1 At the Center of a Cultural Storm

In September 2003, as high school and college students returned to their classes for the fall, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) made an unprecedented move. Frustrated by the rising tide of illegal music file-sharing on the Internet, the trade group filed lawsuits against hundreds of young people and their families, charging infringement of the 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA).[1] With threats of fines as high as $150,000, the high-profile legal actions prompted a flood of press coverage. The news media carried dozens of stories about teenagers charged with piracy for downloading their favorite songs in the privacy of their bedrooms or college dorms. Though the RIAA had given fair warning of its plans for months, many parents were caught off guard. Suddenly thrust into the public spotlight and faced with thousands of dollars in penalties and legal fees, they were forced to admit they had no idea what their children were doing online. As one startled father put it: "They're in there doing their homework and listening to all these different songs. I don't know what the heck they did, but I know one thing; they're not going to be doing it anymore."[2]

The lawsuits also sparked a flurry of heated public debate, with some observers commenting on the irony of an industry suing its own customers. Brianna LaHara, a middle-school honor student whose picture was plastered on the front page of the *New York Daily News,* quickly became the poster girl for public backlash against the music industry's draconian measures. "It's a disaster, PR-wise," commented a lawyer for the nonprofit Electronic Frontier Foundation, an advocacy group fighting against the RIAA crackdown. "Putting a 12-year-old defendant on the front page is not a way to lure people into the record stores."[3] Even some musicians found the music industry's actions indefensible. "Lawsuits on 12-year-old kids for downloading music, duping a mother into paying a $2,000 settlement for her kid? Those tactics are pure Gestapo," rapper Chuck D charged.[4]

For its part, the RIAA countered that it had no choice but to take legal action against individuals. Since the launch of popular peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, the industry had suffered more than a 25 percent drop in album sales.[5] While copyright litigation against Napster had forced that company into bankruptcy, newer decentralized file services such as KaZaA and Grokster had quickly taken its place.[6] Despite a succession of strategies aimed at curtailing online file-sharing, the practice had continued unabated. A survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that nearly 70 percent of Internet users who were downloading music did not care whether the music was copyrighted or not.[7] As *USA Today* columnist Kevin Maney observed, "The RIAA is lashing out because it has no idea what else to do. And there's a reason for that. Nothing like its situation has existed before."[8]

The controversy over music file-sharing is emblematic of the powerful, complex, and sometimes contradictory roles that children and youth play in this era of the Internet. Since the advent of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, the "Digital Generation" has been at the epicenter of major tectonic shifts that are transforming the media landscape. Coming of age at the beginning of a new century, these young people are leading the way into the uncharted territory of cyberspace, avidly embracing not only the Internet, but also a host of wireless devices and digital products—from video games to cell phones to iPods. Never before has a generation been so defined in the public mind by its relationship to technology. Pollsters, market researchers, and journalists closely track their every move, inventing a gaggle of catchy buzz words to describe them—"N-geners," "Webheads," "Keyboard Kids," "CyberChildren," and "the MySpace Generation," to name only a few.[9] As active creators of a new digital culture, these youth are developing their own Web sites, diaries, and blogs; launching their own online enterprises; and forging a new set of cultural practices. From time to time, members of the Digital Generation have placed themselves on the front lines of seminal policy battles over the future of the new media, taking to the Web to organize their peers on issues such as intellectual property, privacy, and content regulation. More often their role has been symbolic, with politicians on the right and the left invoking the welfare of children in their high-stakes public-policy battles.

In our collective effort to make sense of this new generation, the public discourse often has been contradictory, reflecting an ambivalent attitude toward both youth and technology. As our children have ventured fearlessly into cyberspace, seizing upon all manner of digital gismos and gadgets, the public has responded with a mix of wonder, fear, and

perplexity. In many ways, young people are treated with a certain level of fascination. Numerous books and articles pay homage to their role as pioneers. "The Net Generation has arrived!" Don Tapscott announced in his influential 1998 book, *Growing up Digital*. "Today's kids are so bathed in bits that they think it's all part of the natural landscape. To them, the digital technology is no more intimidating than a VCR or toaster."[10] The "Net-geners," Tapscott predicted, "are breaking free from the one-way centralized media of the past and are beginning to shape their own destiny. And evidence is mounting that the world will be a better place as a result."[11] Youth "are at the helm of the largest sociological shift in a generation," proclaimed *Brill's Content*. "Raised on email, instant messages, and Internet time, teenagers are developing into young Turks of technology."[12]

These "young Turks" have earned a reputation for leap-frogging over adult authorities in the realms of business and politics, making their mark on the world in ways unprecedented by previous generations of young people. Michael Lewis's *Next: The Future Just Happened* chronicled the forays of 13-year-old Jonathan Lebed, who quickly discovered how easy it was to set up an online brokerage account and make a killing in the stock market, much to the consternation of Wall Street and his own parents.[13] Teen "netpreneur" Shawn Fanning, a young, self-taught computer guru from Massachusetts, parlayed an avid interest in programming into a multimillion dollar business with the invention of peer-to-peer music-sharing software—Napster—throwing the music industry into turmoil and triggering an ongoing controversy over who controls content on the Internet.[14] Young people also have seized the power of the Internet as a tool for activism, deploying cell phones, laptop computers, and radio scanners to wage what Howard Rheingold calls "smart mob" campaigns against the powers-that-be.[15]

Even the youthful outlaws of the Digital Age have captured the public imagination. A cover article in the *New York Times Magazine* explored the hidden, underground lives of teenage hackers, some of whom have become folk heroes for wreaking havoc on the Internet, releasing digital worms and viruses that disrupt service, destroy files, and force companies to lose millions of dollars. Interspersed with starkly lit photos of some of the infamous players in this new game of disruption, the article asks: "Are they artists, pranksters or techno-saboteurs?"[16]

But much of the press coverage of young people and the Internet has focused on their vulnerabilities in a dangerous cyberworld that entices and ensnares them.[17] In the wake of the 1999 massacre at Columbine High

School, where two troubled teenagers murdered and terrorized dozens of people, news accounts reported that the boys were immersed in the dark shadows of a new digital-media subculture, spending hours acting out virtual murders in ultra violent video games and posting haunting, hate-filled commentary on their own personal Web sites.[18] More recently, a front-page story in the *New York Times* uncovered "the secret life of a teenager who was lured into selling images of his body on the Internet over the course of five years." The honor student had used his own Webcam to take pictures of himself "undressing, showering, masturbating and even having sex—for an audience of more than 1,500 people who paid him, over the years, hundreds of thousands of dollars."[19] A story in the *Washington Post* revealed that some teen girls are flocking to the thousands of Web sites that promote anorexia and bulimia as "lifestyle choices" and offer visitors a full complement of special features designed to normalize and support these life-threatening behaviors, including "'thinspirational' pictures of extremely underweight women, menu suggestions, and discussion boards."[20] Another article told an eerie story of a college freshman who left an ominous "away message" in his instant–messaging account, telling his classmates "Goodbye" before jumping to his death from a dormitory balcony.[21]

These heightened concerns over online dangers are in sharp contrast to widespread beliefs about the positive role of technology in children's lives.[22] A survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that most American families "are filled with contradictions when it comes to the Internet. Parents fear that it can harm their kids but feel that their kids need it."[23] Such conflicted responses echo public debates over such earlier "new media" as film, radio, and television. "Each new media technology," media scholars Ellen Wartella and Nancy Jennings observe, "brought with it great promise for social educational benefits and great concern for children's exposure to inappropriate and harmful content."[24]

But something is distinctly different about this new media culture and the role that young people have played, and continue to play, in its development and expansion. Beginning in the early 1990s and continuing into the early part of the twenty-first century, a powerful combination of technological, social, and economic trends has placed children and youth at the center of digital politics, commerce, and culture.

Coming to power during the same year as the launch of the World Wide Web, the Clinton Administration presided over the dramatic transformation of the Internet from an obscure government-run research network to a privatized and commercialized mass medium. As "the education presi-

dent," who had campaigned on behalf of children, Bill Clinton placed the Digital Generation at the center of the official vision of a gleaming technological future in which the powerful new "Information Superhighway" would connect everyone in an electronic global village, bring to all "the vast resources of art, literature, and science," and make the "best schools, teachers, and courses" available to "all students, without regard to geography, distance, resources, or disability."[25]

On the eve of a new millennium, the Clinton Administration's 1993 Agenda for Action called for all schools, libraries, and hospitals to be connected to the Internet by the year 2000. "Bridging the digital divide" quickly became the rallying call of policymakers and industry leaders. Parents, educators, and librarians embraced the goal of wiring every classroom and library, which promised to be the magic bullet for ameliorating many of society's long-standing inequities and putting all children on an equal footing for full participation in the new economy. The Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) funded a series of high-profile demonstration projects around the country to showcase "how access to the Internet creates opportunities to tap the creativity of children and youth, to nurture their artistic talents, to engage them in civic enterprises, and to create bonds across generations."[26] New-media corporations teamed up with state and local governments around the country to connect schools and libraries to the Internet.[27]

The Internet's educational promise also helped drive its rapid penetration into American homes. In 1993, only 3 million Americans were connected to the Internet.[28] By the end of the decade, that figure had risen to over 150 million. A U.S. Department of Commerce report noted in 2001 that "family households with children under age 18 are far more likely to have computers than families without children: 70.1 percent, compared to 58.8 percent." By age 10, the study noted, "young people are more likely to use the Internet than adults at any age beyond 25."[29] A 2005 Pew Internet & American Life study found that 80 percent of parents with teens were going online, compared to 66 percent of all American adults. And 87 percent of youth aged 12–17 were connected to the Internet.[30]

As the Internet continued its expansion into the mainstream, children were thrust into the center of an ongoing series of "culture wars." The 1990s witnessed the first major Congressional rewrite of the nation's telecommunications laws since the New Deal, sparking a wave of regulatory and legal actions, as industry lobbyists, politicians, and interest groups

competed over future control of the electronic media system. Throughout the deliberations, legislative proposals to protect children from indecency and pornography on the Internet took center stage, sparking widespread debate and sensational press coverage. Though the 1996 Communications Decency Act was struck down on First Amendment grounds, legislative efforts to shield children from Internet harms have continued, each triggering contentious legal battles that have dragged out for years.

These simultaneous tumultuous shifts—in the media and the regulatory landscape—have taken place during a particularly stressful era for families. Today's generation of young people is growing up amid economic and social changes that have triggered major dislocations in family structure, further complicating the job of parenting. The Annie E. Casey Foundation reports that 31 percent of children are living in single-parent families, and 18 percent are living below the poverty line.[31] Experts and social critics express alarm over high divorce rates and their impact on children's well-being.[32] More and more, mothers have found it necessary to work outside the home; many cannot afford the cost of childcare, raising concerns about young "latchkey children" being left home alone.[33] These trends have "shaped, reshaped, distorted, and sometimes decimated the basic parameters for healthy development," observes Patricia Hersch, author of *A Tribe Apart.* "All parents feel an ominous sense—like distant rumbles of thunder moving closer and closer—that even their child could be caught in the deluge of adolescent dysfunction sweeping the nation, manifesting itself in everything from drugs, sex, and underachievement to depression, suicide, and crime."[34]

As parents struggle with the stresses of modern-day life, they are faced with a rapidly expanding and immersive media culture far different from that of their own youth. A 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation survey of children and their families found that members of "Generation M"—U.S. children between the ages of 8 and 18—spend an average of six and a half hours per day with media. While television maintains a central place in their lives, it has been joined by a growing array of new digital technologies that young people are embracing and integrating into their daily activities. Two thirds of children own a portable CD, tape, or MP3 player; half of them have handheld video-game players. Though the study noted that overall today's youth are "largely happy and well-adjusted," it also found that "those who are least content or get the poorest grades spend more time with video games and less time reading than their peers."[35] These trends worry many parents who are concerned that sitting in front of a computer or television for extended periods of time can lead to weight

gain, or that endless instant messaging can interfere with children's ability to form face-to-face relationships.[36]

This explosion of "new media" is occurring at a time when society has not yet resolved many of the issues related to "old media." Long-standing concerns about the impact of violent TV programming have been compounded further by the growing popularity of violent videogames such as *Grand Theft Auto*, in which children can act out the murder and mayhem themselves.[37] Parents are inundated with "how-to" books, Web sites, filtering software, and other tools to help them navigate their way through the new media environment. But many of them feel behind the curve, only learning about their children's favorite media pastimes from the front page of the newspaper or evening newscasts. While experts instruct parents to limit their children's "screen time" and keep the television out of a child's bedroom, most families seem to have a tough time making or enforcing such rules.[38] Feeling guilty, frustrated, and overwhelmed, parents lament their lack of control over a seemingly limitless media culture that surrounds and engulfs their children. "There comes a point," *Washington Post* reporter Bob Thompson commented, "if you're a parent with some pretensions to helping shape your family's value system, where you realize that fighting popular culture is a finger-in-the-dike proposition. There's a raging ocean of it outside your door, pumped out by the Great American Entertainment Machine, and it floods the malls, washes over the schools and seeps through modems and fiber optic cables straight into your living room."[39]

The driving force behind this exploding media culture is the exponential rise in children's spending power during the past several decades, prompted in part by the very changes in family structure that are confounding the role of parents. Never before have children and youth played such a powerful role in the marketplace. The Internet emerged as a new mass medium in the midst of an already highly commercialized children's culture. An enormous advertising and market-research industry was ready and waiting to adapt its strategies to the Digital Age. With the promise of e-commerce profits, "Echo Boomers," "the New Millennials," and "Generation Y" became prized consumers in the growing new economy. "The Generation Y tsunami is already gathering force," *BrandWeek* announced in 1999. "As young people become acculturated and socialized through the Internet, they are beginning to look for entertainment, or at least entertaining content, on their computers. Eyeballs glued to a screen are audiences; where there are audiences, there is advertising; and where there is advertising, there is commerce."[40]

Quintessential "early adopters" of new technology, members of the Digital Generation have eagerly embraced an endless supply of new technological gadgets, becoming both consumers and producers of a flood of digital content. One trade publication commented that young people have not simply adopted the Internet, they have *internalized* it.[41] Their engagement with digital media is ushering in a new set of behaviors, values, and expectations that this generation will carry with them into adulthood. "Pay close attention to Millennials," a market research report advised, "as their usage of media influences other demographic groups and they literally represent the world to come."[42]

The turbulent changes in the media system have created particularly fertile ground for a renewal of long-standing debates over the role of media in the lives of children and youth. From time to time, the shifting and conflicting images of children—as prescient gurus, innocent victims, powerful consumers, or active citizens—have forced a rethinking of what it means to be a child in the twenty-first century.

The story that unfolds in the following pages traces some of the major developments in the formative period of the Digital Age, focusing on the heightened role of children, teens, and young adults in the politics, commerce, and culture of the era. Chapter 2, "Digital Kids," shows how a confluence of historical trends throughout the twentieth century made children and teens a particularly valuable target market during the early commercialization of the Internet, triggering a burst of growth and activity in an already burgeoning youth-market research and marketing industry. Chapter 3, "A V-Chip for the Internet," documents the highly publicized political battles in the early 1990s about indecency and pornography on the Internet, describing how concerns over children prompted policymakers and industry leaders alike to devise strategies for ensuring a "family-friendly Internet." Chapter 4, "Web of Deception," is a case study of consumer-group intervention in the children's online marketplace, which ultimately led to the passage of the first law protecting children's privacy on the Internet. It also shows how the campaign for e-commerce safeguards in the United States became part of a much larger international battle for consumer protections in the global market. Chapter 5, "Born to be Wired," focuses on teenagers as the key "defining users" of new digital media, linking their uses of interactive technologies to their fundamental developmental needs of identity development and social interaction. As the chapter illustrates, digital marketers have found ways—largely under the radar of parents and policymakers—to tap into these psychological needs, creating sophisticated new market-research and profiling strategies

that have become a pervasive and powerful presence in the lives of adole-
scents. Chapter 6, "Social Marketing in the New Millennium," profiles
three contemporary public-education campaigns that have modeled their
efforts on the cutting-edge strategies of digital marketers in order to change
health and social behaviors among youth. Chapter 7, "Peer-to-Peer Poli-
tics," chronicles the myriad new ways that youth have seized the power
of the Internet as a political tool, including the unprecedented mobiliza-
tion of young voters during the 2004 presidential election, and the efforts
of a new generation of young "cyberactivists" who are waging battles with
the music and media industries over control of cultural expression in the
Digital Age. Finally, chapter 8, "The Legacy of the Digital Generation,"
assesses the multiple roles and impacts of this first generation of young
people growing up in the age of the Internet, and offers recommendations
for policy makers, corporations, scholars, and parents that will help ensure
an open, diverse, and equitable digital media system for the future.