

Book review

AMERICAN GIRLS - Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers

Nancy Jo Sales

Expanded from a 2013 article published in *Vanity Fair* magazine and written to explore whether then-recently reported instances of girls' suicides following patterns of cyberbullying suggested the existence of a crisis in the world of girls, this is a profoundly disturbing book. Nancy Jo Sales, a journalist who has covered teenagers for twenty years and is the mother of a teenage girl, spent over two and a half years getting to know girls from ten states, ages thirteen to nineteen, and following them on their social media accounts. The result is a riveting report of what is happening in the lives of teenage girls as they try to navigate the unprecedented challenges presented by social media.

Like many adults observing groups of teens interacting with their phones instead of each other, I have wondered how difficult this smartphone-centric generation will find it to concentrate or to develop intimate personal connections. But as to the dual worlds that teens actually inhabit today, I had no clue. For example, I had no idea that:

- 73% of kids have smartphones; teens spend up to eleven hours per day plugged into an electronic device; and teenage girls, the biggest users of social media, exchange as many as 100 texts a day, according to some studies.
- “Social media” covers a lot of territory. Sales spoke to parents who had “virtually no idea what their daughters were doing on social media,” which apps they were using and how they were using them. Her book listed a dozen “social media platforms your children are probably using” in addition to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.
- Kids begin seeing online porn as young as age six and most boys and girls have watched it before they turn eighteen.

Though many of the social and emotional issues teens are grappling with will be familiar to adults from their own adolescence, kids' private use of social media through their smartphones has added a new dimension to the viciousness they are able to inflict on one another as they work out their place in their social world. Today's teens, posting photos of themselves on social media, can get a numerical score of their social success through their number of followers and “likes,” not only from other kids in their school but from anyone in the entire social media universe who chooses to weigh in. Many teenage girls told Sales they feel “addicted” to social media—how else to keep up with everything going on in their world?

Even worse than not getting enough followers or “likes,” social media provide a platform for the posting of anonymous personal and hurtful comments, often untrue but nevertheless widely believed and repeated by other credulous teens. This phenomenon known as “cyberbullying” often takes place below the radar of parents and schools, leaving the victims to handle this on their own though they are ill-equipped to do so. It is estimated that 40% of girls are cyberbullied. A related statistic uncovered by a UCLA study in 2014 found that as kids spend more time online interacting with their friends and less time communicating face-to-face, their ability to pick up non-verbal cues such as tone of voice or facial expression is lessened and this results in less empathy among teens—40% less than teens in the 1980s according to the study.

But even worse is the huge problem in our culture of the way that the easy access to internet porn by any kid with a smartphone has become the way most teens learn about sex. Internet porn, far more violent and misogynistic than ever before, teaches boys to objectify girls as they copy the attitudes and behaviors of men they see in internet porn. By repeated exposure, not counteracted by information from parents or other adults, this becomes what teens, both boys and girls, see as normal sexual behavior. Girls feel pressure to look “hot” on social media in order to get “likes” and followers, and both boys and girls frequently make sexualized comments on one another's “selfies.” Exchanging nude photos of themselves has become common among kids and Sales heard from many girls about “slut pages,” a kind of “amateur porn site consisting of aggregated nudes, most often nonconsensually shared” that are “common in their school communities.” With webcams kids can easily record and upload videos of their activities, sometimes including videos of themselves or their friends committing such acts as fights or even rapes and posting them online for “likes”.

Sales is a good reporter and her description of the situation is compelling, including several other topics I didn't cover in this review, such as the "hook-up culture". Her conclusions at the end of the book—a "national conversation about online porn and its effects on kids"; making women's history a part of public high school curricula; encouraging Silicon Valley "players" to take responsibility for their role in cyberbullying and the exploitation and degrading of girls—are brief and lack a detailed plan of action (though who knows what that would look like anyway). She includes a list of discussion questions for parents that could give them a place to start.

I can't remember reading another book that has affected me more deeply.