

Citation: Levine, Peter. "A Public Voice for Youth: The Audience Problem in Digital Media and Civic Education." *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. Edited by W. Lance Bennett. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 119–138. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262524827.119

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A Public Voice for Youth: The Audience Problem in Digital Media and Civic Education

Peter Levine

University of Maryland, CIRCLE (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement)

Students should have opportunities to create digital media in schools. This is a promising way to enhance their civic engagement, which comprises political activism, deliberation, problem solving, and participation in shaping a culture. All these forms of civic engagement require the effective use of a public voice, which should be taught as part of digital media education. To provide digital media courses that teach civic engagement will mean overcoming several challenges, including a lack of time, funding, and training. An additional problem is especially relevant to the question of public voice. Students must find appropriate *audiences* for their work in a crowded media environment dominated by commercial products. The chapter concludes with strategies for building audiences, the most difficult but promising of which is to turn adolescents' offline communities—especially high schools—into more genuine communities.

Why Do We Need Civic Engagement?

A good society cannot be governed by a few, even if the governors were skillful, ethical, and representative of the whole society. We always need broad civic engagement, for four important reasons.

First, evidence shows that institutions work better when many people participate. For example, Robert Putnam has shown that American "states where citizens meet, join, vote, and trust in unusual measure boast consistently higher educational performance than states where citizens are less engaged with civic and community life." Putnam finds that such engagement is "by far" a bigger correlate of educational outcomes than is spending on education, teachers' salaries, class size, or demographics.¹ Likewise, the most successful activist governments in the world—the Nordic social democracies—also have among the world's highest rates of voting, signing petitions, boycotting, joining protests, and reading the newspaper. On the other hand, strong governments with weak civil societies are, without exceptions, corrupt and tyrannical.² It seems likely that active citizens check corruption and mismanagement. They also reduce the burdens on public institutions, such as schools, by lending their own passions, ideas, and labor. Governments work better when people communicate among themselves about public problems. As Lewis A. Friedland writes, "Communities in which there are rich, cross-cutting networks of association and public discussion are more likely to formulate real problems, apply and test . . . solutions, learn from them, and correct them if they are flawed: in short, to rule themselves, or work democratically."³

Second, social outcomes are more likely to be *just* when participation is equitable. People who vote and otherwise engage in politics and civil society tend to get a better deal, and that is a reason to encourage everyone to participate. For example, in one survey, all the respondents who had ever received a federal small-business loan said they always vote. They represented a relatively wealthy stratum of society that qualified for business assistance. In contrast, just over half of those who received welfare or public assistance claimed always to vote. These turnout estimates are probably inflated, but the gap of 44.4 percentage points between the two groups is consistent with other research.⁴ A task force of the American Political Science Association recently found that people with education and money have far more than an equal share of influence on government.⁵

Third, some crucial public problems can only be addressed by people's direct public work, not by legislation.⁶ Effective governments are capable of redistributing money and defining and punishing crimes. But many important problems call for persuasion, guidance, contestation, and other forms of "voice," accompanied by citizens' concrete action. For example, to change public attitudes toward gender roles or to encourage young people to value academic knowledge are goals that require persuasion and argumentation along with examples of personal behavior. Rarely can governments reduce prejudice, enhance the appreciation of nature, or deliver personalized care. Although governments express values through laws and institutions, their ability to persuade is severely limited. Besides, liberal states are not *permitted* to offer certain persuasive arguments (such as those that explicitly favor particular religious views or that invoke ethnic solidarity). Voluntary public work expresses values in ways that are sensitive to context and embodied in human behavior and relationships. Public work thus plays an essential role in defining and addressing social problems.

Public and Private Voice

All of these purposes of civic engagement are best served when people deliberate before they act, expressing opinions to some body of peers in an appropriate voice. Styles of communication differ profoundly by culture and context, but a public voice is always one that can persuade other people—beyond one's closest friends and family—to take action on shared issues. As Howard Rheingold notes in this volume, "Moving from a private voice to a public voice can help students [or anyone else] turn their self-expression into a form of public participation."

An example of a very private voice is an e-mail or a social networking site that is meant for close associates of the author. It may include personal references that would be obscure to a casual visitor; it is not intended to interest a community or to address their concerns. An example of a public voice is a political blog in which the author, much like a conventional newspaper columnist, expresses opinions on the issues of the day and hopes to draw a massive or influential audience. There are many mixed and intermediate forms as well—both offline and online.

Some contemporary political theorists define public communication in highly stringent and demanding ways. According to Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (drawing on Jürgen Habermas and others), to speak publicly imposes a set of obligations.⁷ When in the public sphere, one must advance arguments that any rational person can accept. That means that one may not express arbitrary opinions, assert purely selfish interests, or appeal to authorities—such as Scripture—that others reject. One may not shift positions when speaking to different audiences or give reasons that contradict one's conclusions. On this view, the

public speaker is a kind of ethical and rational legislator, addressing an assembly of peers on matters of public concern.⁸

These definitions seem much too stringent for the practical purpose of this chapter, which is teaching young people to be reasonably effective in public domains. Indeed, as Stephen Coleman notes in this volume, idealized standards of public communication have two serious drawbacks. They impose norms that people are supposed to internalize and use for self-regulation, at some cost to their spontaneity, diversity, and freedom. And they teach a style of political engagement that would be naïve and ineffective “in any real political party, trade union, or local council.” Hence my looser definition of a *public voice* as *any* style or tone that has a chance of persuading any other people (outside of one’s intimate circle) about shared matters, issues, or problems.

This broad definition encompasses topics beyond conventional politics. For example, bad software is a shared concern, and one can write a blog to explain to others how to fix technical problems. Poor customer service can be a public issue if one chooses to address or organize one’s fellow customers instead of complaining privately to the company. (See the chapter by Jennifer Earl and Alan Schussman on consumer petitions, which often adopt rhetorical styles drawn from conventional politics.) In these cases, one’s voice is public even though the issues belong to the private sector.

We may disagree about which topics are legitimate for public discussion. For instance, disclosing one’s own sexual history may be inappropriate—or it may be a means of challenging prejudices and limits. Despite these disagreements, however, it is pretty clear that standard instant-messaging chatter is (or ought to be) private. But most good blogs are public. And effective citizens need to understand the difference.

Culture, Media, and Democracy

The previous section on deliberation and public voice implies that to be civically engaged is to address matters of policy or politics. However, civic engagement is a broader concept that also comprises cultural production.

A democratic people not only controls its own government’s budget, laws, and relations with foreign nations; it also shapes its own identity and self-image. Any self-governing community must be able to illustrate and memorialize its values and present its identity to outsiders and future generations of its own people. This is true at the level of a nation, but also in a small community such as the student body of a school. Thus, *civic engagement* includes the production of culture, at least insofar as cultural expression shapes norms and priorities.

Truly engaged citizens produce *heterogeneous* cultural products. Engaged people clump together in communities and associations, each of which inevitably takes on a distinct character. Many communities and associations choose to display their identities through music, statuary, graphic design, narrative history, and other forms of culture. But cultural identity is always contested; it provokes debates, parodies, and expressions of dissent as well as consensus. In other words, it requires the use of a public voice to defend or criticize forms of expression.

While heterogeneity is evidence of civic engagement, a homogeneous mass culture is a threat to democracy: when only a few people produce products that reach a mass market, they obtain great influence. Today, various groups of Americans criticize mass culture for being secular, materialistic, superficial, violent, sexist, and racist and for undermining local,

traditional, and minority cultures. These critiques are not always mutually consistent and may not all be valid. But it seems clear that people feel powerless to change mass culture, and that feeling demonstrates the tension between mass culture and democracy.

Mass culture is, in part, a product of corporate capitalism. Capital increases the audiences for certain books, films, and songs. Sometimes corporate power is relatively weak: for instance, when there is competition among many producers (as in the Jacksonian era of small printers or in today's age of blogs) or when the government sponsors cultural production (as in Western Europe today). However, there remains an *intrinsic* tendency for liberal and democratic societies to develop mass cultures.

When people are free to choose which cultural products to consume, we often observe a "power law" distribution, in which a small handful of products are enormously more popular than the rest. It is not certain why this occurs, but it seems plausible that people want to know what other people are reading, hearing, or viewing; thus they gravitate to what is already popular, making it more so. That instinct is perhaps especially strong in a democracy, where people are taught to believe that average or majority opinion is a reliable guide to quality. Books are advertised as best sellers, movies as blockbusters, and songs as hits because democratic audiences trust popularity. In aristocratic cultures, on the other hand, elites have disproportionate consumer power and tend to view popularity as a mark of *poor* quality. Aristocrats want to have uncommon tastes. As Tocqueville wrote,

Among aristocratic nations every man is pretty nearly stationary in his own sphere, but men are astonishingly unlike each other; their passions, their notions, and their tastes are essentially different: nothing changes, but everything differs. In democracies, on the contrary, all men are alike and do things pretty nearly alike. It is true that they are subject to great and frequent vicissitudes, but as the same events of good or averse fortune are continually recurring, only the name of the actors is changed, the piece is always the same. The aspect of American society is animated because men and things are always changing, but it is monotonous because all these changes are alike.⁹

Tocqueville thought that mass culture posed a serious threat to liberty, but he proposed a solution. Strong voluntary associations would have the means and the incentive to produce differentiated alternatives to mass culture. Members of associations would want to communicate with one another about common concerns and collaborate in producing cultural products primarily for themselves. In that way, civic engagement—meaning especially group membership—would diversify the culture.

Cultural Production in the Era of Networks

The Internet does not make Tocqueville's argument irrelevant, but it creates new opportunities and challenges for the participatory cultural production that he valued. During the second half of the twentieth century, voluntary associations weakened, American communities became more alike, and corporate media dominated. More recently, however, the Internet and other new electronic media have allowed people to produce and disseminate their own ideas, which can be diverse and relevant to their communities (geographical or otherwise). Never has it been as cheap or quick to generate text, sound, or moving images for public access. This opportunity for creativity has great civic potential; it could turn people from spectators and consumers into innovators and creators.¹⁰

On the other hand, the same technology that allows millions of people to produce public materials also gives them easier and quicker access to the most popular digital products—whether music, video, or political news and statements. A few items gain global audiences.

They often feature talented celebrities who are backed by technical experts and corporate funding. Although some corporate products fail in the marketplace, they have the best odds of obtaining a large audience.

The easy availability of celebrity culture could reduce demand for ordinary people's creativity and make the world more homogeneous, thus frustrating local communities (and even whole nations) that want to govern their own cultures. The more that slick, professional products penetrate the international market, the less scope exists for ordinary people to create cultural products that others will value.

This shift is not the result of corporate investment alone. Not many of the successful blogs that arose between 2000 and 2002 had significant financial backing or famous writers; none used complex software that was out of the reach of ordinary users. Nevertheless, a handful of these blogs drew, and have retained, an enormous proportion of the total traffic. Instapundit, for example, became thousands of times more popular than average conservative blogs, and it is hard to believe that it was that much *better* than the average. An alternative explanation for its popularity involves path dependence: people want to know what the most popular sites are saying. Thus, what is already popular tends to become more so.¹¹ Path dependence plus corporate investment combine to produce a web in which a few disseminate ideas to the many—increasingly reminiscent of radio and television.

Some early enthusiasts for the Internet assumed (with the Supreme Court in *Reno v. ACLU*) that everyone with a computer could become a "pamphleteer," putting ideas into the public arena that would reach audiences simply in proportion to their relevance, value, or popularity. In that case, the popularity of Web sites would follow a bell curve, with more sites near the median than near the tails.

But Yochai Benkler rejects such "mid-1990s utopianism."¹² A few sites are enormously more popular than the median, and there is a long tail in which sites show little evidence of an audience at all. For example, the median blog currently tracked by Truth Laid Bear (a popular ranking service) has two incoming links, whereas the top blog has 4,696. Figure 1 shows the incoming links of top-ranked blogs, revealing a precipitous decline.

Early papers that discovered this power-law took a skeptical or critical line. The Internet was not a democracy or a meritocracy. Rather, people and search engines linked to sites that were already popular, thus making them more so. The rich got richer, regardless of merit. But Benkler summarizes findings that are more optimistic than a pure power law theory would imply. Mathematical models of the Web suggest that unknown sites do rise in popularity, and popular ones fall. There are many stories about innovations in tactics, techniques, or ideas that spread very rapidly. For instance, BoycottSBG—a response to the Sinclair Broadcasting Group's alleged Republican bias—obtained enormous participation within a week. As Benkler says, "It was providing a solution that resonated with the political beliefs of many people and was useful to them for their expression and mobilization."¹³

Benkler observes a "self-organizing principle" on the World Wide Web.¹⁴ People with strong mutual affinities find one another and link their Web sites or leave comments on each other's pages. Within these affinity groups, some sites become more popular than others. But (a) there are many affinity groups, and (b) the popularity curve is not always steep within a group. "When the topically or organizationally related clusters become small enough—on the order of hundreds or even low thousands of Web pages—they no longer follow a pure power law distribution. Instead, they follow a distribution that still has a very long tail—these smaller clusters still have a few genuine 'superstars'—but the body of the distribution is substantially more moderate: beyond the few superstars, the shape of the link distribution looks a little more like a normal distribution."¹⁵

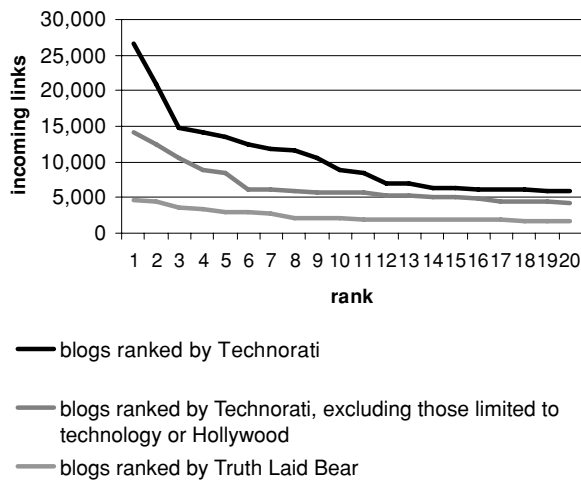


Figure 1
Incoming links to blogs by blog ranking.

Clusters of affinity groups then aggregate, often through sites that are or become superstars. We thus see a highly skewed distribution of popularity on the Internet as whole, yet the Web remains plural and open because of all the smaller groups. As Benkler says, "There is a big difference between a situation where no one is looking at any of the sites on the low end of the distribution, because everyone is looking only at the superstars, and a situation where dozens or hundreds of sites at the low end are looking at each other, as well as at the superstars."¹⁶ On Benkler's model, "filtering for the network as a whole is done as a form of nested peer-review decisions, beginning with the speaker's closest information affinity group."¹⁷ Lively dialogues begin "with communities of interest on smallish scales, practices of mutual pointing, and the fact that, with freedom to choose what to see and who to link to, with some codependence among the choices of individuals as to whom to link, highly connected points emerge even at small scales, and continue to be replicated with ever-larger visibility as the clusters grow."¹⁸

Benkler's portrait of the Internet permits cautious optimism about its value for Tocquevilian associational life. The Net does not give everyone an equal audience, let alone a large one, but it offers more opportunities for cultural creativity, cooperation, and effective public voice than the mass media system that prevailed twenty years ago.

Why Should We Be Especially Concerned about Youth Civic Engagement?

So far, this chapter has emphasized that many people should express their views on public issues and help create a heterogeneous democratic culture. I now turn to adolescents, whose civic participation is especially important.

Contrary to popular stereotypes about "slackers," today's youngest generation of Americans (the Millennials, who were born after 1985) are in some ways quite civically engaged. For example, according to separate surveys collected by Monitoring the Future and the Higher Education Research Institute, American youth have become increasingly likely to volunteer. According to the DDB Lifestyles Survey, there was a substantial gap between the volunteering

rates of older people and youth in the 1970s, but that gap has vanished. Also, whereas the whole U.S. population has become distinctly less likely to participate in a community project since the 1970s, the rate among youth has been unchanged over that time.¹⁹

Young Americans are heavily represented in innovative online activities such as blogging and wikis. In 2004, The Pew Internet & American Life Project identified a group of Power Creators who each created online material in an average of two different ways: for instance, maintaining a personal site and also posting on other sites. This group had a median age of twenty-five. Since the youngest people surveyed were eighteen, the real median was certainly lower.²⁰ A year later, the project found that 17 percent of teenagers (defined as ages twelve to seventeen) had created their own blogs, compared to 7 percent of adults.²¹

In some other respects, however, youth are less engaged compared to past generations. For example, their news consumption and interest in public events fell deeply and consistently over the last thirty-five years. The big drop in news consumption occurred in the 1980s, before the Internet. Young Americans' voter turnout fell by one third in the three decades after 1972 (the first year in which eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds were allowed to vote), while older people's turnout showed no decline.

Given the importance, noted above, of using a public voice, we should assess the degree to which young people express themselves publicly. Among the nineteen survey indicators of civic engagement that Scott Keeter et al. developed in 2003, five are activities that require individuals to express their own political or social opinions in public forums (persuading others about an election, participating in community problem solving, contacting an elected official, contacting a newspaper or magazine, and calling a talk show). Several other indicators measure participation in public discourse (e.g., taking part in a protest, displaying a campaign sign, button, or sticker).²² For most of these indicators, youth were *not* heavily involved. People do not naturally or automatically acquire an effective public voice or the motivation to use it. They must be taught.

We might debate whether, overall, youth civic engagement has improved or declined in the United States and other countries: that would depend on how we weigh the various forms of engagement. Regardless, we should try to strengthen youth participation, for several reasons.

First, as John Dewey observed, young people are relatively "plastic."²³ Adolescents develop habits and attitudes relevant to civic life when they first encounter the world of news, issues, and events. During that initial period, their ideas are flexible and subject to influence. However, once they develop a political identity, it cannot be changed without much effort and discomfort. As Karl Mannheim noted in the 1920s, "Even if the rest of one's life consisted in one long process of negation and destruction of the natural world view acquired in youth, the determining influence of these early impressions would still be predominant."²⁴ Longitudinal data show remarkable persistence in adults' political behaviors and beliefs over the decades of their lives, whereas young people seem susceptible to change.²⁵ For example, careful studies have found that giving high school students opportunities to participate in extracurricular groups enhances their civic participation many decades later.²⁶

Second, young people have special needs that can be met by encouraging them to participate in civic and political affairs. There is a strong correlation between adolescents' civic engagement and successful development. For instance, using three national longitudinal surveys, Nicholas Zill and colleagues found, "Compared to those who reported spending 1-4 hours per week in extracurricular activities, students who reported spending no time in school-sponsored activities were 57 percent more likely to have dropped out by the time

they would have been seniors; 49 percent more likely to have used drugs; 37 percent more likely to have become teen parents; 35 percent more likely to have smoked cigarettes; and 27 percent more likely to have been arrested.” These relationships remained statistically significant even after the researchers controlled for other measured characteristics of families, schools, and students (such as parents’ education levels), and similar results have emerged from other studies.²⁷

One explanation is that young people respond well to being given responsibilities and opportunities to serve their communities. In fact, there is some evidence that adults can address adolescent pathologies better by providing civic opportunities than by trying to detect, prevent, and mitigate problems. For instance, the Teen Outreach Program (TOP) significantly reduced teen pregnancy, school suspension, and school failure. TOP was successful even though it focused “very little attention on the three target problem behavior outcomes.” In other words, the staff did not directly address pregnancy or school-related problems. Instead, youth in the program were enrolled in service projects and asked to discuss their work in classroom settings. An average of 45.8 hours of service reduced teen pregnancy through the *indirect* means of giving young women valuable civic work to do.²⁸ The TOP experiment provides evidence in support of the philosophy known as “positive youth development,” which emphasizes adolescents’ need to contribute their talents and energy.

Another argument begins with the observation that youth have a quasi-autonomous culture. Variation in that culture can have enormous impact on kids. For example, it makes a huge difference whether one participates in a gang or a chess club. But adults and adult institutions are not able to manipulate youth culture. Therefore, it is important for young people to develop their own civic skills. Then, for example, they will be able to do their own conflict mediation and violence prevention within their own peer groups. If young people are helped to develop civic motivations, they may create associations that have positive purposes and are attractive to peers.

Finally, American youth are particularly susceptible to being influenced by corporate-funded mass culture, which is aimed directly at them even though it reaches a global audience. For that very reason, they have special leverage over media corporations, especially if they act cooperatively. It is not an exaggeration to say that youth civic engagement in the United States could benefit democracy around the world if youth-led associations challenged mass culture.

Why Would We Expect Media Production to Boost Youth Civic Skills?

There are not yet enough rigorous evaluations of youth media programs, especially in school settings. We need studies that use control or comparison groups and that measure civic outcomes. However, convergent evidence from similar projects suggests that youth media could be highly effective for teaching public voice and might also boost academic skills.

Service learning means a combination of community service and academic work or classroom discussion; it is now present in half of American high schools.²⁹ A 1999 evaluation found that federally funded service learning had positive effects on students’ civic attitudes, habits of volunteering, and success in school.³⁰ In a smaller study published in 2005, Shelley Billig and colleagues found that students who had been exposed to service learning gained more knowledge of civics and government and felt more confident about their own civic skills, compared to a matched group of students who had taken conventional social studies classes.³¹

Earthforce is a school-based program that involves students in environmental research and political action. Students choose their own issues and strategies. Earthforce was evaluated by Alan Melchior and Lawrence Neil Bailis in 2001–2002, using pre and post student questionnaires, teacher questionnaires, and focus groups (but no comparison groups or test-like assessments). There were many positive changes in self-reported skills, knowledge, and attitudes over the course of the program, and teachers were favorable.³²

These and other studies support the view that active civic participation is an inspiring and effective approach to civic education that also enhances academic skills and engages youth in their schooling. They are tests of what Marina Bers calls “praxis-based” rather than “knowledge-based” civic education. Some of the examples (especially Earthforce) are what she calls constructionist rather than instructionist.

It is important to note, however, that the evaluations cited above were limited to programs that appeared to be well implemented. Many other programs that receive service-learning funds do not implement basic recommendations, such as offering students opportunities for reflection.³³ Even having screened out weaker programs, Billig and colleagues found a great range in impact. Their study underlines the importance of *quality*. Active learning can be counterproductive unless projects are well conceived and executed. And even the best programs can have mixed effects. For instance, youth participants in Earthforce gained skills but became *less* confident in their own civic efficacy over the course of the program. Their agreement with the following statements actually declined: “I believe I can personally make a difference in my school or community,” “I believe that people working together can solve community problems,” “It is important to listen to people on all sides of a community issue if we want to find a solution that will work,” “I think it is more important to look for ways to help the environment for a long time than to do something that will just make a difference for a few days,” and “I pay attention to local environmental issues when I hear about them.” The evaluators conclude, “One possible explanation is that the decline reflects an increased understanding on the part of participants of how slow and difficult change can be, and that participants are both more realistic and in some cases discouraged by the challenges they face in addressing issues in their communities.”

Similar results would likely be found if digital media production were evaluated using surveys and other quantitative measures. There would be a range of outcomes depending on the quality of the programs; and even some of the best would reduce students’ efficacy by confronting them with obdurate social problems.

Youth Media Production in the School Context

Much of the exciting youth media work that one can find by searching on the Web is created in after-school and community-based programs that have support from foundations. These projects are crucial laboratories and will play a lasting role by allowing youth to undertake projects too controversial for schools. For example, *Raices* is an initiative of the Main Street Project that helps Latino youth in rural Midwestern communities to make digital media. Amalia Anderson, director of the initiative, told me that “our media work is grounded in a right to communicate, to challenge the camera as a tool of colonization, and to use our voices to speak truth to power as well as preserve and protect our culture, languages and identity.”³⁴ That kind of mission would have to be submerged in a typical comprehensive public school.

However, most adolescents do not have opportunities for community-based engagement; and voluntary projects always draw self-selected youth. Therefore, school-based programs are essential if we want to reach a broad spectrum of students, including youth who don't find their way into after-school programs.

In their study of civic learning among Chicago public school students, Kahne and Sporte found small positive effects from community-based projects, but very large positive effects from service learning in the schools. This is striking, because most service-learning classes are often *not* very ambitious or engaging, whereas Chicago is a hotbed of excellent community-based youth work. But the youth who have the most to gain do not sign up for after-school programs, and they appear to benefit from service learning in their public schools. It is likely that they would also benefit from youth media courses.³⁵

There is a substantial base on which to build digital media production classes that could reach all American students. In the Knight Foundation's Future of the First Amendment survey, 21 percent of randomly selected schools said that they had a "Student Internet or World-Wide Web publication with a news component that requires students to make judgments about what is newsworthy."³⁶ The question was framed so that it missed some other forms of digital media production of civic value. Thus more than one in five schools may have relevant programs in place today.

Nevertheless, many obstacles stand in the way of adequate opportunities in schools. Some problems, such as the lack of equipment and trained teachers, could be addressed with more public investment. Of course, providing adequate support is a challenge, given budget deficits, opposition to taxes, competing priorities, a history of underinvestment in many school districts, and a system of predominantly local educational funding that leaves poor communities with scarce resources for schooling. However, youth media production could be allocated a larger proportion of existing money and—just as important—of students' time.

Schools are increasingly influenced by research, because state legislation and the No Child Left Behind Act 2003 (NCLB) require them to achieve specified outcomes, and they are looking for tested ways to do so. By showing that youth media production improves academic skills or high school completion, researchers could persuade school districts to invest in equipment and professional development and to provide instructional time.

We have circumstantial evidence that would support this case. Many students drop out because the assigned work is boring and because they lack personal connections to teachers. For instance, in a 2006 study of recent dropouts, more than half said they had satisfactory grades before they left school (C or better), but half said that classes were boring. Furthermore, "only 56 percent said they could go to a staff person for school problems and just two-fifths (41 percent) had someone in school to talk to about personal problems."³⁷ There have been rigorous evaluations of programs—albeit not media production courses—that help students to work on community problems in collaboration with adults. For instance, an evaluation of the Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP) studied randomly selected students and a control group. For about \$2,500 a year over four years, QOP was able to cut the dropout rate to 23 percent, compared to 50 percent for the control group. QOP's approach included academic programs that were individually paced for each student, mandatory community service, enrichment programs, and pay for each hour of participation.³⁸

We also have anecdotes about media production classes that may have prevented individuals from dropping out. For example, in an evaluation of the Educational Video Center (EVC), one student said, "EVC helped me stay in school. Like last year, I was really going to drop out but . . . the teachers [at EVC] are like so cool I was able to go to them and talk to

them and tell them what was going on in my life, tell them all my problems."³⁹ Participants also reported gains in skills and academic engagement.

I find such testimony promising, especially since it is consistent with fairly relevant experimental results (noted above) and the theory of positive youth development.⁴⁰ However, administrators who control scarce resources will not place large bets on youth media production on the basis of such evidence. They may suspect that (a) students who sign up for voluntary media programs already have positive attitudes and skills on entry, (b) students' self-reports of skills are unreliable, (c) participants are generous in their evaluations of programs, and (d) other opportunities for student engagement, such as service learning, have been better researched. To influence educational policy, I believe we need randomized field experiments that measure the impact of digital media creation on relatively hard measures, such as high school completion or valid and reliable measures of skills.

If such experiments showed positive results, then NCLB and the standards movement that it typifies would provide some leverage. But these laws also create a challenge by focusing on basic literacy and mathematics as measured by pencil-and-paper tests. That focus makes it harder to devote instructional time to media production; media skills are not directly tested, yet what is tested is taught. Nevertheless, NCLB and other current policies could accommodate youth media work if we could show that providing creative opportunities is an efficient way to keep kids engaged in school.

The Audience Problem

I do not pretend that the struggle for adequate resources will be easy. However, in the rest of this chapter, I will address a different issue that is more complex and less amenable to being solved with money alone: the audience problem.

As noted above, democracy requires broad and diverse cultural creativity. The new digital media—Web sites, e-mail, digital cameras, digital voice recorders and video cameras, and the like—offer opportunities for individuals and voluntary groups to create their own cultural products and to use a public voice, and many have done so. However, the technology is not enough; people must also *want* to create—and specifically to make products with public purposes—rather than use the Internet to get access to mass-produced culture.

One important motivator is the belief that one can reach other people: an audience. Not everyone wants to maximize the sheer number of people reached, although the popularity of Site Meter and other tools for counting visits suggests that some do care about numbers. But others may be more interested in finding a responsive audience that provides comments and feedback; or they may seek a politically relevant audience that can act in response to their media. (A politically relevant audience might comprise especially influential people, such as reporters and elected officials, or it might consist of fellow members of a community who could act collectively.)

In any case, we communicate in a public voice in order to address someone, and it matters *who* listens. It is discouraging to build something if no one comes. As Howard Rheingold says, "Teachers would do well to ask 'are [students] connecting with others?' as well as asking 'are they expressing themselves?' when evaluating the outcome of digital media project-based learning."⁴¹

Global Action Project (GAP) is an independent nonprofit that teaches media production to youth in several countries so that they can "use their media as a catalyst for dialogue and social change."⁴² In response to my query, Megan McDermott, the GAP director, asked a

group of participants whether and why an audience was important to them. According to her notes, they said that they needed people to watch their videos in order to affect the social issues that concerned them: "Because that's how we're going to make it work to open up the audience's eyes." Students also wanted honest feedback from an attentive group, "because it lets you know if your video is hot or not . . . They give feedback and point out things you might miss in your own film. They give feedback that might be good and can make your video or film better."⁴³

McDermott said that youth in GAP are encouraged to think about their audience from the beginning of their projects. At first, they want to reach everyone, but then they fine-tune their goals to be more realistic and to enhance their impact on their communities. They are less concerned, she said, with the number of viewers than with the kind of conversations that they provoke.

EVC is "dedicated to the creative and community-based use of video and multi-media as a means to develop the literacy, research, public speaking and work preparation skills of at-risk youth."⁴⁴ EVC's executive director Steven Goodman told me, "Students certainly enjoy knowing that their work will be seen by audiences. . . . I'm sure the students prefer larger audiences but respond more to the quality of audience response and engagement. . . . At EVC, a responsive audience is one which gives the students positive feedback, asks a lot of questions, and is engaged in the screening. The students do look for this kind of engagement and feel their work may not have been received well if it is lacking."⁴⁵

The Community Arts Center Teen Media Program in Cambridge, MA, holds an annual festival to screen student videos. According to written questionnaires, students were pleased with the event but more satisfied with the turnout than the quality of the discussion. "The crowd on Friday was a highlight—'lots of people.'" "Some of the questions in the discussion were good, but some were stupid."⁴⁶

Anderson of the Main Street Project concurred that numbers weren't as important as "having the right audience—not just an audience for the sake of people to watch. In my experience youth are most interested in making sure their work (stories) are first screened with family and friends and other people of color. Since their work is often personal, and because they have learned through the workshops the importance of people of color telling our own stories and speaking for ourselves . . . they are far more interested in thinking through where the community screenings will take place, and how sharing their stories can empower others, challenge isolation and lead to organizing campaigns." She added that they want audiences who have deep respect for their work and who can participate in creating change.

Creating Audiences for Youth Media Products

Given the media environment sketched above, I am concerned that we may set kids up for disappointment when we imply that the Internet will make them pamphleteers or broadcasters who can change the world by reaching relevant people. Even if some kids are highly successful, most will *not* draw a significant or appropriate or responsive audience. Most Web sites remain in the tail of the distribution. If you create a site that hardly anyone visits, you will get little feedback. Kids who build such sites may feel that they are failures, especially in a culture that prizes popularity. That is why efforts to draw friends and to advertise (or exaggerate) the size of one's network are so prominent on social networking sites such as MySpace.

The topics that young people know best are very local. For instance, when the Lower Eastside Girls Club in New York City began podcasting, they chose to create an audio segment on school uniforms. This was important to them, but not to many others. Even their most likely audience, their fellow students, seemed to shun their amateur work in favor of professional digital media. Other kids across the country are concerned about school uniforms, but they have no reason to listen to a podcast on that subject from New York City.

Students are unlikely to obtain a substantial audience through sheer talent or innovation. Some kids will, but the average won't. Furthermore, many adolescents do not belong to tight affinity groups, differentiated from the mass youth population. Benkler mentions "communities of interest on smallish scales" that conduct peer review and create audiences by linking to one another. But adolescents do not automatically have such communities. The typical U.S. high school is a massive and anonymous institution to which students feel no attachment. Kids have common concerns, but they tend to share them with millions of others. Mass media culture is profoundly homogenizing.

Four Strategies

In this final section, I explore four responses to the audience problem, each of which has some promise.

The first response is to create highly interactive, gamelike environments in which youth can express public views and do civic work. An example is *Zora*, as described by Bers in this volume. Student participants in *Zora* clearly have an audience—the other players. The question is whether schools can be encouraged to devote significant amounts of instructional time to such activities. They would have to be shown that playing *Zora* advances some of the objectives for which they are held accountable, such as reading test scores or retention in school.

The second response is to expand audiences by marketing youth products or by organizing face-to-face events. This appears to be a common strategy in the foundation-supported, community-based groups. Often, they organize screenings so that youth can get feedback. Goodman of EVC described premiere screenings at which 50–150 people convene face-to-face to watch student videos. He reported, "Our students almost always come away from their screenings feeling a sense of accomplishment, pride, success and recognition they never experience in school or elsewhere in their life. These are times when their parents, friends and teachers see their creative and intellectual potential; the audiences see what they are truly capable of, and the students are just overjoyed."

McDermott of GAP said that adult audiences often ask unhelpful questions, such as, "Why did you choose this topic?" or "Do you want to be a professional film-maker?" The youth in GAP have begun to circulate better questions in advance, such as, "What can we do about the problem that you have presented in your video?" or "What were the strongest and weakest parts of the documentary?" Apparently, adults appreciate such guidance.

Most of this discussion and feedback occurs in face-to-face settings. McDermott described a public screening of a youth-made video about gentrification that drew academic experts, activists, and some of the kids' parents and friends. The discussion was very rich and rewarding for the young filmmakers. Overall, McDermott thought that youth were both satisfied and dissatisfied with their audience—glad for the feedback they received, but not fully satisfied by their impact on their communities.

A strategy of recruiting face-to-face audiences makes good sense for community-based groups that also want to achieve social change by organizing residents. Their leaders have the skills and motivation to follow through once students have created media projects. If they were unable or unwilling to convene residents, their whole strategy of social change would make no sense.

However, I worry that this strategy will not work well in schools, particularly if media production becomes more common. In general, teachers are not trained or supported—or even allowed—to convene community meetings. Besides, if we could massively enlarge the number of youth who were involved in media production in schools, we would find it increasingly hard to find audiences for their work.

A third strategy is to enable students to create digital media products with relatively low investments of time and expertise. When J-Lab, the Center for Interactive Journalism, offered mini-grants for citizen journalism, scores of youth-oriented projects applied, asking for support to build ambitious online products such as GIS maps of gentrification or databases of video interviews. (I served on the selection committee in 2004 and 2005.) Youth who commit the time necessary for such projects will be sorely disappointed if no one uses their work. However, one can produce public media without that much investment. Whereas a custom-built Web site is a huge job, one can launch a site on MySpace or create a blog within DailyKos in a few minutes.

Luke Walker, education project manager of TakingITGlobal, writes: “The ‘old’ model of spending hours/days/weeks creating a website, securing server space, and sharing it for all (or no one) to see is both outdated and largely irrelevant for the average young person, although it’s still happening far too often in the school context. As long as that is the production model that teachers are using in their classes, then yes, we are setting children up for failure and disappointment—particularly if we’re stopping at the point of posting the content on the web (where many people’s knowledge/expertise ends) and not teaching students to employ all the marketing tactics that make commercial/mainstream/high-profile websites successful. More and more, though, young people are moving away from traditional websites to creating a presence in social networking spaces like MySpace.”⁴⁷

Most (62 percent) adolescents who read blogs say that they only read blogs by people they already know.⁴⁸ That is evidence of Benkler’s “communities of interest on smallish scales.” There is no reason to believe that teen bloggers are disappointed if only friends visit their sites. After all, they can launch their blog in five minutes using a service like Blogger. The investment is commensurate to the payoff.

I see promise in these user-friendly formats. However, we need examples in which they advance educational or civic purposes. A made-from-scratch Web site or video requires many skills (technical, creative, and organizational) and is thus highly educational. It is not yet clear that MySpace can serve those functions. To be sure, students could create an elaborate product, such as a video or a map, and post it on a social networking site as a means of distribution. But would they be satisfied if only their friends visited?

Furthermore, can students learn to use a public voice and achieve civic purposes by interacting mostly with friends? Adolescent culture (at least in the United States) is strongly segregated, not only by race, ethnicity, and class, but also by identity type. In an influential study begun in 1985, Eccles and Barber asked students to identify themselves with one of the characters in a then-recent Hollywood movie, *The Breakfast Club*. All but 5 percent readily placed themselves in precisely one of the following categories: jock, princess, brain, criminal, or basket case. Moreover, each type of student spent most of his or her time with others of

the same self-ascribed category.⁴⁹ Students' identities at tenth grade were strongly predictive of outcomes a decade later.⁵⁰ Thus, if we leave students to self-associate, given the norms in a modern American high school, they are likely to segregate into groups that reinforce social stratification and that cannot address broad or shared problems.

Optimists might predict that technologies built on network principles will overcome segregation and make it less important for youth to develop an effective public voice. Each participant can communicate privately with friends who have similar backgrounds, interests, and social circumstances, yet inclusive networks will emerge to shape public opinion and gain political influence. Possibly. But network structures are equally compatible with balkanization and can segregate those who have political interests from those who do not feel connected to the public sphere.⁵¹ It is difficult to see how one social group can change the opinions of another without using their voice to reach a large and diverse audience.

Howard Rheingold, in his contribution to this volume, provides thoughtful guidance for educators—in schools, colleges, and after-school programs—who want to encourage youth to develop an effective public voice. He recognizes that young people begin with interests and concerns, but they do not naturally or automatically possess the motivations and skills necessary to influence public opinion and institutions. He proposed exercises that would develop their skills, making full and creative use of digital technologies.

I strongly endorse this guidance, but I worry that it may never directly benefit the vast majority of students. We know from a century's experience with student newspapers and school governments that they tend to draw an elite group of young people who begin with comparatively strong civic skills and motivations, as well as superior academic records and prospects. They enhance their own civic skills by exercising a public voice, but their work is largely ignored by most of their fellow students. According to survey data, an average high school newspaper benefits those who produce it but has no effects on the student body as a whole, because students are not sufficiently connected to the school community to care about its news.⁵²

In short, there are limits to any strategy that gives kids online opportunities without changing their lifeworlds. Factors such as segregation and stratification are powerful determinants of how people use technology. I do not believe that youth media can be fully satisfactory until young people's communities become more democratic. That is a very tall order, but I suggest that technology does not provide an alternative to the hard task of reforming the offline communities and institutions in which young people come of age.

Locally produced media matter more to people who belong to a community or a public, in the sense that John Dewey meant: "Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy."⁵³

One potential community to which most adolescents belong is their school. But the standard American high school is too big and unfocused to support conjoint activity or consciousness of a communal life. It has no common normative framework. As Harry Brighouse describes it,

It is a 2000-plus student institution, in which no individual knows every other individual; in which many children never have any teacher for more than one year of instruction; in which the prevailing values include pep rallies for sports and a slavishly conformist loyalty to school and neighbourhood.

These schools maintain a deafening silence about spiritual or anti-materialist values, take sides in the Cola wars, and accept as a given the prevalence of brand names and teen-marketing.⁵⁴

Most secondary schools allow enormous internal segregation, or even encourage it by allowing students to choose diverse academic tracks. Furthermore, school buildings are isolated from the broader community—behind bars and metal detectors in the inner cities, or behind great lawns and parking lots in the suburbs. Students are asked to make very consequential choices about academic programs, extracurricular activities, and peer groups without much attention from adults, unless they receive good guidance at home. If there are forums intended for deliberation in the whole student body, such as school newspapers, student governments, cultural events, or Web sites, they attract only particular subcultures. There is no common agenda or interest that can draw everyone—no “public” in the Deweyan sense.

Dewey acknowledged that “in any social group whatever, even in a gang of thieves, we find some interest held in common, and we find a certain amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard. How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?”⁵⁵ These criteria are relevant to school culture. Do students feel that they have a great deal in common, beyond the bare obligation to enter the same building every day? And do the various associations within the school overlap with one another and connect with groups beyond the school walls?

If students do not have much in common and do not belong to overlapping groups, then celebrity culture will attract most of their interest. Youth will not be interested in products created by peers that address local issues. They will not even *know* most of their peers. It is not only people who are concerned about civic engagement and digital media who now believe that the standard American high school is poorly organized and must be turned into more of a community. The low rate of high school completion—only two-thirds in some studies—has caught the attention of powerful institutions. The Bill and Melinda T. Gates Foundation, the National Governors Association, and other national organizations are calling for smaller, themed institutions with more student participation in common work. Thomas Toch wrote a manifesto for the small schools movement in which he argued that most large high schools fail to “engender a strong sense of community.” Instead, they “tend to be intensely impersonal places.” The results include “alienation and apathy among students and teachers,” a pervasive anonymity that “saps students’ motivation to learn and teachers’ motivation to teach.”⁵⁶

The mean student population of American schools rose about fivefold between 1940 and 1970, and high schools of two thousand or more became common.⁵⁷ But the tide is turning. “New York City is phasing out large high schools and planning for 200 new small schools over the next five years. Chicago is planning 100. Los Angeles is converting 130 middle and high school campuses to smaller units.”⁵⁸ And so on across the country.

Early in the movement for high school reform (circa 2000), there was a lot of enthusiasm for simply reducing the average number of students per building. Evidence of impact was not especially compelling. The movement has shifted away from school size to other strategies. Without necessarily decreasing the student–teacher ratio, it is possible to make each teacher responsible for fewer students by assigning youth to clusters that stay together for several years and that continue with the same teaching staff. Schools can be connected more closely to external institutions such as universities, community colleges, museums, and major non-profits (also, more controversially, to churches). Schools can adopt curricular themes so that

everyone in the building has some common interest or frame of reference. (Examples of schoolwide themes include the environment, the U.S. Constitution, Africa, and health care.) Giving each school a curricular focus means that students and their families will exercise more choice among schools but less choice within schools, which will become inclusive communities. A common theme can be deliberated and contested, provoking meaningful conversations in a public voice.

The movement for high school reform has momentum and exemplifies one way to address the audience problem. High schools happen to be physical, local venues. I think that geographical communities remain important, because many of our interactions with one another and with governments occur at the local level. If our immediate geographical settings fail to be communities—as is the case in most high schools—then we lose our ability to engage in some important ways. As Friedland concludes, “place, the environment of action, not technology, is the critical element in civic and democratic participation.”⁵⁹ However, high school reform is an *example* of the broader claim that adolescents need communities and associations. Some valuable ties may be dispersed and virtual, not local and face-to-face.

Conclusion

Community-based, nonprofit youth media groups have developed an impressive body of experience and knowledge. The next step is to increase the scale of media work dramatically, which means offering more and better courses in schools. Given current policies, that will take rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental studies that show the impact of youth media work on outcomes that major institutions care about—not so much civic engagement as high school completion and preparation for college.

Meanwhile, as youth media work becomes more common in schools, it will be important to find responsive, engaged audiences for students’ products. Deliberately marketing students’ work and using new user-friendly formats (such as social-networking software) may help. But ultimately, schools will have to be restructured so that they function more like communities before youth media work is fully satisfying.

As a first step, it would be useful to study the ecology of youth media within different kinds of schools. Does a higher proportion of the student body seek youth-produced media in schools that are small and focused (as I hypothesize), or does school size make no difference? What are the effects of having a diverse or a homogeneous student population on media consumption? What are the apparent effects of academic tracking on students’ interest in one another’s work? Do digital media become means of connecting various peer groups and subcultures within schools, or do they reinforce divisions?

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