Introduction to Our Space

For most young people today, engagement with new digital media is a routine aspect of life. Through computers, mobile phones, and other handheld devices, many youth use social networks (e.g., Facebook), play games (e.g., RuneScape, World of Warcraft) and use online information sources (e.g., Wikipedia). Some youth also use Twitter, keep blogs (e.g., LiveJournal), and share videos, stories, and art they've created (e.g., YouTube, Fiction Alley).

Important skills and knowledge can be gained from these activities, but there are also risks. However, young people may only rarely consider the learning opportunities, risks, and the related question of what it means to be an ethical, socially responsible "citizen" on the Internet. The materials in this casebook are designed to encourage youth to reflect on these important issues. Through role-playing activities and reflective exercises, students are asked to consider the ethical responsibilities of other people, and whether and how they behave ethically themselves.

Our Space was co-developed by The GoodPlay Project (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and Project New Media Literacies (Established at MIT and now housed at University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communications and Journalism). The GoodPlay Project is a study of how young people think about ethical issues in online spaces. Project New Media Literacies is an educational initiative focused on promoting the social skills and cultural competencies required to meaningfully engage with participatory culture. The *Our Space* collaboration grew out of a shared interest in fostering ethical thinking, and conduct, among young people when they exercise their new media skills. For more background about the collaboration that resulted in this casebook, see "How We Got Here," by Howard Gardner and Henry Jenkins (See Appendix).

In this Introduction, we first describe the Ethical Thinking and New Media Literacies emphasized throughout *Our Space*. We then describe the Core Themes explored in the units.

Ethical Thinking in New Media Environments

Our Space is inspired by the belief that young people need to think habitually about online life in ethical terms.

In this casebook, we define *ethical thinking* as the capacity to think about one's roles and responsibilities in the communities in which one participates, offline and online. Such thinking requires the capacity to think abstractly about one's roles; to do so in a nonpartisan, disinterested way; and to consider the impact of one's actions *beyond the self* and on a larger collective—such as one's school, community, state, nation, and world. Research conducted by the GoodPlay Project suggests that young people rarely think in ethical ways about their online activities.

Our Space **is aimed at cultivating the following** *ethical thinking skills***:**

- **Perspective-taking**, or striving to understand the motives and goals of multiple stakeholders in online communities. Stakeholders might include one's friends, peers, parents, and teachers; other individuals with whom one interacts online; and the creators, owners, or subjects of content downloaded or accessed online.
- Reflecting on one's **roles and responsibilities** when online—for example, when presenting oneself in an online community; when sharing information about the self and others; when taking action in an online, multiplayer game; when deciding how to respond to something troubling, such as hate speech; and when deciding whether and how to make use of information, music, video, and text accessed online.
- Considering the **potential benefits and harms to communities** of various choices online—including those related to conduct and speech, self-presentations, privacy, establishing one's credibility, assessing the credibility of others, and using online content.

If youth engage these skills, we believe they will be more likely to behave as, and conceive of themselves as, responsible *citizens*—as opposed to simply bystanders or (at worst) abusers—of online communities.

Ethical thinking is especially important in new media environments because of the great powers they afford young people—to shape their own and others' identities, credibility, and privacy; to create and share their own content, and remix or mash-up others' creations; and to join and participate in a new set of communities, the size and scope of which may be unknowable.

Full participants of online communities exercise critical new media literacies, including:

- **Performance**—the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery.

- **Simulation**—the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real world processes.

- **Judgment**—the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources (including friends and peers).

- **Negotiation**—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.

- **Networking**—the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information; in other words, networking creates opportunities to share with others.

- **Collective intelligence**—when participants pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal.

- **Appropriation**—the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content.

The materials in this casebook highlight these skills that are often exercised by youth—consciously or not—in their various activities online. Our hope is that youth will come to acknowledge that exercising these skills, or powers, carries a civic responsibility—an obligation to think, and ideally act, in ethical ways.

Core Themes

The casebook is divided into five units, each of which focuses on a core theme—namely, participation, identity, privacy, authorship and ownership, and credibility. This quintet of themes was derived from research conducted by the GoodPlay Project. The research suggested that each theme is "high stakes" online and thus carries both promises and risks, particularly for young people. Importantly, the choices young people make online with respect to privacy and the other themes have implications not just for themselves, but for others. To us, this means that these themes have *ethical* dimensions. Here, we briefly describe each unit's core theme and the ethical dimensions addressed in the unit lessons.

- **Participation**—We define participation broadly, as the ways in which people conduct themselves online. Participation online can include signing an online petition, commenting on a friend's status update on Facebook, uploading an original video to YouTube, contributing to an ongoing blog, etc. Online spaces provide young people with positive opportunities to assume new roles, learn new skills, and collaborate with others to address urgent social problems. At the same time, opportunities to participate in harmful or counterproductive ways abound, such as through hate speech, griefing, trolling, cyberbullying, and other forms of misconduct that can harm both individuals and whole communities. The Participation unit raises the following key questions: *In online contexts, where communities can rapidly form, and just as rapidly*

disintegrate, how should norms of behavior be established, maintained, and respected? What are your roles and responsibilities in the online communities in which you participate? How can a person's conduct in an online community affect other participants and the community as a whole?

- **Identity**—The Internet provides new contexts for young people to express, explore, and develop their identities. They can use photos, interests and "favorites" lists, and other content to play up—or hide—different aspects of their identities. Online self-expressions and forms of "identity play" can also affect others in various ways. Youth who celebrate gay, lesbian, or other kinds of identities through blogs and/or profiles may uplift others who feel marginalized and unable to express themselves. On the other hand, some forms of online identity exploration can be deceptive and can undermine relationships. Key questions raised in the Identity unit include: *How do different forms of self-expression online affect others? What are the potential benefits and harms to others? When does "identity play" cross the line and become identity deception?*

- **Privacy**—Traditional notions of privacy are being challenged by new media that offer rich opportunities to network, communicate, and share information with vast audiences. By creating social network profiles and sharing at least some personal information online, young people can reach out to others, share their ideas and experiences, and form support networks around various struggles. At the same time, disclosing too much online can be harmful, given that information can persist indefinitely and can be shared with unintended audiences. Deception intended to protect one's privacy can also have unintended negative effects on relationships with others. Key questions addressed in the Privacy unit include: *What are the boundaries of sharing information about yourself and others online? What are the potential benefits of being able to share information online? What are the potential harms—to yourself and to others? In what circumstances can concealment of personal information—and anonymity—be beneficial vs. harmful?*

- **Credibility**—Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of people—especially their credentials, skills, and motivations—and of information. The volume of information available online creates both opportunities and risks—for learning, for making informed choices, and for connecting with other people. On the opportunities side, anyone can contribute information to knowledge communities like Wikipedia. On the risks side, it is relatively easy to post misinformation or to misrepresent one's credentials and expertise in online forums, and risk doing harm to people

who turn to such forums for advice. Certain properties of the Internet make it difficult to assess whether information can be trusted—including the potential for anonymity in many online spaces; the asynchronous nature of communication; and the absence of cues (such as tone and facial expression) that help us assess what people say offline. The Credibility unit addresses the following key questions: *What are the benefits and risks associated with the volume of information available online? How do you know when you can trust online information sources? How do you present a credible self online? What are your responsibilities when posting information about yourself, about other people, or information in different online spaces? How can you assess the credibility of other people based on their online profiles, blogs, and other content about them? What are your ethical responsibilities when you are an information seeker?*

- **Authorship and Ownership**—Traditional notions of authorship and ownership are being rethought in response to collective authorship on sites like Wikipedia, by the capacity to distribute amateur and professional videos to mass audiences through sites like YouTube, and by the technologies that allow remixing of content. Both promises and risks are apparent. New media afford unprecedented access to information, which may inspire new forms of learning; they also afford budding authors and other creators new avenues to participate in creative life. On the other hand, the Internet offers opportunities to abuse the free flow of information and content through illegal downloading, plagiarism, and failure to cite sources properly or consider the intentions of original creators and owners of online content. The Authorship and Ownership unit addresses the following questions: *How has the act of creation been altered by new media? What does it mean to be an author or a creator today? What is the difference between being "inspired by" someone else's work and plagiarism? How can you remix, or otherwise "appropriate" the work of others in a responsible, ethical way? How do legal aspects of ownership, such as copyright, public domain, fair use, and creative commons limit or enable some forms of appropriation?*

While each unit in *Our Space* addresses one theme as a primary focal point, it is important to note that the five themes are not independent of one another. For example, choices about presenting one's identity online frequently overlap with, and beg consideration of, privacy and credibility issues. Moreover, any use of the Internet involves participation in a community, whether or not participants realize it. Accordingly, many of the lessons raise several themes, at least implicitly. In the Orientation

activity designed for teachers, we explicitly address all five themes. We encourage students and teachers to reflect on new, unanticipated themes and questions raised by the materials as well.