

Conclusion

The goal of this project and this book is to document the everyday lives of youth as they engage with new media and to put forth a paradigm for understanding learning and participation in contemporary networked publics. Our primary descriptive question is this: How are new media being taken up by youth practices and agendas? We have organized our shared analysis across our different case studies according to categories of practice that correspond to youth experience: media ecologies, friendship, intimacy, families, gaming, creative production, and work. In this way, we have mapped an ecology of different youth practices as well as mapping the broader social and cultural ecologies that contextualize these practices. As we take into account these larger structuring contexts, we remain attentive to the dynamics of youth culture and sociability, seeking to understand new media practices from a youth point of view. We describe the diversity in forms of youth new media practice in terms of genres of participation rather than of categories of youth based on individual characteristics. In this way, we articulate the relationship between broader social and cultural structures and everyday youth activity in ways that take into account the changing and situationally specific nature of youth engagement with particular practices. Although we see our work as essentially exploratory, as among the first steps toward mapping the terrain of youth new media practice, we try to identify some initial landmarks and boundaries that define this area of ethnographic inquiry.

Following from our descriptive focus, we have a central analytic question: How do these practices change the dynamics of youth-adult negotiations over literacy, learning, and authoritative knowledge? We suggest that participation in networked publics is a site of youth-driven peer-based learning that provides important models of learning and participation that

are evolving in tandem with changes in technology. We argue that what is distinctive about our current historical moment is the growth of digital media production as a form of everyday expression and the circulation of media and communication in a context of networked publics enabled by the Internet. We see peer-based learning in networked publics in both the mainstream friendship-driven hanging out in sites such as MySpace and Facebook as well as in the more subcultural participation of geeked out interest-driven groups. Although learning in both of these contexts is driven primarily by the peer group, the structure and the focus of the peer group differs substantially, as does the content of the learning and communication. While friendship-driven participation is largely in the mode of hanging out and negotiating issues of status and belonging in local, given peer networks, interest-driven participation happens in more distributed and specialized knowledge networks. We see kids moving between these different genres of participation, often with the mediating practice of experimental messing around with new media. Networked publics provide a space of relative autonomy for youth, a space where they can engage in learning and reputation building in contexts of peer-based reciprocity, largely outside the purview of teachers, parents, and other adults who have authority over them.

These frameworks for understanding the shape of youth participation in networked publics help us understand what may be the most productive levers of change and intervention. Skills and literacies that children and youth pick up organically in their given social worlds are not generally objects of formal educational intervention, though they may require a great deal of social support and energy to acquire. In friendship-driven contexts, young people learn about the opinions and values of their peers through testing of social norms and expectations in everyday negotiations over friendship, popularity, and romantic relationships. These negotiations take place in peer publics that have been largely segregated from adult sociability ever since the establishment of teens as a distinct cultural demographic. On the interest-driven side, gamers and media creators are often motivated by an autodidactic ethic, rejecting or downplaying the value of formal education and reaching out to online networks to customize their own learning practices. Given the centrality of youth-defined agendas in both of these contexts, the challenge is to build roles for productive adult participation that respect youth expertise, autonomy, and initiative.

We believe that one key to productive adult involvement is in taking advantage of this current moment in interpretive flexibility about the nature of public participation. We have an opportunity to define, in partnership with youth, the shape of online participation and expression and new networked, institutional structures of peer-based learning. In this conclusion, we summarize the findings of our research in terms of what we see as potential sites of adult participation and intervention in youth practices. We do this in the spirit of suggesting avenues for future research and programmatic exploration. Our work has not focused on evaluating specific pedagogical approaches or institutional configurations, but we do believe that our work has implications for those seeking to do so. We organize this concluding discussion in relation to current debates over new media literacy, online participation, and the shape of contemporary learning institutions.

Shaping New Media Literacies

In our descriptions of youth expression and online communication, we identify a range of practices that are evidence of youth-defined new media literacies. On the friendship-driven side, we have seen youth developing shared norms for online publicity, including how to represent oneself in online profiles, norms for displaying peer networks online, the ranking of relationships in social network sites, and the development of new genres of written communication such as composed casualness in online messages. The commonplace practices of youth who are not framing themselves as particularly tech or media savvy—creating a MySpace profile, looking around for information online, finding and using a gaming cheat, or knowing how to engage in an appropriately casual IM conversation—are picked up within a networked social ecology widely available to youth today. Chapters 2 and 3, on friendship and intimacy, argue for an appreciation of the social and literacy skills that youth are developing in these ways. A mere decade ago, however, even these kinds of commonplace online competencies were the province of a technology elite of early adopters and certain professional communities.

On the interest-driven side, youth continue to test the limits on forms of new media literacy and expression. Here we see youth developing a wide range of more specialized and sometimes exclusionary forms of new media

literacies that are defined in opposition to those developed in more mainstream youth practices. When youth engage in practices of messing around, they are experimenting with established rules and norms for media and technology use and expression. In geeked out interest-driven groups, we have seen youth engage in the specialized elite vocabularies of gaming and esoteric fan knowledge and develop new experimental genres that make use of the authoring and editing capabilities of digital media. These include personal and amateur media that are being circulated online, such as photos, video blogs, web comics, and podcasts, as well as derivative works such as fan fiction, fan art, mods, mashups, remixes, and fansubbing. Chapters 6 and 7, on creative production and work, describe many of these practices. In these geeked out practices, and in the more mainstream practices on the friendship-driven side, we see youth actively negotiating the shape of new media literacies. While standards for literacy are constantly under negotiation in any community of practice, we do believe that the relative newness of digital production and online communication means that we are in a moment of interpretive flexibility, where values, norms, and literacy are particularly malleable.

Although youth online expressions may seem very foreign to those who have not grown up with them, youth *values* in this space are not so far off from those of adults. In our work, contrary to fears that social norms are eroding online, we did not find many youth who were engaging in any more risky behaviors than they did in offline contexts. As we describe in chapter 5, on gaming, those practices most commonly associated with bad behavior, such as play with violent video games, when viewed in a social context are an extension of familiar forms of male bonding. And just like in adult worlds, youth are engaged in ongoing struggles to gain a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy and to develop status and reputation among peers. We think it is important to recognize these commonalities in values that are shared among kids and adults; we see no need to fear a collapse of common culture and values. We do not believe that educators and parents need to bear down on kids with complicated rules and restrictions and heavy-handed norms about how they should engage online. For the most part, the existing mainstream strategies that parents are mobilizing to structure their kids' media ecologies, informed by our ongoing public discourse on these issues, are more than adequate in ensuring that their kids do not stray too far from home.

At the same time, our research does enable us to be a bit more precise about the influence of these technosocial shifts on intergenerational relations. Although the underlying social values may be shared intergenerationally, the actual shape of peer-based communication, and many of its outcomes, are profoundly different from those of an older generation. We found examples of parents who lacked even rudimentary knowledge of social norms for communicating online or any understanding of all but the most accessible forms of video games. Further, the ability for many youth to be in constant private contact with their peers strengthens the force of peer-based learning, and it can weaken adult participation in these peer environments. The simple shift from a home phone to a mobile phone means that parents have lost some of the ambient social contact that they previously had with their children's friends. When you have a combination of a kid who is highly active online and a parent who is disengaged from these new media, we see a risk of an intergenerational wedge. Simple prohibitions, technical barriers, or time limits on use are blunt instruments; youth perceive them as raw and ill-informed exercises of power.

The problem lies not in the volume of access but the quality of participation and learning, and kids and adults need to first be on the same page on the normative questions of learning and literacy. Parents need to begin with an appreciation of the importance of youth's social interactions with their peers, an understanding of their complexities, and a recognition that children are knowledgeable experts on their own peer practices. If parents can trust that their own values are being transmitted through their ongoing communication with their kids, then new media practices can be sites of shared focus rather than sites of anxiety and tension. In the chapter on families, as well as in those on gaming and creative production, we see numerous cases of parents and kids' coming together around new media in ways that exhibit a shared sense of what counts as valuable learning and positive sociability, and where both parents and kids bring interests and expertise to the table. These examples vary from parents who engage playfully in kids' online peer communications, who watch *telenovelas* with their kids in the living room, who work on collaborative media productions with their kids, who will play a social game with a visiting boyfriend, to parents who simply encourage and appreciate kids' self-motivated learning with media and technology, giving them space and time to experiment

and tinker. It is important to note that these kinds of engagements do require parents to invest in some basic learning about technology and media, and we believe issues of differential participation and access may be just as important for parents as they are for kids.

We also believe it is important to recognize the diverse genre conventions of youth new media literacy before developing educational programs in this space. Particularly when addressing learning and literacy that grow out of informal, peer-driven practices, we must realize that norms and standards are deeply situated in investments and identities of kids' own cultural and social worlds. Friendship-driven practices of hanging out and interest-driven practices of geeking out mobilize very different genres of new media literacy. While it is possible to abstract some underlying skills, it is important to frame the cultural genre in a way appropriate to the particular context. For example, authoring of online profiles is an important literacy skill on both the friendship- and interest-driven sides, but one mobilizes a genre of popularity and coolness and the other a genre of geek cred. Similarly, the elite-speak of committed gamers involves literacies that are of little, and possibly negative, value for boys looking for a romantic partner in their school peer networks. Following from this, it is problematic to develop a standardized set of benchmarks to measure kids' levels of new media and technical literacy. Unlike academic knowledge, whose relevance is often limited to classroom instruction and assessment, new media literacy is structured by the day-to-day practices of youth participation and status in diverse networked publics. This diversity in youth values means that kids will not fall in line behind a single set of literacy standards that we might come up with, even if those standards are based on the observations of their own practices.

We believe that if our efforts to shape new media literacy are keyed to the meaningful contexts of youth participation, then there is an opportunity for productive adult engagement. Many of the norms that we observed online are very much up for negotiation, and there were often divergent perspectives among youth about what was appropriate, even within a particular genre of practice. For example, as described in chapter 2, the issue of how to display social connections and hierarchies on social network sites is a source of social drama and tension, and the ongoing evolution of technical design in this space makes it a challenge for youth to develop shared social norms. Designers of these systems are central participants in

defining these social norms, and their interventions are not always geared toward supporting a shared set of literacy practices and values. More robust public debate on these issues that involves both youth and adults could potentially shape the future of online norms and literacies in this space in substantive ways. On the interest-driven side, we see adult leadership in these groups as central to how standards for expertise and literacy are being defined. For example, the heroes of the gaming world include both teens and adults who define the identity and practice of an elite gamer. The same holds for all the creative production groups that we examined. The leadership in this space, however, is largely cut off from the educators and policy makers who are defining standards for new media literacy in the adult-dominated world. Building more bridges between these different communities of practice could shape awareness on both the in-school and out-of-school side if we could respond in a coordinated and mutually respectful way to the quickly evolving norms and expertises of more geeked out and technically sophisticated experimental new media literacies.

Participation in Networked Publics

At least since the early 1990s, the question of online access and public participation has been on the radar of policy makers in the form of agendas addressing the digital divide (Bikson and Panis 1995; The White House 1993; Wresch 1996). While national context and economic factors have been central to this question, debates over the digital divide also examined factors such as gender and age as structuring differential access to technology-related competencies (Ito et al. 2001; Shade 1998). Throughout the 1990s, policy interventions in the United States focused on providing public access to the Internet through community institutions such as public schools and libraries (Fabos 2004; Henderson and King 1995). Today the picture is much more complex. Basic access to technology, the ability to navigate online information, and the ability to communicate with others online are increasingly central to our everyday participation in public life. At the same time, the range and diversity of networked publics and forms of participation have proliferated dramatically, making the definition of baseline technology access and literacy difficult if not impossible to achieve. Further, commercial online access and Web 2.0 sites have largely overshadowed the public and nonprofit sites and infrastructures of

the Internet, even as we have seen a steady growth in user-generated content (Fabos 2004). A digital-divide agenda focused on technology access does not address what Jenkins and his colleagues (2006) have called the “participation gap.” The more complex and socially contextualized skills of creating digital media, sharing information and media online, socializing with peers in networked publics, and going online to connect with specialized knowledge communities require both high-end technology access and social and cultural immersion in online worlds (Seiter 2007).

We suggest that the notion of networked publics offers a framework for examining diverse forms of participation with new media in a way that is keyed to the broader social relations that structure this participation. In describing new media engagements, we look at the ecology of social, technical, and cultural conditions necessary for certain forms of participation. When examining the kind of informal, peer-based interactions that are the focus of our work, we find that ongoing, lightweight access to digital-production tools and the Internet is a precondition for participation in most of the networked public spaces that are the focus of attention for U.S. teens. Further, much of this engagement is centered on access to social and commercial entertainment content that is generally frowned upon in formal educational settings. Sporadic, monitored access at schools and libraries may provide sufficient access for basic information seeking, but it is not sufficient for the immersed kind of social engagements with networked publics that we have seen becoming a baseline for participation on both the interest-driven and the friendship-driven sides.

On the friendship-driven side, participation in online communication and gaming is becoming central to youth sociability. As described in chapter 1, youth who are shut out from these networks for technical or economic reasons often develop creative work-arounds, such as going to a friend’s house to play games, befriending the computer-lab teacher, or using a digital camera as an MP3 player. The fact that these friendship-driven practices are so widely distributed in youth culture functions as a driver for a kind of bottom-up universal-access agenda. Although there are still kids who are excluded from participation, they get a substantial push of both motivation and peer support because these practices are part of the common currency of youth social communication. For example, as we discuss in chapter 6, although most kids were not well versed in web design and HTML, they generally could find a friend who could help them with

setting up their MySpace profile. In many ways, these processes of youth participation in mainstream popular culture are similar to how media such as television, music, and popular games function as a “ticket to play” for kids’ communication (Dyson 1997). Economic barriers have continued to be an issue for lower-income kids’ participation in commercial cultures (Chin 2001; Seiter 2005). New media accentuate this tendency by requiring more expensive technology and sophisticated forms of technical literacy.

Adult lack of appreciation for youth participation in popular common cultures has created an additional barrier to access for kids who do not have Internet access at home. We are concerned about the lack of a public agenda that recognizes the value of youth participation in social communication and popular culture. When kids lack access to the Internet at home, and public libraries and schools block sites that are central to their social communication, they are doubly handicapped in their efforts to participate in common culture and sociability. These uses of new media for everyday sociability also can be important jumping-off points for messing around and interest-driven learning. Contemporary social media are becoming one of the primary “institutions” of peer culture for U.S. teens, occupying the role that was previously dominated by the informal hanging out spaces of the school, mall, home, or street. Although public institutions do not necessarily need to play a role in instructing or monitoring kids’ use of social media, they can be important sites for enabling participation in these activities. Educators and policy makers need to understand that participation in the digital age means more than being able to access “serious” online information and culture; it also means the ability to participate in social and recreational activities online. This requires a cultural shift and a certain openness to experimentation and social exploration that generally is not characteristic of educational institutions.

When we turn to interest-driven practices, we see kids developing more specialized forms of expertise and engaging with esoteric and niche knowledge communities. The chapters on gaming, creative production, and work aim to map some of the characteristics of these interest-driven communities of practice. These are groups that see value in subcultural capital that is not widely distributed in mainstream culture. These are not practices that are amenable to being codified into a baseline set of literacies, standardized bodies of knowledge, or normalized forms of participation. Young

people who know how to mess around and pursue self-directed learning with new media have mastered genres of participation that are applicable to different content domains if given the necessary contextual supports. We believe that these genres of participation can generalize across a wide range of cultural and knowledge domains. For example, in both chapters 5 and 6 we note how youth who have been engaged in geeked out practices often participate in multiple technical or creative communities concurrently or serially. As technical and media skills and practices become more mainstream, the kids who are associated with these more specialized groups will compete to differentiate themselves with even more specialized forms of expertise that test the boundaries of technical virtuosity. Because of this, a participation gap in relation to these practices is a structural inevitability, and in fact, drives motivation and aspirations. In this domain we should value diversity rather than standardization to enable more kids to succeed and gain recognition in different communities of interest.

Although we have not systematically analyzed the relation between gender and socioeconomic status and participation in interest-driven groups, our work indicates a predictable participation gap. Particularly in the case of highly technical interest groups and geeked out forms of gaming, the genre itself is often defined as a masculine domain. These differences in access are not simply a matter of technology access but have to do with a more complex structure of cultural identity and social belonging. Girls tend to be stigmatized more if they identify with geeked out practices. While we may recognize that geeked out participation has valuable learning properties, if these activities translate to downward social mobility in friendship-driven networks of status and popularity, many kids are likely to opt out even if they have the technical and social resources at their disposal. The kinds of identities and peer status that accompany certain forms of new media literacy and technical skills (and lack thereof) is an area that deserves more systematic research.

The focus of policy and educational agendas needs to be not on the specific content or skills that kids are engaged in when they pursue interest-driven participation but rather on the genre of participation. We identify a series of peer-based learning dynamics that operate in these contexts, with basic social principles that drive engagement, learning, and the development of expertise. We also describe how youth can transition between different genres of participation by shifting from hanging out forms of

media engagement to messing around, to geeking out. Conversely, we have seen youth who use their geeked out interests or marginalized identities to leverage online connections and build friendships with like-minded peers not available to them locally. For example, chapter 6 describes deep friendships built through media production, and chapter 3 describes how for gay youth, online groups can be a lifeline for affiliating with other gay teens. Although not discussed at length in this book, C. J. Pascoe and Natalie Boero's study of pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia groups are also an example of how online spaces can support marginalized identities and practices. This latter case, in particular, argues for the importance of keeping these specialized interest spaces open to participation by experienced and credible leadership that can steer the community in productive directions. These are stories about changing structures of participation that are supported by different social, cultural, and technical ecologies. It is not sufficient to design specific learning environments or pedagogical interventions without considering the overall ecology of social, technical, and cultural support that young people need to navigate these transitions.

For youth who do not have easy access to digital-production tools and the online networks of interest-driven groups, local youth media programs play an important role as a place to connect with like-minded peers. The case studies on local youth media programs that we examine, such as the hip-hop project, the video-production center, the after-school video game-production project, and school computer labs that have opened their doors to kids during breaks and after school, are all examples of adults providing resources and institutional cover for kids to pursue their hobbies and interests in new media. The most successful examples we have seen are programs that bring kids together based on kids' own passionate interests and that have plenty of unstructured time for kids to tinker and explore without being dominated by direct instruction. Unlike classroom teachers, these lab teachers and youth-program leaders are not authoritative figures responsible for assessing kids' competence, but rather they are what Dilan Mahendran has called "co-conspirators," much like the adult participants in online interest-driven groups. In this, our research is in alignment with what Vivian Chávez and Elisabeth Soep (2005) have identified as the "pedagogy of collegiality," which defines adult-youth collaboration in what they see as successful youth media programs. Again, this is an area that we believe deserves further research and attention to pedagogical

design. Programs of this kind provide leadership and models for youth to aspire to in addition to the resources for kids to access the means for digital production. These are examples of public institutions not only providing the basic access to technology tools and skills training but also filling a gap in the broader ecology of social, cultural, and technical resources to enable participation in the more informal and social dimensions of networked public life.

Intergenerational Learning Institutions

Adult participation as coconspirators in interest-driven groups provides some hints as to how educators and policy makers can harness these social dynamics for learning agendas that are more keyed to adult social worlds. In many ways, the crucial ingredient in youth engagement and successful adult intervention in these spaces seems to be a stance of mutual respect and reciprocity, where youth expertise, autonomy, and initiative are valued. We describe this in terms of peer-based learning, in which those who youth identify as peers are a crucial determinant of whom they look to for status, affiliation, and competition. In friendship-driven networks, these dynamics are not so different from what their parents grew up with, involving the same growing pains of learning to take responsibility for their actions in a competitive social environment. On the interest-driven side of the equation, the ways in which we have sheltered youth from workplaces and institutionalized them in age-segregated schools means that there are few opportunities for youth to see adults as peers in these ways. As we describe in chapters 6 and 7, when kids have the opportunity to gain access to accomplished elders in areas where they are interested in developing expertise, an accessible and immediate aspirational trajectory that is grounded in an organic social context can be created. In contrast to what they experience under the guidance of parents and teachers, with peer-based learning youth take on more grown-up roles and ownership of their self-presentation, learning, and evaluation of others.

As we point out, adults can have an important role in providing leadership and role models for participants in interest-driven groups, even in contexts of peer-based learning. In friendship-driven practices that center on sociability in given school-based networks, direct adult participation is often unwelcome, but in interest-driven groups there is a much stronger

role for more experienced participants to play. Unlike instructors in formal educational settings, however, these adults participate not as educators but as passionate hobbyists and creators, and youth see them as experienced peers, not as people who have authority over them. These adults exert tremendous influence in setting communal norms and what educators might call learning goals, though they do not have direct authority over newcomers. How adult roles are structured in these peer-based interest-driven groups is one element of how the genre of participation is defined, and it could be studied more systematically as a particular pedagogical stance that is grounded in a structure of reciprocity.

This dynamic is fundamentally different from the deferred-gratification model that youth experience in schools, where they are asked to accept that their work in one institutional context (school) will transition at some uncertain time to what they imagine for themselves in the future (work). By contrast, their participation in interest-driven groups and their local friend-based sociability are about status, reputation, and validation in the here and now of their lives. As we describe in chapter 7, less privileged youth can be particularly critical of the aspirational models put forth by schools, because they understand that the odds are stacked against them as far as translating their accomplishments in school into social capital in adulthood. For these youth in particular, the aspirational trajectories offered by more informal economies and flexible forms of creative production in networked publics can be a way out of alienating learning experiences in formal education.

Interest-driven networked publics are often organized by local, niche, and amateur activities that differ in some fundamental ways from the model of professional training and standardized curriculum that is put forth in schools. Just as amateur sports leagues are predicated on a broader base of participation than professional sports, hobby groups and amateur media production lower the barriers to active participation in networked publics. At the same time, kids still can find role models and heroes in these smaller-scale networks, but these role models and heroes are much more accessible than the pros, where the aspirational trajectory is distant and inaccessible. Success and recognition in these niche and local publics can be tremendously validating, and they mark a pathway toward a more civic and participatory public life. Kids from less privileged backgrounds understand that the ideology of equal opportunity through public education does not

operate in the same way for them as for more privileged kids. Even those kids who are not going to navigate successfully to adult careers by pleasing their teachers can find alternative pathways toward participation in different kinds of publics that are not defined by structures they see as unfair and oppressive. We see the implications of our work less in the service of reshuffling the deck of who succeeds in professional careers in new media, and more in terms of how educational interventions can support a more engaged stance toward public participation more generally.

Our work across the different domains of practice that we examined queries the changing shape of participation in different kinds of publics, but our focus is on youth-driven publics, not civics as defined by adult agendas. While the latter is something that requires additional research, we believe that some of the most promising directions for encouraging online civic engagement begin from youth-driven bottom-up social energies, an ethic of peer-based reciprocity, and a sense of communal belonging, rather than from a top-down mandate of adult-directed civic activity. We have some examples of this in our research, including the mobilization of kids to immigrant-rights protests through MySpace, connecting with activist groups online, or helping out in school or community institutions as technical and media experts. For the most part, however, local community institutions and activity groups made little use of digital technologies and kids' media interests and did not extend beyond the local given social networks. Few kids we spoke to were interested or involved in traditional politics, even though they might be highly energized by their local politicking among peers on social network sites or in other online groups and games. We did not focus our research on uncovering the more exceptional cases that might function as models in this domain (as we did in the case of creative production), so this is an area that we also believe deserves more research. The gap between the energies that kids bring to their peer-based politics and social engagements, and their participation in more adult-centered civic and political worlds, represents a missed opportunity.

Kids' participation in networked publics suggests some new ways of thinking about the role of public education. Rather than thinking of public education as a burden that schools must shoulder on their own, what would it mean to think of public education as a responsibility of a more distributed network of people and institutions? And rather than assuming

that education is primarily about preparing kids for jobs and careers, what would it mean to think of education as a process of guiding kids' participation in public life more generally, a public life that includes social, recreational, and civic engagement? And finally, what would it mean to enlist help in this endeavor from an engaged and diverse set of publics that are broader than what we traditionally think of as educational and civic institutions? In addition to publics that are dominated by adult interests, these publics should include those that are relevant and accessible to kids now, where they can find role models, recognition, friends, and collaborators who are coparticipants in the journey of growing up in a digital age. We end this book with the hope that our research has provoked these questions.

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Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out

Kids Living and Learning with New Media

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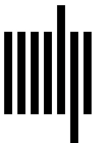
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