Participatory Ontologies and Youth Cultures

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The Participation Paradox, or Agency and Sociality in Contemporary Youth Cultures
— Stuart R. Poyntz

Beginning in infancy, young people in the global North and in much of the global South now grow up learning the language of consumer media culture through a constant diet of screen images, audio messages, and text-based communication that compete with schools and families as the primary storytellers and teachers in children's lives. As Stephen Kline has observed, this situation is not new, yet it is important to understand in relation to the growth of a global information economy that is shaping how participatory life—the way children and youth play, feel and think together—operates today.

Beginning in the 1980s and early 1990s, Manuel Castells identified "the logic and technologies of

networks [as] central to the restructuring of global capitalism" and the genesis of a global information economy (Barney 70). Castells spoke of a model of informationalism, thereby drawing attention to the increasing role of "knowledge and information in all processes of material production and distribution" (*Rise* 91–92). He meant to suggest by this that the transition from an industrial economy to a global information economy is best understood in terms of a process in which industrial forms of capitalism are permeated "by the ganglia of digital networks" (Barney 70). As a consequence, technology came to be central to the organization, development, and growth of a global economy, while increasingly altering the nature of economic activity itself. Most importantly, alongside the production of material things—like cars, refrigerators, and clothes—knowledge and information have themselves taken on new significance as productive resources and commodities. The application of information and knowledge is now in fact central to the production of material things, but information and knowledge are also productive resources in their own right, creating new forms of immaterial, symbolic, and affective commodities central to the way we learn, understand, and feel each other today.

This has had a profound impact on the lives of young people, among other groups. Around the world, in fact, as Thomas Tufte and Florencia Enghel suggest, the past two decades have witnessed an intensification in the mediated lives of children and youth, the result of which is that contemporary mediascapes now provide a powerful and complex catalogue of immaterial and affective commodities, "such as characters, plots and textual forms," through which young people produce scripts for themselves and the "imagined lives" of others (Appadurai 35–36). The intersection of electronic and digital mediation with the experiences of children and youth is, as always, cut through with opportunities alongside the legacies of profound social inequities, political insecurities, and forms of economic destabilization. In the face of these structural divides, however, the more general point is that in an era of informationalism young people simply have more media options—in terms of both the technologies used and the content available.

In North America, for instance, teenagers now spend approximately fifty hours each week with various media, including TV, movies, music, cellphones, and computers. Nearly three-quarters of eight- to eighteen-year-olds have a TV in their bedroom, while half have a video game console and/or cable/satellite TV, and a third have their own computer and Internet access (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 11). These figures reveal a shift to a "screen rich bedroom culture" (Livingstone 21) that has increasingly become the norm for kids in countries across the global North. The fact that cellphones are now media-content-delivery platforms has only intensified this situation,

because where cellphones have historically been used to hold a conversation, this now accounts for only thirty minutes of the nearly three hours per day teenagers spend using such devices. The rest of the time, young people are using cellphones for texting (ninety minutes per day) or for listening to, playing, or watching other media (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 18).

The electronic and digital "feed" that envelops children's lives is thus pervasive and of deep concern for many. Among parents, the fear is often that "sitting in front of a computer or television for extended periods of time can lead to weight gain, or that endless instant messaging can interfere with children's ability to form face-to-face relationships" (Montgomery 6). Fears about how young people consume media are also layered with long-standing fears about how old and new media bring violent and sexually charged images and stories into adolescents' lives. These concerns are not to be ignored (for a discussion, see Poyntz and Hoechsmann), but recent developments also raise a different and in some ways more complex set of issues.

At the centre of these issues is what might best be described as the participation paradox, which arises as information and symbolic production play an increasingly central role in our lives. Participation in information-rich, mediated life is tricky business today. In increasingly globalizing, fragmented societies, for instance, it can appear that people's social networks are in decline, that people are living more solitary, disconnected lives (Deuze 67). Young people in particular are often seen to be disengaged, especially where traditional markers of public participation in politics, places of worship, and the state are concerned (Bennett 3). These claims must be understood next

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to developing forms of "hypersociability," however, whereby emerging forms of networked individualism are enhancing "the capacity of individuals to rebuild structures of sociability from the bottom up" (Castells, *Internet Galaxy* 132).

For our purposes, this is to say that networked individualism and hypersociality draw attention to the many ways young people can now express themselves, interact with each other, and participate in larger public worlds through information networks and technical resources. The rub, however, is that, while such participation can often seem immensely promising, digitally mediated environments are thread through and often times dominated by the plots, textual forms, marketing practices, and affective commodities of commercial corporations. What results then is a participation paradox. On the one hand, as Lawrence Lessig notes in *Free Culture* and *Remix*, there are more opportunities than ever for children and youth to be actively involved with contemporary media environments, more ways for interventionist fans, local noncommercial producers, activists, and others to use screen resources to produce meaning in their own and others' lives. Such a culture extends older, active relationships audiences have always had with broadcast media, but young people's ability "to transform [their] personal reaction[s]" to the images, sounds, and narratives of consumer media into forms of "social interaction" is also more accessible than

ever today (Jenkins, *Fans* 41). On the other hand, then, it is of note that transnational media corporations are also adept and attentive to the ways that young people's participation can be nurtured for profitable ends. Astute media conglomerates are in fact "co-conspirators in the emergence of a participatory media culture" (Deuze 67) because they use various platforms, products, and resources to provide wholly integrated, technologically imbued environments to enable young people's interactivity with media. Such environments include new vehicles of surveillance, affect, and warmth through which media companies shape youthful identities and social futures. For instance, any number of children's play spaces and practices—including the guerilla marketing network, Girl's Intelligence Agency; web spaces such as Lego's Factory, Club Penguin, Webkinz, and NeoPets; and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's children's site, *The Outlet*—now nurture children's creative expression and/or sense of responsibility through a sociality knit to the development of new products and to dynamic data maps that track kids' everyday lives. In addition, any number of reality TV shows encourage audience participation as a central part of program content and flow, and online games designed around branded characters, alongside contests, product extensions, and behind-the-scenes access to celebrities and writers enable younger media consumers to influence programming decisions directly. All these strategies

produce more interactive and sustained relationships between media conglomerates and audiences, and are symptomatic of the way media participation and creation are now used as a means for generating consumer loyalty and inexpensive media content.

In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins explains these developments as part of a culture convergence, a shift in socio-cultural life made possible by the development of digitalia and global communication networks. Convergence is typically thought to refer to the development of global media giants like Disney, Viacom, or Rupert Murdoch's Fox empire. But as regulatory policies and technological affordances have changed—allowing older medium-specific companies to integrate their brands and corporate properties into new, highly concentrated global media forces—young people (and others) have come to utilize, manipulate, discuss, and become more involved with media resources than ever before. Convergence is not only an economic and technological change, then; it also, as Jenkins notes, "represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (*Convergence Culture* 3).

The upshot of this is that children and youth are now central to the production of information in contemporary culture. They are both robust actors in media creation and frequent targets of a highly involving global media system. For some time the very idea that young people might participate in acts of media creation or in public life more generally has been thought of as an unmitigated good. If we look back at the history of community media and other forms of "alternative" media production (for example, pirate radio, video production, local newspapers and zines, community bulletin boards, and Usenet newsgroups on the Internet), participation by novice or non-professional creators in acts of media production is cast as vital for developing more robust democratic cultures. The problem today, however, is that participation itself has been knit to the accumulation of capital through forms of social production in which immaterial labour, communication, and affect are central.

Used in this way, immaterial labour refers to two primary forms of creative work: first, it refers to labour that is largely mental or computational, using symbols, ideas, and codes; second, it refers to "affective labour that engages affects such as well-being, excitement and ease" in the generation of capital (Allison 91). In each case, "communication is involved—communicating information and communicating affect—which is utilized in the process of production but also produced itself as an end product" (Allison 91). Immaterial labour thus speaks to the way contemporary forms of capitalism are moving away from the production of material things toward the production of creative commodities (Hardt; Hardt and Negri). Again, this is

not to say that the production of things is unimportant. It is rather that immaterial labour is central to all forms of production in contemporary socio-economic life, and "the immaterial labour—of the mass media, advertising, service providers, the Internet, etc.— . . . is [increasingly] hegemonic in shaping the logic and future of capitalism in the 21st century" (Allison 91). Because teens and pre-teens are typically the first to take up new technologies, however, and because they continue to retain tremendous influence in relation to media developments, trends, and products, they occupy a unique position in the move to immateriality today.

Young people are, in fact, central to the trajectories of immaterial labour, as witnessed, for instance, by the promise and economic hope associated with something like J-cool in Japan. J-cool refers to the recent explosion in global trade and attention paid to Japanese youth goods—Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh, the Hello Kitty franchise, Japanese fashion and music, and so on—that has come at a time when the Japanese economy as a whole has been stagnant relative to pre-1991 levels of economic growth and developments in the global economy as a whole. Japan's economy is of course highly complex, but if J-cool has represented an important area of growth during the 2000s, it is growth that is reliant on the feelings of warmth and affection, and the experiences of fictional role-playing and pleasure that young people *consume* and *create* through their involvement with Japanese consumer culture. The products and experiences associated with J-cool encourage interaction, frenetic play, and even creative work by children and youth. At the same time, it is just these forms of cultural participation that operate "at the level of affective labour," to create feelings of "well-being, excitement

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and attachment that are . . . productive of capital" (Allison 91). As such, J-cool is symptomatic of the way young people's lives are deeply interwoven with what I've called the participation paradox. The resources and products characteristic of J-cool enable new forms of social involvement and connection; but such involvement and participation is hardly innocent. It is in fact fostered as a form of social production that is increasingly seen to be key to Japan's economic future.

Of course, what is true of J-cool is also true of other recent developments in contemporary youth cultures. Take for instance the rapid growth of youth media production in schools and community-based learning environments across the global North over the past decade (Poyntz and Hoechsmann). On the one hand, we might see this development as part of a trend encouraging young people to become spokespersons for themselves. On the other hand, by enabling students to take responsibility for their own stories and to tell these stories to the world, such media production works to ensure that their interests and concerns are being oriented around the development of enterprising subjectivities. Such subjectivities in turn are coincident with the "norms of individualism, self-reliance and self management, which resonate with new configurations of power and authority" central to neo-liberal forms of capitalism (Bragg 343). In other words, the call for youth to develop their own media voices can mask a more subtle form of regulation, one

that does not enable youth agency so much as regulate that agency in the form of an affective sociality knit to the needs of contemporary capital accumulation. In this sense, we need to be cautious and wary of the new participatory ontologies—which is to say, new ways of being and acting in the world—that characterize youth cultures and youth experiences because, in an age of post-Fordist flexible accumulation, young people are growing up in semiotic environments marked by new and complex forms of sociality that may or may not be in their best interests.

This situation forms an important backdrop for the papers that follow. As I have tried to do here, each of the following papers takes on the task of exploring the meaning of participation, including the way contemporary participatory ontologies might be understood in relation to young people's lives. To begin, Zoë Druick explores the meaning of participatory media as they emerged during the 1960s. She addresses these media as "one of the key social and aesthetic formations" symptomatic of that era's "structure of feeling" and discusses three experimental practices as a way of distinguishing early efforts to use media to imagine and nurture a democratic public. The work explored includes *Culloden* and *The War Game*, two films by Peter Watkins; *A Married Couple*, Allan King's renowned 1969 experiment in observational cinema; and *VTR St-Jacques*, an important example of the National Film Board's Challenge for Change

Program, which attempted to foster a forum for dissenting voices by bridging the worlds of professional filmmakers and community activists. Through these case studies, Druick reminds us of a participatory media tradition that continues to resonate and contrast with those contemporary forms of digital interactivity that are plagued by forms of commodification. As such, her paper is a reminder of how youth media participation today might be enhanced through a strategic engagement with the democratic ambitions evident in earlier practices.

Clare Bradford's paper focuses on how M. T. Anderson's 2002 youth novel *Feed* is structured by the processes of production and circulation common to young people's highly mediated lives. Bradford examines the way in which the novel treats human agency in a dystopian future USA dominated by a global network of images, audio messages, and text-based communication, while also considering how the novel itself and the author's official website position readers to engage with Anderson as an author. In the end, she shows how the book "encourages readers to reflect on the consumerism and the neo-liberal politics of their own time and to imagine the 'what-if'

implications of a world in which these tendencies dominate political and economic life."

Finally, Darin Barney's paper offers a short history of the idea of participation in relation to Western political thought and certain Western art practices in order to draw an important distinction between the meaning of participation and politics in young people's lives. Too often, he reminds us, participation and politics are elided together as though participation is always good for democratic life. Today, however, Barney argues, "*citizenship-as-participation* is something altogether different from *politics*." In fact, in a time when states in various nations across the global North are working hard to nurture young people as particular kinds of "good citizens," it may be that participation is not political at all.

None of the four papers included here claims to exhaust the problematic of participation in young people's lives, but together these works offer provocative and important entry points into this problematic. In this sense, they are crucial in a time when the participatory ontologies of all our lives are in flux, under threat, and yet moving forward into an as-yet-to-be-determined future.

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