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# Young People in Digital Society

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Amanda Third  
Western Sydney University  
Sydney, NSW, Australia

Philippa Collin  
University of Western Sydney  
Sydney, Australia

Lucas Walsh  
Monash University  
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Rosalyn Black  
Deakin University  
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

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*For adults, and the young people they once were.  
And for our own children—Alexis, Amelia, Lukas, Max, Millie and  
Violeta—who will be, soon enough, young people themselves.*

# Preface: Framing Matters

This book documents a research project undertaken in parallel with the authors' participation in an Australian cross-sector dialogue that has been taking place since 2007 in the context of the Technology and Wellbeing Roundtable (hereafter referred to as the Roundtable).<sup>1</sup> An initiative of ReachOut (formerly the Inspire Foundation) and the Telstra Foundation, the Roundtable represents a long-standing community of practice that has played—and continues to play—a key role in shaping the research, policy and service agendas pertaining to young people's digital practices in Australia. Although it is a unique entity internationally, the Roundtable is nonetheless a manifestation of a current trend towards cross-sector networks, and coordinated, collaborative approaches to understanding and responding to the perceived risks and opportunities associated with these practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the Roundtable include organizations such as the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), Google Australia, Telstra Corporation, the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People (from 2014, this became the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People), the Starlight Children's Foundation, the Foundation for Young Australians, Kids Helpline (BoysTown), Lifeline Australia and the Alannah & Madeline Foundation; a range of universities including Western Sydney University, the University of South Australia and Monash University. A large number of the participating organizations were also partners in Australia's federal-government-funded Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre (2011–16), which brought together over 75 partners from across sectors to examine how young people's technology use can be leveraged to support their mental health and wellbeing. Many members also participate in important policy forums such as the federal government's Consultative Working Group on Cybersafety.

The Roundtable is an alliance of approximately 30 organizations from across the corporate, not-for-profit, government and academic sectors, all of which are invested in better understanding young people's quotidian technology practices and promoting the positive potential of technology use for young people's mental health and wellbeing. The Roundtable does not have a formalized advocacy role. Nor does it fund research, product development or programmes. It is conceived as a knowledge-brokering entity whose sole purpose is to promote dialogue among stakeholders about key policy and practice issues. For members, participating in this conversation pays dividends—reducing duplication across sectors and enhancing the communal knowledge base among organizations, many of which have limited and/or under-resourced research and evaluation capacity.

When the Roundtable first began to meet in 2007, some participants expressed deep concerns about the potentially negative impacts of young people's technology practices. Reflecting mainstream discourses, these concerns sometimes verged on moral panic, particularly when the conversation turned to the possibilities of 'internet addiction' or online 'predation' or 'sexual grooming'. Conversely, other members were keen to promote a more moderate view, focusing on the potential benefits of technology. Roundtable members frequently lamented the absence of reliable statistics—the dominant and accepted evidence—regarding the risks and potential harms associated with young people's online participation, which could usefully inform policy and practice. Some were ignorant of, or sceptical about, qualitative research. Other Roundtable members came to the table with an explicit youth participation agenda, seeking to draw others into dialogue about how the sector could work together to embed young people's insights and experiences at the heart of public debate, policymaking and programmatic responses. Researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and working in academic, government and not-for-profit organizations, were keen to find ways to generate an evidence base that could bolster policies and programmes in the field. In short, the Roundtable comprised a diverse mix of players, often with competing or contradictory agendas. Far from a space of consensus, then, the Roundtable was replete with the micropolitics of power.

Nonetheless, more than ten years after its inception, the Roundtable's conversations have matured significantly and are a litmus test for the kinds of collective shifts in thinking that become possible when researchers work in productive partnerships with government, industry and the not-for-profit sector. Roundtable member organizations now enthusiastically embrace the idea that policymaking and programmes must be youth-centred. Further, the Roundtable has provided a space within which to assert and actively demonstrate how qualitative research—the kind of research that underpins the majority of the evidence we discuss in this book—can productively inform policy and practice. There is now a general appreciation of the value of qualitative approaches in providing an interpretive frame that can account for the social and cultural dimensions of young people's lived experiences of engaging with technologies.

As a consequence, the Roundtable's conversations have gradually shifted in emphasis. Whereas the issues of risk and cybersafety originally dominated, the Roundtable's conversations now encompass a broad range of opportunities and concerns. They generally take more holistic and strengths-based approaches that recognize the importance of maximizing the full potential of connectivity by promoting young people's digital literacy, resilience and participation. Simultaneously, the remit of the Roundtable has broadened, from a focus on children and young people to increasingly focus on the whole population, and on intergenerational perspectives as well as particular populations. While Roundtable members do not interpret and implement knowledge uniformly, nonetheless these conversations have become more nuanced, more responsive to young people's insights and experiences and grounded in critical reflection upon key terms and concepts.

Researchers have been integral to this evolution. When the Roundtable first began to meet, researchers were conceived of as 'experts' who could contribute specialist knowledge to the Roundtable's project. As members grew more familiar with one another over time, some member organizations commissioned participating researchers to conduct qualitative evaluations of programmes or services, bedding down the relationships that

had developed in the Roundtable context. The collaborative research of the Roundtable was consolidated by the award of an Australian Research Council Linkage grant in 2011, which, among other things, included funding to collaboratively define a research agenda, and to design and deliver three small-scale, iterative and qualitative studies to address key knowledge gaps.<sup>2</sup> Using a collaborative process, the research team worked with Roundtable members to identify existing knowledge gaps, design the research questions and define the scope and methods of each of these studies, which were conducted between 2011 and 2013. The topics of each of the three studies— respectively, young people’s understandings of online risks, digital inclusion and digital citizenship—reflected the prominent concerns and curiosities of the Roundtable membership. Further, our collective work has been motivated by a desire to explore knowledge-brokering processes that can better embed young people’s insights and experiences in the Roundtable’s deliberations.

Given that member organizations participate in important policy forums, such as the Australian federal government’s Online Safety Consultative Working Group, and given that they also engage in ongoing processes to reflect upon their practices and ground their policies and programmes in rigorous evidence, Roundtable conversations have played a key agenda-setting role for the youth mental health and technology sectors more broadly. In this respect, while the research outcomes of particular studies have been crucial in their capacity to invoke change within allied policy and practice settings, so too is the Roundtable’s mutual pedagogical process reframing the ways such debates play out in Australia. This process is necessarily an ongoing one, and research insights and critical terminology are not evenly understood or applied in the work of Roundtable members. Nor is there always consensus about the ways young people’s experiences can be mobilized to achieve organizational aims and better outcomes for young people. Nonetheless, the social dynamics of the Roundtable have a regulating effect on the ways knowledge is activated, and are incrementally inspiring a paradigmatic shift in

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<sup>2</sup>This project is entitled ‘Young People, Technology and Wellbeing Research Facility’ (LP100100837). The research team comprises the four authors of this book, along with Jane Burns, Sky Hugman (PhD candidate) and Cheryl Mangan.

approaches to engaging with social complexity in this domain. This book aims to capture the spirit of, and some of the key insights that have been generated by, this vibrant process of knowledge production and exchange, not only for the purposes of documenting, at least partially, the Roundtable's history to date, but also to contribute to ongoing debates internationally about the role of the digital in young people's everyday lives.

In addition to the Roundtable members who have participated enthusiastically and generously donated their time and expertise, we are grateful to many people and entities for making this project possible. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, we thank the 118 young people from Sydney, Melbourne, Lithgow and Bendigo who participated in our three studies, sharing openly their experiences of technology, and supporting our efforts to learn from them and arrive at a much deeper understanding of the myriad implications of the digital for contemporary social life. Our thanks also go to the Australian Research Council Industry Linkage Research Scheme for supporting a project whose outcomes, due to the open, collaborative and iterative process we proposed, were not easy to predict or quantify in advance. We are very grateful for the experimental space that this funding enabled.

This research project could not have been delivered without the financial, in-kind and collegial support, as well as the political and intellectual commitment, of our seven research partners: Kids Helpline, the Foundation for Young Australians, the National Children's and Youth Law Foundation, ReachOut, the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, the Starlight Children's Foundation and the Telstra Foundation. We have thoroughly enjoyed working together and have learned much from you. Your ongoing commitment to young people is totally admirable. Similarly, we are grateful to our home institutions—Western Sydney University, Monash University and Deakin University—for providing us with the time and intellectual space to embark on this project, and for providing ethics, grant administration and communications support (in particular, Helen Barcham, Reed Everingham, Jane Hobson and Emily-Kate Ringle-Harris). Sky Hugman, the PhD student dedicated to a meta-analysis of the knowledge-brokering processes of the Roundtable on this project, has been an outstandingly thoughtful contributor and critical friend to the project team. A number

of part-time research assistants have worked under conditions requiring enormous flexibility and the capacity to respond quickly and think creatively: Delphine Bellerose, Sherene Idriss, Emma Kearney, Jane McCormack, Vanessa Mendes Moreira De Sa, Harriette Richards and Bettina Rösler. Similarly, a number of colleagues have contributed valuable input and helped shape and test our thinking, including Ien Ang, Peter Bansel, Tony Bennett, Natalie Bolzan, Michelle Catanzaro, Anne Collier, Sandra Cortesi, Louise Crabtree, Milissa Deitz, Katherine Gibson, Gerard Goggin, John Hartley, Gay Hawkins, Justine Humphry, Paul James, Amelia Johns, Gar Jones, Rey Junco, Emma Keltie, Girish Lala, Sonia Livingstone, Peter Lunt, Liam Magee, Anthony McCosker, Clare Monagle, Lilly Moody, Jono Nicholas, Tanya Notley, Kate Pawelczyk, Kari Pihl, Jeanette Pope, Wendy Protheroe, Ned Rossiter, Kat Sandbach, Zoe Sofoulis, Jon Stratton, Teresa Swist, Georgina Theakstone, Sue Turnbull, Dimitris Vardoulakis, Sonja Vivienne, Gill Vogl, Jess Whyte, Samantha Yorke and the Sydney Scraggs. Urszula Dawkins provided exceptional guidance on collaborative authoring, and support in editing the manuscript and ensuring that four voices could sing in harmony. And last of all, but absolutely not least, we are deeply indebted to our loved ones, who make possible all those wonderful things that cannot be enumerated here: Tony Cerra, Emma Rujevic, Lukas, Alexis and Dimitris Vardoulakis; Max and Millie Walsh; Marcelo Zavala Baeza and Amelia and Violeta Zavala-Collin.

Lastly, this book was written collaboratively. In undertaking the challenge of writing together in long form, for the first time, we decided (perhaps idealistically) that we would use the process to confront our individual and collective limits and to have the kinds of discussions that would deepen our thinking. To that end, we did not simply divide up the chapters; rather, we each took responsibility for creating a first draft of separate chapters, deliberately leaving them imperfect and unfinished to give the other members of the team space to write themselves into each chapter. Each chapter went through several iterations, inspiring robust debate and reflection. Then, the lead author worked with an editor to unify the voice and style across chapters. However, it is difficult to enact the ideal of a co-authored manuscript that genuinely synthesizes the thinking of four different people. We are aware that there are lumps and bumps, moments of awkwardness and pieces that don't fit; indeed, we

have commented that the book takes us right back to the feeling of being an adolescent. However, what inconsistencies there are reflect genuine disjunctures in our thinking. In this spirit, we invite you, the reader, to seize these moments as ones in which to intervene and, if possible, resolve—because it is imperative that this is an ongoing conversation.

Sydney, NSW, Australia

Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Amanda Third  
Philippa Collin  
Lucas Walsh  
Rosalyn Black

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