

## Research Approach

Although a growing volume of research is examining youth new media practice, we are still at the early stages of piecing together a more holistic picture of the role of new media in young people's everyday lives. A growing number of quantitative studies document the spread of new media and related practices among U.S. youth (Griffith and Fox 2007; Lenhart et al. 2007; Rainie 2008; Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005). In addition to these quantitative indicators, there is a growing body of ethnographic case studies of youth engagement with specific kinds of new media practices and sites (some examples include Baron 2008; Buckingham 2008; Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005; Ling 2004; Livingstone 2008; Mazzarella 2005). Although the United Kingdom has funded some large-scale qualitative studies on youth new media engagements (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Livingstone 2002), the United States has not had comparable qualitative studies that look across a range of different populations and new media practices. What is gen-

erally lacking in the literature overall, and in the United States in particular, is an understanding of how new media practices are embedded in a broader social and cultural ecology. While we have a picture of technology trends on one hand, and spotlights on specific youth populations and practices on the other, we need more work that brings these two pieces of the puzzle together. This study addresses this gap, through a large-scale ethnographic study that looks across a wide range of different youth populations and their new media practices. We approached the descriptive goal of our study with a research approach that was defined by ethnographic method, a youth-centered focus, and the study of the changing new media ecology.

### **Ethnography**

An ethnographic approach means that we work to understand how media and technology are meaningful to people in their everyday lives. We rely on qualitative methods of interviewing, observation, and interpretive analysis in an effort to understand patterns in culture and social practices from the point of view of participants themselves, rather than beginning with our own categories. The goal is to capture the youth cultures and practices related to new media, as well as the surrounding context—such as peer relations, family dynamics, local community institutions, and broader networks of technology and consumer culture. The strength of this approach is that it enables us to

surface, from the empirical material, what the important categories and structures are that determine new media practices and learning outcomes. This approach does not lend itself to testing existing analytic categories or targeted hypotheses but rather to asking more fundamental questions about what the relevant factors and categories of analysis are. We believe that an initial broad-based ethnographic understanding, grounded in the actual contexts of behavior and local cultural understandings, is crucial in grasping the contours of a new set of cultural categories and practices.

### **Focus on Youth**

Adults often view children in terms of developmental “ages and stages,” focusing on what they will become rather than as complete beings “with ongoing lives, needs and desires” (Corsaro 1997, 8). By contrast, we take a sociology-of-youth-and-childhood approach, which means that we take youth seriously as actors in their own social worlds and look at childhood as a socially constructed, historically variable and contested category (Corsaro 1997; Fine 2004; James and Prout 1997; Wyness 2006). Our work has focused on documenting the everyday new media practices of youth in their middle-school and high-school years, and we have made our best effort at documenting the diversity of youth identity and practice. We have also engaged, to a lesser extent, with parents, educators, and young adults who participate in or are involved in structuring youth

new media practices. Readers will see the subjects of this research referred to by a variety of age-related names. We use the term “kids” for those 13 and under, “teens” for those aged 13 to 18, and we use the term “young people” to refer to teens and young adults aged 13 to 30. We use the term “youth” to describe the general category of youth culture that is not clearly age demarcated but that centers on the late teenage years. Interviews with young adults are included to provide a sense of adult participation in youth practice as well as to provide retrospective accounts of growing older with new media. While age-based categories have defined our object of study, we are interested in documenting how these categories are historically and culturally specific, and how new media use is part of the redefinition of youth culture and “age-appropriate” forms of practice.

### **New Media**

We use the term *new media* to describe a media ecology where more traditional media, such as books, television, and radio, are intersecting with digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication (Jenkins 2006). In contrast to work that attempts to isolate the specific affordances of digital production tools or online networks, we are interested in the convergent media ecology that youth inhabit today. We have used the term *new media* rather than terms such as *digital media*

or *interactive media* because the moniker of “the new” seemed appropriately situational, relational, and protean, and not tied to a specific media platform. Our work has focused on those practices that are “new” at this moment and that are most clearly associated with youth culture and voice, such as engagement with social network sites, media fandom, and gaming. The aim of our study is to describe media engagements that are specific to the life circumstances of current youth, at a moment when we are seeing a transition to participation in digital media production and networked publics. Following from our youth-centered approach, the new media practices we examine are almost all situated in the social and recreational activities of youth rather than in contexts of explicit instruction.

### The Study

The Digital Youth Project was led by four principal investigators, Peter Lyman, Mizuko Ito, Michael Carter, and Barrie Thorne. During the course of the three-year research grant (2005–2008), seven postdoctoral researchers,<sup>1</sup> six doctoral students,<sup>2</sup> nine MA students,<sup>3</sup> one JD student,<sup>4</sup> one project assistant,<sup>5</sup> seven undergraduate students,<sup>6</sup> and four research collaborators<sup>7</sup> from a range of disciplines participated in and contributed fieldwork materials to the project. Our project was designed to document, from an ethnographic perspective, the learning and innovation that accompany young people’s everyday engagements with new

media in informal settings. Specifically, our focus on youth-centered practices of play, communication, and creative production located learning in contexts that are meaningful and formative for youth, including friendships and families, as well as young people's own aspirations, interests, and passions. The practices we focused on moved across geographic and media spaces and, as a result, our ethnography incorporated multiple sites and research methods, varying from questionnaires, surveys, semi-structured interviews, diary studies, observation, and content analyses of media sites, profiles, videos, and other materials. Collectively, we conducted 659 semi-structured interviews, 28 diary studies, and focus group interviews with 67 individuals. Interviews were conducted informally with at least 78 individuals and we also participated in more than 50 research-related events, such as conventions, summer camps, award ceremonies, or other local events. Complementing our interview-based strategy, we also carried out more than 5,194 observation hours, which were chronicled in regular field notes, and we have collected 10,468 profiles, posts from 15 online discussion group forums, and more than 389 videos as well as numerous materials from classroom and after-school contexts. Our Digital Kids Questionnaire was completed by 402 participants, with 363 responses from people under the age of 25. Our analysis for our joint book and report draws on work across 20 distinctive research projects that were framed in terms of four main areas: homes and neighborhoods, institutional spaces, online sites, and interest groups.<sup>8</sup>

## Homes and Families

We focused on homes and families in urban, suburban, and rural contexts in order to understand how new media and technologies shape 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). Through the five projects outlined below, we focused on young people ranging from ages 8 to 20 with attention to developing an understanding of the influence of ethnic, racial, gender, class, and economic distinctions on young people's media and technology practices and participation (Chin 2001; Escobar 1994; Pascoe 2007; Seiter 2005; Thorne 2008).

**Coming of Age in Silicon Valley** Heather A. Horst examined the appropriation of new media and technology in Silicon Valley, California, among families with children ranging from the ages of 8 to 18. Horst's research focused on the gendered and generational dynamics of new media use in families. Throughout this report, research from this study will be referenced as *Silicon Valley Families*.

**Digital Media in an Urban Landscape** Lisa Tripp, Becky Herr-Stephenson, and Katynka Z. Martínez coupled participant observation in the classrooms of Los Angeles-based teachers involved in a professional-development program for media arts and technology with participant observation in after-school

programs with home interviews, which were conducted in English and/or Spanish. Examples drawn from this study are noted as *Pico Union Families*, *Computer Club Kids*, *Animation around the Block*, *L.A. Youth and Their Community Center*, and *Los Angeles Middle Schools*.

**Discovering the Social Context of Kids' Technology Use** Dan Perkel and Sarita Yardi used digital-photography diary studies to develop an understanding of the technology practices of kids entering middle school. This project also developed methods for use of camera phones in diary studies, which supplemented the interviews and participation in Horst, Martínez, and C. J. Pascoe's research on new media in everyday life. Research drawn from this study is labeled *Digital Photo-Elicitation with Kids* throughout this report.

**Freshquest** Megan Finn, David Schlossberg, Judd Antin, and Paul Poling's study focused on the roles of media and technologies in the lives of teenagers through a study of technology-mediated communication habits of freshman students at the University of California, Berkeley. This study included interviews and surveys with Berkeley freshmen as well as a smaller sample of first-year students at a community college outside of San Francisco. We use the name *Freshquest* to indicate material that emerged from this study.

**Living Digital: Teens' Social Worlds and New Media** C. J. Pascoe and Christo Sims conducted a multi-sited ethnographic project in order to analyze how teenagers communicate, negotiate social networks, and craft a unique teen culture using new



media. Whereas Pascoe carried out research in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sims interviewed teenagers in rural California and Brooklyn, New York. Examples from Pascoe's work are labeled *Living Digital*. Christo Sims's research materials are denoted as *Rural and Urban Youth*.

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

In the past two decades, researchers interested in “informal learning” have increasingly turned their attention to institutions, such as libraries, after-school programs, and museums, 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, four of our research projects focused on media literacy and after-school programs in an effort to understand how they fit into the lives of young people.

**Information the Wiki Way** Laura Robinson examined the role played by material resources in everyday information-seeking contexts among economically disadvantaged youth at a high school in an agricultural region of Central California. Research

materials from this study are noted as *Wikipedia and Information Evaluation*.

**Teaching and Learning with Multimedia** Lisa Tripp and Becky Herr-Stephenson explored the complex relationships between multimedia production projects undertaken in middle-school classrooms and students' out-of-school experiences with multimedia, with particular attention to the gaps and overlaps of media use within the contexts of home and school. We use the phrase *Los Angeles Middle Schools* to identify material from this study. The material from the *Computer Club Kids*, *Animation around the Block*, and *L.A. Youth and their Community Center* projects carried out by Katynka Z. Martínez was also integrated within this analytic framework.

**The Social Dynamics of Media Production in an After-School Setting** Judd Antin, Dan Perkel, and Christo Sims looked at how the students from low-income neighborhoods negotiate and appropriate the structured and unstructured aspects of after-school programs in order 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 are often lacking in their homes and schools. We cite material drawn from this study with the label *The Social Dynamics of Media Production*.

### Networked Sites

Six of our research projects concentrated on understanding emerging practices surrounding membership and participation

on a series of Web sites that dominated young people's media ecologies between 2005 and 2007. Rather than restricting our focus to bounded spaces or locales (Appadurai 1996; Basch, Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997), we started our research by focusing on these popular sites, concentrating 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 (boyd 2007; Kendall 2002; Lange 2008; Miller and Slater 2000).

**Broadcast Yourself: Self-Production through Online Video-Sharing on YouTube** Sonja Baumer's study analyzed self-production as an agentive 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. We use the short title *Self-Production through YouTube* to indicate research material from this study.

**Life in the Linkshell: The Everyday Activity of a Final Fantasy Community** Rachel Cody looked at the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Final Fantasy XI* in order to understand how social activity extends beyond the game into Web sites, message boards, and instant-messenger programs, and encourages a level of collaboration that is impossible within the game. Research material from this study is noted as *Final Fantasy XI*.

**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. We cite material from this study with the label *Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*.

**Thanks for Watching: A Study of Video-Sharing Practices on YouTube** Patricia G. Lange focused on the ways in which YouTube users learn how to represent themselves and their work in order to become accepted members of groups who share similar media-based affinities through making videos and reacting to feedback. *YouTube and Video Bloggers* denotes material used from Lange's research.

**The Practices of MySpace Profile Production** Dan Perkel investigated how young people create MySpace pages, with particular attention to the sociotechnical practices and infrastructure of profile making, such as social support and assistance, the location of visual and audio material online, and copying and pasting snippets of code. Material from Perkel's study is noted as *MySpace Profile Production*.

**Virtual Playgrounds: An Ethnography of Neopets** Heather A. Horst and Laura Robinson explored cultural products and knowledge creation surrounding the online world of Neopets, with particular attention to how participants develop notions of reputation, expertise, and other forms of identification. We use the short title *Neopets* to refer to research from this study.

### **Interest-Based Communities**

Recognizing the tremendous transformations in the empirical and theoretical work on youth subcultures, new media, and

popular culture through recent decades (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Gilroy 1987; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979, 1987; Jenkins 1992; McRobbie and Garber 2000; Seiter 1993; Snow 1987), researchers across our project focused on the modes of expression, circulation, and mobilization of youth subcultural forms in and through new media. Six of our research projects focused on popular and subcultural forms and the changing relationships between producers, consumers, and participants through interest-driven engagements with new media.

**Game Play** Matteo Bittanti examined the complex relationship between teenagers and video games through a focus on the ways in which gamers create and experiment with different identities, learn through informal processes, craft peer groups, develop a variety of cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and produce significant textual artifacts through digital play. We use the label *Game Play* to indicate material derived from this study.

**Hip-Hop Music and Meaning in the Digital Age** Dilan Mahendran explored the practices of amateur music making in the background of hip-hop culture in San Francisco Bay Area after-school settings. The study sought to understand 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. All material from this study is indicated by the phrase *Hip-Hop Music Production*.

**Mischief Managed** Rebecca Herr-Stephenson investigated multimedia production undertaken by young Harry Potter fans and the role technology plays in facilitating production and distribution of fan works. We note material drawn from this study with the label *Harry Potter Fandom*.

**No Wannarexics Allowed** C. J. Pascoe and Natalie Boero focused on the construction of online eating-disorder communities through an analysis of pro-anorexia (ana) and pro-bulimia (mia) discussion groups, with particular attention to how the “ana” and “mia” lifestyles are produced and reproduced in these online spaces. All examples from this study are cited by the phrase *Pro-Eating Disorder Discussion Groups*.

**Team Play: Kids in the Café** Arthur Law conducted ethnographic observations at a cybercafé where teens gathered to play online video games in collaborative team engagements, examining the construction of friendships and teamwork through networked gaming. We use the title *Team Play* to reference material from this study.

**Transnational Anime Fandoms and Amateur Cultural Production** Mizuko Ito examined a highly distributed network of overseas fans of Japanese animation, focusing on how the fandom organized and communicated online and how it engaged in creative production through the transformative reuse of commercial media. We use the short title *Anime Fans* when referencing material from this study.