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Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out

Kids Living and Learning with New Media

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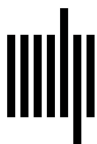
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Appendix II: Project Descriptions

In this appendix, we provide an overview of the research sites included in the Digital Youth Project. We have organized the sites into four general categories: homes and neighborhoods, institutional spaces, networked sites, and interest groups. While the categories are primarily organizational, they do help to emphasize the range of sites of inquiry that we draw upon for the analysis here—twenty distinctive research projects in total¹—as well as the epistemology that shaped the ways we approached our effort to understand youth’s engagement with new media from an ethnographic perspective. As is evident in our descriptions, many projects moved among different categories of research sites. For example, Lisa Tripp and Becky Herr-Stephenson’s study of Los Angeles middle schools and Katynka Martínez’s study of Pico Union families followed students at school and within their homes and neighborhoods. The points of intersection and divergence between the kids in the different studies were of great interest, such as when a researcher in the neighborhood cluster of studies discovered an anime fan, or conversely, when interest-based new media hobbies were notably absent among kids in a particular study. In this book, we describe practices that we observed in multiple case studies that emerged through collaborative analysis, and the specificities of the research sites and projects have largely been erased. In this appendix, we introduce the individual projects to provide the reader with some of the context that readers may feel is missing in previous chapters. Each study comprises an ethnographic analysis of new media in the lives of a particular population; taken as a whole, they offer a broader ecological perspective of how new media practices are distributed among diverse youth in diverse contexts.

Homes and Neighborhoods

We focused on homes and families in urban, suburban, and rural contexts to understand how new media and technologies shaped the contours of kids' home lives and, in turn, how different family structures and economic and social positions may structure young people's media ecologies (Bourdieu 1984; Holloway and Valentine 2003; Livingstone 2002; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; see also chapter 4 in this book). Working in the context of multicultural California (among other sites), we have taken seriously the need to understand the influence of ethnic, racial, gender, and class distinctions on many young people's media and technology practices (Chin 2001; Escobar 1994; Pascoe 2007a; Seiter 2005; Thorne 2008). Indeed, one of the advantages of this large-scale ethnographic project is the diversity of sites that we have been able to access.

In their study of middle-school students and their families in Los Angeles, Lisa Tripp, Becky Herr-Stephenson, and Katynka Martínez conducted participant observation in the classrooms of teachers involved in a professional-development program for media arts and technology as well as participant observation in after-school programs (Martínez, Animation Around the Block; Martínez, High School Computer Club; Martínez, Pico Union Community Center). In addition to the work in institutionalized settings, this study also incorporated interviews with kids, their siblings, and their parents. The interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and took place, when possible, at students' homes, which allowed the researchers to better understand the rich contexts of neighborhood and family life, such as Martínez's study "Pico Union Families". In a similar vein, but with a very different population, Heather Horst's study "Silicon Valley Families" examined the appropriation of new media and technology in Silicon Valley, California. Recruiting her research participants from parents' email lists at schools in the region, she focused her studies on the role of new media in kids' communication, learning, knowledge, and play in families with children between the ages of eight and eighteen to understand the gendered and generational dynamics of the incorporation of new media at home.

In their study "Living Digital," C. J. Pascoe and Christo Sims conducted a multisited ethnographic project in order to analyze how teenagers communicate, negotiate social networks, and craft a unique teen culture using

new media. In C. J. Pascoe's case, she introduced herself to students in a local digital-arts program in an ethnically diverse suburban area of the East Bay, near San Francisco, where she later interviewed many of the high school-aged teenagers outside of school. Christo Sims (Rural and Urban Youth) carried out research in homes in an area near the Sierra Nevada range of rural California with a population of primarily white working- and middle-class families. In addition, he conducted work in Brooklyn, New York, an area that boasts a significant Caribbean, African-American, and Latino population; he gained access to the community with the help of a local after-school program. By looking at teens across a variety of geographic locations (rural, urban, and suburban) and socioeconomic statuses, Pascoe and Sims aimed to understand how new media have been folded into teens' friendship and romance practices.

Megan Finn, David Schlossberg, Judd Antin, and Paul Poling's study "Freshquest" also focused on the role of media and technologies in the lives of teenagers through an examination of technology-mediated communication habits of freshman students at the University of California, Berkeley. Using a survey administered to 3,161 first-year students between 2005 and 2006, their primary goal was to understand how students adopt and use information and communication technologies and how they talk about growing up with technology, both in relation to their socioeconomic status and social networks. Finn and her colleagues also administered 140 surveys and conducted focus-group interviews with first-year students at a community college in a suburb of the San Francisco Bay Area in 2006. As noted throughout this book, most of the material described is derived from the focus groups conducted with undergraduates at the University of California, Berkeley.

Along with interviews, surveys, and questionnaires, many of the projects in our homes-and-neighborhoods studies experimented with different ways of engaging young people, using the media in kids' everyday lives to narrate and explain their varying engagements and commitments to new media. Dan Perkel and Sarita Yardi's project "Digital Photo-Elicitation with Kids" used digital-photography diary studies to show the technology practices of kids entering middle school. Moving from an after-school program in the San Francisco Bay Area to the context of family life, Perkel and Yardi looked at the kinds of technologies participants used in their homes and in their summer activities, who they used them with, and what these

activities meant to kids. With the assistance of Scott Carter, a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley, we also developed a diary study that used digital cameras and cell phone cameras (camphones) (Carter 2007). Building upon recent use of diary studies to document everyday media use (cf. Dourish and Bell 2007; Horst and Miller 2005; Ito, Okabe, and Anderson forthcoming; Okabe and Ito 2006; Van House et al. 2005), participants used mobile phones and digital cameras to chronicle their use of new media. Combined with other interviews, observations, and participation in many arenas of young people's neighborhood and home lives, this methodology enabled researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the media ecologies that young people create and inhabit.

Learning Institutions: Media-Literacy Programs and After-School Programs

Over the past two decades, researchers interested in "informal learning" have increasingly turned their attention to institutions such as libraries, after-school programs, and museums as sites that structure learning experiences that differ from those in school (see Barron 2006; Bekerman, Burbules, and Silberman-Keller 2006). As institutions temporally and spatially situated between the dominant institutions in kids' lives—school and family—after-school programs and spaces offered potential for observing instances of informal learning, particularly given the increasing importance of after-school and enrichment programs in American public education.

In light of the possibilities of these spaces, a number of our projects focused on after-school programs in an effort to understand how they fit into the lives of young people. For example, Judd Antin, Dan Perkel, and Christo Sims investigated media-production classes at a San Francisco technology center. Assuming roles as volunteer program helpers for their project "The Social Dynamics of Media Production," Antin, Perkel, and Sims looked at how the students from low-income neighborhoods negotiate and appropriate the structured and unstructured aspects of the program to learn new technical skills, socialize with new groups of friends, and take advantage of the unique access to both technical and social resources that often are lacking in their homes and schools. In this case, researchers participated regularly in the program. In some instances, researchers conducted interviews with the participants in their homes or outside the

program in an effort to understand how the program—and, more broadly, new media—shaped their lives.

Although we primarily focused on learning spaces outside formal school contexts, we also carried out two research projects in structured learning contexts. Moving beyond binary questions of access, such as digital divides (Compaine 2001; Servon 2002), Lisa Tripp and Becky Herr-Stephenson's study "Los Angeles Middle Schools" examined the complex relationships between the multimedia-production projects that were undertaken in middle-school classrooms and the students' out-of-school experiences with multimedia. Contextualizing these in-class observations with interviews in homes and schools throughout urban Los Angeles, Tripp and Herr-Stephenson aimed to understand the gaps and overlaps of media use within the contexts of homes and schools. Similarly, Laura Robinson's study "Wikipedia and Information Evaluation" examined the role material resources played in everyday information-seeking contexts among economically disadvantaged youth at a high school in an agricultural region of central California. Project researchers primarily focused on the school sites in an effort to think about how digital and online media may facilitate productive learning environments. In addition, our work in schools and after-school programs was motivated by a desire to get to know young people across the multiple contexts of their lives. In all of our institutional projects, researchers carried out observations in the programs and provided formal and informal feedback to the organizations that provided them with access and support.

Networked Sites

Rather than restricting our focus to bounded spaces or locales (Appadurai 1996; Basch, Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997), as researchers we wanted to acknowledge the "world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts" (Amit-Talai 2000, 6) that young people inhabit through new media. Often working in tandem with other forms of media and communication, new media provide communication venues that individuals incorporate into their lives to form, maintain, and strengthen social ties and relationships (Boase 2007; di Gennaro and Dutton 2007; Hampton 2007; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Miller and Slater 2000; Panagakos and Horst 2006; Wellman et al. 2003; Wilding

2006). Recent scholarship of online communities illustrates that significant relationships and community can be formed, even in the absence of physical copresence (Baym 2000; Constable 2003; Hine 2000; Kendall 2002; Rheingold 2000; Smith and Kollock 1999; Varnelis 2008; Wilson and Peterson 2002). Indeed, the Digital Future Project reveals that the percentage of individuals who report membership in an online community has more than doubled in the past three years (USC Center for the Digital Future 2008), indicating the growing importance of new media in facilitating social groupings and community in the United States. For this reason, a significant part of our research focused on a number of the most prominent online websites with the aim of understanding the inner workings of online groups and emerging practices surrounding community formation.

Exploring a series of sites that dominated young people's media ecologies between 2005 and 2007, we concentrated our efforts on understanding practices as they spanned online and offline settings, without privileging one context as more or less authentic, or more or less virtual (Kendall 2002). We were not interested in establishing a boundary between online participation as distinct from offline; rather, we saw specific online sites as an entry point into a varied set of hybrid practices that flowed through these sites. For example, in the discussion of social network sites that became popular in 2005 (such as Bebo, Facebook, and MySpace), we argue that the online contexts are largely a mirror and extension of sociability in teens' local school-based relations. In her study "Teen Sociality in Networked Publics," danah boyd examined the ways in which teens use sites such as MySpace and Facebook to negotiate identity, socialize with friends, and make sense of the world around them. Her project addresses teens' friendship-driven practices and contextualizes their use of networked publics in their lives more broadly. Dan Perkel's study "MySpace Profile Production" investigated how young people create MySpace pages. Whereas boyd examined the sociality of MySpace, Perkel concentrated on the socio-technical practices and infrastructure of profile making, including getting started with the help of friends, finding visual and audio material online, and copying and pasting snippets of code. The project revealed how a MySpace profile is produced through the socially and technically distributed activity of many people and is intimately tied to the specific, local communities that the profile owner inhabits.

Two of our researchers examined the phenomenon of YouTube, the video-sharing site that became popular in 2006. Patricia G. Lange analyzed how children and youth interactively negotiate aspects of the self by creating, sharing, and watching videos on the site. In her study "YouTube and Video Bloggers," Lange examines how and what participants learn by making videos and providing feedback. She argues that through social interaction and self-comparison to other video makers, YouTubers learn how to represent themselves and their work in order to become accepted members of groups who share similar media-based affinities. In addition to conducting interviews and analyzing videos, Lange became a video blogger and received feedback on her videos posted (and featured) on YouTube and on her own research website. Sonja Baumer focused on identity practices of American youth on YouTube in her study "Self-Production through YouTube." Baumer's study emphasizes self-production as an agentic act that expresses the fluidity of identity achieved through forms of semiotic action and through practices such as self-presentation, differentiation and integration, self-evaluation, and cultural commentary.

Just as social network sites and YouTube emerged as central to a wide range of young people's participation in online sites during the course of our research, gaming sites also piqued the interests of kids and teens. Heather Horst and Laura Robinson's study "Neopets" explored cultural products and knowledge creation surrounding a popular children's website. Looking at practices varying from authoring relatively simple web pages, participating in online auctions, writing stories, and creating galleries to showcase collections of specialized items, the study used questionnaires and interviews to examine how participants develop notions of reputation, expertise, and other forms of identification. Rachel Cody examined a very different kind of online game in her study of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game Final Fantasy XI. By becoming a member of a linkshell, the communities through which players organize their game playing, Cody's research examined how the social activity extended beyond the game into websites, message boards, and instant-messenger programs. This contact strengthened the relationships formed within the game and encouraged a level of collaboration that is impossible within the game, allowing players to create strategies through videos, screen shots, and community experiences. Throughout all of the online-based research, a commitment to participation and engagement through these

sites remained central to developing an understanding of these sites and practices.

Interest-Based Groups

Although social scientists have studied youth subcultures for some time, the relationship between media and youth culture emerged most cogently in the British cultural studies movement in the 1970s and 1980s.² Ranging from music, fashion, hairstyles, language, lifestyle, and other forms of popular culture, research emphasized youth cultural forms and agency (Hall and Jefferson 1975). Looking at differences in practices across age, class, ethnicity, race, gender, and other measures of difference and power (Hebdige 1979; Jenkins 1983; McRobbie 1980; Willis 1977), cultural studies scholars examined youth, popular culture, media, and the creation of alternative publics, with particular attention to the ways in which the meaning, or texts, resisted and subverted normative practices and structures in society (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Bucholz 2002; Maira and Soep 2004; Snow 1987). For example, rebellion and the development of an alternative lifestyle was pervasive in the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos of punk culture, one of the first groups to market and circulate its own music outside mainstream society and, in turn, to challenge traditional sites of production, consumption, and copyright (Hebdige 1979). This DIY ethic continues in the remix culture of the early hip-hop and DJ movements (Gilroy 1987; Hebdige 1987; Sharma 1999). This attention to the relationship between media and popular culture and the changing relationships among production, consumption, and participation continues in much of the work on youth and the ethnography of media (e.g., Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002).

Recognizing the tremendous transformations in the empirical and theoretical work on youth subcultures, new media, and popular culture through the past decades, researchers across our project focused on the modes of expression, circulation, and mobilization of youth subcultural forms in and through new media. For example, Dilan Mahendran's project "Hip-Hop Music Production," explored the practices of amateur music-making against the background of hip-hop culture in the San Francisco Bay Area's after-school settings. Mahendran's research illuminated the centrality of music-listening and -making by both enthusiasts and youth in general as

world-disclosing practices that challenge the assumption that youth are simply passive consumers. The commodification of digital media technologies focused on the low-cost private or personal-computing model has enabled DIY music makers to create, produce, and distribute both highly collaborative and individual works of art. Following the DIY theme inherent in many subcultural artistic communities, Mizuko Ito's "Anime Fans" examined a highly distributed network of overseas fans of Japanese animation. She focused on how the fandom organized and communicated online and how it engaged in creative production through the transformative reuse of commercial media. Becky Herr-Stephenson's study "Harry Potter Fandom" investigated multimedia production undertaken by young Harry Potter fans and the role technology plays in facilitating production and distribution of fan works. Herr-Stephenson's research situates young fans' media production at the intersection of interest-driven and friendship-driven participation, calling attention to the unique characteristics of this large, vibrant, and prolific fandom.

Where much of the early work on subcultures and media focused on creative and artistic modes of expression, we are only just beginning to understand the scope and scale of other subcultural practices. C. J. Pascoe and Natalie Boero's study "Pro-Eating Disorder Discussion Groups" examined the construction of online eating-disorder communities by analyzing pro-anorexia ("ana") and pro-bulimia ("mia") discussion groups. Based on participants' characterizations of anorexia as a lifestyle choice rather than a disease, the project attempts to move beyond dominant clinical narratives of eating disorders, instead highlighting participants' ambivalence regarding gender, body size, and offline relationality. Pascoe and Boero reveal how the ana and mia lifestyles are produced and reproduced in these online spaces. Moreover, their study demonstrates the ways new media bring to the fore other practices that previously existed but remained underground or outside the purview of mainstream society.

Like the anorexic and bulimic communities that have found new modes of expression in online venues, gaming cultures and communities have become more public in the new media ecology. Focusing on a local gathering place for gamers in the San Francisco Bay Area, Arthur Law's study "Team Play" explored the social context in which teenagers are made use of video games at a cyber café. The study highlighted two styles of game play at the café: solo teenagers playing a real-time strategy game by

themselves and groups of teenagers playing first-person shooters together. Despite their differences, each style is highly social and demonstrates that online video games can be seen as a venue for maintaining friendships across vast distances or providing additional social activities on top of traditional ones such as basketball or football. Looking at the emergence of networked gaming, Matteo Bittanti's study "Game Play" examines the complex relationship between teenagers and video games. Bittanti focused on the ways in which gamers create and experiment with different identities; learn through informal processes; form peer groups; develop a variety of cognitive, social, and emotional skills; and produce significant textual artifacts (e.g., information, comments, reviews, music videos, and game videos) through digital play. Electronic gaming has become a focus for young people's social interaction, interest-driven learning, and creative production.

Notes

1. Three pilot projects that we do not discuss at length in this report book were formative in structuring our research methodologies and attention to informal learning. The first, Dan Perkel and Sarita Yardi's project "Searching for Count Whistleboy: Explorations in Collaborative Storytelling through Design Research" used a design research approach to explore the possibilities of collaborative storytelling among fifth graders. Through design activities, games, group discussion, and interviews, Perkel and Yardi examined the topics of collaboration, appropriation, and social dynamics around the kids' creative productions. The second project, Sarita Yardi and Sarai Mitnick's study "Media Literacy Education: Understanding Technology and Online Media in the Lives of Middle-School Girls," investigated the role of technology and online media in the lives of girls in an after-school technology program for middle-school girls in Oakland, California. The third project, Alison Billings's "Wondering, Wandering, and Wireless: An Ethnography of the Explainers and Their Brief Affair with a Mobile Technology," examined the ways in which technology could be incorporated more effectively for technology literacy. Billings explored how "Explainers," or young people who are front-line educators to the visitors at a science and technology museum in the San Francisco Bay Area, used a new mobile device in an effort to improve the quality of their work by providing them access to on-the-fly resources.
2. Mintz (2004) argues that youth subcultures did not emerge until in the 1950s.

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