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About	Migros is Switzerland's largest retail company and the largest employer in the country. Migros Magazin is owned by Migros. It's the most read newspaper in Switzerland. More than 1.5 million copies are printed weekly and distributed domestically throughout Switzerland.
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	This article is part of a two-part series in <i>Migros Magazin</i> that profiles Sandra Cortesi's life and work with young people and digital media. This article highlights her remarkable journey to her current position at the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard University and her quick rise to international prominence in her field. The authors also request her expert opinion on a wide range of topics including youth vs. adult media habits, techniques traditional media can use to better engage with youth, and the effects of the changing American political climate on new research.

## Sandra Cortesi on the digital world's future potential

*At Harvard, Sandra Cortesi explores how teenagers interact online – not from an adult perspective, but together with youth.*

**Text** [Ralf Kaminski, Dinah Leuenberger](#) **Images** Michael Sieber



*“Often, parents’ lack of understanding or fear of their children wasting time online leads to defensiveness – making it harder to identify the real risks to youth,” says Sandra Cortesi.*

**Sandra Cortesi, access to the digital world today is considered almost a basic need, such as food or shelter.**

If you have a cell phone with access to the digital world and you have the necessary skills to use the Internet, you probably cannot imagine life without these things. I too would have trouble without a mobile phone and Internet access. At the same time, it depends on where you grow up.

### **Why?**

The Internet probably plays a lesser role in a less digitally connected area in South America. However, it could also be of great importance to a teenager there. What if you identify as transgender, gay, or lesbian and grow up in a place where it is considered

taboo? Then digital access would be a huge benefit because it makes an exchange with others possible.

### **About**



**Sandra Cortesi (35)** is Director of Youth and Media at the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard University. She was born in Venezuela, grew up in Colombia, and came to Switzerland at the age of eleven. Today, she lives and works in Cambridge (USA) but travels often because of her work: she spends a third of her time in Switzerland and a third on various projects around the world.

More Information: <http://youthandmedia.org>

### **Where does media use differ most between young people and adults?**

Young people use many more online platforms for more diverse activities. Engaging with the digital world also has a greater impact on the identities of young people because they make friends, express themselves creatively, or even build their own brands using digital platforms. Adults may move to one or two social media channels like Facebook or LinkedIn, in addition to the SBB [Swiss Railways], a weather and a newspaper app, and that's it.

### **A teenager wakes up and has 150 WhatsApp messages. How does he handle this flood of messages?**

That is certainly challenging for some. However, it also depends on the platform and how complex it is. In terms of WhatsApp group chats, receiving 150 messages isn't so

serious because you don't have to respond to everything. Moreover, many messages aren't as substantial as a long email and can therefore be answered quickly, often while having a meal or on the bus.

### **But can they concentrate on what's going on around them?**

Adults have a different understanding of what "around" means. Above all, they understand the offline world and believe people should be present there. For example, it bothers adults when teenagers at the dining table are using cell phones because it violates adults' own social norms. Young people also find what happens around them to be important; they just don't separate the online and offline world. They may be less present at the dining table, but they feel even more present in the digital world. A young person's attention often changes back and forth between both worlds. However, there are moments when teenagers want to be offline; they also sometimes have a desire for more privacy.

***"Young people are often less aware of what's going on behind the scenes."***

### **It doesn't seem that way.**

And yet, that's the way that it is. Their concept is simply different: adults think about privacy as it relates to their jobs, to the government, or to companies. Adolescents think more about privacy as it relates to their friends or parents. Young people have many strategies around whom they engage with, what platforms they use, or what they show in a picture so they do not get into trouble. However, there are blind spots. Young people are often less aware of what's going on behind the scenes, such as how companies collect and use data. There must be more education around these topics.

### **And do young people change their behavior when they hear about these practices?**

Not necessarily.

### **So they don't care?**

I don't think anyone doesn't care. But the strict consequence would be to withdraw from the digital world: that would probably be too high of a price for most, and that

does not really fit into the year 2018. We currently lack options and solutions. You can currently use Adblocker or a VPN, but that is not a complete solution. A complete solution would be a complete withdrawal from these technologies: bye-bye Instagram!



*Sandra Cortesi must always have an open ear for young people.*

### **Why explore the Internet usage of children and adolescents?**

My current boss, Urs Gasser, published the book *Born Digital* in 2008 together with John Palfrey. It is still very relevant today, but it was written from an adult perspective. So we wondered if that could be done differently. From an adult perspective, one does not always judge the behavior of adolescents correctly. Engaging adolescents directly in research opens up a completely different and important perspective – and frankly, it's more fun.

### **And how did you come to Harvard?**

When I studied psychology in Basel, I worked for Urs Gasser, who was teaching and conducting research at the University of St. Gallen. He thought it was cool that I wanted to better understand how to incorporate adolescents into research. After graduating, I followed Gasser to Harvard, where I developed the Youth and Media project with him. We integrate young people's perspectives into the brainstorming, implementation, data analysis, writing, and visualization process as well as the development of future research. This way, the chances are higher that our research will make sense.

### **That's easier said than done?**

In the beginning, it was very difficult. I could not speak English very well, and the extremely long work days were a big change right after attending university. But it

was—and still is—very satisfying how positively people have responded to my ideas. Nobody wonders whether it is important to better understand young people. At Harvard, people are more open to new ideas and they are also more willing to take risks than in Switzerland. Actually, I just wanted to stay for eight months, but now it has been eight years.

***“You have to ask yourself what content you provide to young people and how you present it.”***

### **What are your research priorities?**

Our research priorities are, to a large extent, determined by the young people themselves. For example, we explore how adolescents think of privacy, how artificial intelligence influences their lives, and how they deal with cyberbullying. In the latter case, we have found that extreme punitive measures are not always the right course of action: a young person who is bullying another student at school or on the Internet may possibly experience bullying or victimization at home. Therefore, the young person would be doubly punished if extreme punitive measures were taken. Our most important project deals with information quality: we explore how adolescents engage with information: how they find it, how they assess it, and what they do with it.

**Traditional media outlets are suffering from a decline in their audience and are dealing with an aging audience overall. Is there a way to reach a young people, or is it hopeless?**

It is not hopeless. And in times of disinformation and misinformation, a *New York Times* or an *NZZ* [Swiss daily newspaper] also have an important role to play. But you have to ask yourself what content you provide to young people and how you present it. Whenever possible you should integrate young people into the content development process. Once young people realize the content is relevant to them, you will have a greater chance with them.

**Paid newspapers hope that even teenagers will eventually buy a subscription with them.**

In that case, it's probably already too late. You have to start now with the twelve-year-olds if you want to have a chance. It's important to find out what the added value a paid newspaper (as opposed to a free newspaper) has for children and adolescents. Can they find topics that they can't find anywhere else? Were these topics designed with young people? Do you take young people's opinions as seriously as you do with

adults'? There are paid media apps that young people use. The willingness to pay is certainly there, even if it is oftentimes the parents who finance it at the time. The problem, however, is that the content is so similar across many platforms. And if the content costs money on one platform but not on another, then the consequences are clear.

### **Can you engage with teenagers using serious content?**

Absolutely. You just have to offer them different introductory content. When Beyonce performs during the Super Bowl halftime show and makes a political statement, this event is not simply politics or simply entertainment. Covering this event in an effective way is an example of how you could engage with young people.



*“Today’s young people are simply differently informed,” says Sandra Cortesi.*

### **So you can’t say that young people are less informed because they no longer read newspapers?**

They may be even better informed than we used to be. Young people are often the first in the family to know when something important has happened in the world. They can get online very quickly to grasp what is happening globally. Maybe their knowledge is not quite so deep, but then again, when I was 15, I didn’t read my parents’ *NZZ* [Swiss daily newspaper] every day. Young people are simply informed differently. An adult who is over 35, would struggle to list ten hashtags that were relevant in the past year. A young person would find that easier – they could even list hashtags related to political themes.

### **Will today’s adolescents grow up differently because they are online around the clock?**

In Switzerland, where 100 percent of households have smartphone access, there is no longer separation between online and offline life. Both have merged with one another, and the digital world has expanded into the real world of life. Of course, transitioning to digital use gradually from a young age has to happen. I don't think it's ideal for a two-year-old child to be constantly playing on a tablet. Adults can support young people by teaching them fundamental values that also apply in the digital world.

**So is it the wrong approach to want to protect children as much as possible with regulations?**

You have to respect how parents want to deal with their children. But often parents' lack of understanding or fear of their children wasting time online leads to defensiveness – making it harder to identify the real risks to youth. Parents are afraid of strangers who want to hurt their children, which unfortunately can happen. But the numbers show that this happens to a much lesser extent than you would intuitively think.

***“Especially in the field of technology, the Swiss events where I participate are very male-dominated and white.”***

**So you advocate for less fear?**

Yes. The fears of the parents often cannot be confirmed. And risk does not mean damage. Because the media oftentimes shows only the bad, many cannot imagine what positive opportunities arise through the digital world. It would be nice if parents could not only ask their children at the dinner table how school was but also what happened online. There could also be opportunities for adults to become better acquainted with the digital world and have their children explain things to them. For example, parents can learn through their children how to use apps to increase creativity or promote one's identity online.

**You are only 35 and are already at Harvard. Is that even possible?**

It would take a lot to give up my work at Harvard. It's just a cool environment and a privilege to do research there. Academically, I am currently working on my doctorate at the University of Basel. There are theoretically many possibilities outside of academia: I could go into politics, work in the private sector, or work for an international organization.

### **Maybe again in Switzerland?**

Sometimes I can imagine working in Switzerland again. However, the U.S. is much further along in regards to gender equality. Especially in the field of technology, the Swiss events where I participate are very male-dominated and white. Which I also comment on critically and would like to help change. (Laughs)

### **Have you noticed a change in research with the new American government?**

Yes, on different levels. Young people I work with in America are strongly influenced by the current climate. I work with African-Americans, Latinos, and people who identify as transgender. For them, everyday life is more difficult at the moment than it already was before.

### **But financially, the political changes have no effect?**

Our financing model works differently. The Berkman Klein Center is mainly funded by foundations. However, if we look at the larger research landscape, the new American government certainly has a large impact. Unfortunately, in many areas, public funding for research is being drastically cut and, at the same time, the tax burden of private universities has increased.

### **You have a partner with two children. Do you often see them in light of your long work days?**

Nobody has complained yet. I'm also more concerned about quality than with quantity. And I really enjoy being able to travel so much, because this is how I see my family in South America and in Switzerland.

### **And the two teenagers are often your guinea pigs?**

With the 300 WhatsApp messages they receive a day, they are certainly representative of young people today. (Laughs) One of them had a Snapchat streak of 780 days. When the streak ended, it was like doomsday.