadly, she passed away in 2017.

I'm Sara Grimes, Director of the Knowledge Media Design Institute at the University of Toronto, and host of the Critical Technology Podcast. Today, I'll be speaking with Dr. Robin Stevens about her ongoing research on how Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ youth use social media and the implications for their health and wellbeing. Let's just jump right in.

What is a digital neighborhood and what role does it play in the lives of Black and Latinx youth?

Dr. Robin Stevens 4:21

The digital neighborhood, the way that I think about it, it's not specific to any one platform or social media. It's a way that I conceptualize young people existing in their online communities and spaces, and it allows it to evolve for a platform form to rise and fall in prominence, for platforms to be different by this specific group of young people we're working with, and it really mirrors some parts of the geographic neighborhood. So in the earlier studies I did, young people were using Facebook and Instagram pretty heavily, though they were migrating off Facebook. And so their digital neighborhoods would look like what was happening in the Facebook feeds, what was happening on Instagram. It would reflect sometimes what was happening in their real worlds offline. And sometimes it would be people, obviously they would never know and never meet, but still were a part of their community.

The digital neighborhood analogy really came to me because I was working with a group of young people that lived in communities that had high levels of violence. So the geographic neighborhood was not a site for socialization. It wasn't a safe place to be. So young people spent a lot of indoors. And as a result, the digital neighborhood became a way for them to still connect and commune with other young people in a way, a third space for them. And sometimes great things happen like they do in the regular neighborhood, and sometimes they were challenges.

The other thing I think is helpful in my understanding of the digital neighborhood, is it helps us as scholars really understand or start to chip away at sort of a unspoken belief that because you use social media or you are using the same platforms as Black and Latinx youth from the East Coast, that you understand their experience. Because we all live in neighborhoods, but it's very clear and easy for us to wrap our minds around that not every neighborhood is the same. So while they may all have the same brick and mortar buildings, the variety, the quality, the walkability, resources access are all different. Even if we all have school and a drug store and streets and homes, the diversity of a neighborhood matters. And we know from our public health work, that the geographic neighborhood influences health. So I'd like to push us to think about how does the digital neighborhood influence the health and wellbeing of young people.

Dr. Sara Grimes 7:07

Your work highlights that although Black and Latinx youth are often both early adopters and heavy users of social media technologies, their perspectives and experiences are routinely excluded from most of the academic literature on youth and social media. Your own research reveals that their exclusion has created significant gaps in our knowledge about how young people use and misuse these technologies. Can you talk a little bit about how your findings diverge from and challenge the previous literature in this area?

Dr. Robin Stevens 7:40

Oh, I'd love to, because this is my favorite soapbox to stand on. I think as a professional community, we really don't have a good reason why Black and Latinx youth are excluded from our understanding of social media, new technology adoption, because we see such robust adoption of technologies, of content creation, being leaders and innovators in this space. But yet our scholarship does not include them, not as the margin, but the center of what's happening. And I think we really suffer. And what has happened in my opinion is the conversations, the critiques center, white middle class youth worries about cyber bullying, worries about privacy, that aren't really matched with the reality of many of the most robust users. And by doing that, we aren't able to criticize, we don't have the public support of criticizing platforms to do better to help address challenges that their platforms create for young people. Or even beyond addressing, how do we make sure platforms like TikTok, like Instagram, where the content is built on the backs of Black and Brown people, but they're excluded from any profit model that's generated from the work they do. And their work is often taken and amplified by white users or white creators without attribution, without any financial remediation really.

So I think what's missing, there's a lot of things. One, I think there are things that platforms get wrong. And as long as we, the scholars or advocates, don't listen to how Black and Latinx youth experience the platforms, how they use them, what risks they bring to their lives, there's no opportunity to challenge the systems and we render their experiences invisible. We create another structure in the United States that is experienced differently for people of color and for white people where the concerns of people of color are ignored. And I think that's really dangerous, particularly because we have such early and robust adoption and creation on platform. It's really an opportunity to let young people shine, to profile them, to ask them what's working and what's not. Because whatever we do to improve it for Black and Brown youth would also improve the system.

Dr. Sara Grimes 10:34

You mentioned TikTok as a popular forum for young Black and Latinx content creators, but one where their work is often appropriated and exploited. What are some of the other ways social media platforms are failing Black and Latinx youth?

Dr. Robin Stevens 10:49

The way that platforms amplify things like violence, violent videos of known and unknown peers to Black youth, it is triggering and it affects their mental health. So watching videos of people getting beat up, watching killings, watching shootings, and there's very little, I feel groundswell to say these videos don't just magically appear in the feeds of Black youth. There's clearly some algorithmic pressure that makes them more available, that makes them more salient. They influence how people experience their lives. They can be detrimental to our young people's health by exposure to community level violence. I just think we've missed the boat on that. People are more concerned about Facebook and cyber bullying than exposure to community level violence, which I actually think is quite widespread and challenging.

Another thing, young people... And this is in the work Brendesha Tynes, which I've been learning a lot from, is the amount of racism Black kids experience online in their digital neighborhood. So when they step outside of their known peers online, but maybe in video gaming, things like NBA live. The amount of times young people are called racial slurs or stereotyped in these gaming spaces, the reports are really shocking. It's like they experience a level of interpersonal racism that they do not report in their everyday lives. So if we don't ask Black teens what's happening, there is no critique of online gaming and racism, except for the few scholars who are working there. And I think this is a larger issue, an important issue for the broader community, for other academics. I think scholars have done a good job, particularly feminist scholars, of raising the flags around the attacks on women online, but I don't see any level of scholars outside of maybe of some Black scholars working on racism online.

Dr. Sara Grimes 13:07

A lot of the public discussion about kids in technology is pretty deterministic, positioning a particular device or media as unilaterally causing bad or good effects. Your research challenges deterministic accounts of kids in social media, and instead draws attention to the complex, or to use your term, iterative relationship between young people's media

consumption and their everyday behavior. I'd love it if you could say a little more about your approach, how you avoid determinism and how you navigate conducting research with teams on such sensitive issues?

Dr. Robin Stevens 13:45

That's a great question. I think part of my approach... I'm a community engaged scholar. So I don't really know how to do research on a group of people. I only really know how to do research with them. And so I think it changes the ethos that I have when I approach my young people. So this study did not start as a study of technology use at all. I'm trained in public health. First, I trained at Michigan where the community partners run much of the show in projects and it's not just a stamp or an advisory board. It's you answer to your community partners with your ideas and with your findings. So when I first started working in Camden, New Jersey, it began with just me asking questions. And we just interviewed youth with my partner, Dr. Stacia Gilliard-Matthews. We would just conduct interviews with teens and hear and ask them questions about a variety of things.

I was trained in sexual health. She's trained in substance abuse. If you're doing interviews, you start with like the light questions. You don't start right with sex, right? So you start with... I would ask them about their phones. And I would ask about, "Show me what's on your phone. What are you doing online?" And that was supposed to be 15 minutes of an interview, but that grew into a huge... The young people basically decided this is the work that I need to do because this is what they wanted to talk about. And within them talking about their devices and the platforms, they would talk about their sexual health. They would talk about relationships. They would talk about violence. They would talk about drugs. Everything was happening, the digital was through all of it. They were excited to talk about this stuff. So they would be sharing with me information, I'm be like...

I can't tell you how many times I would ask a teenager to see their phone, and they would be like, "Ms. Robin, look at this." It was just like, it opened up our conversations. And sometimes they would say, "Look at this," and I would be like, "Oh my goodness, I can't believe." But it was wonderful. It's easy for them to talk to me about a topic like sexual health or risk or drug use when we're looking at a phone and looking at somebody else. That opens a door for conversation. That's not about them, but they can still hear my response. I give them all the credit for saying, "This needs be talked about." I am honored to be able to represent them and their stories and their experiences and to advocate for them. But it is their story. They are the full agents of their lives.

And also, let's be honest. I'm not going to be more technologically advanced than my kids. I'm not going to know where their risk are more than they're going to know. I don't think it is valuable to try to parent children, especially not teens as a researcher. I don't think it's productive from a public health perspective. So I think what we want to do is give them the tools to make the best decisions, and then believe that they can.

Dr. Sara Grimes 17:17

Something that's come up in a couple of your responses here today reminds me of one of the main findings described in your 2017 article, *The Digital Hood*, which is that, "Facebook primarily operates as a digital community where social problems are magnified." You point out that this disproportionately impacts youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods and problematizes the widespread assumption that increased access to technologies or internet connections will solve the digital divide. How do real-world situatedness, race, and other dimensions of intersectional identity interact with questions of access and the digital divide?

Dr. Robin Stevens 17:58

I think about it, like we all have access to the justice system. We all have access to the educational system, but the way we experience those systems is markedly different because of the racial hierarchy in this country. Black teens experience is markedly different than someone who lives 20 miles away in the suburbs. So I do think we're in a time when that is exactly what's happening in the digital space. So yes, access is important. I think everyone should have access and I think broadband should be free for all communities. Yes, but that's not enough, that doesn't solve the fact that we're still going to experience these technological structures differently because they are built inequitably.

For example, when employers moved to accepting applications only online, one thing our teens were complaining about was that they accessed online through their phones, not through Wi-Fi or hotspots. So when they wanted to fill out a job application for a big box store, they want to fill out for a fast food restaurant, like teens all over the world, country do. When you try to access the application site on your phone, it's so wonky. It's not built for mobile. So it was making it impossible for them to complete the applications. Whereas if you could access it from a laptop with Wi-Fi, then you can zip right through it.

So right there, both groups of people have access to the internet, but the very device creates a barrier to employment. And many of these stores, when they transition to online applications, they don't receive paper. So it's not like I could still drop off my resume. The only way I can apply is through the online portal, which is not maximized for phones. So that's just one example of yes, we can all have access. Yes, we should all access, but the systems still are not built equitably.

Dr. Sara Grimes 20:15

A key focus of your 2019 article #digital hood is risk-related content, a term you use to describe a range of social media content from videos featuring real world physical fights to sexual harassment in the comment section. Can you tell us a bit more about risk-related content and what roles or functions it plays in the lives, health and wellbeing of Black and Latinx youth?

Dr. Robins Stevens 20:41

Yes. We focus on risk-related content to remove judgements placed on behaviors. So it's a very public health perspective in that your most health behaviors are neither good nor bad, but they will increase your risk of negative outcomes. That's why we focus on the idea of risk rather than value judgements of bad or good, because that can lead to stigma and shaming. That's not a helpful place to work from because sometimes people need to make risky choices to still maximize their wellbeing. It happens.

For example, if someone has substance use dependence and is reducing that substance use dependence and opts for tobacco and cigarettes instead, do we tell that person, "Oh, you are replacing one with the other and cigarettes are really bad. They're going to kill you." Or do we see this as, even though it's a risky behavior, it is a good choice for that person in that space. So that's why we focus on what is risk, not bad or good. And different types of risk behavior seem to have absolutely different roles and functions.

One thing that became clear is almost all, I mean, 80% of youth reported being exposed to the risk-related content that we measured. So sexual behavior, nudity, substance use, violence. Youth were regularly exposed to those things. However, what became clear over time is they were not highly engaged. Though most youth report seen risk content online in their social media feeds, very few of our youth, I think typically less than 10% were actually posting any of this type of content. So even though it seems ubiquitous in

a way that this is what is on the internet, they're seeing violence, there's seeing people with drug paraphernalia, people are posting news, it really wasn't that high level of participation in the behavior. So it's really about exposure.

I read this, as young people are strategic, and I've seen this over and over in my work, they are navigating their digital neighborhoods to maximize their wellbeing, to maximize their safety, to maximize their privacy. So while they may see it, while they may laugh, very few of them are actually creating that type of content, which suggests either they're not participating or they're doing it privately. That was one part I think was eye opening. What it also suggests is as future research goes forward and people are assessing or trying to use analysis of content on social media to speak to what the normative behavior is of teens, it suggests that the content that is present is actually not normative. So it could be an overestimation of risky behavior. I think I would caution researchers of overreading it. I would ask that we would think about the ways that youth are navigating.

The other thing I found with the young people, and we did qualitative work as well as the quantitative work, is they specifically said, "I avoid certain platforms because they cause so much drama and the drama spills over into my real life. I navigate around it." Their concerns about privacy were not about the general public's exposure to their content, but their concerns about privacy were about the other people in their circles, in their social worlds. So it really was, "I think about how my life online could impact my life offline with people I know at my high school, at my job." Not, "One day my employer will find this video." And they were very, very, very strategic about what they were posting and what they would like, what they would respond to, who they would engage with, with the knowledge that their whole social network could read it. You could lump that into a privacy concern, but I think when we say privacy, people aren't thinking about it the way that Black and Latinx youth are thinking about privacy.

The thing that also concerns me as scholars and advocates, working with youth, particularly in the criminal justice system, we also know that they are being surveilled by police departments, but for their behavior online. And at the time of this work, it was clear that young people did not realize that. That posting, that the friends they had, who you were posting picture with was something that was being surveilled for Black and Brown youth. And I actually don't think that that is a common concern when we talk about privacy. I don't think it's on the radar of scholars and I don't think it's on the radar of the kids.

Dr. Sara Grimes 26:08

This idea of young people being strategic is also a really important part of your published works. An argument you advance in both the 2017 and 2019 articles is that young people often respond to negative social media experiences by coming up with their own strategies for sense making, for avoidance, and for distancing themselves from it. Another thing that you mentioned in one of your earlier responses here today that I want to follow up on, and that might be linked to this idea of being strategic, is your mention of Black and Latinx youth being at the forefront of content creation on social media platforms. Is any of this content creation also strategic?

Dr. Robin Stevens 26:47

I never really put those things together. I appreciate you doing that, thinking about the strategies of avoidance, but then also coupled with the strategies of joy and creation that is co-occurring on platforms. And so I'm thinking about Vine, I'm thinking about TikTok. How can we not talk about TikTok which has been tremendous? One thing that has struck me is how Black youth, young adults, have been using these platforms to create one, just brilliant comedic content, art and dance, and educational materials and advocacy. And also the fifth area I would say is, I don't want to say catharsis, but the way you young people are responding, particularly on TikTok with the duets, how you can give voice, you can answer back, you can clap back. We see it on Twitter as well. How did I miss Twitter? We see it on Twitter as well, where there is an art form really to speaking your mind to your publics.

I think these platforms are a little different than what we saw earlier in the digital neighborhoods with the Facebooks and early Instagram. Is that these new platforms are really about broadcasting. These are our own cabled networks. These are our own YouTube channels. And so now we're talking outside of the neighborhood. Now, young people are talking to everyone and they are saying that their voices are being heard. They are becoming visible. They are no longer willing to wait for an academic to publish an article about them or for someone to profile them in the newspaper. But they are responding in real time to each other and to news events, to politics, to racism. And it is wonderful. It is wonderful.

However, what has been most disturbing, and if you've been watching particularly TikTok for a while, I think TikTok as a company has tried more than others to actually

acknowledge Black creators and creatives and potentially amplify their work, look for models to actually monetize that. So yes, let's give them props for doing that. But what we still see as the reproduction of something that is beyond TikTok, which is, I mean, this is really the story of American art and music, which is Black music, Black art, Black dance being taken and made popular by a white creator with a larger audience. So we saw it with the Renegade dance and also Fortnite dances. We see it over and over, but the difference with TikTok this time in this generation, which I love, I love this generation, is they went on strike. So they said, "We will not post any more dances because without us, you have no content." I think that is so powerful. I wish it received more press, but I like this shaking of the table coming from the young people.

It is still not equitable. I mean, I turned on Netflix, my little Netflix the other day, and the very person who took, I believe her name is... Jalaiah's Renegade dance and made it popular, has her own TV show now. Like where is the TV show for the originator, for the creator. So I think we still have miles to go. I don't actually think it's all on TikTok. I think it points out huge inequity in consumption of Black media versus willing to invest in Black media. And I think that's way beyond the digital space, but I'm love the amount of advocacy and agency and strategy and collaboration Black creators are working together to try to disrupt the system.

Dr. Sara Grimes 31:14

In preparation for this interview, you shared with me a recent commentary you wrote that is, if you don't mind me saying, incredibly powerful. In it, you discuss a concept called the invisible visibility of Black youth. Would you mind explaining what that means and how it shapes and limits both academic and policy discourses?

Dr. Robin Stevens 31:35

That invisible visibility, it's a personal concept but I see it continue when I'm working with young people. I see it in media. And I'm not the first person to talk about this. This well predates me. It's part of the experience of being Black in America. And it really is that Black youth are visible as problems. So problems to be fixed, causes of problems, just bodies that need to be addressed. But we are invisible in our humanity, in our contributions, and our right to be able to complain about the way that a platform works in our contribution to building TikTok and building Vine and building Twitter, in our contribution to culture and to American culture. So it's almost if Black youth only exist

when as a stereotypical arc type of young people that are broken and we need to invest in fixing them as a problem.

I'm sure other scholars will say it goes back further, but for me, this concepts grew out of W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, which I read my first week in college. I was like, "What is this?" But the beginning of the book, I believe it's in the intro, it says, "What is it like to be a problem?" And it was the first time that I really... It just hit home. And then I traveled with that concept throughout my training in public health, which problematizes Black bodies all the time as disparity statistics or body parts to be fixed, but never whole humans, never given the humanity that other communities receive.

It's stigmatizing, and it also really influences how people who may want equity in the United States, even approach achieving it because it's typically approach from a problem to be fixed, a deficit mindset. Let's focus on the individual. How can we help the kids navigate? How can we teach them to avoid this? How can we make sure they use protection? And it lenders the social structures and the racial hierarchy of the United States invisible so that we don't attack the structure that makes it hard to be Black in America. We just try to fix the individual and we work so heavily on the individual level that sometimes I think we can do more harm than good, because it's very stigmatizing to feel like a problem person that needs to be fixed your whole life.

Dr. Sara Grimes 35:13

Thank you for sharing that. I'm going to shift gears a bit and ask you the question that I'm asking all my guests this season. The United Nations recently adopted a new general comment confirming and outlining how children's rights apply in the digital environment. Do you think this will have any impact on the issues and relationships you describe in your work?

Dr. Robin Stevens 35:38

After reviewing it, I actually was very impressed at the scope and it clearly filled a void that was there. This policy. So I am grateful for it. I think if applied, it could really be extremely helpful, but it provides a guidepost of what we should be doing. And I think that was necessary because people definitely play fast and loose in the digital on a variety of ways and issues. So I think that guide is necessary to say, "This is the standard. This is what is required."

The implementation, that's different, and I don't think that is in the scope of the work, but how we will achieve that... What I think it does is it gives advocates, scholars, the guidepost to point to, to say, "This is what we should have been doing." So it really gives something a little stronger to advocate with in our diverse communities. I don't want to be pessimistic, but it's like the climate accords. Like, yes, we should absolutely agree, but then we do very little in practice as a nation. But we still need it there as a judgment overall of how we are not getting there. That was my initial little response to it.

Dr. Sara Grimes 37:23

A big thanks to Professor Stevens for joining us today. Please follow the links in the podcast description to find out more about Dr. Stevens's research, the Health Equity and Media Collab, the publications mentioned in today's episode, as well as information on where to send your questions or comments. The Critical Technology Podcast is produced by me, Sara Grimes, with support from the KMDI. Audio mix and sound design by Mika Sustar. Music by Nicholas Manalo. Theme song by Taekun Park. Our logo was designed by JP King, and the artwork for today's episode was created by Kenji Toyooka. Please subscribe to stay up to date on new episodes and posts as they become available. Thank you for listening.