

Conclusions and Implications

The goal of our project and our book has been to document the everyday lives of youth as they engage with new media and to put forth a paradigm for understanding learning and participation in contemporary networked publics. In addition to our descriptive agenda, we had a central analytic question: How do these practices change the dynamics of youth-adult negotiations over literacy, learning, and authoritative knowledge? In this concluding section, we summarize the findings of our research in relation to implications for learning, education, and public participation.

Robust participation in networked publics requires a social, cultural, and technical ecology grounded in social and recreational practices.

We have suggested that the notion of networked publics offers a framework for examining diverse forms of participation with new media in a way that is keyed to the broader social relations that structure this participation. In describing new media

engagements, we have looked at the ecology of social, technical, and cultural conditions necessary for certain forms of participation. When examining the kind of informal, peer-based interactions that are the focus of our work, we have found that ongoing, lightweight access to digital production tools and the Internet was a precondition for participation in most of the networked public spaces that are the focus of attention for U.S. teens. Further, much of this engagement is centered on access to social and commercial entertainment content that is generally frowned upon in formal educational settings. Sporadic, monitored access at schools and libraries may provide sufficient access for basic information seeking, but it is not sufficient for the immersed kind of social engagements with networked publics that we have seen becoming a baseline for participation on both the interest-driven and the friendship-driven sides.

Adult lack of appreciation for youth participation in popular common cultures has created an additional barrier to access for kids who do not have Internet access at home. We are concerned about the lack of a public agenda that recognizes the value of youth participation in social communication and popular culture. When kids lack access to the Internet at home, and public libraries and schools block sites that are central to their social communication, they are doubly handicapped in their efforts to participate in common culture and sociability. These social activities are also jumping-off points for messing around with digital media creation and self-expression. Contemporary social media are becoming one of the primary “institutions” of

peer culture for U.S. teens, occupying the role that was previously dominated by the informal hanging out spaces of the school, mall, home, or street. Although public institutions do not necessarily need to play a role in instructing or monitoring kids' use of social media, they can be important sites for enabling participation in these activities. Educators and policy makers need to understand that participation in the digital age means more than being able to access "serious" online information and culture; it also means the ability to participate in social and recreational activities online. This requires a cultural shift and a certain openness to experimentation and social exploration that is generally not characteristic of educational institutions.

Although we have not systematically analyzed the relation between gender and socioeconomic status and participation in interest-driven groups, our work indicates a predictable participation gap. Particularly in the cases of highly technical interest groups, and geeked-out forms of gaming, the genre itself is often defined as a masculine domain. These differences in access are not simply a matter of technology access but have to do with a more complex structure of cultural identity and social belonging. In other words, girls tend to be stigmatized more if they identify with geeked-out practices. While we may recognize that geeked-out participation has valuable learning properties, if these activities translate to downward social mobility in friendship-driven networks of status and popularity, many kids are likely to opt out even if they have the technical and social resources at their disposal. The kinds of identities and peer

status that accompany certain forms of new media literacy and technical skills (and lack thereof) are areas that deserve more systematic research attention.

Networked publics provide a context for youth to develop social norms in the context of public participation.

Young people are turning to online networks to participate in a wide range of public activities. On the friendship-driven side, youth see online spaces and communications media as mechanisms to hang out with their friends. Given constraints on time and mobility, online sites offer the opportunity to casually connect with their friends as well as engage in private communication that is not monitored by parents and teachers. The ability to browse the profiles and status updates of the extended peer network in sites such as MySpace and Facebook means that youth can gain information about others in an ambient way, without engaging in direct communication. On the interest-driven side, youth turn to networked publics to connect with like-minded peers who share knowledge and expertise that may not be available to them locally. By engaging with communities of expertise online in more geeked-out practices, youth are exposed to new standards and norms for participation in specialized communities and through collaborative arrangements. These unique affordances of networked publics have altered many of the conditions of hanging out and publicity for youth, even as they build on existing youth practices of hanging out, flirting, and pursuing hobbies and interests.

In our work, contrary to fears that social norms are eroding online, we did not find many youth who were engaging in any riskier behaviors than they did in offline contexts. Youth online communication is conducted in a context of public scrutiny and structured by well-developed norms of social appropriateness, a sense of reciprocity, and collective ethics. We do not believe that educators and parents need to bear down on kids with complicated rules, restrictions, and heavy-handed norms about how they should engage online. At the same time, the actual shape of peer-based communication, and many of its outcomes, are profoundly different from those of an older generation. We found examples of parents who lacked even rudimentary knowledge of social norms for communicating online or any understanding of all but the most accessible forms of video games. Further, the ability for many youth to be in constant private contact with their peers strengthens the force of peer-based learning, and it can weaken adult participation in these peer environments. When you have a combination of a kid who is highly active online and a parent who is disengaged from these new media, we see a risk of an intergenerational wedge. Simple prohibitions, technical barriers, or time limits on use are blunt instruments; youth perceive them as raw and ill-informed exercises of power.

The problem lies not in the volume of access but in the quality of participation and learning, and kids and adults need to first be on the same page on the normative questions of learning and literacy. Parents need to begin with an appreciation of

the importance of youth social interactions with their peers, an understanding of their complexities, and a recognition that children are knowledgeable experts on their own peer practices and many domains of online participation. If parents can trust that their own values are being transmitted through their ongoing communication with their kids, then new media practices can be sites of shared focus rather than sites of anxiety and tension. We believe that if our efforts to shape new media literacy are keyed to the meaningful contexts of youth participation, then there is an opportunity for productive adult engagement. Many of the norms that we observed online are very much up for negotiation, and there were often divergent perspectives among youth about what was appropriate, even within a particular genre of practice. For example, the issue of how to display social connections and hierarchies on social network sites is a source of social drama and tension, and the ongoing evolution of technical design in this space makes it a challenge for youth to develop shared social norms. Designers of these systems are central participants in defining these social norms, and their interventions are not always geared toward supporting a shared set of practices and values. More robust public debate on these issues that involves both youth and adults could potentially shape the future of online norms in this space in substantive ways.

Youth are developing new forms of media literacy that are keyed to new media and youth-centered social and cultural worlds.

In our descriptions of youth expression and online communication, we have identified a range of different practices that are evidence of youth-defined new media literacies. On the friendship-driven side, we have seen youth developing shared norms for online publicity, including how to represent oneself in online profiles, norms for displaying peer networks online, the ranking of relationships in social network sites, and the development of new genres of written communication such as composed casualness in online messages. On the interest-driven side, youth continue to test the limits on forms of new media literacy and expression. Here we see youth developing a wide range of more specialized and sometimes exclusionary forms of new media literacies that are defined in opposition to those developed in more mainstream youth practices. In geeked-out interest-driven groups, we have seen youth engage in the specialized “elite” vocabularies of gaming and esoteric fan knowledge and develop new experimental genres that make use of the authoring and editing capabilities of digital media. These include personal and amateur media that are being circulated online, such as photos, video blogs, Web comics, and podcasts, as well as derivative works such as fan fiction, fan art, mods, mashups, remixes, and fansubbing.

It is important to recognize the diverse genre conventions of youth new media literacy before developing educational programs in this space. Particularly when addressing learning and literacy that grow out of informal, peer-driven practices, we must realize that norms and standards are deeply situated in

investments and identities of kids' own cultural and social worlds. For example, authoring of online profiles is an important literacy skill on both the friendship- and interest-driven sides, but one mobilizes a genre of popularity and coolness, and the other a genre of geek credibility. Similarly, the "elite" language of committed gamers involves literacies that are of little, and possibly negative, value for boys looking for a romantic partner in their school peer networks. Following from this, it is problematic to develop a standardized set of benchmarks to measure kids' levels of new media and technical literacy.

On the interest-driven side, we saw adult leadership in these groups as central to how standards for expertise and literacy are being defined. For example, the heroes of the gaming world include both teens and adults who define the identity and practice of an elite gamer. The same holds for all of the creative production groups that we examined. The leadership in this space, however, is largely cut off from the educators and policy makers who are defining standards for new media literacy in the adult-dominated world. Building more bridges between these different communities of practice could shape awareness on both the in-school and out-of-school side, if we could respond in a coordinated and mutually respectful way to the quickly evolving norms and expertise of more geeked-out and technically sophisticated experimental new media literacies.

Peer-based learning has unique properties that drive engagement in ways that differ fundamentally from formal instruction.

We see peer-based learning in networked publics in both the mainstream friendship-driven hanging out in sites such as MySpace and Facebook as well as in the more subcultural participation of geeked-out interest-driven groups. In these settings, the focus of learning and engagement is not defined by institutional accountabilities but rather emerges from kids' interests and everyday social communication. Although learning in both of these contexts is driven primarily by the peer group, the structure and the focus of the peer group differ substantially, as does the content of the learning and communication. While friendship-driven participation is largely in the mode of hanging out and negotiating issues of status and belonging in local, given peer networks, interest-driven participation happens in more distributed and specialized knowledge networks. In both the friendship-driven and interest-driven side, however, peers are an important driver of learning. Peer-based learning is characterized by a context of reciprocity, where participants feel they can both produce and evaluate knowledge and culture. Whether it is commenting on MySpace or on a fan fiction forum, participants both contribute their own content as well as comment on the content of others. More expert participants provide models and leadership but do not have authority over fellow participants. When these peer negotiations are happening in a context of public scrutiny, youth are motivated to develop their identities and reputations through these peer-based networks, exchanging comments and links and jockeying for visibility. These efforts at gaining recognition are directed at

a network of respected peers rather than formal evaluations of teachers or tests. In contrast to what they experience under the guidance of parents and teachers, with peer-based learning we see youth taking on more “grown-up” roles and ownership of their own self-presentation, learning, and evaluation of others.

In contexts of peer-based learning adults can still have an important role to play, although it is not a conventionally authoritative role. In friendship-driven practices that center on sociability in given school-based networks, direct adult participation is often unwelcome, but in interest-driven groups there is a much stronger role for more experienced participants to play. Unlike instructors in formal educational settings, however, these adults participate not as educators but as passionate hobbyists and creators, and youth see them as experienced peers, not as people who have authority over them. These adults exert tremendous influence in setting communal norms and what educators might call learning goals, although they do not have direct authority over newcomers. The most successful examples we have seen of youth media programs are ones that bring kids together based on kids’ own passionate interests and that have plenty of unstructured time for kids to tinker and explore without being dominated by direct instruction. Unlike classroom teachers, these lab teachers and youth-program leaders are not authority figures responsible for assessing kids’ competence, but rather they are what Dilan Mahendran has called “co-conspirators,” much like the adult participants in online interest-driven groups. In this, our research is in alignment with what Chávez

and Soep (2005) have identified as the “pedagogy of collegiality” that defines adult-youth collaboration in what they see as successful youth media programs.

Kids’ participation in networked publics suggests some new ways of thinking about the role of public education. Rather than thinking of public education as a burden that schools must shoulder on their own, what would it mean to think of public education as a responsibility of a more distributed network of people and institutions? And rather than assuming that education is primarily about preparing for jobs and careers, what would it mean to think of education as a process of guiding kids’ participation in public life more generally, a public life that includes social, recreational, and civic engagement? And finally, what would it mean to enlist help in this endeavor from an engaged and diverse set of publics that are broader than what we traditionally think of as educational and civic institutions? In addition to publics that are dominated by adult interests, these publics should include those that are relevant and accessible to kids now, where they can find role models, recognition, friends, and collaborators who are coparticipants in the journey of growing up in a digital age. We hope that our research has provoked these questions.

