Should we be worried about how our kids use the internet?

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Part of Jacqueline Vickery's job is to be constantly concerned.

Vickery, an assistant professor in the University of North Texas' media

arts department, isn't worried about herself. She's worried about what other people are worried about. Particularly when it comes to how society thinks about the internet and technology.

In her new book, "Worried About the Wrong Things," Vickery examines the history of how digital media has been understood by adults - and how they are afraid of how young people use digital tools. The book focuses on how, because of that fear, parents and schools have cut off access to digital media for young people in disadvantaged communities.

She said these fears often stem from people not valuing how kids use the web. Instead of trying to understand the value that young people get from working in digital spaces, "we tend to dismiss (their use of the internet) or scold them for it or try to push them in a different way instead of saying, 'What are the values of how they're using it?' " Vickery said.

Vickery said such fears come from simply not understanding advances in technology. In the book, she outlines three waves of panic associated with the internet: pornography, predators, and peers.

Parents feared their children would easily access pornography through the internet. Then, they began to fear that sexual predators could reach their children through social media. After that wave, she said, there was a panic over young people harming one another through online bullying and sexting.

Vickery said a lot of this has to do with how these events are portrayed in the news. "No one writes a story on 'Kid successfully navigates web without a problem,' you know?" Vickery said. "Like, that's boring. So unfortunately, a lot of what you hear is when something goes wrong."

Vickery cites the case of Megan Meier. In 2006, the 13-year-old

committed suicide after a boy on MySpace told her "the world would be a better place without (her)." The account turned out to be run by Lori Drew, the mother of one of Meier's friends. Drew used the account to get back at Meier after she and Drew's daughter got into a disagreement.

The story helped spark a national discussion about the risks of the internet and technology. The coverage of the event led several states to write new laws focusing on online harassment.

Vickery argues that a more credible threat is the inequality in access to technology. She points to communities where kids have little access to computers and the internet outside of school. And even in school, students' access is often restricted to what the schools deems is appropriate.

"I saw a lot of missed opportunities for young people who could benefit from digital media or who may not have access outside of school," Vickery said. School "may be their primary internet access, and then it became this kind of incredibly regulated space which kind of shuts down a lot of the benefits that they would otherwise have gained."

Along with creating a privilege gap, Vickery argues the fear over technology is creating a fear of risks for young people. In the book, she differentiates between healthy risk-taking, like connecting with a new community over the web, and harmful behaviors like encountering a predator online. She worries that people in authority are making young people scared of taking any risks at all.

She uses the analogy of kids on a playground to illustrate the need for taking risks online. If a parent takes their children to play, the kids might fall and skin their knees. But that experience helps them learn what not to do.

"That's how it should be with digital media, that we help these kids take risks to assess, 'Is this risk worth taking?' " Vickery said. " 'Do I trust this? Do I not? If I get into trouble, do I know what to do, do I know who to ask? ... We just tell kids, 'Don't do it, don't take risks,' instead of, 'Hey, risks can be beneficial, they can grow payoff.' That's why we take risks with anything."

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