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# **Kids Across the Spectrums**

## **Growing Up Autistic in the Digital Age**

**By: Meryl Alper**

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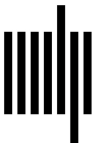
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## 8 CONCLUSION

The research for this book wound down right as the COVID-19 pandemic began. It may, in fact, be one of the last books to be published for a while that is based on the ethnographic study of young children conducted from physically inside their homes. In April 2020, I pivoted to Skype to speak with two autistic kids whom I had interviewed a few years prior—now 13-year-old Saylor (White, girl) and 10-year-old Caleb (Black, boy)—and their respective mothers, Maggie and Audrey.<sup>1</sup> By then, in-person public school in Massachusetts had been suspended and moved online, and an assortment of social distancing measures had commenced across the state. For Caleb and Saylor, the pandemic had already begun to alter how they sought connection with their peers and how technology facilitated those interactions and relationships.

Right before the lockdown, Saylor had started to exercise more physical and social independence from her parents. “She did get to a point where she’s walking home from school with a friend, [and telling me,] ‘Oh, we’re going to go to Dunkin’ Donuts and hang out,’” shared Maggie, whose family lived in a predominantly White and mostly residential Boston suburb. Maggie did not take these typical teenage freedoms for granted, considering her daughter’s prior struggles with bullying. When Saylor spoke about what had changed in her life due to the pandemic, the loss of her newfound mobility stuck out. “I’ve gotten a little stressed out because I think people in my town might have it and everything shut down so fast,” she said, “I thought this whole week, I’m just going to go to Dunkin’ and get a coffee and come home and quarantine, but Dunkin’ is pretty much closed.” The internet

is always open, however, and much of Saylor's socializing, as well as that of her peers, had migrated online. She was feeling somewhat neglected by her friends, who were enticed by endless entertainment options at home. "Corona has been pretty lonely," Saylor shared, "None of my friends really communicate with me anymore because . . . they're all just playing video games. . . . I'll be like, 'Hey, do you want to FaceTime?' They'll be like, 'I can't right now, I'm on *Fortnite*.'"

While Saylor spoke of gaming displacing richer online and offline social opportunities, video games opened up new ways for Caleb to play with classmates during quarantine. His in-person playdates had already been limited prior to the pandemic. There was not a lot of spare room in his seven-hundred-square-foot apartment, and Audrey—a single mom and immigrant from Haiti—did not think it was safe for friends to come over and play with her son outside because they lived on a busy main road in a part of Boston with a high crime rate. In our earlier interview, Caleb had reported with respect to his media habits, "I don't chat with people on games. I've never done that before." This had changed a month into the pandemic. He and a few classmates would log on to their school-supplied Google Chromebooks to video chat while working on homework together. Those sessions led to scheduled online meet ups on weekends to play Roblox while each boy kept their camera on. Though Caleb might have eventually started social gaming when he got older, Audrey believed that the pandemic was a catalyst. "[It's] changed the way he's interacting with his friends. He's using technology. He wasn't doing that at all before," she said.

Saylor and Caleb's experiences are particular to the COVID-19 era, but also gesture toward key themes that I have discussed throughout this book. First, their usage of media was not entirely different from that of their non-autistic peers. For example, both kids reported increased screen time. In the United States, 72 percent of parents with children in grades K–12 indicated in April 2021 that their child had spent more time in front of screens since the start of the pandemic a year earlier.<sup>2</sup> Mobile devices and video games allowed Caleb and Saylor to self-organize social spaces outside of school. Second, despite the same autism diagnosis and similar profiles (e.g., sharp conversational skills, challenges with focusing), their social uses of media differed in important ways. Technology seemed to exacerbate Saylor's loneliness while minimizing Caleb's. These distinctions may have resulted from how they were being socialized as a teen girl and a tween boy. Beyond

age and gender, their social possibilities were also influenced by issues of race and power outside their homes, like housing segregation and neighborhood safety. Being autistic no doubt impacted how Saylor and Caleb were handling disrupted routines and constrained geographies due to COVID-19,<sup>3</sup> including using media to cope,<sup>4</sup> but it was not the only factor in how they each demonstrated resiliency.

Third, their stories exemplify my theorization of the sociotechnical shaping of sociality, or how the relationship between society and technology shapes and is shaped by neurotypical interpersonal expectations and norms. Though some people on the spectrum have difficulty reading facial expressions,<sup>5</sup> both children valued seeing their friends' faces online (Saylor through FaceTime and Caleb using Google Hangouts). This echoes research indicating that autistic children missed embodied social contact during the pandemic and that technology was not a panacea for this longing.<sup>6</sup> Parents widely reported that autistic children who required substantial support struggled with the medium of remote learning and regressed academically, socially, and behaviorally as a result of the pandemic,<sup>7</sup> while some thrived taking classes virtually from the comfort of home.<sup>8</sup> Autistic young people may have been better equipped than their nonautistic peers in some ways to make the sudden switch to distanced socializing. Many already had intimate experience with barriers to physical participation and had been using media and technology to navigate uncertain futures.

It will take years to understand the pandemic's long-term impact on the mental health of young people, including kids on the spectrum like Caleb and Saylor. It is my hope, though, that the vivid perspectives of children and their families in this book—the first to chronicle autistic young people's media and technology practices in depth—are both timeless and timely, universal yet specific. In the remainder of this concluding chapter, I review how the three overarching themes that I identified in my fieldwork—cultural belonging, social relationships, and physical embodiment—define autistic children's media use. Next, I summarize the contribution that this book makes to theoretical understandings of sociality and technology. I then propose practical advice for how these empirical findings can be applied in several contexts. Lastly, I suggest how future research on autism, media, and social technologies can be more inclusive. Such topics are immediately relevant to autism researchers, but they also concern scholars of technology and society, children and media, education, human-computer interaction,

sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, human development, and family communication.

### BOOK SUMMARY

In this book, I approach the question of what young people on the spectrum are doing with media by taking care to avoid simplistic and damaging tropes about autism and “mechanical boys” that have circulated within mainstream culture for well over fifty years.<sup>9</sup> I identify three main technological caricatures of autistic children that these narratives produce: (1) computer-savvy and intensely focused geeks who are valuable societal and economic assets to the technological and scientific sectors; (2) heavy internet users at social risk for online and offline peer isolation and aggressive behavior; and (3) those whose autism has been caused by too much screen time and not enough people time.

In their own way, the first and second narratives each encourage the regulation and management of autistic bodies, either for the extraction of capital or as a pretext for increased surveillance. Some young people on the spectrum are indeed using their technological talents to important ends, including developing apps that help themselves and others manage their own conditions.<sup>10</sup> But prevailing techno-centric autism stereotypes are largely based on notions of the prototypical autistic child as White, male, and upper-middle class,<sup>11</sup> which also does a disservice to these boys by flattening out the nuances of their social and emotional lives.<sup>12</sup> The third myth concerns the idea that technology and specific media texts (like the preschool TV show *Peppa Pig*) make children more “autistic,” cause “autistic symptoms,” or put children “at risk” for autism.<sup>13</sup> Research asserting causal claims between autism and screen media are empirically flawed in several ways. Autism is a developmental condition, meaning it develops prior to birth. Fetuses cannot view screens, so the idea that media causes autism is beyond belief. Such studies describe “connections” and “links” that are correlational or cyclical, but not directly causal.<sup>14</sup> These studies also presume that the complex characteristics of autism are easily definable and reducible.

I found this to be far from the case when tracing the role of media and technology in autistic children’s social lives. I examined how they make sense of where they belong culturally in terms of their identities (chapter 2) and learning environments (chapter 3). I studied the kinds of personal relationships

that they forge with family (chapter 4) and friends (chapter 5). And I tried to understand their embodied experiences of neurodivergence, namely their sensory (chapter 6) and emotional (chapter 7) processing.

Each child had different strengths and challenges, as well as varied backgrounds. While autism is inseparable from autistic children, children on the spectrum are more than their autism alone, and this extends to their digital, mass, and social media use. This book demonstrates how prevailing views of the relationship between autism and technology reflect a bias that does not account for gender, race, ethnicity, class, and other aspects of human difference. For example, though the idea of autistic youth as “naturally” geeky is persistent and pervasive, there is nothing natural about having access to hardware and software, to necessary infrastructure like high-quality internet, and to enriching opportunities outside of school.<sup>15</sup> To deny these realities in the lives of autistic people is to oversimplify and reduce their existences.

## THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Viewing autistic youth and their technology use as homogenous not only shortchanges children and families, but it is a missed opportunity to understand communication and social technologies themselves in a more nuanced way. My last book centered around the idea of “voice” (and a population of nonspeaking disabled individuals), and this one has focused on what it means to be “social.” Autism is clinically characterized by an individual’s lack or deficit of sociality, but I was driven to ask, how do autistic children enact “the social”? How do they do so through an array of media and technology? And what can this tell us about the relationship between society and technology more broadly? I found that autism does not only concern being social (or not), but it is profoundly sociological and sociotechnical.<sup>16</sup> The modern media and technology practices of autistic children reveal tensions and contradictions in how social norms are made, remade, and unmade through highly complex interactions and relationships on interpersonal and institutional levels. This book has adopted an asset model of disability, inverting a deficit view that can overshadow strengths. It looks toward those who are clinically defined as having “social deficits” to learn how technology shapes social experiences as well as how to critically contextualize social communication.<sup>17</sup>

It is a paradox that autism is insufficiently theorized in media and technology, yet these same tools and materials are pervasive in the lives of

autistic children and adults. Borrowing a typology of youth media practices developed by anthropologist Mizuko Ito and colleagues, some autistic kids are “geeking out” (exploring media interests), but they are also “messing around” (producing media) and “hanging out” (using media to socialize).<sup>18</sup> Some autistic kids engage in these activities more so than others do. Their social preferences, however, may not look like those of neurotypical children and thus get invalidated or ignored, even when engaging with the same digital platforms.

Consider the parasocial relationships formed by multiple children on the spectrum with YouTube media personae, discussed in chapter 5. These online experiences were socially meaningful in and of themselves to kids like Brendan, though they could also scaffold mutually beneficial relationship building with peers offline, as with Jeremiah. The binary between “social” and “nonsocial” media does not hold in the case of autistic youth, who may form affective bonds with media in its material and symbolic forms. As Brendan’s mom, Marcia, noted of these seeming contradictions, “I can’t explain it. The electronics mean more to him than the social connection. So, it’s not that he doesn’t want friends. It’s not that he doesn’t love his family. It’s just that it means a lot to him, and he really enjoys it, so he would prefer that.”

This book captures only a subset of mediated autistic socialites, or possibilities for being social and on the spectrum through information, media, and communication technologies. Some of these socialites are seen as more valid now than before the COVID-19 pandemic, though this approval is conditional. For example, children’s video game play reportedly soared during the pandemic due to physical distancing measures.<sup>19</sup> In that time, news articles began to appear in major publications not only assuaging parents of guilt over their more relaxed screen time rules, but also extolling the social benefits of intensive game play.<sup>20</sup> Many neurodivergent youth, however, were already comfortable with and even preferred cultivating and maintaining relationships via online means, such as chatting and socially sharing in game play through digital platforms like Twitch and Discord.<sup>21</sup> Ways of being that are favored by minoritized populations are often not considered socially acceptable until they are adopted and assimilated by nonminoritized groups. Cultural approval of socially adaptive technology is contextual and contingent, and it does not automatically extend to all aspects of autistic people’s lives that could be made more accessible during the pandemic or beyond.<sup>22</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This book arrives at an encouraging cultural moment in which more and more individuals, industries, and institutions are talking about neurodiversity as an important dimension of inclusion. In addition to theoretical contributions, this book makes several recommendations for different kinds of audiences, with members who may or may not be autistic themselves.<sup>23</sup> I distill my reflections into actionable media advice for parents of kids of the spectrum. I make suggestions for those who work directly with autistic children (e.g., teachers, therapists), many of whom may not necessarily understand the overall context of technology in these children's lives or who see it only as a problem. I also critically intercede in discussions about high-tech behavioral, social, and emotional interventions whose stated intention is to help kids on the spectrum, but that I argue do not account for the many ethical issues that these technologies raise. I have additionally included advice for media producers, technology developers, and policy makers who have significant influence over structural forces shaping how kids on the spectrum, as well as their siblings and peers, grow up in the digital age.

## PARENTS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, psychologists likened parents' more relaxed media rules for their children in the absence of childcare to a "babysitter of last resort."<sup>24</sup> Screen media may have lightened an impossibly heavy load for parents, but it has long served that role for caregivers of autistic youth—in addition to de facto teacher, therapist, and social worker. Parents of kids on the spectrum report receiving inconsistent messaging from medical providers about how to manage their child's media use, especially if that management style differs for their neurotypical siblings and if the autistic child also has any other co-occurring conditions such as ADHD.<sup>25</sup> Following other strengths-based work on technology use in marginalized families,<sup>26</sup> I highlight in this book what children and families are doing well so that these assets can be built upon. In terms of how parents might navigate challenging issues in practice, I have identified six developmental areas, while each of the other chapters in this book also present additional takeaways.

**SOCIAL** Parents of autistic kids can support their child's use of media to communicate and connect in ways that respect their preferred modes of



sociality. Autistic children like Caleb may find it easier to socialize with classmates through video games with chat functions. This format could be particularly beneficial for those who might not be regularly included in after-school play. There is a difficult balance, however, in giving kids autonomy and opening them up to disempowering situations (i.e., cyberbullying, online harassment), like Matt and Bryan's risky, unmonitored Roblox use (chapter 5). For parents, using media together, like family movie nights, can help build a child's social communication skills. That being said, there are often challenges beyond a caregivers' immediate control, like being a single parent and not having a second caregiver to rely upon for attending to the needs of other children in the household.

*EMOTION* Emotionally, parents should pay attention to how media can soothe or stress their child, even if the child is nonspeaking and may not articulate their mood in traditional ways. Children on the spectrum can be very empathetic, like Sam, who used both gestures and his augmentative and alternative communication device to express how he understood the feelings of his mom and the character Blue from *Blue's Clues* (chapter 7). Other autistic kids might convey emotions in a more reserved way, which then shapes the media content that they choose. It is important, though, to help children on the autism spectrum learn to regulate their emotions in ways that do not always involve the relief provided by a screen, especially as technology can also sometimes make emotion regulation more difficult for some. Parents can additionally scaffold children's emotion management, like talking together about the emotionally intense situations in which media characters find themselves.

*COGNITION* In terms of cognitive development, parents can help autistic children become critical thinkers about media and technology to the fullest extent of their abilities. Some kids on the spectrum can fully grasp the complexity of what they see and read online, while others might not know what is inappropriate to post on social media or understand that what they are watching on YouTube is an advertisement. Parents should meet their children where they are and watch videos together to explain what could be confusing for their child. Caregivers, however, face challenges of staying informed themselves. For example, neither Adrian nor his well-educated parents were aware that he could not change his original, non-anonymized

username in Scratch when he first joined the site, leading to privacy concerns later on (chapter 3).

*BEHAVIOR* Behaviorally, parents should set reasonable boundaries around media but also give kids on the spectrum an active role in defining parameters. Media can provide a sense of routine for autistic children who thrive with clear schedules and plans, as well as for those like Amaya living with unresolved trauma (chapter 7). But for some, constant media use might negatively impact their ability to self-regulate and transition to nonmedia activities. Sensory dysregulation can also trigger a loss of behavioral control, which certain media might ameliorate or intensify. For example, Aaliyah loved to watch PBS KIDS and sing along to songs, but specific content that played between episodes elicited a physically painful response (chapter 6). To help, parents can involve kids in making predictable and safe choices about their media and technology use while being attentive to when they have become overstimulated.

*SLEEP* With respect to sleep, media can work both with and against an autistic child's sleeping habits. Many kids on the spectrum, like Sofia, tend to have nonnormative sleeping habits to begin with (chapter 3). When others in the home are sleeping, media could be what is keeping these children company at night and thus keeping them from disrupting their parents' sleep or waking up their siblings. But, if media before bed is making things worse, then parents should consider enacting small changes for developing new routines, like not using screens in the hour leading up to bedtime. Adolescents on the spectrum, like Brendan, may also be self-aware of how technology impacts their sleep and understand the benefits of rules and moderation (chapter 4).

*CREATIVITY* Lastly, parents should give autistic kids large canvases, metaphorically speaking, to explore their interests and create things, both physical and digital. Some children on the spectrum have amazing artistic skills and an eye for detail, but there are many with minimal resources who lack basic internet access, such as Robert and Anthony, limiting the possibilities of their creativity as well as their vocational potential. Making and reading paper comic books and graphic novels can be a great way for autistic kids to build worlds in a nondigital way too, especially in the case of kids like Casey who use the medium to explore their multifaceted identities (chapter 2).

## PRACTITIONERS

Parents, of course, should not and cannot bear the entire responsibility for helping their kids on the spectrum grow up happy and healthy. Clinicians, therapists, and other medical professionals with whom they interact regularly can be partners in enabling autistic children to thrive in a highly mediated world, provided that caregivers can access this health care to begin with, which is not a given in the United States. Recreational media may be a helpful clinical tool; for example, popular games like *Minecraft* have been used in therapy to enable autistic children to process trauma.<sup>27</sup> From my conversations with parents and observations of kids, it became clear, however, that not all therapists are equally well-trained to carry out this work, nor are all therapeutic interventions equally concerned with autistic children's overall well-being. I was encouraged, though, by the work between Diego and his behavioral therapist, Tiffany (chapter 3), which required her to relinquish control to Diego and allow him to create his countless PowerPoint "books" during their sessions with her technical and social support.

Teachers and therapists who work in schools (i.e., speech-language, occupational, and physical therapists) have had more glimpses as of late into the domestic spaces of their students through the screens of Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet. The stories in this book, told from the perspectives of autistic kids and their parents, as well from families with a diverse array of backgrounds, hopefully generate creative pedagogical ideas and offer alternative explanations for student behavior and performance. For example, unexamined racial biases may be at work when diagnoses are made and Individualized Educational Programs (or Plans) are developed. These prejudices can contribute to understandings of some children as more "stereotypically" autistic in their technological engagement and, subsequently, to those kids being offered additional resources. Other autistic children may not be seen that way and hence may not receive that help,<sup>28</sup> as in the case of Clayton (chapter 1).

## MEDIA PRODUCERS

While there have been more fictional on-screen representations of autism over the past five or so years, it is almost as if autistic girls of color do not exist in the eyes of the media. Though kids on the spectrum can identify with media characters with other disabilities or autistic characters with different racial or gender backgrounds (chapter 2), they deserve more options. TV shows could play an important role in continuing to push back against

the status quo in this respect, having already made major inroads for autism representation on programs like *Sesame Street*, *Hero Elementary*, and *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* in the United States, *Pablo* in the United Kingdom, and *Heartbreak High* in Australia.<sup>29</sup>

Such work necessitates a more diverse set of autistic producers, creators, and creative consultants. Mass media can add new layers to our general understandings of autism in an authentic and diverse way, including websites, books, movies, podcasts, and social media accounts. The online publication *Spectrum* covers scientific research on autism and autism's more social and cultural dimensions (though it would benefit from having more autistic writers). There are documentary movies about the experiences of nonspeaking autistic people who express themselves through alternative communication systems. An increasing number of autistic people of color and their parents are using digital media to share their points of view and develop community, such as the *Autism in Black* (autisminblack.org) podcast.

#### TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPERS

There are rising calls within and outside the tech industry to grapple with the morality and ethics of deploying technologies without considering the possible disproportionate negative impacts on marginalized groups. By and large, this critical reckoning has yet to extend to the field of autism technologies and popular media technologies regularly used by autistic children.<sup>30</sup> Most "autism apps" (i.e., applications that tout their therapeutic potential for autism) not only are low quality, but are poorly maintained and updated in app stores, leading to their abandonment by users.<sup>31</sup> Autistic children themselves are rarely involved in the process of designing assistive autism technologies in a meaningful way.<sup>32</sup> The fetishization of high-tech interventions like humanoid robots and Google Glass has led many in the technology sector to overlook the developmental areas in which kids on the spectrum already show interest and a desire to learn. For example, I dedicated a significant amount of space in chapter 3 to detailing autistic children's fascination with literacy and numeracy, which, for some of these children, is likely a result of being hyperlexic. Research on embodied artificially intelligent agents as assistive technologies focuses mainly on controlled experiments in laboratory environments and does not account for the habits, routines, and rituals cultivated inside the home media environment of children on the spectrum.

As discussed in earlier chapters, many autistic kids turned to YouTube and other websites to easily access material, like foreign language videos, but also shown were the ways in which those platforms may not be entirely positive for children's mental and emotional health (e.g., exposing them to adult or overly commercial content). Therefore, there is an opportunity for more playful, weird, and delightful digital tools and content to be put safely and securely in their hands by actors that, at a minimum, follow the current guidelines outlined in the US Children's Online Privacy and Protection Act (COPPA). COPPA's regulatory strength, though, is much weaker than newer online child consumer privacy legislation such as the United Kingdom's Age Appropriate Design Code. YouTube is many things to autistic children out of necessity, including a makeshift clinical tool for coping with mental health distress (e.g., Amaya in chapter 7), so it is hard for parents, especially those who are underresourced, to opt out altogether. As I discuss in chapter 4, Google has a responsibility to offer parents better, more customizable choices for how to manage their child's consumption without limiting the agency of children, while the US government, federally and on the state level, should take legal measures to shore up online child safety, data protection, and algorithmic transparency.

## POLICY MAKERS

Lastly, besides these technology policy changes, this book highlights the unsustainability of pushing the collective needs and agency of children, people with disabilities, and their families even further away from the center of societal priorities.<sup>33</sup> A culture of "intensive parenting" that demands the prioritization of individual choice over collective responsibility for child rearing disproportionately affects disabled children and their caregivers.<sup>34</sup> I have drawn attention to the understudied role of health-care systems, clinical providers, and health disparities in shaping children's digital media use, such as April and Kimberly's challenges in scheduling therapeutic services for their daughters (chapters 3 and 7). Community-based organizations with multilingual and racially diverse staff play an essential role in brokering access and lessening labor for parents of autistic children who may be already significantly limited in resources like money, time, and flexible schedules. Such groups merit greater funding on local, state, and federal levels. Enabling autistic children to derive the greatest benefit from media in their daily

lives demands addressing structural forms of racism, bigotry, ableism, and various overlapping forms of inequality and discrimination head on.<sup>35</sup>

## FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a number of topics related to autism, childhood, and technology that are beyond the scope of this book but warrant additional attention. One underexplored issue is the deployment of mobile and wearable GPS tracking devices for children on the spectrum as risk-prevention tools. Critical scholars of technology and society have analyzed the political economy of child location tracking technologies as well as their social benefits and drawbacks (e.g., decreased child autonomy and increased surveillance; the intensification of parenting).<sup>36</sup> These discussions, though, have barely extended to the safety and security of disabled and autistic youth, who already have more limited control over their time and space. The concerns and anxieties of these children's caregivers have not been sufficiently considered, either.<sup>37</sup> For example, Saylor's afterschool in-person socializing before the pandemic was in part facilitated by such technology. Her parents kept track of her whereabouts through the Life360 family tracking app and location services enabled on her iPhone. Maggie did not want to be "the parent that watches every step someone is taking," but felt it necessary, as Saylor had trouble keeping track of time and remembering to text her parents if she was running late.

GPS technologies worn on or near the body (i.e., wristwatches, anklets) by autistic children are primarily intended for those with a tendency to run suddenly or "bolt" into dangerous situations, like Bennett in chapter 4. Such technologies gained a higher profile after the death of 14-year-old Avonte Oquendo, a Black boy who managed to run away from his Queens, New York school in 2013 and whose body was tragically found months later in the East River. A law in his name funding parental procurement of wearable location tracking technology for autistic children was passed on the US federal level in 2018.<sup>38</sup> To date, though, very little empirical research has been conducted on the pros and cons of these surveillance technologies, how they are understood by autistic people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and their families, or their implementation alongside or in place of other educational and behavioral supports.<sup>39</sup>

There are also methodological improvements to be made in the study of autistic children's socioemotional development and engagement with media. For instance, I discussed research in chapter 7 suggesting that autistic children are more likely to have a condition known as alexithymia, which concerns an inability to communicate, label, and identify emotions and feelings. Interestingly, children's engagement with media and the emotional responses that it may or may not elicit are part of the very assessment tool used to study alexithymia in school-age kids. The Toronto Alexithymia Scale for Children (TAS-C) was designed to measure children's alexithymia.<sup>40</sup> Two items on the modified TAS-C are "I like watching funny TV shows, more than TV shows about people's problems" and "I don't like movies where I have to concentrate to understand the story."<sup>41</sup> A child responding to these items with "sometimes" or "a lot like me" would increase their TAS-C score. From the perspective of children and media scholarship, however, these statements are not good proxies for a child's ability to talk about feelings. School-age children are drawn to humorous stories, may be accustomed in the YouTube era to content that is much shorter than film length, and prefer movies with simple plots.<sup>42</sup> Children and media researchers should be drawn upon as resources by psychologists and psychiatrists who lack this domain expertise.

Future research also needs to be more representative, longitudinal, qualitative, and global in nature.<sup>43</sup> Autism research must more frequently report the race, ethnicity, and gender of participants.<sup>44</sup> Greater efforts should be made to generate knowledge from the media experiences of autistic girls and non-White children on the spectrum. More studies are warranted of children on the spectrum living in the Global South, as well as of media use among autistic teens ages 14–18 and their transitions to adulthood.<sup>45</sup> For example, how do autistic TikTok personalities influence the self-concept of youth on the spectrum who use the platform? How do teens on the spectrum handle social pressures to manage their self-presentation online? Might social media have a unique impact on autistic girls at risk of developing an eating disorder? Considering that a great deal of research is drawn from parent report and surveys, more inroads should be made to conduct ethnographic work that is embedded in the daily lives of autistic children and adolescents. This includes directly engaging with them in a manner that best accommodates their diverse cognitive, behavioral, and communication profiles. Beyond a given medium or platform, content is also understudied as a central aspect of autistic kids' media usage.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, more space needs to be made for research on autism and technology across academic disciplines that study media and society. One thread running through this book is the push and pull between the medical establishment and autistic people, who historically have been excluded from designing and developing research that could best improve their lives and livelihoods. This is currently undergoing a major shift, with more autistic people getting involved as clinicians and researchers themselves and lay autistic individuals on social media advocating for new research directions.<sup>47</sup> Parents can be important partners in this process, but there is a long history of their voices sometimes drowning out those of others in the autism community. One way forward may be through taking a systems approach that recognizes the macro- and micro-level influences on autistic people's life trajectories. As I discuss in chapter 4, this angle helped to identify a significant gap in the study of families with two or more children on the autism spectrum and the role of media in their family functioning.

There is a pressing need to move beyond rhetoric that characterizes technology as either a social cure or social harm while also identifying the areas in which marginalized young people need psychological, physiological, social, and emotional support. Intersectional approaches to childhood and autism can help us understand how race, ethnicity, gender, and religion differentially impact the lives of kids on the spectrum at home, at school, and in their communities. In this book, I have suggested new strategies and advocated for better resources in supporting autistic children and adolescents in the digital age, while, along the way, rethinking assumptions about the relationship between autism, technology, and society. Autistic youth deserve more inclusive online and offline spaces that better leverage the potential of media and technology to promote their fullest possible expression, independence, and communication.





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