

Exploring life in an urban neighborhood through social media

November 9 2018, by Carol Peters



Jeffrey Lane's book, *The Digital Street*, is the first about the digital life of an urban neighborhood. Credit: Rutgers University

The inspiration for a new book by Jeffrey Lane that examines how social media impacts the lives of black teenagers grew out of his involvement with a community initiative to engage teens online as a way of building a safer neighborhood.

Through his role in the project while he was living in Harlem during graduate school, Lane met hundreds of [teenagers](#) and the people who cared for them. He found himself defusing conflicts, playing basketball, and setting up a computer lab for youth and seniors with donated computer equipment.

As a result, Lane, an assistant professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University-New Brunswick, saw firsthand how smartphones and [social media](#) were drastically changing the ways teenagers were communicating and managing every aspect of their lives. He also observed that their parents, mentors, and other neighborhood adults, in addition to police, were also using the technology to stay informed about them, and even take action against them.

Lane realized he had stumbled upon a new and unstudied phenomenon. People in his neighborhood were all living in parallel worlds on two streets: the physical streets and the digital street that technology opened to them.

"It quickly became clear that the teenagers I was getting to know as an outreach worker were all connected to each other online, and had been for years," Lane said. "Whatever they were going through in the neighborhood they were experiencing digitally as well – friendships and dating, school and finding work, watching their back, etc."

What he witnessed as a graduate student studying in the sociology department at Princeton University became the basis for his dissertation and now his new book, *The Digital Street*, published by Oxford

University Press.

Lane, who teaches communication, said it's the first book that studies the digital life of an urban neighborhood.

"The book is based on studying the same people and events as they move between the streets and social media. It's the first book to show how the digital life of a neighborhood impacts black teenagers."

Lane found that online interactions shaped social support, dating, and neighborhood rivalries among teenagers as well as interventions by outreach workers, police, and prosecutors.

Lane explained that the overlapping realities of the digital and physical streets have changed the way teenagers interact with each other, which has wide-ranging implications. "The street's different now, Lane said. "When girls and boys pass each other, they've already studied each other's profiles and maybe even talked online. There are more lines and layers of communication so teens have new ways to manage and pace their relationships. I think this gives teenagers more control of [street](#) life, at least it did for the teens I studied.

Social media and smartphones have also drastically changed the ways parents, outreach workers, and other adults understand what is going on in teenagers lives. Lane said, "Parents and neighborhood adults have access to the test moments and turning points in the lives of the adolescents under their care. Teens, of course, need and deserve their privacy, but when you're talking about teens exposed to poverty and neighborhood violence, the more caring adults with resources that are present in their on- and offline lives the better."

Lane's research provides the groundwork for the graduate and undergraduate courses he teaches. He incorporates a focus on urban

inequality and sociology, communication and technology and youth and media.

"I draw on the lived experiences of teenagers in Harlem to connect to major issues in communication and technology," Lane said. "To talk about their lives and social media use is to discuss the field's most pressing topics: privacy, visibility, surveillance, [social support](#) and networks."

Ultimately, Lane said about the impact of *The Digital Street*, "I hope the book benefits the very people and agencies dealing directly with young people in poverty whose lives and struggles are more accessible and visible on the internet."

Provided by Rutgers University

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