

## **Enabling Participation**

While to adults the Internet primarily means the world wide web, for children it means email, chat, games—and here they are already content producers. Too often neglected, except as a source of risk, these communication and entertainment-focused activities, by contrast with the information-focused uses at the centre of public and policy agendas, are driving emerging media literacy. Through such uses, children are most engaged—multi-tasking, becoming proficient at navigation and manoeuvre so as to win, judging their participation and that of others, etc. . . . In terms of personal development, identity, expression and their social consequences—participation, social capital, civic culture—these are the activities that serve to network today's younger generation.<sup>7</sup>

### **Participatory Culture**

For the moment, let's define participatory culture as one with

1. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,

3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,
4. members who believe that their contributions matter, and
5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created).

Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued.

In such a world, many will only dabble, some will dig deeper, and still others will master the skills that are most valued within the community. The community itself, however, provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation. Historically, we have valued creative writing or art classes not only because they help to identify and train future writers and artists, but also because the creative process is valuable on its own; every child deserves the chance to express him- or herself through words, sounds, and images, even if most will never write, perform, or draw professionally. Having these experiences, we believe, changes the way youths think about themselves and alters the way they look at work created by others.

Most public-policy discussion of new media has centered on technologies—tools and their affordances. The computer is discussed as a magic black box with the potential to create a learn-

Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement.

ing revolution (in the positive version) or a black hole that consumes resources that might be better devoted to traditional classroom activities (in the more critical version). Yet, as the epigraph above suggests, media operate in specific cultural and institutional contexts that determine how and why they are used. We may never know whether a tree makes a sound when it falls in a forest with no one around. But, clearly, a computer does nothing in the absence of a user. The computer does not operate in a vacuum. Injecting digital technologies into the classroom necessarily affects our relationship with every other communications technology, changing how we feel about what can or should be done with pencils and paper, chalk and blackboard, books, films, and recordings.

Rather than dealing with each technology in isolation, we would do better to take an ecological approach, thinking about the interrelationship among different communication technologies, the cultural communities that grow up around them, and the activities they support. Media systems consist of communication technologies and the social, cultural, legal, political, and economic institutions, practices, and protocols that shape and surround them.<sup>8</sup> The same task can be performed with a range of different technologies, and the same technology can be

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deployed toward a variety of different ends. Some tasks may be easier with some technologies than with others, and thus the introduction of a new technology may inspire certain uses. Yet these activities become widespread only if the culture supports them, if they fill recurring needs at a particular historical juncture. The tools available to a culture matter, but what that culture chooses to do with those tools matters more.

The importance of culture's complex relationships with technologies is why we focus in this paper on the concept of participatory cultures rather than on interactive technologies. Inter-activity is a property of the technology,<sup>9</sup> while participation is a property of culture. Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. A focus on expanding access to new technologies carries us only so far if we do not also foster the skills and cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those tools toward our own ends.

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We are using participation as a term that cuts across educational practices, creative processes, community life, and democratic citizenship. Our goals should be to encourage youths to develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture. Many young people are already part of this process through

**Affiliations** Memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media, such as Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, message boards, metagaming, or game clans.

**Expressions** Producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videos, fan fiction, zines, or mash-ups.

**Collaborative problem-solving** Working together in teams—formal and informal—to complete tasks and develop new knowledge, such as through *Wikipedia*, alternative reality gaming, or spoiling.

**Circulations** Shaping the flow of media, such as podcasting or blogging.

The MacArthur Foundation has launched an ambitious effort to document these activities and the roles they play in young people's lives. We do not want to preempt or duplicate that effort here. For the moment, it is sufficient to argue that each of these activities contains opportunities for learning, creative expression, civic engagement, political empowerment, and economic advancement.

Through these various forms of participatory culture, young people are acquiring skills that will serve them well in the

future. Participatory culture is reworking the rules by which school, cultural expression, civic life, and work operate. A growing body of work has focused on the value of participatory culture and its long-term impact on children's understanding of themselves and the world around them.

### **Affinity Spaces**

Many have argued that these new participatory cultures represent ideal learning environments. James Gee calls such informal learning cultures "affinity spaces,"<sup>10</sup> and explores why people learn more, participate more actively, and engage more deeply with popular culture than they do with the contents of their textbooks. Affinity spaces offer powerful opportunities for learning, Gee argues, because they are sustained by common endeavors that bridge differences—age, class, race, gender, and educational level—and because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests, because they depend on peer-to-peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills, and because they allow each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others. For example, Rebecca Black finds that the "beta-reading" (or editorial feedback) provided by online fan communities helps contributors grow as writers, not only helping them master the basic building blocks of sentence construction and narrative structure, but also pushing them to be close readers of the works that inspire them.<sup>11</sup> Participants in the beta-reading process learn both by receiving feedback on their own work and by giving feedback to others, creating an ideal peer-to-peer learning community.

Affinity spaces are distinct from formal educational systems in several ways. While formal education is often conservative, the informal learning within popular culture is often experimental. While the formal is static, the informal is innovative. The structures that sustain informal learning are more provisional; those supporting formal education are more institutional. Informal learning communities can evolve to respond to short-term needs and temporary interests, whereas the institutions supporting public education have changed little despite decades of school reform. Informal learning communities are ad hoc and localized; formal educational communities are bureaucratic and increasingly national in scope. We can move in and out of informal learning communities if they fail to meet our needs; we enjoy no such mobility in our relations to formal education.

Affinity spaces are also highly generative environments from which new aesthetic experiments and innovations emerge. A 2005 report on *The Future of Independent Media* argued that this kind of grassroots creativity was an important engine of cultural transformation:

The media landscape will be reshaped by the bottom-up energy of media created by amateurs and hobbyists as a matter of course. This bottom-up energy will generate enormous creativity, but it will also tear apart some of the categories that organize the lives and work of media makers. . . . A new generation of media-makers and viewers are emerging which could lead to a sea change in how media is made and consumed.<sup>12</sup>

This report celebrates a world in which everyone has access to the means of creative expression and the networks supporting artistic distribution. The Pew study suggests something more:

young people who create and circulate their own media are more likely to respect the intellectual property rights of others because they feel a greater stake in the cultural economy.<sup>13</sup> Both reports suggest we are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced.

David Buckingham argues that young people's lack of interest in news and their disconnection from politics reflects their perception of disempowerment. "By and large, young people are not defined by society as political subjects, let alone as political agents. Even in the areas of social life that affect and concern them to a much greater extent than adults—most notably education—political debate is conducted almost entirely 'over their heads.'"<sup>14</sup> Politics, as constructed by the news, becomes a spectator sport, something we watch but not do. Yet the new participatory culture offers many opportunities for youths to engage in civic debates, participate in community life, and even become political leaders, even if sometimes only through the "second lives" offered by massively multiplayer games or online fan communities.

Empowerment comes from making meaningful decisions within a real civic context: we learn the skills of citizenship by becoming political actors and gradually coming to understand

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the choices we make in political terms. Today's children learn through play the skills they will apply to more serious tasks later. The challenge is how to connect decisions made in the context of our everyday lives with the decisions made at local, state, or national levels. The step from watching television news to acting politically seems greater than the transition from being a political actor in a game world to acting politically in the "real world." Participating in these affinity spaces also has economic implications. We suspect that young people who spend more time playing within these new media environments will feel greater comfort interacting with one another via electronic channels, will have greater fluidity in navigating information landscapes, will be better able to multitask and make rapid decisions about the quality of information they are receiving, and will be able to collaborate better with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. These claims are borne out by research conducted by Beck and Wade into the ways that early game-play experiences affect subsequent work habits and professional activities.<sup>15</sup> Beck and Wade conclude that gamers were more open to taking risks and engaging in competition but also more open to collaborating with others and more willing to revise earlier assumptions.

This focus on the value of participating within the new media culture stands in striking contrast to recent reports from the Kaiser Family Foundation that have bemoaned the amount of time young people spend on "screen media."<sup>16</sup> The Kaiser reports collapse a range of different media-consumption and media-production activities into the general category of "screen time" without reflecting very deeply on the different degrees of social connectivity, creativity, and learning involved. We do

not mean to dismiss the very real concerns they raise: that mediated experience may squeeze out time for other learning activities; that contemporary children often lack access to real-world play spaces, with adverse health consequences; that adults may inadequately supervise and interact with children regarding the media they consume (and produce); and that the moral values and commercialization in much contemporary entertainment may be harmful. Yet the focus on negative effects of media consumption offers an incomplete picture. These accounts do not appropriately value the skills and knowledge young people are gaining through their involvement with new media, and, as a consequence, they may mislead us about the roles teachers and parents should play in helping children learn and grow.