

6 CREATIVE PRODUCTION

Lead Authors: Patricia G. Lange and Mizuko Ito

Two fourteen-year-old boys from the Washington, DC, area have an account on YouTube in which they post videos made by their own video-production company. Their videos often sport a personalized introduction in the form of their logo, written in LEGO building blocks, set ablaze by a lighter. One of the boys, Max, hopes to be a director or filmmaker and thought it was important to have a production company, since some of his favorite filmmakers, such as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, have production companies too. Max also has a number of friends who pitch in by acting in his videos, which are often put together quickly and spontaneously in the context of social activities. For instance, the boys became bored at a slumber party and felt inspired to make a horror film that was well received after they posted it on YouTube. In another instance, a simple outing with Max's mother at the beach turned into a YouTube sensation when he recorded her singing along to the Boyz II Men song playing through her headphones. She was unaware that people around her could hear her and had started to laugh. Max posted the video on YouTube and it attracted the attention of ABC's *Good Morning America*, on which the video eventually aired. In the two years since it was posted, the video has received more than 2 million views and more than 5,000 text comments, many of them expressing support. Max's work has also attracted attention from another media company, which approached him about the possibility of buying another of his videos for an online advertisement. He regularly receives fan mail and comments on his videos. This example illustrates the new possibilities that the Internet offers for kids to receive feedback not only from peers but also from media companies. The advent of this socially based, digital milieu means they can connect with large numbers of dispersed others and test wider reaction to their work.

Digital and online media are opening new avenues for young people to create and share media. Surveys conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life project indicate a rapid growth in what it describes as online “content creation,” particularly among youth (Lenhart et al. 2007). The growing availability of digital media-production tools, combined with sites where young people can post and discuss media works, has created a new media ecology that supports everyday media creation and sharing for kids engaged in creative production. Social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook, blogs, online journals, and media-sharing sites such as YouTube, deviant-ART, and FanFiction.net are all examples of sites that enable youth to post or repost content in the context of ongoing personal communication. Media educators are beginning to consider this new media ecology’s potential to reshape the conditions under which young people engage with media and culture, moving youth from positions as media consumers to more active media producers. In what Henry Jenkins (2006) and his colleagues have described as “participatory culture,” budding creators can develop their voices and identities as media creators through ongoing interaction with engaged peers and audiences (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins et al. 2006). Conversely, researchers also are concerned that the blurring of the boundaries between social communication and media production could degrade the standards of the latter. For example, Naomi Baron (2008, 6) asks, “Could it be that the more we write online, the *worse* writers we become?”

Drawing from a range of case studies, this chapter describes different modes of new media production that young people engage in, analyzing these practices in relation to learning and the development of skills and identities as media producers. We draw primarily from our case studies on youth media production by Dan Perkel (MySpace Profile Production), Dilan Mahendran (Hip-Hop Music Production), Patricia G. Lange (YouTube and Video Bloggers), Sonja Baumer (Self-Production through YouTube), Mizuko Ito (Anime Fans), and Becky Herr-Stephenson (Harry Potter Fandom). Discussion of game-related production is largely covered in chapter 5. The focus of this chapter is on the social processes of interest-driven genres of participation, but we also describe how kids get involved in messing around with new media through their more friendship-driven practices, and we draw from studies on the friendship-driven side to describe some of these dynamics. The interest-driven groups that are the

focus of this chapter tend not to be segregated by age, though all have strong youth participation. As with chapter 5, we include accounts by young adults who participate in these groups, and we draw on retrospective accounts of how they got involved in creative production. The chapter is organized as a progression from these messing around genres of participation toward deepening immersion in geeked out participation centered on creative production. We are not assuming that kids necessarily move in a linear fashion from hanging out, to messing around, to geeking out. In fact, kids will often move fluidly back and forth between these genres. Rather, we use this as an organizing heuristic to present the different genres of participation available to youth that involve digital media production.

After introducing our conceptual framework for production, new media, and learning, we begin our description with practices of everyday, personal media production—the creation and sharing of personal photos, videos, and online profiles. After describing a range of practices of media creation and sharing, we turn to a consideration of how young people transition to practices that they self-identify as “media production” and the creation of works that are circulated beyond personal networks. How do young people get started on practices such as video production and editing, web comics, or machinima? From there the chapter describes how young people improve on their craft in the context of digital media production and online exchange. What kind of creative communities and collaborations do youth engage in through the course of producing new media? What are the mechanisms they describe for how they improved their craft? And finally, how do they gain audiences and receive recognition and fame for their work? In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of our ethnographic findings for media education.

Creative Production in the Digital Age

What constitutes “creative work” is contested by scholars. The term traditionally has been used to describe “imaginative” or “expressive” work, where “expressive” refers to sharing aspects of the self (Sefton-Green 2000, 8). Our understanding of what constitutes creative production includes imaginative and expressive forms that are also shaped by kids’ individual choices and available media. The influx of digital media into everyday life is reshaping these understandings, particularly our assumptions about

the relation between media production and consumption. Media theorists have argued for decades that media “consumption” is not a passive act and that viewers and readers actively shape cultural meanings (Buckingham 2000; Dyson 1997; Eco 1979; Jenkins 1992; Kinder 1999; Radway 1984; Seiter 1999b). Contemporary interactive and networked media make this perspective difficult to ignore. Developments in the technology sector in the past decade have pushed this understanding into common parlance and consciousness. “Web 2.0,” “user-generated content,” “modding,” “prosumer,”¹ “pro-am,”² “remix culture”—these buzz words are all indicators of how creative production at the “consumer” layer is increasingly seen as a generative site of culture and knowledge. A decade ago, creating a personal webpage was considered an act of technical and creative virtuosity; today, the comparable practice of creating a MySpace profile is an unremarkable achievement for the majority of U.S. teens. As sites such as YouTube, Photobucket, and Flickr become established as fixtures of our media-viewing landscape, it is becoming commonplace for people to both post and view personal and amateur videos and photos online as part of their everyday media practice. In turn, these practices are reshaping our processes for self-expression, learning, and sociality.

In the case of young people, new media production is framed by ongoing debates about the appropriate role of media in young people’s lives. Our discourse about media and creativity is framed by a set of cultural distinctions between an active/creative or a passive/derivative mode of engaging with imagination and fantasy. Generally, practices that involve local production—creative writing, drawing, and performance—are considered more creative, agentive, and imaginative than practices that involve consumption of professionally or mass-produced media—watching television, playing video games, or even reading a book. In addition, we commonly make a distinction between active and passive media forms. One familiar argument is that visual media, in contrast to oral and print media, stifle creativity, because they do not require imaginative and intellectual work. Popular media, particularly television, have been blamed for the stifling of childhood imagination and initiative; in contrast to media such as music or drawing, television has often been demonized as a commercially driven, purely consumptive, and passive media form for children and youth.

Media educators have argued for critical engagement with television and other forms of commercial media, developing programs that teach youth

about the conditions under which media are created and revealing the ideological dimensions of popular media. In his review of media-education efforts, David Buckingham has described how media education has been turning more and more to programs that emphasize media production rather than relying exclusively on the “inoculation” approach to media education (Buckingham 2003). In the older inoculation approach, media education focused mostly on teaching kids to deconstruct texts so that they would not be adversely affected by violence or manipulated by deceptive commercial content (Bazalgette 1997; Hobbs 1998). In contrast, emerging youth media programs have been motivated by the belief that engaging in media production should be the cornerstone of media education and lead to youth empowerment through the development of self-expression (e.g., Chávez and Soep 2005; Goodman 2003; Hobbs 1998; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2004). These educators believe that shifting youth identity from that of a media consumer to a media producer is an important vehicle for developing youth voice, creativity, agency, and new forms of literacy in a media-saturated era. Compared to programs that focus on critical engagement, production-oriented programs are still relatively sparse in media education. In at least some contexts, however, there seems to be a growing recognition of their importance (Buckingham, Fraser, and Sefton-Green 2000).

Today, these long-standing debates about media, kids, and creativity are being reframed by the proliferation of new forms of digital media production and social media. What is unique about the current media ecology is that photos, videos, and music are closer at hand and more amenable to modification, remix, and circulation through online networks. In the past few years, it has become common for personal computers to ship with a basic kit of digital production tools that enable youth to manipulate music, photos, and video. In addition to the new genres of creative production that are being afforded by digital media-creation tools, we see networked publics as affording a fundamental shift in the context of how new media are created and shared; media works are now embedded in a public social ecology of ongoing communication (Russell et al. 2008). As is common when new media capabilities are introduced, it takes some time for literacy capacity to build and for people to come together around new genres of media and media participation that make use of these capabilities. Given that multimedia production tools have become mainstream as consumer

technologies only in the past decade, we are now at a transitional moment of interpretive flexibility with regard to literacy and genres associated with the creation of digital music, photos, and video. The practices that we describe in this chapter need to be situated as part of this transitional moment, when youth are experimenting with new digital cultural forms and, in interaction with adult mentors and parental guidance, are developing new forms of media literacy.

Judged by the standards of traditional media production, many new genres of digitally remixed derivative works would be considered inferior to original creations that did not rely on appropriation of content produced by others. Contrary to this view, Marsha Kinder points out the historical specificity of contemporary notions of creativity and originality. She suggests that children take up popular media in ways that were recognized as creative in other historical eras. "A child's reworking of material from mass media can be seen as a form of parody (in the eighteenth-century sense), or as a postmodernist form of pastiche, or as a form of Bakhtinian reenvoicement mediating between imitation and creativity" (1991, 60). In a similar vein, Anne Haas Dyson (1997) examines how elementary-school children mobilize mass-media characters within creative-writing exercises. Like Ellen Seiter (1999a), Dyson argues that commercial media provide the "common story material" for contemporary childhood, and that educators should acknowledge the mobilization of these materials as a form of literacy. These theorists point to the more socially embedded and relational dimensions of creative production that are in line with much of what we see proliferating on the Internet today.

Renee Hobbs (1998) describes how one of the central debates in the field today is the question of how central popular cultural texts should be used in media education. Although educational institutions have traditionally devalued popular culture, Buckingham, Fraser, and Sefton-Green (2000, 151) argue that students tend to learn a "great deal more from reworking forms with which they have greater familiarity and a personal engagement already." They argue that the most successful school-based media-production programs enable students to manipulate genres with which they are most familiar, to receive regular and frequent interaction with audiences (and knowledgeable peers), and to redraft and iterate their media production multiple times (Buckingham, Fraser, and Sefton-Green 2000, 151). In a similar vein, the New Media Literacy project, headed by Henry Jenkins

at MIT, is one example of a project that is building frameworks for incorporating popular culture practices and the aesthetics of remix into media-production programs.

These approaches are in line with a New Literacy Studies approach as described in the introduction to this book, seeing creativity as a process of not only creating original works but of recontextualizing and reinterpreting works in ways that are personally meaningful or meaningful in different social and cultural contexts. These approaches are efforts to bridge the more recreational practices and media literacy that kids are developing outside school with more formal and reflective educational efforts that center on media production. As with all efforts to bridge the boundaries between instructional programs and everyday peer-based youth culture, these translations are fraught with challenges. Even in educational programs that recognize the importance of new media literacy, educators struggle to develop frameworks for assessing and giving appropriate feedback on student work. Teachers tend to assume the media are “doing the work” when kids engage in critical, remix, and parodic forms of production that use elements from other media (Sefton-Green 2000). Teachers are also wary of media work that appears to be “too polished” or “suspiciously flashy,” particularly those genres with which kids are more familiar than teachers (Buckingham, Fraser, and Sefton-Green 2000).

These difficulties in translating recreational media engagement into school-based forms point to persistent tensions between peer-based learning dynamics and genres and those embedded in formal education. Educators have examined a wide range of topics relating to the tension between in-school and out-of-school forms of literacy (Bekerman, Burbules, and Silberman-Keller 2006; Hull and Shultz 2002a; Mahiri 2004; Nunes, Schliemann, and Carraher 1993); media literacy is somewhat unusual in that we are dealing with both an intergenerational tension (between adult authority and youth autonomy) and a tension between educational and entertainment content (Ito 2007). This chapter, to inform educational efforts in media education, is an effort to describe the kind of new media literacies and creative production practices that youth are developing in their peer-based social and cultural ecologies. Any effort to translate popular and recreational social and cultural forms into educational efforts needs to be informed by these youth-centered frames of reference. The peer-based learning genres we see in youth online participation differ in

some fundamental, structural ways from the social arrangements that kids find in schools. Simply mimicking genre or sharing an assessment dynamic is not sufficient to promote the forms of learning that youth are developing when they are given authority over their own learning and literacy in these domains.

In the sections to follow, we describe how young people are engaging in the production of digital music, images, and videos, and how these activities are contextualized in their everyday life-worlds. Digital media production is on its way to becoming a part of our everyday communication and online socialization, as well as an integral part of a diverse range of more geeked out forms of media engagement. Throughout our description, our goal is to describe the social, cultural, and technical contexts that motivate youth engagement with creative production and the networks of learning resources that help them improve their craft. These networks can vary from the more mainstream friendship-driven networks that support learning how to create a MySpace profile to the more specialized communities of interest centered on video production and remix. Although structured educational efforts can help fill this gap, successful youth producers in highly technical areas are generally driven by an ethic of being “self-taught” (Lange 2007b). They structure their learning as an integral part of their own individual passions for creating media, and they draw from a network of offline and online human resources and artifacts on an as-needed basis. We have found that in less technically driven areas, kids learn from peers through observation and informal questions situated within the context of social activities (such as making videos while on an outing or making a profile page while hanging out). Even among youth who are more technical and espouse an ethic of being self-taught, narratives of how they get started contain many references to peers, family, and other adult mentors who provided advice and encouragement in their media-production efforts.

When we turn to the geeked out production processes that youth are involved in, we see networked publics supporting interest-driven social relationships that are centered on creative production. We describe some of the cases we have seen of young people’s engaging in production collaborations, where, similar to what Becker (1982) observed in his study of art worlds, different participants develop specializations to contribute to the shared enterprise. Networked media add to the creative production

process by providing opportunities to circulate work to different publics and audiences and to receive feedback and recognition from these audiences. As we discuss in chapter 7, youth have been largely shut out from the skilled labor market, and this includes domains of creative production. Further, access to different kinds of public spaces and venues is also restricted for youth. These structural conditions are one reason why youth access to networked publics is potentially so transformative but also deeply challenging to our established modes of regulating and protecting youth. The current concern over how youth are circulating personal videos and photos in social network sites is inextricably tied to the more celebrated examples of how youth creative talent is flourishing online. By describing youth creative production in terms of the underlying dynamics of online participation in networked publics, we hope to provide a broader framework for these debates over youth expression and media engagement.

Everyday Media Production

We begin our description of different practices of creative production with a discussion of some of the most pervasive and everyday forms of media production that we have observed in our studies. Certain forms of digital-media creation, such as digital photography and online profile creation, are now commonplace among young people. Although youth who engage with these forms of media creation do not necessarily see themselves as “media producers,” they are often engaged in sophisticated forms of media creation. As described in chapter 2, the period from 2004 to 2007 saw widespread adoption of social media by teens, particularly social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Although the focus of participation on these sites has been the practices of friendship and intimacy described earlier in this book, one side effect of these friendship-driven practices is that many youth become involved in the production and social sharing of digital media. This involves the creation and customization of online profiles as well as the production and circulation of personal media such as photos and videos. Although home movies and personal photos have been part of youth culture for some time, possibilities for online sharing mean that these media have a new kind of social life within networked publics.

Personal Photos and Videos

The vast majority of photographs and videos are produced not from a creative impulse but to capture personally meaningful events and relationships. While the increasing availability of digital recording devices is a precondition for these forms of everyday media production, they are not themselves the driver of these practices. Digital photography and videotaping grow out of existing practices of self-archiving (such as journaling, scrapbooking, and keeping photograph albums) and are propelled by the growth in avenues to share these media with friends and family. Although our study did not focus on these forms of media production and sharing, we have seen indicators of the growth of digital photography and videotaping and its circulation online. In this sense our work supports the conclusions of other research in this area, which describes how the spread of digital cameras and camera phones has led to more ubiquitous forms of image capture and sharing (Koskinen, Kurvinen, and Lohtonen 2002; Ling and Julsrud 2005; Okabe and Ito 2006; Van House et al. 2005).

Interviews with youth who are active online are often peppered with references to digital photos they have taken and shared. In box 2.1, Katynka Martínez describes two sixteen-year-old girls and their practices of taking photos together and sharing photos through Photobucket. Many teens also view new media as “something to do” while they are hanging out with their friends. Flutestr, a white sixteen-year-old participant in Heather Horst’s study (Silicon Valley Families), described how she likes to kill time looking at pictures on her camera phone when she is hanging out with friends:

So I took pictures . . . I went to Vegas and I didn’t bring my camera because it runs out of batteries really quickly and it has no memory. We have to buy a memory card for it, but I kind of forgot it. So I had my cell phone so I took pictures of, like, the resorts and the casinos and stuff. And then that was really cool so I had them on there. And I have pictures of all my friends. Like, if I’m bored I’ll take out my camera and, like, try and play with it. So I use a camera phone a lot.

In another example, Alison, an eighteen-year-old video creator from Florida (who is of white and Asian descent) in Sonja Baumer’s study (Self-Production through YouTube), aspires to be a moviemaker. At the same time, she sees her videos as personal media.

I like watching my own videos after I’ve made them. I am the kind of person that likes to look back on memories and these videos are memories for me. They show

me the fun times I've had with my friends or the certain emotions I was feeling at that time. Watching my videos makes me feel happy because I like looking back on the past.

These forms of casual, personal media creation can lead to more sophisticated and engaged forms of media production. For example, Inertia,³ a twenty-four-year-old white male from England and an accomplished anime music video (AMV)⁴ creator, described in an IM interview how he first got involved in editing:

Inertia: Straight after finishing university I made a dozen little projects and music videos to camcorder footage, sometimes with anime music, but hadn't really tried with actual AMV footage still. . . . I used to just film everything . . . like a real first year photography student or something . . . anything funny or memorable I'd try to film it.

Rachel: So how did you learn to edit then?

Inertia: It was bad, sooo bad most of it should never see the light of day . . . but i still edited it into music videos to remind us of the fun we'd had over the years. i learnt by trying really . . . first time I picked up an editor was just before I got into anime, but I couldn't do much. I literally would just take home movie stuff, put it together, cut out bad bits, and save. (Ito, Anime Fans)

These cases demonstrate how the increasing availability of digital media-creation tools opens avenues for young people to pick up media production as part of their everyday creative activity. Although the practices of everyday photo and video making are familiar, the ties to digital distribution and more sophisticated forms of editing and modification open up a new set of possibilities for youth creative production. Digital media help scaffold a transition from hanging out genres to messing around with more creative dimensions of photo and video creation (and vice versa).

Sharing Personal Media

One of the primary drivers of personal media creation is sharing this media with others. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the ways in which the traffic in media and practices such as profile creation is embedded within a social ecology, where the creation and sharing of media is a friendship-driven set of practices. Online sites for storing and circulating personal media are facilitating a growing set of options for sharing. Youth do not need to carry

around photo albums to share photos with their friends and family; a MySpace profile or a camera phone will do the trick. Consider the following two observations by Dan Perkel (*The Social Dynamics of Media Production*) in an after-school computer center:

Many of the kids had started to arrive early every day and would use the computers and hang out with each other. While some kids were playing games or doing other things, Shantel and Tiffany (two apparently African-American female teenagers roughly fifteen to sixteen years old from a low-income district in San Francisco) were sitting at two computers, separated by a third one between them that no one was using. They were both on MySpace. I heard Shantel talking out loud about looking at pictures of her baby nephew on MySpace. I am fairly sure she was showing these pictures to Tiffany. Then, she pulled out her phone and called her sister and started talking about the pictures.

This scene Perkel describes is an example of the role that photos archived on sites such as MySpace play in the everyday lives of youth. Shantel can pull up her photos from any Internet-connected computer to share casually with her friends, much as researchers have documented that youth do with camera phones (Okabe and Ito 2006). The fact that photos about one's life are readily available in social contexts means that visual media become more deeply embedded in the everyday communication of young people. In this next example from Perkel's study (*MySpace Profile Production*), we get a glimpse into how young people take and modify photos with this social sharing in mind.

I sat down next to Janice (a teenager roughly fourteen to fifteen years old who appeared to be African-American), who was on one of the computers at [the center]. I saw her on Yahoo! Mail dragging photos from her email to the desktop of one of the [center's] computers. She told me that she had been to [the] Stonestown mall in San Francisco with her cousin and had taken pictures. One of them was over her mock kissing a mirror and later I would see this picture as her profile picture on MySpace. Another picture had some special effects. She told me that she had done this at the Apple Store. Then, she proceeded to upload them to her MySpace account, though I noticed that it took her several attempts. The story here is that she took the photographs in one location, used Yahoo! as a way to move her pictures around from different locations, took advantage of the Apple Store to do some creative editing to at least one of the pictures, and then finally used [the center] as a place to upload them to her MySpace profile.

The case that Perkel describes is particularly notable in how Janice mobilizes multiple infrastructures to create photos to share on MySpace: taking

digital photos at an outing with a cousin, modding photos at an Apple Store, and finally use of the community center to upload photos to the Internet using Yahoo! and MySpace. In her one of her studies (Pico Union Community Center), Katynka Martínez also documents how youth see online photo-sharing sites as a way to share photographic records of their everyday lives, and how they often develop highly sophisticated strategies for authoring and sharing. Martínez conducted diary studies in which kids documented their everyday media use. Stephanie, a sixteen-year-old Latina of Colombian and Irish descent, said that one of her best friends takes her camera to school every day. “Sometimes we’ll be like . . . she will tell me or I’ll tell her, ‘Straighten your hair,’ or I’ll tell her, ‘Straighten your hair.’ So we’ll straighten our hair and then we’ll be like, ‘Okay. We’re gonna take pictures tomorrow for MySpace.’” Stephanie shared her Photobucket account with Martínez, showed her hundreds of photos that she has saved, and explained that she will do searches on media and topics that interest her and save the photos she likes. Her close friends share their Photobucket passwords, and they go on to each other’s accounts to view photos they’ve found online as well as photos they’ve taken. This case is described in more detail in box 2.1.

These stories from our case studies provide a window onto how digital media are reshaping long-standing practices of personal photography. Young people take photographs with opportunities for near-term social sharing in mind. Then they mobilize a suite of different technologies to modify and circulate those photos, creating new opportunities for this visual media to enter the stream of everyday conversation and sharing.

Profiles

Just as the sharing of photos and videos online is blurring the boundary between personal communication and creative production, online profile creation also lies in the boundary between hanging out and messing around genres of participation. Profile modification is most pervasive on MySpace; other sites such as Facebook, Blogger, LiveJournal, deviantART, or YouTube also enable members to create custom profile pages. As teens create their profiles, and post and link on their own profiles and their friends’ profiles, they are engaged in acts of social communication and everyday media sharing and “consumption” that also entail creating their own digital media. In several of our studies, we have had a chance

to both watch the process of profile creation, sometimes through the course of several weeks or months, and also discuss the profile-creation process with teenagers, many of whom created profiles on MySpace. These observations provide a window onto how youth engage with profile creation as a form of creative production embedded in their everyday social relations.

Perkel (2008) describes the importance of copying and pasting code in the process of MySpace profile creation, a practice in which youth will appropriate media and code from other sites to create their individual profiles. He characterizes MySpace profile creation as a process of “copy and paste” literacy, in which youth appropriate media and code from other sites to create their individual profiles. Although this form of creative production may appear purely derivative, young people see their profiles as expressions of their personal identities. Some youth described how one of the main draws of MySpace was not just that this was the site that their friends were already using, but that the site seemed to allow a great deal more customization than other sites. Carlos, a seventeen-year-old Latino high-school senior from a low-income neighborhood in northern California, for example, described how his cousins sold him on the site because it was a site where he could put up “all your pictures, change the background, and customize it and do all that.” This chance to not just go online and be social but also to make something excited Jacob, a seventeen-year-old African-American high-school senior, who noted, “It was tight. I was like—this is real. It’s the only website where you can actually come up with your own stuff” (Perkel, *MySpace Profile Production*).

This ability to customize gives youth freedom in defining layout, media, colors, music, and the like, but this also involves a certain amount of technical complexity. For most of the cases that we documented, at least one other person was almost always directly involved in creating kids’ profiles. When asked about this, common responses were that a sibling, a cousin, or a friend showed them how to do it. In their research, Judd Antin, Christo Sims, and Dan Perkel (*The Social Dynamics of Media Production*) watched in one after-school program as people would call out asking for help and others would come around doing it for them (literally taking the mouse and pushing the buttons) or guiding them through the process. In an interview at a different site, Carlos told Perkel that he had

initially found the whole profile-making process “confusing” and that he had used some free time in a Saturday program at school to ask different people to help him. Then later, when he knew what he was doing, he had shown his cousin how to add backgrounds. He said he had explained to her that “you can just look around here and pick whichever you want and just tell me when you’re finished and I’ll get it for you.” The story about Jacob in box 6.1 provides an example of how he “got one of his girls to do it.”

Box 6.1 “MySpace Is Universal”: Creative Production in a Trajectory of Participation

Dan Perkel

I interviewed Jacob, a seventeen-year-old African-American, on a Saturday morning at a technology program run out of a school in the East Bay city of Richmond, California. A community leader at the site said that the school was in an area of town where all of the “drive-bys” and the “shootings” happened. As the community leader surveyed the room of twenty to thirty high-schoolers sitting at rows of computers, some typing, some browsing the web, others talking loudly, he compared the program to that of a flower struggling to grow out of a concrete wall. While there were a lot of “brown versus black” problems in the community, he said, everyone in the program was working together.

Jacob, unlike most of the other kids in the Saturday program, did not attend that high school. A woman from another community center, whom he called his “job-finder lady,” had suggested that he come to the program to see if there was a job for him or some way to get paid to be there. That had not yet panned out. But at the time of the interview, it was his fourth week at the program, which he said “just looks like a club or something.” While he still felt a bit of an outsider, he was having fun and had even stayed there until late in the evening the week before. Among other things, being there gave him another opportunity to work with computers, something that was becoming more and more important to his life and career aspirations.

Like many kids we talked to for this project, Jacob had a MySpace profile that served as a communications hub. He used it to keep in touch with the friends he left in Atlanta when he moved to the East Bay the summer before. He also used it to talk to other friends he did not see every day and to follow up with girls he met at parties. But unlike many of the kids who were observed elsewhere or interviewed at that site, Jacob was trying to design MySpace layouts, using the HTML and CSS (cascading style sheets) code that translates

into the background colors, borders, fonts, and other design elements of a MySpace profile.

Jacob traced his own interest in web design to when he had been introduced to digital media creation for a fifth-grade class assignment. He learned how to use the software in ways that the other students did not. By the time he was in high school he surprised another teacher who, after giving a Power Point assignment, had assumed that he would not do very well (he admits to having frequently fallen asleep in class because he was often bored). Jacob described this initial experience of mastery, and the recognition of it by his teacher and others, as an important part of his background in engaging with web design and MySpace.

Besides attending the Saturday program, Jacob also had been participating in a program at his own high school. Because that program was “too cramped,” he was part of a group that stayed after school, but this did not seem to bother him as he had access to computers and software that he did not have anywhere else. The list of “nice programs” he mentioned included Photoshop, Flash, Dreamweaver, Fireworks, and others. He had access to all the things “you need to [build] any kind of website, or any kind of project or picture.” The current session of the technology program had moved on from doing web design, but the teachers still let him hang out after school and work on his projects: “By my own will, not because somebody is telling me.”

By the time he had started web design at his after-school program, he had been introduced to MySpace. He was excited about the site, especially because it gave him an opportunity to customize it: “It was tight. I was like—this is real. It’s the only website where you can actually come up with your own stuff.” At first, he “didn’t know nothing about HTML” and had to get help making his profile. Jacob said that at first, like other kids described in this chapter, he did not know how to copy and paste the code to change the background or how to add videos and music. He would call up the girl who introduced him to MySpace. She would call friends of hers, and they would guide him through the process or sometimes log in to his account and change things for him. But once he moved to California and realized that they could still get into his account, he changed the password. He did not change his layout because he still did not know how to do it. In some ways, Jacob’s depiction of himself at this point is of someone more dependent on the help of others than were other people we talked to about their use of MySpace. But Jacob eventually realized that even others who have learned how to change a profile do not know how to modify the code or the layouts they get from other people, a point expressed in other discussions with teenagers: “And that’s what they do, just take it. All these websites . . . even the girls, they don’t understand HTML. But they know how to get it from somebody else.”

It was his after-school program in high school that led him to make the connections between web design and the bits of code that people use to change MySpace layouts. During his interview, Jacob said that he was in the middle of working on his first one. The layout on his site, though, came from another source of inspiration, a girl he had found on MySpace who made layouts for others to use. He said he does not talk to her, but he uses her layouts and now knows how to change them and modify them if there is something he does not like:

I'm just taking her designs and editing it my own self, putting my own little two cents in. The design itself is good, but I might want it a different color. And once I get it that different color that I want then I'm going to post it on there.

While acknowledging that other people know how to get pieces of code, he also set himself apart by noting that he knew something else that may lead to other opportunities. For example, the girl whose MySpace layouts he had been using and modifying is advertising her layouts on her profile. He speculated that she was probably making money on her activity.

It seemed that Jacob was considering if and how he could get paid to do the same thing. In fact, he had a job interview for UPS back in Atlanta doing web design and was considering it, but he felt conflicted about the location:

It's the UPS headquarters and the man said you have a job here if you do this design and finish school. And I was like, "I can do that. But . . . but how long . . . I'm young." "Don't matter; I'm the boss, I can do whatever I want. If I want to employ you, it don't matter how young you are as long as you pass high school. It don't matter." So I was like, "Cool, cool; I might just do that."

In his view, MySpace provided him another option, especially if he could follow the model of the girl who designed his layouts. He saw MySpace as a site where he could do the kind of creative work he wanted to do and reach anyone he might want to:

It's connected to almost everybody. . . . I mean, anybody around California you can probably get connected through MySpace. It's like not one person in the United States you can't get connected to, unless they don't have one. But now? Everybody has one. From the oldest people to the youngest people have a MySpace now. They might not use it, but they got one. So that's the point. MySpace is universal.

MySpace, to Jacob, is a universal connector to friends in the area and across the country. But it is also a universal space to display his emerging creative design skills, which he sees as an opportunity for the future.

Although most youth did rely on others for help in creating their profiles, we did find some youth who were able to figure things out without the help of a more knowledgeable peer. For example, Federico, a seventeen-year-old Mexican American high-school senior from the East Bay area of northern California (Perkel, MySpace Profile Production), stated:

I was like going through websites trying to look for backgrounds and stuff. Oh, how do I put this, and where do I put it? And how do I copy it and stuff? Because I pretty much didn't know nothing about computers. But then after that I was like . . . I started clicking buttons and looking at stuff. I'm like—okay, remember this place and site. And then I keep messing up and it looks all weird. Then after that days went by and then I started learning little by little how to do it. But it was hard.

What people ended up putting on their profiles was usually not the result of planning and careful consideration, but of whatever they happened to see while making or revisiting their profiles. In many cases, teens may initially work on a profile and largely leave it as is except for some minor modifications later. For instance, danah boyd (Teen Sociality in Networked Publics) spoke with Shean, a seventeen-year-old black male from Los Angeles, who said, "I'm not a big fan of changing my background and all that. I would change mine probably every four months or three months. As long as I keep in touch with my friends or whatever, I don't really care about how it looks as long as it's, like, there." In some cases, boyd also observed, teens created a MySpace profile as a way to relieve boredom.

This approach toward tinkering and messing around is typical of the process through which profiles are made and modified. Some of the people we interviewed talked about just putting up on their profiles material that was humorous. Carlos described his profile almost in terms of a collection of images and things he had found. Pointing at the various images on the screen, he noted: "I got Six Flags and the fat little kid. Got this dude and that girl. Got Itchy and Scratch [from *The Simpsons*]." When Dan Perkel (MySpace Profile Production) asked him to describe his process of finding things and deciding to put them on his profile, Carlos corrected him:

I pretty much don't . . . I just go to a certain website and if it looks like it has a lot of funny stuff I just go through that whole page and if I find something I like I just copy, paste it, and put it there. And I won't save it or nothing; I'll just keep on going through the website and copy and paste until I got anything I want. And from there I just save it. And if it looks good, it looks good. If it doesn't, I still keep it the same.

For youth who saw online profiles primarily as personal social spaces, this casual approach to their profiles was typical, and they tended not to update them with much frequency, or only when they grew tired of one. Nick, a sixteen-year-old male from Los Angeles who is of black and Native American descent, told danah boyd (*Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*),

That's the main time I have fun—when I'm just putting new pictures and new backgrounds on my page. I do that once every couple of months because sometimes it gets real boring. I'll be on one page. I'll log on to my profile and see the same picture every time. I'm, man, I'm gonna do something new.

For most youth, profile creation is a casual activity in defining a personal webpage and graphic identity, pieced together with found materials on the Internet. This is a form of messing around that can provide some initial introductions to how to manipulate online digital media.

We found that personal media creation was often a starting point for broadening media production into other forms, a transition between hanging out, friendship-driven genres of participation and messing around and geeking out. As kids shared personal media such as posting videos or sharing fanfic they often connected with others in ways that encouraged them to increase production and broaden participation in communities of interest, both online and off. By creating profiles and creating, modifying, and sharing visual media, youth are developing visual and media literacy in ways that are driven by their desire to participate in friendship-driven practices. We now turn to a discussion of how kids transition from messing around with new media production to more geeked out modes, describing cases that illustrate the broad range of engagement kids have with making media, developing skills, and making social connections.

Getting Started

Personal media creation and sharing can be understood as a jumping-off point for entry into more challenging forms of creative production. Just as casual tinkering with videos or photos can lead to a more abiding interest in digital media production, social network sites can be a vehicle for youth to experiment with having public profiles as creative producers. In our interviews with young media creators, we have collected many accounts of how they got started in media production. These narratives often begin with a story of how they were “playing around” with media devices that

were available to them, and then they move on to a story about how they picked up more advanced skills in media production. Often they reference being inspired by a particular media work or creator in deciding to pursue their own productions. One eighteen-year-old Brazilian editor, Gepetto,⁵ describes this trajectory, beginning with the first time he saw an AMV. His friend had given him a CD with some anime episodes, and there was an AMV on it as filler. “I was amazed at the idea that such a pretty little video clip was made by a fan just like me. . . . I was really affected by the video. I put it on loop and watched it several times in a row.” He went on to make his own video soon after seeing this first AMV. “My first video took about two and a half hours to make and it turned out extremely horrible. But I loved it.” The key here is that beginning editors see AMVs as inspiring and impressive but also something that they can aspire to, something made by “a fan just like me” (Ito, *Anime Fans*). Amateur media provide a more accessible model than professional media do, and a community of available peers to start kids off in creative production.

Unlike those in many other forms of specialized practice, experts in information technology often emphasize that they picked up their skills outside of formal training and instruction. Members of technical hierarchies pride themselves on being self-taught—learning how to manipulate code, technical devices, and networked forms of distribution on their own (Lange 2003, 2007b). The media creators we interviewed often reflected these values by describing how they were largely self-taught, even though they might also describe the help they received from online and offline resources, peers, parents, and even teachers. Portelli (1991) notes that exploring these tensions is particularly useful because they represent the realm of desire and what interviewees wish to convey in terms of identities of expertise and appropriate participation in technical, social groups. For example, one successful web comics writer, SnafuDave⁶, whom Mizuko Ito (*Anime Fans*) interviewed said: “Basically, I had to self-teach myself, even though I was going to school for digital media . . . school’s more valuable for me to have . . . a time frame where I could learn on my own” (see box 7.1). Despite his adoption of “self-taught” discourse, SnafuDave nonetheless described learning to use Photoshop, Flash, and Illustrator by making use of online tutorials and a network of graphic artists he met online. When makers describe themselves as self-taught, they are generally referring to the fact that they did not receive formal instruction,

and they will acknowledge various sources of help they turned to to get started.

Adults are not simply bystanders to their children's expert technical creative endeavors; we found a number of cases in which parents and educators played an important role in influencing their children's involvement with media, either by providing resources; introducing kids to genres, software, or sites; or by working in collaboration with kids. One group of successful young YouTube video makers talked about how their uncle had a cable television show, which they eventually inherited. The boys described themselves as able to figure out technical aspects of video making on their own, but they acknowledge that they helped each other out and originally learned from their dad. A sixteen-year-old white girl from New York named Ashley, who wishes to be a filmmaker, noted, "I learned to use the camera just by playing around with it, and I used an editing program on my mom's iMac computer." As described in box 6.2, Ashley also revealed a number of ways in which her mother helped her learn how to make good videos. Many youth also described how school projects in video making provided the impetus for them to get started in video production. After-school programs and community centers also provide spaces where kids could mess around and learn about creative production with knowledgeable adults and peers. Despite the centrality of self-directed learning in young people's stories of how they got started in video production, successful entry into production is enabled by a wide range of social and technical resources that support as-needed help and learning. What self-motivated youth require to pursue these interests is not so much a formal instructional setting as access to wide-ranging sources of expertise.

Box 6.2 All in the Family

Patricia G. Lange

A mother and daughter named Lola and Ashley have a series of shows on YouTube. Ashley is a sixteen-year-old white girl who characterizes herself as a "future filmmaker" on her YouTube page. From New York, the mother-daughter team summarizes and provides commentary about current reality-TV shows. They first learned about YouTube through a television show that reviews and comments on television. Contrary to the idea that YouTube replaces television, the mother-daughter team's discussions and critiques

heavily draw on material from shows such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *Beauty and the Geek*, and *Top Chef*, to name just a few of their preferred topics. Their body of work is impressive; they've made more than two hundred videos together since they first established their account in the fall of 2006. To achieve a kind of recognizable branding, their videos share certain consistent features. For instance, they always sit in front of a graphic with the name of the show they are discussing in their video. Lola sits on the viewer's left-hand side and Ashley on the right (see figures 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3). Their banter is unique to them yet comfortably familiar to many people who may recognize the sense of fun and friendship their videos convey.

The following transcript is excerpted from their recap of the season premiere of *Top Chef Chicago*, which is a television show in which there is a weekly challenge or contest to make a certain dish. The challenge for that week's episode required each chef-contestant to make a deep-dish pizza. Lola and Ashley provided some personal observations on the episode:

Lola: They need to each re-create a signature deep-dish pizza.

Ashley: And they have ninety minutes to do it.

Lola: Poor Stephanie; she cut her finger in the first thirty seconds.

Ashley: [rolls her eyes] The girl is a bundle of nerves!

Lola: I know.

Ashley: She was like [grabs her finger and shudders], "Aaah!"

Lola: Well, they were all workin' pretty damn hard on their pizzas.

Ashley: [nods]

Lola: At the end, there was a lot of pizzas getting stuck in those pans.

Ashley: Some broke-down pizzas!

Lola: Yeah, and I think Richard actually used two; was it Richard who used two pans?

Ashley: I think so.

Lola: Andrew had to use a cast-iron skillet to make his.

Ashley: They only had enough pans so that each person could have one.

Lola: Well, there was a lot of doughy, bready pizzas because if you're not used to working with deep-dish pizzas you don't really realize how much that shizz is going to rise.

Ashley: It was like that pizza-bread stuff that you get from . . .

Lola: Focaccia.

Ashley: Yeah. That stuff is good! That's not what they were asking for!

Lola got started making videos on YouTube because her daughter expressed an interest in going to film school and pursuing a career in film or communications. Ashley persuaded Lola to help her and be a part of her video-making experiences. Reluctant at first, Lola agreed to help her daughter pursue her goals. Lola is now a key part of a video-making production team



Figure 6.1

Lola and Ashley recap *Top Chef*. Screen capture by Patricia G. Lange, 2008.



Figure 6.2

Lola and Ashley review *Beauty and the Geek*. Screen capture by Patricia G. Lange, 2008.



Figure 6.3

Lola and Ashley discuss *Big Brother*. Screen capture by Patricia G. Lange, 2008.

that is gaining popularity on YouTube. Between the time of their interview in May 2007 and August 2008, they gained more than 1,900 subscribers and more than 140,000 views of their YouTube channel page (which is YouTube's equivalent of the MySpace profile page). One of their fans has even done compilations of their reviews and commentary. For Lola, the purpose of their YouTube presence is to help her daughter build a portfolio that will help her pursue her career goals and enhance her already impressive scholastic record. They hope Ashley will obtain a scholarship to a prestigious college that they could otherwise not afford. Notably, Lola sees their joint video making not only as a means to an end but also as a way to stay close to her daughter and be involved in her life. Setting very few limits on her computer time, Lola stays regularly involved in Ashley's online activities. Ashley is comfortable sharing the account with her mother. As she put it, "I would never put anything up that my mom doesn't approve of and I have nothing to hide anyway." Lola emphasizes her interest in having a close relationship with her daughter through video making. Lola said:

I wanted to be involved with my kids but I think it's more important that the kids want the parents to be involved. [Because] I've seen other parents . . . my mom doesn't understand the type of relationship I have with my kids and she's like, "I'm gonna get you some software so that you can spy on your kids when they're on the Internet." And I'm like, "I don't have to do that. I know exactly where they are because I'm with them."

[So] I feel sorry for the people who have to have a relationship like that with their kids where the kids feel like they have to sneak around behind the parents' back and they don't know what's going on. So I thought that was important. So that's probably another reason why I wanted to do the videos with [my daughter] because, you know, I wanted to stay involved.

Ashley characterizes both of her parents as very technical, with formal educational training in computers and related technical subjects. She also has close relatives who have degrees in film. Ashley's home environment is filled with computers; each child has his or her own and there are some to spare. Ashley reports that their living room alone has four computers. The house is also well networked. Ashley has learned a lot about computers and video by playing around with cameras and editing software. She also describes how her mom teaches her good video-making techniques, such as keeping things short and avoiding too many transitions. They characterize themselves as "best friends," and Ashley trusts her mother's advice and is grateful to have a second opinion. They often watch their videos and those of other video makers on YouTube to improve their technique.

Lola and Ashley like watching television. Their process involves watching shows they like and taking notes about what they would like to say. After Ashley finishes her homework they set up the camera, even if it is after 11:00 p.m. because they think consistency is important. Lola can do the editing quickly, but she often encourages Ashley to practice so she can gain more experience. Lola now characterizes Ashley as more proficient, having picked up computer-related skills quickly. Their goal is generally to put up a video once per week, although quality is more important than meeting a weekly deadline. Ashley said, "I would like to post at least once a week but I'd rather have fewer good-quality videos than a lot of bad ones which were hastily made."

After the video is posted, Ashley works to promote the videos by networking with other people on YouTube, posting bulletins on MySpace, and alerting friends via instant messaging. She often subscribes to popular YouTubers so that other people will see her channel icon and potentially check out her work. Ashley is on YouTube every few hours during the day, although she does not watch videos at school. When she logs on to YouTube, she checks the number of views on her videos and then checks for comments and new subscribers or Friend requests. As a rule, she agrees to automatically accept Friend requests because her major purpose on YouTube is to network to promote her work. After checking for new Friend requests, she then looks to see if the people she has subscribed to have new videos, and then she examines favorite categories, such as "animation" and "pets and animals." Lola also finds herself frequently checking their account. She spends hours a day on the site. She characterized herself as "hooked" and she joked that her daughter tells her she has a "sickness."

Unlike many other YouTubers, Ashley has very little interest in meeting other YouTubers in person. For her the site is more of a way to achieve future goals. Yet, like many YouTubers, she also enjoys watching videos. Her most memorable moments involve encountering enjoyable videos from some of her favorite video makers. For Ashley, “The best thing about YouTube is that there is always something to watch no matter what you like. The worst thing is that you will never be able to see everything you want to see because it’s just too immense.” Some of Lola’s most memorable moments also revolve around favorite videos—and she appreciates that YouTube is widely accessible. For Lola, one of YouTube’s biggest weaknesses and strengths is that it is free and therefore available to anyone. The site contains a lot of “any old garbage” as well as fun videos. More important, it gives a range of video makers such as themselves—or as they say, “average people” with “real opinions”—an opportunity to express themselves and promote their work.

Specialization and Collaboration

As young people begin to develop their expertise in creative production, they often also work to develop a unique voice and specialty. Unlike schools, which might ask young people to perform to more standardized forms of achievement, recreational settings provide opportunities for youth to develop more targeted expertise and delve into esoteric and niche domains of knowledge. For example, Gepetto, introduced earlier, turned to the online community of AMV editors for more specialized knowledge of editing. Although he managed to interest a few of his local friends in AMV making, none of them took to it to the extent that he did. He relies heavily on the networked community of editors as sources of knowledge and expertise and for models to aspire to. In fact, in his local community he is now known as a video expert by both his peers and adults. After seeing his AMV work, one of his high-school teachers asked him to teach a video workshop to younger students. He joked that “even though I know nothing, [to my local community] I am the Greater God of video editing.” The development of his identity and competence as a video editor would not have been fully supported within his local community; it was the networked relations mediated by the Internet that led to ongoing peer-based learning and specialization.

Attention to specialized and esoteric knowledge is characteristic of all fandoms, but it is even more accentuated in highly technical fan practices such as machinima, video editing, music making, and fansubbing.

Certain forms of media creation often involve collaboration between different specialties. In describing youth hip-hop creation, Dilan Mahendran (Hip-Hop Music Production) notes how youth develop targeted specialty crafts, such as beat making (Mahendran 2007). Beats are instrumental works created on Reason or other software. For many students at his DJ project, “making beats” was a primary practice. Beat making is a specialty craft that requires an enormous dedication of time if one is to become proficient, and only a couple of the students Mahendran observed mastered this craft at this amateur level. The beat is elemental to a rap song and aspiring rappers want original authentic beats to set themselves off from other rappers. The practice for beginning rappers is to use commercial beats that they sample from CDs of well-known rappers such as Jay-Z or Kanye West, but after they begin to hone their craft they often demand custom beats that they may help produce. Beats are highly valued works that accomplished rappers will seek original versions of.

Mahendran’s work, as detailed in box 6.3, highlights the dynamic interplay between specialization and collaboration and the ways in which consumption, fandom, media connoisseurship, and remix are stepping-stones to developing voice and an identity as a member of a creative elite. Hip-hop is a particularly important case, in that it was a genre of music that was ahead of the curve in terms of developing styles of sampling and remix, as well as being grounded within very active amateur production communities where youth develop creative identities and competencies. Within different media and genres of creative production, becoming a creator entails developing either a specialized role in collaborative forms of production, or a signature style that marks an individualized voice. For example, within the fandom surrounding anime, there is a wide range of fan productions, varying from the more individualized mode of fan fiction writing or AMV creation to more collaborative modes such as fansubbing, in which subtitles are added to anime and which require working together as a tight-knit team.

Box 6.3 Making Music Together**Dilan Mahendran**

Mistreat was almost nineteen in the summer of 2005 when she joined the Rap Project in the Mission District of San Francisco (see figure 6.4). Mistreat had moved from El Salvador to the Mission District with her mother, father, and brother when she was ten years old. Years later, she came to participate in a ten-week introduction to hip-hop class being offered that summer in the Mission. Mistreat had never rapped or made music before but she had become a deep listener of hip-hop and rap music. She had not always listened



Figure 6.4

Mistreat rapping in the San Francisco MC Competition. Photo courtesy of www.Uthtv.com, 2006.

to hip-hop, though. In grade school she listened to *salsa romantica* and Latin artists such as Marc Anthony, music that was popular with girls in her home country of El Salvador. In middle school she listened to mainstream hip-hop and R&B such as *NSYNC and 98 Degrees. When she hit high school most other students were into hip-hop, particularly artists such as Messy Marv and San Quinn from the local Bay Area Hyphy⁷ music scene. Hip-hop was the music she related to because of its rough edge and its rejection of warm and fuzzy love music. Mistreat wrote often about her life and experience coming to San Francisco and figuring out how she could fit into the teenage scene in junior high and high school.

There was plenty to write about: home life, school life, and friends. So when she came to the Rap Project she had a quite a bit of content about everyday matters, which she prodigiously transformed into rap lyrics. Mistreat's first attempt at recording was masterful. It was hard to believe that she had never rapped before nor had previous experience in a recording booth. It was clear that she was a virtuoso and a rare talent. She had a rapid-fire style of rapping that would twist the tongues of most mortals. More important, she had a unique voice that was readily distinguishable from the luminary rappers that she most tried to emulate. She sounded like no one else; she was authentically herself when she rapped. This was rare for most of the rappers who came out of the Rap Project, because as they began rapping they tried to emulate their favorite rappers in tone and style, although some did eventually develop their own voices. Most others who began emulating Jay-Z or Lil Wayne, for example, often continued this mimicry and never got to the next level.

A major pedagogical component of the Rap Project introductory classes was the pairing up of students to work on songs together. Though collaboration was a part of the structure of the class, the pairing up of students was a more organic process and not directly organized by the instructors. Mistreat quickly linked up with Young Mic, another very eager rapper who wrote lyrics prolifically. Young Mic, a nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican, grew up in the African-American San Francisco neighborhood of Lakeside. Young Mic would come each day two hours early with notebooks full of writing. Like Mistreat, he wrote extensively before finding rap as a mode of expression. Young Mic began his personal narrative writing while in the county jail for burglary. One of the other inmates had suggested that he should rap to those stories he wrote. Young Mic said he was kind of surprised when the inmate told him that, because he too had never rapped before, even though he had listened to hip-hop since middle school.

Both Mistreat and Young Mic were inseparable in open-studio time and during classes. They were the most avid of all the students in the areas of rapping and recording. Unlike other students in the class, both Mistreat and Young Mic were determined to become rappers. During the ten-week class,

Young Mic recorded twenty-four of his own songs, several of which ended up on the class's final album, much to the chagrin of some of the other students. Young Mic gave frequent advice to Mistreat, who seemed to see herself as a novice compared to him. They shared ideas on lyric writing and how to improve lyrical flow and cadence. Young Mic often used beats from established rappers such as Jay-Z or Kanye West. Mistreat was willing to work with other students and rap to the beats that they were working on in the studio. Mistreat asked another student named Johnny Quest, a sixteen-year-old African-American who lived in Pittsburgh, California (an hour drive from the Mission), to make a beat for a song that she had been working on. Johnny Quest was an avid sampler and he sampled tracks from the sound track of the movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) to compose a deep meditative beat for her.

Mistreat's collaboration with Johnny Quest was as much about his unique beats as about including Johnny Quest in the making of the class final album. Because Johnny Quest did not show any interest in rapping, he felt a bit marginalized by the others. Some of the other students who focused on rapping and song making were a bit reluctant to use the beginner beats of other students because the commercially available beats that they sampled were more highly produced. This did not deter Mistreat from using Johnny Quest's beats for a production track on the final class album.

Though the digital technological environment in the studio affords incredible power to individuals to control their own production from beginning to end, it seemed an impossibility to produce a song without the concerted help of others. Each of the students developed special skills, whether in rapping, beat making, or producing final songs. The songs that students loved the most were often songs in which either two or more students rapped on the track or one rapped and another sang the chorus. Though some students enjoyed the camaraderie of coming to the after-school program, most were passionate about making music. Music as the goal of these students' attention was significantly different from the notion of hanging out. Music brought these students together and in some cases, such as the ones described here, close friendships bloomed.

In the case of fansubbing, established groups generally have formal tests and trial periods before admitting a new member, and there is a high degree of specialization within each production team as well as in the community overall. Each fansub group has a "raw provider," who collects the original episode in Japanese; a translator; an editor; a timer, who times the length of time the subtitles should be on screen; a typesetter; an

encoder; and usually several quality checkers, who review the final episodes. Although many fansubbers experiment with different roles in a group, they usually have a specialty around which they build their reputations. For example, one encoder described how initially he was attracted to the specialty because of the depth of knowledge that he could pursue within an expert community. "It just got interesting because other encoders were like, 'Here are some tips and tricks.' . . . There were so many tricks in how to handle that stuff that it got pretty interesting." Mastering esoteric knowledge becomes a source of status and reputation. After gaining this status as an expert, a subber will find that his or her services are in great demand in the tight-knit community.

In her study of YouTube video makers and video bloggers (YouTube and Video Bloggers), Patricia Lange found that video production, especially those that spring from video as a form of social activity among offline friends, often relies on the coordination of several individuals who gravitate toward specialized roles within a group. Lange found that in such groups of friends, roles such as director or editor were not particularly fluid. Interviews indicated that friends recruited to be actors did not always express the desire nor did they achieve the mentoring to shift into other aspects of informal video production. Rather, one or at most two people in a small video-making group usually stood out as recognized experts among their local peers in school or in social activities, and it was these individuals, Lange found, who often contributed more intensely to the final product. A production group in many of the genres Lange studied, such as informal comedy sketch and video blogging, emerged from peer groups of friends who get together to make videos. While everyone might contribute by acting and perhaps providing improvised dialogue, not everyone directs and edits. Other members may or may not be encouraged to experiment with taking on new roles. A select few often have the interests and abilities to guide the efforts of a loosely collaborative local group of friends who make movies together as an expression and extension of friendship rather than because all individuals have an equal interest in future video making at the professional level.

Another form of collaboration that online video makers engage in is the "collab" video, in which a maker will collect video from other video creators. In these cases, sometimes well-known or even famous YouTubers may lend footage or become actors or participants in someone else's

montage or video compilation. In addition, youth video makers may also attend meet-ups and interview their favorite YouTube personalities. The youth then edit together the videos in ways that show their perspective and interpretation of attending events. In these scenarios, the youth have control over the videos. YouTube celebrities or participants that a kid may respect because of their popularity or technical video-making ability are not in positions of authority or mentorship, but rather they are contributors to the kid's vision. These dynamics show that online spaces such as YouTube and blogs, and real-life gatherings such as meet-ups, provide opportunities for youth to interact with adults as peers, moving out of the age-segregated contexts of the school.

In the case of media production that requires multiple forms of expertise, collaboration is an integral part of the production process. Digital media and networks enable kids to decompose bits of the production process and coordinate their work through a variety of online tools. The current media ecology represents a convergence of a range of social and technical capabilities—the ability to share rich media online, greater processing power in personal computers, accessible video- and image-editing tools, and social media sites—that enable these forms of collaborative creation. We saw the growth of amateur, collaborative digital media production first in music (Russell et al. 2008); now these arrangements are being produced in video making. Through these collaborative arrangements, kids develop close partnerships and friendships and gain opportunities to learn from others with different forms of knowledge and expertise.

Improving the Craft

Creative communities that are organized online provide sources of help, expertise, and collaborative partners as well as a context where creators can get feedback from audiences and fellow creators. We found that trajectories of improvement varied across individual producers and different communities of interest, but in all cases, there were mechanisms in place for creators to learn from one another. Some groups had hierarchical structures, recognized standards, and specific mechanisms for distributing feedback. Others had a more unstructured organization, varying or minimal standards, and more informal mechanisms for providing peer-to-peer advice and assistance.

Certain online sites become a focal point for peer-based learning, sharing, feedback, reviews, and competitions that push young people to improve their craft. Sites such as YouTube, deviantART, and after-school media programs give kids access to peers and experts in the areas of interest to them. It enables access to people who are uniquely placed to evaluate their particular media creation or contribution in ways that people outside a narrow area of specialization could not appreciate. Online sites provide both hard-coded and social mechanisms that enable participants to share their work as well as engage in related commentary and discourse. For example, animemusicvideos.org has numerous mechanisms for feedback and reviews, including discussion forums, simple ratings, competitions, top video lists, and templates for doing full reviews of videos. **AbsoluteDestiny**⁸ (a white twenty-seven-year-old), one of the most well-known editors in the community, describes to Mizuko Ito (Anime Fans) how he initially created AMVs in relative isolation, until he discovered what AMV editors fondly call “the org.”

AbsoluteDestiny: I wasn’t really being influenced by other communities until I went online for AMVs and found this whole other community already going on. A lot of the work really pushed the boundaries in terms of effort and editing and the kind of level you would go to in order to create effects. It was much more than I had done, and it became a bit of a challenge to see if I could extend my own work to bring it up to that standard.

Mizuko: How did you get famous?

AbsoluteDestiny: It was slow at first. At first I joined the community, asked for feedback, didn’t really get any, and discovered that the way to become noticed and to get feedback on your own works was to give feedback to other people. There’s a lot of mutual back rubbing going on, and we would do feedback swaps. I would say OK, I’ll give you my thoughts on your video if you’d give me your thoughts on mine. By doing that, and by being very active, just having your name out and about, really really helps. . . . So I would leave feedback on quite well known creators and lesser known creators, and just getting into chat conversations on forums with these people, getting to know them. . . . When it finally came about that I made a video that actually did something that people might notice, which was the *Shameless Rock* video, was quite a departure for me. . . . So then

because people knew me, but didn't really know my work, they would watch my video and then they would say, "Oh my god, there is this really great video out there that AbsoluteDestiny has done. Go and see it." And I was essentially an overnight success.

In addition to the org, AMV creators also meet up at anime conventions, which participants call "cons," and these meet-ups often define the elite core of the AMV world. For example, the Anime Weekend Atlanta (AWA) convention is widely known to be the central con for the AMV scene, and there will be a dinner meet-up of more than a hundred creators to kick things off. At most cons, the AMV editors will be hanging out in the screening room or the hotel-lobby bar, exchanging opinions about work, or as Darius,⁹ a twenty-four-year-old African-American editor, described, "And they'd talk about some other works or—or whatever. Not even their works, but just 'Hey, what's up. How you doing? This is damn good Jack Daniel's.'" Both AMVs and fansubbing are specialized practices relying on deep knowledge of cult media. Creators appreciate feedback from other creators or well-informed members of their public, and they think that there are certain creative standards that have been established by their tight-knit community. The reciprocity between different creators is an important dimension of how learning works in these communities; the core participants occupy the roles of creator, viewer, and critic. For example, fansubbers have ongoing debates about what constitutes quality work, and fansub comparison sites will conduct detailed comparisons of the quality of translation, encoding, editing, and typesetting between competing groups.

These peer evaluation mechanisms are in play in online writing communities as well. In C. J. Pascoe's "Living Digital" study, the case of Clarissa, a seventeen-year-old white female from California, is an example of how this dynamic operates with online creative writing. The role-playing board¹⁰ she participates in is a tight-knit creative community intent on maintaining quality standards. To participate in the board, writers must craft extensive character descriptions and formally apply for admission. Clarissa described how she receives ongoing and substantive feedback from other participants on the site, and she does the same for her peers (Pascoe 2007b). For her story, see box 1.3. In the case of fan fiction, writers and readers have a range of sites that they can go to. As is the case with orangefizzy, a thirteen-year-old Asian-American female from

California, recommendations and social networking play a large part in decisions related to where they read and publish fan fiction (Herr-Stephenson, Harry Potter Fandom).

Becky: Where do you read fanfic?

orangefizzy: at harrypotterfanfiction.com [HPFF] and fictionalley.org [FA].

Becky: and have you published your writing there too?

orangefizzy: not on FA, but on HPFF.

Becky: why did you choose those sites?

orangefizzy: i don't remember why i chose them to begin with looking on FA because it's bigger. I like HPFF, though, because it's small and is not full of people who like to write Snape/Hermione doing extremely x rated things.

Becky: why did you choose to publish on HPFF and not FA?

orangefizzy: because HPFF's forums has more of a "community we all know each other" feeling to it than FA, which is huge. and since i talked to the HPFF people, i preferred to put my work in their archives.

The social aspects of fan fiction communities can be important influences on how readers and writers interact with texts. For example, many communities have norms defining what is and is not appropriate feedback. At times, however, and particularly in larger communities, readers do not always provide what writers perceive as valuable feedback, as ChoMalfoy, a seventeen-year-old female originally from China and now living in Canada, mentioned in her interview (Herr-Stephenson, Harry Potter Fandom):

Becky: you mentioned that you used to write a little bit . . . did you share the stuff you wrote?

ChoMalfoy: Yes. On FanFiction.net and FictionAlley and my LJ [Live Journal].

Becky: did you get a lot of feedback on your pieces?

ChoMalfoy: Yeah, a reasonable amount.

Becky: did it impact your writing at all?

ChoMalfoy: No, the thing with reviews on fanfiction . . . people don't usually do constructive criticism. Mostly, it's encouragement/expressing desire for the author to hurry up with the next chapter.

In other communities, critical feedback is provided by “beta readers,” who read fics before they are published and give suggestions on style, plot, and grammar. The relationships between writers and beta readers vary greatly depending on the situation and the people involved, and the expectations for beta readers differ between different sites. Describing her (quite different) relationships with her beta reader and the writer for whom she reads, orangefizzy said: “. . . yeah. i have a beta, and beta for another person. my beta is my best online friend, but i haven’t heard from the girl i beta for in MONTHS. i need to poke her soon, see that she hasn’t died.”

Not all creative groups have a tight-knit community with established standards. YouTube, for example, functions more as an open aggregator of a wide range of video-production genres and communities, and the standards for participation and commentary differ according to the goals of particular video makers and social groups. Although some creative works are targeted for small niche groups, other youth creators we have spoken to wish to take advantage of opportunities to connect with a wide set of dispersed, similarly interested people in order to maximize the potential for receiving feedback, recognition, and critique for their work. Critique and feedback can take many forms, including posted comments on a site that displays works, private message exchanges, offers to collaborate, invitations to join other creators’ social groups, and promotion from other members of an interest-oriented group. On YouTube a famous video maker might give a “shout-out” or mention another creator’s work he or she admires. Even in the most competitive environments, the collaboration of other participants as promoters is often crucial to determining the critical and popular success of certain works. Viewers and fans who are often producers themselves rate, comment, and promote certain works over others.

In both the more tight-knit niche communities and more open sites such as YouTube, creators distinguished between productive and unproductive feedback. Simple five-star rating schemes, while useful in boosting ranking and visibility, were not valued as mechanisms for actually improving one’s craft. Fansubbers generally thought that their audience had little understanding of what constituted a quality fansub and would take seriously only the evaluation of fellow producers. Similarly, AMV creators play down rankings and competition results based on “viewers choice.” The perception among creators is that many videos win if they use popular anime as

source material, regardless of the merits of the editing. In the YouTube world, many participants are concerned about “haters,” or people who leave mean-spirited, discriminatory, or hurtful comments containing images of violence or death. While creators disliked these comments, they did not necessarily think that they should be restricted or excluded from the site. A number of youth creators also mentioned that they deliberately refuse to remove even hurtful comments posted on their pages as a way of showing their support for free speech online (Lange 2007a).

In contrast to these attitudes toward audience feedback, a comment from a respected fellow creator carries a great deal of weight. Darius, the twenty-four-year-old African-American mentioned earlier (Ito, *Anime Fans*), described some of the challenges he had in getting people to view and comment on his videos, but he was deeply appreciative when one fellow editor did give him feedback on his work.

And so somebody finally watched it at AWA, and was, like, oh, different concept, but it was a pretty cool video. Not necessarily award winning, but it was cool. I can watch it. I was, like, oh, okay. Thank you. I finally got somebody to tell me that, that much. But, like, you know, sometimes trying to get feedback on some of these things is like pulling teeth.

These moments, when young people get validation for their work from a peer, are important stepping-stones to developing an identity as a media creator. While some youth eschew the critiques as less useful because they are telling them what they already know, others highly value finding recognition and acceptance from peers for their work, even when they must endure hurtful commentary or harsh criticism from others. As Frank, a white fifteen-year-old male from Ohio on YouTube, stated, “But then even when you get one good comment, that makes up for fifty mean comments, ‘cause it’s just the fact of knowing that someone else out there liked your videos and stuff, and it doesn’t really matter about everyone else that’s criticized you” (Lange, *YouTube and Video Bloggers*). Edric, a rapper in Dilan Mahendran’s study (*Hip-Hop Music Production*), is a nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican male who was born and grew up in San Francisco. He described the moment when he first stepped into the recording booth and received some recognition from fellow artists.

So I went into the booth. And I was nervous. It took me two times to finally get my words right. And finally I got my words right and did this song. And everyone was like, “Man, that was nice. I liked that.” And I was like, for real? I was like, I

appreciate that. And ever since then I've just been stuck to writing, developing my style . . .

Almost all creators bounce their ideas off fellow creators and ask specifically for feedback on their work. For example, in his work studying after-school video programs, Dan Perkel (*The Social Dynamics of Media Production*) observed how Nina (a twelve-year-old girl from a low-income neighborhood in northern California who appeared to be African-American) used LiveType to make a title for a video. After she made a title for her group's show, a few of her other team members came around, happened to see it, and showed their appreciation. One of the boys got very excited upon seeing it and the girl beamed proudly.

This type of ongoing feedback and communication among fellow creators and informed critics is one of the primary mechanisms through which creators improve their craft after their entry into a creative practice. Youth media programs, such as those described by Mahendran and Perkel, can provide the contexts for this kind of peer-based evaluation to happen. Other youth turn to online forums and interest-based communities, with their corresponding infrastructures of meet-ups and screenings. Through these ongoing exchanges, creators develop a sense of shared creative standards, genre conventions, and new forms of literacy. These social practices of evaluation, standard setting, and reputation building, well established in professional art worlds, are now being taken up by a larger swath of amateurs engaged in digital media production and online sharing.

Gaining Audience

Although audiences are not always seen as the best sources of critical feedback, most creators do seek visibility for their works, even if it is with relatively small groups of friends, families, or peers. The desire for sharing, visibility, and reputation is a powerful driver for creative production in the online world. While fellow creators provide the feedback that improves the craft, audiences provide the recognition and validation of the work that is highly motivational.

Although sharing is a motivator for most kinds of media creation we have observed, the boundaries that kids put on the sharing vary by kids and media type. For personal media, though youth may post publicly to

sites such as MySpace or YouTube, the work generally is not intended to be circulated beyond friends and family. Many budding media creators also decide to share with only a small group. For example, several fan fiction writers in Mizuko Ito's *Anime fans study* wrote extensively but shared their writing with only their close friends. In some cases, people produce works for themselves and use their online creative-production spaces as personal sketchbooks in which they can experiment with things. Finally, our study has also identified a number of kids and youth who are reluctant to publicly share their materials. Keke, a sixteen-year-old black female from Los Angeles in danah boyd's study (*Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*), described conflicting desires to become a music producer and her reluctance and shyness at sharing her work:

danah: So what about writing? What do you write about?

Keke: I write about global warming and the war on Iraq, and I also write songs. I want to be a music producer when I grow up. I do a lot of music. Me and my best friend, London, we do a lot of music. We got a lot of songs that we've written together. So, yeah.

danah: So what do you do when you've written these things? Do you share them with anyone?

Keke: No. They're just . . . 'cause I'm real shy. For my music, I'm real shy. I don't know. I've just been shy. But every time I . . . 'cause I rap, so when I've rapped and stuff, people tell me I'm real good. I'm still shy, but I don't share none of the stuff I write about with other people 'cause some of it is real personal, 'cause I write a lot of stuff about my brother, who died, yeah.

danah: Do you think you'll ever share what you write?

Keke: Nope, never [laughs]. Never will I share it, 'cause everybody I hang out with . . . they don't really pay attention to stuff like I do. Like, I watch the news like it's a channel . . . if I am on the Internet, I'm looking up homeland security, stuff like that.

Young people struggle over their sense of confidence and safety about sharing their work to wider audiences. As creators get more confident and involved in their work, however, they generally will seek out audiences, and the online environment provides a vehicle for publishing and circulation of their work. In Dilan Mahendran's study (*Hip-Hop Music Production*), the more ambitious musicians would use a MySpace Music template as a way to develop profiles that situate them as musicians rather than a stan-

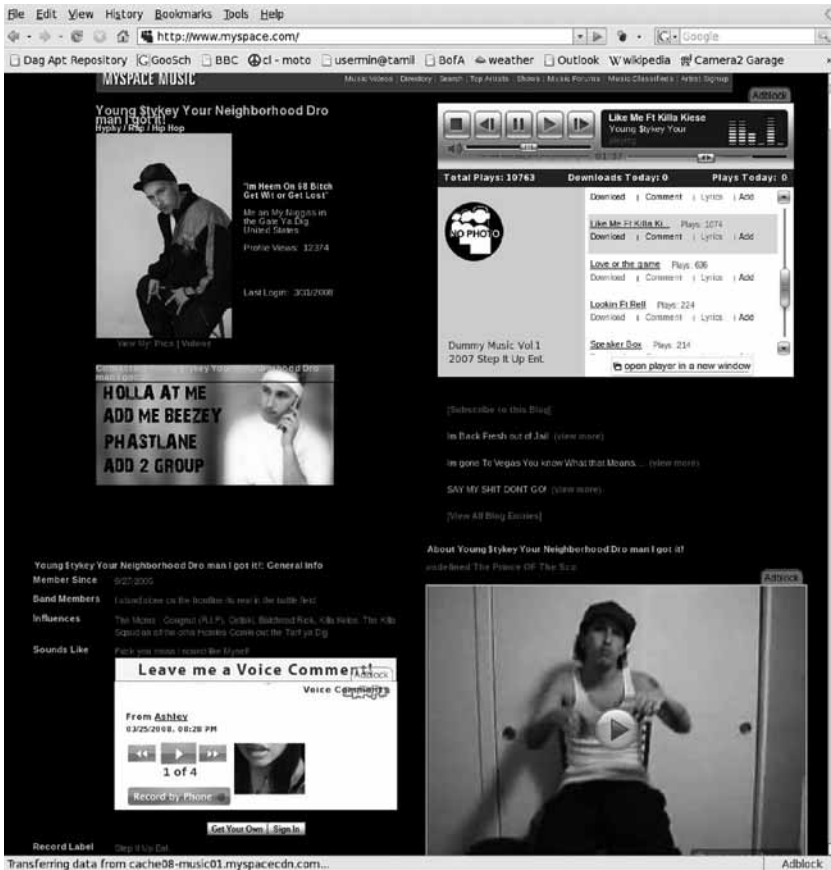


Figure 6.5

An example of a MySpace Music profile. Reprinted with permission from Young MIC. Screen capture by Dilan Mahendran, 2006.

ard teen personal profile (see figure 6.5). Similarly, video makers who seek broader audiences gravitate toward YouTube as a site to gain visibility.

More specialized video communities, such as those who do AMVs or live-action vidding,¹¹ will often avoid general-purpose video-sharing sites such as YouTube because they are not targeted to audiences who are well informed about their genres of media. In fact, on the forums on the org, any instance of the term “YouTube” is automatically censored. Even within these specialized groups, however, creators do seek visibility. One AMV creator in Mizuko Ito’s “Anime Fans” study, Xstylus¹² (a white twenty-

eight-year-old), described the moment when his video was shown at Anime Expo (AX), the largest anime convention in the United States:

It was replayed again to an even-more-packed house during Masquerade, AX's most popular event. Never had I ever seen so many people laugh so hard in my entire life. The only people who could ever come close to experiencing such a feeling are Hollywood directors having won an Academy Award for Best Picture. It was the finest, greatest, most moving moment of my entire existence. Nothing will ever top it. Ever.

XStylus received recognition for his work in the context of a formal competition organized by the convention. Most major anime conventions now will include an AMV competition in which the winning works are showcased, in addition to providing venues for fan artists to display and sell their work. The young hip-hop artists Dilan Mahendran spoke to also participated in musical competitions that gave them visibility, particularly if they went home with awards. Even fansubbers who insist that quality and respect among peers are more important than download numbers will admit that they do track the numbers. As one subber in Ito's study described, "Deep down inside, every fansubber wants to have their work watched, and a high amount of viewers causes them some kind of joy whether they express it or not." Fansub groups generally make their "trackers," which record the number of downloads, public on their sites.

Similarly, on YouTube, people have access to "view counts" of particular videos, although these are generally regarded as unreliable (YouTube was sometimes slow and inconsistent in updating them) and easily manipulated (by makers who can create automated refresh programs to reload the video and make it appear as though it is being viewed widely). For youth producers who wish to professionalize or maintain an advanced-amateur status in which they can partner with YouTube, numbers of views and comments are used as a rough metric for granting partnership and promoting their work. Another metric involves the number of "subscribers" that a person on YouTube has. Being a subscriber of someone on YouTube means that you will be alerted (usually via email) when he or she posts new videos. Some YouTubers participate in a kind of "sub-for-sub" reciprocity in which a video maker subscribes to someone else with the expectation or hope that the subscription will be reciprocated. However, many people actively resist this assumption and prefer to subscribe only when content interests them.

Reciprocity agreements and friendships can greatly assist one's visibility. One interviewee in Mizuko Ito's anime study (*Anime Fans*), SnafuDave (see box 7.1), is a successful web comics creator who hosts a site for his own comics and the comics of several other artists. He described that as he was getting started, the friendships he made with other established artists were instrumental in his gaining audience. Some of these artists ended up using his site to publish their work, which "was a really big pull." Others would mention his site in their own postings, which would also drive audience to his site. He also places advertisements for his site on other established web comics sites. In this case, he generally pays for the advertising, even though there is often a spirit of reciprocity within the web comics world. "I try to pay for all of my advertising, just because I know, say, if they do give me that spot, then they're losing money by not selling it to someone else." In addition to these forms of ad placements, he visits conventions around the country to promote his work and sell related merchandise.

Youth such as SnafuDave who are able to reach wide audiences can parlay their creative work into future careers. Even in the case of youth who stay within recreational and amateur domains of creative production, the ability to connect with audiences is a key part of what drives their participation and learning in creative production. The ability of digital networked media to create new publics and audiences for amateur work is one of the most transformative dimensions of contemporary new media. The ability to define new collectivities and niche publics for culture and knowledge has been the subject of much writing on contemporary digital culture (Anderson 2006; Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006; Shirky 2008; Varnelis 2008). Examining media production provides a window onto how these dynamics are operating in the everyday lives of youth.

Aspirational Trajectories

In most cases, young people who create digital media are not aspiring to be professionals or to get famous through their creative work. They engage in digital media production as a social activity, a fun extracurricular hobby, or maybe even a serious lifelong one. Most of the dominant forms of fan production—fan fiction, video remix, amateur comics—are not commercially viable. Even older fans who do professional-quality work and who have a substantial following in the fandom generally have no professional or commercial aspirations in the area and have day jobs that are not related

to their creative hobbies. For example, doki¹³ (a white thirty-two-year-old), one of the leaders of the AMV world, describes himself as “a game designer by day, AMV creator by night.” Another anime fan, Scottanime¹⁴ (a white thirty-one-year-old), spends almost all his time off from being a mail carrier organizing anime conventions (Ito, Anime Fans). Even though these activities may not result in economic or vocational outcomes, participants in amateur media creation work hard to improve their craft, and they get tremendous validation from their creative communities and audiences for a job well done. Some researchers refer to a category of creators as “proteurs,” or “people who have gained recognition as professionals for their hobbies even if they don’t have relevant professional certificates or degrees” (Faulkner and Melican 2007, 53). As discussed in box 6.4, several groups of youth podcasters have achieved recognition for their achievements from fans and from major corporations such as Scholastic (the U.S. publisher of the Harry Potter book series) and Warner Brothers (the studio that produces the films).

Box 6.4 **Spoiler Alert:** Harry Potter Podcasting as Collaborative Production

Becky Herr-Stephenson

Sitting on the floor of a crowded annex of a Los Angeles bookstore, I am just one of nearly two hundred people waiting for an event to start. To my right, a mother and son talk about a theory on time travel. Behind me, a teenage girl scribbles furiously in a well-worn notebook. All around, excited conversation ebbs and flows, at times becoming uncomfortably loud. One can only imagine what the other bookstore patrons are thinking. This place has often served as a quiet space for a cup of tea and a new book; that is certainly not the experience available today. When the event starts, the audience cheers for a group of people making their way to the small stage. It is not a prolific author, nor a band, nor a popular public speaker that we are there to see—it is a group of regular (if geeky) people who have become BNFs (big-name fans) for recording podcasts about Harry Potter. But one would never know that if she were just wandering by the annex on the way to the travel guides section.

Since the publication of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* nearly ten years ago, Harry Potter fans have adopted a variety of technologies for sharing writing, facilitating discussion, creating artwork and computer graphics, and producing audio and video. Podcasting, the production of audio files for

download via RSS (really simple syndication), emerged as a popular genre of fan production in August 2005. At the height of the “Summer of Potter,” July 2007, more than thirty podcasts were in active production. Podcasting seems a natural fit for this technology-savvy fandom, which has expertly migrated many longtime elements of fandom (including sharing information, media production, and social networking) to online spaces, opening the fandom to geographically diffuse and generationally diverse groups of fans. Podcasting allows for ongoing analysis of canon materials and in-depth, sustained commentary on fans’ consumption and production practices, discussions that do not necessarily have a home within other forms of fan production.

Harry Potter podcasts take on a variety of formats, but most contain the same basic elements: news updates, literary analysis and theory building, and commentary on other media within the franchise, such as the films, sound tracks, merchandising, and video games. Some shows focus on a specific interest—such as fan fiction or “Wizard Rock” music, while others focus on a particular character or relationship within the books.

Podcast production can vary from an individual who hosts, records, edits, and publishes the show by herself to a group with a hierarchical organization similar to small video-production collectives or independent bands. In most cases, podcasts are run by a small team of hosts. The hosts prepare a rundown or outline for each episode, usually working with collaboration and communication tools such as instant messaging, Skype conference calls, and Google Docs, which allow simultaneous collaborative editing of texts. Email and phone contact (voice and texting) also frequently play a role in some of the necessary microcoordination around a podcast recording. In addition to the discussion among the hosts, podcasts frequently feature segments recorded by correspondents or specialists in a particular aspect of fandom that are “rolled in” between host discussions. One podcaster, a white nineteen-year-old from Illinois, emphasized the importance of opening the production to contributors aside from the hosts. He said, “The main focus of [our show] is to give other people a chance to be podcasters . . . we want to give them an opportunity to be a podcaster. The first thing we decided was that anyone who wants to be a guest host can be on the show.” Since the technological demands for recording a podcast are relatively low, and because there is no need for the hosts to be colocated for recording, it is possible to open up the production process in this way.

Equally important as segment contributors and guest hosts, a third element to Harry Potter podcasts (and podcasting in general) is general audience participation. Shows frequently have voice-mail services where listeners can call in and record questions and comments that are played during the show. Alternatively, some podcasts solicit audience feedback via email, and the hosts read and respond to those comments. The audience participation in podcast-

ing is similar to that of talk-radio programs, but it also reflects the value placed on accessibility, dialogue, and blurring boundaries between producer and consumer that are characteristic of online creative production.

Production does not end with recording. In addition to editing the audio, podcasters must navigate distribution and publicity channels. Unlike mainstream media, in which a separate entity generally would handle the distribution and marketing of a program, podcasters (and most other amateur producers) need to make decisions about the venues in which they will publish and promote their shows. For many podcasts, the first step is creating a show webpage. The show page acts as home base for the show and provides information about the podcast and links to download episodes. Other venues for publication of the show feeds include online music retailers such as iTunes, podcast aggregators such as podcastalley.com, or social network sites such as MySpace. Within the fandom, cross-promotion and linking are a regular practice, as fans tend to exist within small “neighborhoods” of sites that cater to their particular interests and favorite practices. It is not unusual to find out about new episodes of a podcast through one’s Friend list on LiveJournal, a MySpace bulletin, or a Friend’s Facebook status update before the episode is available on iTunes.

In some cases, promotion extends beyond the fan community. Two podcasts made of geographically dispersed, teenage and mixed-age adults are particularly noteworthy. They are associated with large fan sites that have achieved notoriety within the fandom as well as recognition by corporations such as Scholastic (the U.S. publisher of the series) and Warner Brothers (the studio that produces the films). These two podcasts have produced weekly episodes (with few exceptions) for more than two years, and they continue to put out new episodes even after the final book was released on July 21, 2007. One unique element of these shows is that they regularly record live podcasts at events such as fan conferences, book releases, movie premieres, and occasionally, just because they happen to be traveling together for another event. To support the costs of production (bandwidth, software, on-site production, travel, etc.), both shows feature advertisements in the episodes and on their websites. In a manner very similar to early radio and television, episodes start with advertisements for the shows’ sponsors, which vary from website hosting services to major chain booksellers.

Several popular Harry Potter podcasts are winding down production since the release of the last book, releasing sporadic special episodes rather than weekly or monthly episodes. At the same time, some podcasters are beginning to experiment with video podcasts and live streaming technologies. It is a moment of transition for this type of production, just as it is for the fandom as a whole. Harry has grown up and defeated the Dark Lord, and fans, who still have much to say, are looking to new forms of production for expression.

Although aspirations for creative production are quite varied, we have observed a category of children and youth who have plans to become media professionals. These individuals see their creative production as a means to train themselves, improve technical skills, gain visibility and reputation, and develop relevant contacts in appropriate arenas. In some cases, parents lend support to their children's endeavors by helping to provide material and emotional infrastructures that enable them to develop their skills and visibility. In other cases, parents are involved much more directly in children's career paths by participating and coproducing the media productions. For example, as box 6.2 describes, a sixteen-year-old girl, who calls herself a "future filmmaker" on YouTube, and her mother make and post videos to build the daughter's résumé and help her gain the skills that will enable her to become accepted in appropriate media-oriented educational programs.

In most cases, children who express interest in becoming professionals are not necessarily sure which role in media, such as being a director or editor, they wish to take up. Some of them plan to major in artistic or related disciplines in college. A few kids and youth we have spoken to did not necessarily start out with particular plans to pursue media careers, but they found broad success in their communities of interest and changed their majors or started to consider media as a potential career. In his research in after-school video programs (*The Social Dynamics of Media Production*), for example, Dan Perkel found that several participants planned to pursue media-related careers. However, he stated that it was difficult to tell to what extent participation in the after-school program stimulated this interest or if it was part of a deep prior interest. We have found that hierarchies of recognition and technical specialization often develop among youth in local peer groups and in schools. For example, we observed some experienced youth video makers being asked to contribute to school activities by holding workshops or creating videos to advertise or document school events. Regardless of how many of these kids actually will be able to go on to pursue careers as video makers, we have seen many instances of kids who begin in the amateur space but eventually aspire to a professional track.

In addition to providing new avenues for professionalization, new-media distribution affords different aspirational trajectories. By linking "long tail" (Anderson 2006) niche audiences, online media-sharing sites make amateur-

and youth-created content visible to other creators. Aspiring creators do not need to look exclusively to professional and commercial works for models of how to pursue their craft. Young people can begin by modeling more accessible and amateur forms of creative production. Even if they end there, with practices that never turn toward professionalism, they still can gain status, validation, and reputation within specific creative communities and smaller audiences. The ability to specialize, tailor one's message and voice, and communicate with small publics is facilitated by the growing availability of diverse and niche networked publics. Gaining reputation as a rapper within the exclusive community of Bay Area Hyphy hip-hop, being recognized as a great character writer on a particular role-playing board, or being known as the best comedic AMV editor for a particular anime series are all examples of fame and reputation within specialized communities of interest. These aspirational trajectories do not necessarily resolve into a vision of making it big or becoming famous within the mode of established commercial media production. Yet they still enable young people to gain validation, recognition, and audience for their creative works and to hone their craft within groups of like-minded and expert peers. Gaining recognition in these niche and amateur groups means validation of creative work in the here and now without having to wait for rewards in a far-flung and uncertain future in creative production.

In terms of discourses of fame, some producers straightforwardly claimed they sought fame and widespread recognition for their work. However, others eschewed connections to fame, which is a construct that often is laden with ideological baggage and negative connotations. For example, a group of older male teen producers from California on YouTube (who had won a festival prize for their work) expressed frustration that some of the most famous youth contributors to the site created work that they saw as subpar, uncreative, and not particularly technical (Lange, YouTube and Video Bloggers). Fame is often discussed as a relational construct in which a person who may be considered famous by certain measures denies being as famous as another producer or media maker. For some participants, being famous was not as important as improving their skills and receiving legitimation from a select few peers they deemed capable of understanding their contribution in a meaningful way.

What is significant about contemporary networked publics is that they open up multiple aspirational trajectories for young people. While some

may aspire to professionalization and large audiences, others see their creative work as a serious but amateur hobby, pursued for the love of it and not for financial gain. Online distribution may be opening new avenues to fame and professional careers for a small number of creators, but the more radical and broad-based changes are happening at the amateur layer. Unlike professional media production, amateur media can support a proliferating number of creators buoyed by long-tail, small audiences. These niche audiences represent an opportunity for a growing number of youth to engage in media production in the context of public participation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we describe some of the specificities of how kids engage in creative production and a wide range of practices that might fall under the umbrella of “online content creation.” Most of the content creation that youth engage in is a form of personal media creation that is focused on documenting their everyday lives and sharing with friends and family. In some cases, this everyday personal media production serves as a jumping-off point for developing other kinds of creative interests. In other cases, youth express interest in developing highly technical media skills from an early age. Yet both commonplace and exceptional cases in media production share certain commonalities, and the boundary between “casual” and social media production and “serious” media production is difficult to define. Although friendship-driven and hanging out genres of participation are generally associated with more casual forms of media creation, they can transition quickly to messing around and geeking out. Conversely, the relationships that youth foster in interest-driven creative production can become a source of new friendship and collegiality that is an alternative to the kinds of friendships and status regimes that youth must inhabit at school. We can see this in the social energies that young people bring to online discussions with their interest-based friends as well as in conventions and meet-ups where youth are sharing their lives as well as their creative work.

All these cases demonstrate the growing centrality of media creation in the everyday social communication of youth. Whether it is everyday photography or machinima, youth are using media they create as a way of documenting their lives and as a means of self-expression. These cases also

demonstrate the centrality of peer-based exchange in motivating creative work and providing a learning context. Peers are fellow creators youth see as knowledgeable audiences who have shared investments in the work, and with whom they have a relation of reciprocity. Peers view and comment on their work and vice versa. This may be the given peer group of local friends or family, or it may be a specialized creative community. Teens consider what their friends will think of their MySpace profiles, and video creators hope fellow makers will appreciate the craft that went in to their work. In both these cases, networked publics enable kids to connect with others in ways that facilitate sharing and peer-based learning. Even when the initial impetus for media production comes from family, school, or after-school programs, a prime motivator for improving the craft lies in the network of peers who serve as audiences, critics, collaborators, and coproducers in the creation of media.

School programs can provide an introduction to creative production practices that kids may not otherwise have exposure to. In most programs, however, the audience for production is limited to the teacher and possibly the class. In addition, most classroom projects are not driven by the interests of the participants themselves. By contrast, the examples we have found in youth recreational and hobby productions indicate a different dynamic. When youth have the opportunity to pursue projects based on their own interests, and to share them within a network of peers with similar investments, the result is highly active forms of learning. In after-school programs where youth have the opportunity to showcase their work to a broader audience of creators and aficionados, they can gain validation for their work in ways similar to what we have observed online. For example, Dilan Mahendran's study (Hip-Hop Music Production) found that youth hip-hop creators in the program he studied distributed their works to larger audiences and participated in a range of public performances and competitions. The case of hip-hop demonstrates the power of amateur and small-scale communities of media production to support aspirational trajectories that rely on reputation in more niche or local contexts. Online networks enable young people to find these niche audiences in ways that were not historically available to youth. Although it is rare for youth to be able to reach a scale of audience that rivals professional media production, many are able to reach beyond the boundaries of home, local activity groups, and families in finding appreciative audiences for their work.

Within all these contexts, whether supported by online groups or local programs, youth are experimenting with new genres of media and new forms of literacy that take advantage of a moment of interpretive flexibility in the contemporary media ecology. This chapter focuses on the social processes of media production. By concentrating on these processes, we have investigated how young people are actively negotiating with one another about standards of quality and craftsmanship. Part of the excitement for young creators is that they can be part of defining new genres and cultural forms, not simply reproducing existing ones. This is an example of some of the specificity of how generational identity, media literacy, and technical change coconstruct one another.

Notes

1. "Prosumer" is a contraction of "producer" and "consumer," or "professional" and "consumer." The term was coined by Alvin Toffler (1980) to describe the blurring of the boundaries between producers and consumers.
2. "Pro-am" refers to "professional amateurs" and was popularized by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller (2004). The term refers to the trend toward amateurs creating work to professional standards.
3. "Inertia" is a screen name.
4. Anime music videos (AMVs) are remix fan videos, in which editors will combine footage from anime with other sound tracks. Most commonly, editors will use popular Euro-American music, but some also will edit to movie trailer or TV ad sound tracks or to pieces of dialogue from movies and TV.
5. "Gepetto" is a screen name.
6. "SnafuDave" is a screen name.
7. "Hyphy" is a rap genre that originated in the San Francisco Bay Area and is closely associated with the late rapper Mac Dre and with Fabby Davis Jr. Hyphy music is often categorized as rhythmically up-tempo with a focus on eclectic instrumental beat arrangements, and is tightly coupled with particular dance styles.
8. "AbsoluteDestiny" is a screen name.
9. "Darius" is a real name.
10. Role-playing boards, also know as play-by-post games, are a hybrid between fan fiction and role-playing games. Writers generally take on the role of a character in a fantasy world and post narrative about their character to a web forum to collaboratively create stories or engage in a role-playing game.

11. “Vidding,” like AMVs, is a process of remixing footage from TV shows and movies to sound tracks of an editor’s choosing. Unlike AMVs, however, the live-action vidding community has been dominated by women.

12. “Xstylus” is a screen name.

13. “Doki” is a screen name.

14. “Scottanime” is a screen name.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/8402.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8402.001.0001)

Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out

Kids Living and Learning with New Media

By: Mizuko Ito

Citation:

Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media

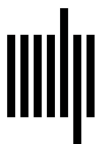
By: Mizuko Ito

DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/8402.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8402.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262258920

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2013



The MIT Press

© 2010 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information about special quantity discounts, please e-mail special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu.

This book was set in Stone Sans and Stone Serif by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ito, Mizuko.

Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out : kids living and learning with new media / Mizuko Ito.

p. cm. — The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series in Digital Media and Learning

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01336-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Mass media and youth—United States. 2. Digital media—Social aspects—United States. 3. Technology and youth—United States. 4. Learning—Social aspects.

I. Title.

HQ799.2.M352I87 2010

302.23'108350973—dc22

2009009932

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1