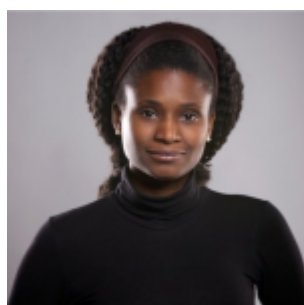


Youth and digital technology in Jamaica

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*There is great potential for digital media to address some of the problems faced by young people in Jamaica today, finds **Paula Laurel Jackson**. Paula is an independent researcher with a focus on creativity, peer-to-peer learning and digital media. As a result of her research with youth, she created a **skill and knowledge-sharing platform** for kids and her most recent work explores youth and childhood experiences to digital media in the Caribbean. [Header image credit: E. Parker, CC BY-NC 2.0]*

I set out to explore the relationship of young people to digital media in Jamaica, the largest English-speaking Caribbean Island. I also wanted to look into the role that parents play in navigating their children's digital media lives. So I sent out questionnaires to pupils and their parents/guardians, and interviewed high school pupils ages 10 through 16 from two schools in Kingston, Jamaica.

Digital media devices

Although Jamaica has significant income inequality, most young people, irrespective of their demographic, said that they owned a mobile phone. Mobile phone use on the island is high, at over 100%, indicating that there is more than one mobile phone per individual on the island. When asked about what devices they use most to go online, the majority said that they use their smartphones, because these give them greater freedom, flexibility and secrecy – all of which are important to them. When asked why secrecy is important to them, they mentioned that they wanted to have a space where their parents would have no control. The young people in the study also view their device as an essential part of their identity: “[My phone is] my life. It is an extension of myself”, as one participant put it.

Facebook, Instagram and YouTube

The pupils said that they spend most of their time on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. **There are just over 1 million Facebook users in Jamaica** (out of a population of **2.9 million**), with **current**

figures indicating that over one-third are under 24. The pupils mentioned that if they are not actively engaged with either Facebook or Instagram, they feel left out. One male pupil stated, “It is like you just do not exist in the world anywhere if you are not on FB [Facebook].” Facebook and Instagram offered the young people a chance to create their identity; as one female stated: “It gives me freedom to be and say what I really want to.”

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Most of the young people expressed great peer pressure to be active on Facebook, and felt that they had no choice if they wanted to be accepted by their peers, an observation that resonates with **Marcia Forbes’ research findings in a study investigating youth engagement in social media in the US, Trinidad, Dominica and Jamaica.**

The young people who were politically active mentioned that they use Facebook extensively to motivate other young people, who would normally not be accessible, in making decisions that would affect their future. Those who spend a lot of time on YouTube use it to see what other people are doing. They watch YouTube primarily for “inspiration”, for “laughs”, or for “watching other people play games and create things”. A third of the pupils spoke about being fascinated by “YouTubers”, those who have been able to create engaging content and who are earning money from it.

Content development as job creation

Unemployment on the island in 2015 was just over 13%, and unemployment among Jamaica’s young people is 33%. The young people in the study thought that a high-school degree or even a university degree was no longer a permit for a future job. They were very aware of the high and growing unemployment rate among young people. **The World Bank and the Jamaican government is addressing this issue by attempting to nourish creative and entrepreneurial talent among Jamaican youth.**

As a result of these initiatives, several young people, the boys in particular, spoke about wanting to use their creativity and talents towards creating an online enterprise. A few young Jamaicans have already started to produce **online enterprises, develop apps**, create entertainment/educational shows on YouTube and are earning a living from these activities. One of the respondents noted: “these Jamaicans are setting the stage and showing us what is possible by earning a living from their creativity and sharing it on the internet.”

Internet empowering young people to stay in Jamaica

Many pupils spoke about using technology to improve their social conditions at home in Jamaica. One respondent mentioned that “technology offers us a chance to become empowered, and now, instead of having to travel abroad to live a good lifestyle, I can stay here in Jamaica and try to improve living conditions here for my future and that of other future generations.” This is a stark change in ideology, as most young people have traditionally aimed at migrating to the US or UK as soon as they can, where they believe they can find better prospects for employment.

More parental support required

The main concern facing parents related to their lack of knowledge about digital media, and their corresponding lack of influence over their children’s digital media choices and usage. The majority of parents of those children under 12 felt that they had little control or influence over their children’s digital lives. They spoke about the need to restrict the time allowed to engage with digital media. Some mentioned that they felt the need to monitor and veto what their children were watching or doing. However, as the children got older, the parents feared that their influence would wane. As one parent expressed: “Digital media is so alien to me. My son lives on the internet and I feel as if he is in another planet. I don’t understand it. I do not know who he speaks with, what he does or even why. It is very disempowering for me as a parent and authority figure.”



This notion of disempowerment was expressed by many of the parents. The majority also felt a strong need to protect their children online, but were unaware of how to do so. (This feeling was also shared by the parents in Daniel Kardefelt-Winther's recent post about parental influence in Sweden.) Parents in Jamaica wanted to initiate a discussion, as Anthea Henderson suggested in another recent blog post, but several parents indicated that they were too embarrassed or ashamed to bring it up.

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This exploratory study indicates the great potential for digital media in addressing some of Jamaica's problems facing young people today. They are recognising that they could use digital media as a tool for empowerment. As far as their parents are concerned, however, they could do with a support system to help them understand the role that digital media plays in their children's lives. Establishing a platform for parents where they could perhaps, on an anonymous basis, seek assistance, could be helpful. This would mean that the parents could freely voice their concerns and ask questions without feeling ashamed at the lack of their knowledge.

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