

# CAMmer in the Spotlight

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### Getting to know... danah boyd

**What has been your most memorable project so far, and why?** I spent over a decade researching the rise of social media and teenagers' use of new technologies. It's hard not to see this as my most memorable project because it was my life for so long. From Friendster to MySpace to Facebook to Twitter, I was living and breathing each new technology personally and as a researcher. I worked for numerous companies and spent time in 16 different US states, traveling constantly for fieldwork or speaking. I fought with elected officials and mouthed off to technology founders. Yet, perhaps the most memorable part of all of that work were the interviews with teens who were really struggling. The girl I met in Los Angeles only days after her brother was murdered in front of her. The boy I met in Nashville whose mother had had him arrested. The girl I met in Iowa who was taking care of her meth head mother. The boy I met in California whose religious father wouldn't let him have friends. Their stories, their heartache, their voices still sit with me. I think of their resilience

when I argue for youth to have more freedoms and I reflect on their pain when I listen to politicians seek to protect privileged youth at the expense of those who are struggling. I also count my lucky stars every day for not having to experience the challenges that so many teenagers I met have to face.

**What are you currently working on?** After being on the road for over 200 days a year, I knew that I would have to slow down when I got pregnant. Two years ago, as I put the finishing touches on "It's Complicated," I started to imagine how I might create a research institute that would be flexible enough to respond to new technologies, ongoing social concerns, and the politics of socio-technical anxieties. Two days after my first son was born, I got the first check to start Data & Society, a think/do tank in New York City designed to 1) identify social issues that emerge because of data-centric technologies; 2) frame and research emergent issues; and 3) build a network of researchers, practitioners, and misfit toys who can respond to the



fear and hype that tends to come with socio-technical shifts. I am now directing this crazy networked organization, which employs 31 people and has a network of hundreds who attend our events and participate in various research activities with us. We have five signature initiatives:

- 1) Enabling Connected Learning. What is the value of data in a learning ecosystem? How do we resolve the tensions between student privacy debates and personalized learning possibilities?
- 2) Ethical Research. What structures should be put into place to guarantee that “big data” research is ethical in nature?
- 3) Fairness and Civil Rights. As technology is re-configuring criminal justice, education, employment, finance, health, and housing, how can we guarantee social justice? And how can we design technology to account for issues of inequity from the get-go?
- 4) Future of Labor. From workplace surveillance to fair labor concerns, how do we understand and prepare for how technology is being used to shape work?
- 5) Intelligence and Autonomy. What is the mundane reality of robots and autonomous systems? What are the regulatory implications?



In addition to these projects, there are fellows working on a wide range of topics including data in human rights, public health evidence, financialization, smart cities, etc. We also host events like our weekly seminar series called Databites. We're publishing research reports on emergent topics and helping to convene key actors. My role in all of this is to support amazing people doing amazing research that can have significant impact on public conversations. Although I dabble in many of these projects, I'm mostly excited to be creating a cross-disciplinary, sector-agnostic space for important work to happen. Not all of my work is youth-oriented these days, but it's all about creating a more equitable society and my motivation for doing this comes from my work with youth. For more detail, see our website and @datasociety.

**Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?** Right now, I'm having the time of my life with Data & Society and so it's hard not to think of that first. But I don't think that the impact of what I'm doing with Data & Society is nearly as significant as the work being done by Crisis Text Line (CTL), an amazing organization whose board I'm on. Every day, CTL receives thousands of messages from young people desperately in need of someone to

talk with. Whether struggling with disordered eating or trying to figure out what to do after being raped by a family member, these youth are reaching for their phone and texting the counselors that volunteer and are supported by CTL. They are revealing the pain that they face and trained counselors are helping them develop strategies for getting help, building resilience, or simply choosing to live one more day. While I'm not involved in the day-to-day operations, I'm honored to be able to support this organization and only wish that I could do more. It still astounds me that we do so little to help young people navigate mental health issues and I'm regularly shocked by how few folks are interested in supporting work like this.

**What would be your work motto?** It's cheesy but:

Love what you do, do what you love.

More practically, take breaks. I'm a huge believer in "email sabbaticals" in order to really allow for a mind cleanse. So many people think it's impossible to take a serious break but with the right communication strategies and planning, you can take serious time off and be good to your collaborators. You can read [here](#) how I do it!

**Which of your publications is your favorite, and**

**why?** I wrote "It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens" in order to bring together as much of my research as possible to make it publicly accessible for parents, educators, politicians, and

youth advocates. I worked with my publisher to make it freely available from the day of publication. I did this because I believe I have professorial mandate. I get to spend my life researching and learning for a living and I believe that I have a responsibility to give back by sharing what I learn. This does not mean publishing in locked-down journals and teaching to small classes of privileged undergraduates. I feel as though I must work hard to make what I know available to as many people as possible. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into making "It's Complicated." While it's not perfect, I'm proud of what I did with that piece and even prouder of the fact that anyone can read it.

**If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?**

Truthfully, I'd use it to make Data & Society bigger and to support more researchers doing more important work. I feel as though academia has slowly boiled researchers and they're croaking everywhere in ways that deeply depress me. Too few scholars are able to take intellectual risks and push at the boundaries of disciplines. Too much emphasis is placed on publishing in locked-down journals. The politics of tenure have turned too many brilliant minds into bitter bureaucrats. I can't fix academia but I can create a space for research to flourish and that's where my heart is right now. Every day I wake up and wonder what I can do to understand how technology can address inequity

and not be used to magnify it. And every project that I do is rooted in that question. And that commitment means that I'm always thinking not just about research but about how research can connect to practice.

**If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?**

I struggle with advice giving because I have only gotten where I've gotten because I never listened to anyone's advice. I broke every rule I encountered and spent much of the early years of my career being told that I was never going to amount to anything. As I was finishing my PhD, countless academics told me that I was unhireable, too rogue, and intellectually vapid. The advantage of growing up a geek, freak, and queer without money is that I came to terms with my outsider status and was able to accept not being accepted. After working in fast food, I made a commitment to myself. I took out an obscene loan to go to a prestigious college so that I could develop skills that would always guarantee me employment somewhere, somehow. Every bet that I've taken with my research career has been buoyed with the reminder that my computer science degree meant that I could always get a job in tech. And indeed, working in tech was what allowed me to self-fund my research. I don't think it's easy to take risks and I don't think that everyone should. There are serious costs to taking risks in academia. I was willing to pay them but I don't think most students can,

should, or want to. With that in mind, perhaps the best piece of advice is: always have a back-up plan.

**Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?**

I'd like to nominate Vicky Rideout, out of raw curiosity – her path has been so different from mine and I'd love to know more about her route. I'd like to ask her: What have been the joys and frustrations of running your own research consultancy?