



TASA The Australian
Sociological Association

TITLE: Morally bad? Rethinking youth and online risk

Author/s: Philippa Collin, Rosalyn Black, Lucas Walsh, Amanda Third

Affiliation/s: University of Western Sydney, Deakin University, Monash University,
University of Western Sydney

Dominant discourses of young people online are inscribed by neoliberal logics of risk and responsabilisation designed to govern young people's online identities and practices. Inherent is an established notion that risky online behaviour is morally 'bad' or 'dangerous'. In this paper we critique this view and point to evidence that risk does not equate easily with harm, and that young people are more likely to develop strategies to navigate risky online behaviour than avoid it. We argue discourses of young people's online practices as 'risky-and-therefore-bad' arise, in part, from a lack of engagement with young people's perspectives on the nature and role of the online in their everyday lives. We also posit that the application of a 'risk-as-bad' discourse produces other kinds of potential harms and limits the benefits of online participation.

To make this argument, we draw on a qualitative research project that adopted a novel 'future histories' approach based on biographical narrative methodology (Alheit 1994; Wengraf 2001) to explore how 40 young people aged 16 - 18 conceptualise and negotiate ideas of risk online by imagining how technology will affect them in the future. We found many practices deemed 'risky' in policy and online safety programs are seen as features of exploring identity, developing digital literacies and navigating challenges or coping with harm. We found young people narrated 'online risk' in terms of adult expectations in a way that obfuscates broader opportunities of digital life, contradicting neo-liberal logic.