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# Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture

Media Education for the 21st Century

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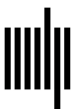
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## Why We Should Teach Media Literacy: Three Core Problems

Some defenders of the new digital cultures have acted as though youths can simply acquire these skills on their own without adult intervention or supervision. Children and youths do indeed know more about these new media environments than most parents and teachers. In fact, we do not need to protect them so much as engage them in critical dialogues that help them to articulate more fully their intuitive understandings of these experiences. To say that children are not victims of media is not to say that they, any more than anyone else, have fully mastered the complex and still-emerging social practices.

There are three core flaws with the *laissez-faire* approach. The first is that it does not address the fundamental inequalities in young people's access to new media technologies and the opportunities for participation they represent (what we call the *participation gap*). The second is that it assumes that children are actively reflecting on their media experiences and thus can articulate what they learn from their participation (the *transparency problem*). The third is that it assumes children, on their own, can develop the ethical norms needed to cope with a complex and diverse social environment online (the *ethics challenge*).

Any attempt to provide meaningful media education in the age of participatory culture must begin by addressing these three core concerns.

### **The Participation Gap**

Cities around the country are providing wireless Internet access for their residents. Some cities, such as Tempe, Arizona, charge users a fee; others, such as Philadelphia, Boston, and Cambridge, plan to provide high-speed wireless Internet access free of charge. In an interview on PBS's *Nightly News Hour* in November 2005, Philadelphia mayor John Street spoke of the link between Internet access and educational achievement:

Philadelphia will allow low-income families, families that are on the cusp of their financial capacity, to be able to be fully and completely connected. We believe that our public school children should be—their families have to be connected or else they will fall behind, and, in many cases, never catch up.<sup>17</sup>

Philadelphia's Emergency People's Shelter (EPS) is ahead of the curve; the nonprofit group's free network access serves shelter residents and the surrounding neighborhood. Gloria Guard of EPS said,

What we realized is if we can't get computers into the homes of our constituents and our neighbors and of this neighborhood, there are children in those households who will not be able to keep up in the marketplace. They won't be able to keep up with their schoolmates. They won't be able to even apply for college. We thought it was really important to get computer skills and connection to the Internet into as many homes as possible.<sup>18</sup>

However, simply passing out technology is not enough. Expanding access to computers will help bridge some of the gaps between digital haves and have nots, but only in a context in which free Wi-Fi is coupled with new educational initiatives to help youths and adults learn how to use those tools effectively.

Throughout the 1990s, the country focused enormous energy on combating the digital divide in technological access. The efforts have ensured that most American youths have at least minimal access to networked computers at school or in public libraries. However, as a 2005 report on children's online experience in the United Kingdom concluded,

No longer are children and young people only or even mainly divided by those with or without access, though "access" is a moving target in terms of speed, location, quality and support, and inequalities in access do persist. Increasingly, children and young people are divided into those for whom the Internet is an increasingly rich, diverse, engaging and stimulating resource of growing importance in their lives and those for whom it remains a narrow, unengaging, if occasionally useful, resource of rather less significance.<sup>19</sup>

What a person could accomplish with an outdated machine in a public library with mandatory filtering software and no opportunity for storage or transmission pales in comparison to what the same person could accomplish with a home computer with unfettered Internet access, high bandwidth, and continuous connectivity.<sup>20</sup> Our school systems' inability to close this participation gap has negative consequences for everyone involved. On the one hand, those youths who are most advanced in media literacies are often stripped of their technol-

ogies and robbed of their best techniques for learning in an effort to ensure a uniform experience for all in the classroom. On the other hand, many youths who have had no exposure to these new participatory cultures outside school find themselves struggling to keep up with their peers.

Wartella, O'Keefe, and Scantlin reached a similar conclusion:

Closing the digital divide will depend less on technology and more on providing the skills and content that is most beneficial. . . . Children who have access to home computers demonstrate more positive attitudes towards computers, show more enthusiasm and report more enthusiasm and ease when using computers than those who do not.<sup>21</sup>

More often than not, those youths who have developed the most comfort with the online world are the ones who dominate classroom use of computers, pushing aside less technically skilled classmates. We would be wrong, however, to see this as a simple binary of youths who have technological access and those who do not. Wartella and her coauthors note, for example, that game systems make their way into a growing number of working-class homes, even if laptops and personal computers do not. Working-class youths may have access to some of the benefits of play described here, but they may still lack the ability to produce and distribute their own media.

In a 2005 report prepared for the MacArthur Foundation, Lyman finds that children's experiences online are shaped by a range of social factors, including class, age, gender, race, nationality, and point of access. He notes, for example, that middle-class youths are more likely to rely on resources and assistance from peers and family within their own homes and thus seem more autonomous at school than working-class children, who

often must rely more heavily on teachers and peers to make up for a lack of experience at home. The middle-class children thus seem “naturally” superior in their use of technology, further amplifying their own self-confidence in their knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

Historically, those youths who had access to books or classical recordings in their homes, whose parents took them to concerts or museums, or who engaged in dinner conversation developed—almost without conscious consideration—skills that helped them perform well in school. Those experiences, which were widespread among the middle class and rare among the working class, became a kind of class distinction that shaped how teachers perceived students. These new forms of cultural participation may be playing a similar role. These activities shape the skills and knowledge students bring into the classroom and, in this fashion, determine how teachers and peers perceive these students. Castells tells us about youths who are excluded from these experiences: “Increasingly, as computer use is ever less a lifestyle option, ever more an everyday necessity, inability to use computers or find information on the web is a matter of stigma, of social exclusion, revealing not only changing social norms but also the growing centrality of computers to work, education and politics.”<sup>23</sup>

Writing on how contemporary industry values our “portfolios” as much as our knowledge, Gee suggests that what gives elite teens their head start is their capacity to

pick up a variety of experiences (e.g., the “right” sort of summer camps, travel, and special activities), skills (not just school-based skills, but a wide variety of interactional, aesthetic, and technological skills), and achievements (honors, awards, projects) in terms of which they can help to define themselves as worthy of admission to elite educational institutions and worthy of professional success later in life.<sup>24</sup>

They become adept at identifying opportunities for leadership and accomplishment; they adjust quickly to new situations, embrace new roles and goals, and interact with people of diverse backgrounds. Even if these opportunities were not formally valued by our educational institutions or listed on a resume when applying for a job, the skills and self-confidence gathered by moving across all of these online communities surely would manifest themselves in other ways, offering yet another leg up to youths on one side and another disadvantage to youths on the opposite side of the participation gap.

### The Transparency Problem

Although youths are becoming more adept at using media as resources (for creative expression, research, social life, etc.), they often are limited in their ability to examine the media themselves. Sherry Turkle was among the first to call attention to this transparency problem:

Games such as *SimLife* teach players to think in an active way about complex phenomena (some of them “real life,” some of them not) as dynamic, evolving systems. But they also encourage people to get used to manipulating a system whose core assumptions they do not see and which may or may not be “true.”<sup>25</sup>

Not everyone agrees. In an essay on the game *SimCity*, Ted Friedman contends that game players seek to identify and exploit the rules of the system in order to beat the game.<sup>26</sup> The antagonistic relationship between player and game designer means that game players may be more suspicious of the rules

structuring their experiences than are the consumers of many other kinds of media. Conversations about games expose flaws in games' construction, which also may lead to questions about the games' governing assumptions. Subsequent games have, in fact, allowed players to reprogram the core models. There is a difference between trying to master the rules of the game and recognizing the ways those rules structure our perception of reality, though. It may be much easier to see what is in the game than to recognize what is missing.

This issue of transparency crops up regularly in the first wave of field reports on the pedagogical use of games. Karen Schrier developed a location-specific game for teaching American history, which was played in Lexington, Massachusetts; her game was designed to encourage reflection on competing and contradictory accounts of who fired the first shot of the American Revolution.<sup>27</sup> The project asked students to experience the ways historians interpret evidence and evaluate competing truths. Such debates emerged spontaneously around the game-play experience. Yet Schrier was surprised by another phenomenon: the young people took the game's representation of historical evidence at face value, acting as if all of the information in the game were authentic.

Schrier offers several possible explanations for this transparency problem, ranging from the legacy of textbook publishing, where instructional materials did not encourage users to question their structuring or their interpretation of the data, to the tendency to "suspend our disbelief" in order to have a more immersive play experience. Kurt Squire found similar patterns when he sought to integrate the commercial game *Civilization III*



into world-history classes. Students were adept at formulating “what if” hypotheses, which they tested through their game play, yet they lacked a vocabulary to critique how the game itself constructed history, and they had difficulty imagining how other games might represent the same historical processes in different terms. In both cases, students were learning how to read information from and through games, but they were not yet learning how to read games as texts that were constructed with their own aesthetic norms, genre conventions, ideological biases, and codes of representation.<sup>28</sup> These findings suggest the importance of coupling the pedagogical use of new media technologies with a greater focus on media literacy.

These concerns about the transparency of games, even when used in instructional contexts, are closely related to concerns about how young people (or indeed, any of us) assess the quality of information we receive. As Renee Hobbs has suggested, “Determining the truth value of information has become increasingly difficult in an age of increasing diversity and ease of access to information.”<sup>29</sup> More recent work by the Harvard Good Works Project has found that issues of format and design are often more important than issues of content in determining

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how much credibility young people attach to the content of a particular Web site.<sup>30</sup> This research suggests some tendency to read “professional” sites as more credible than “amateur” materials, although students lack a well-developed set of standards for distinguishing between the two. In her recent book *The Internet Playground*, Ellen Seiter expresses concern that young people are finding it increasingly difficult to separate commercial from noncommercial content in online environments: “The Internet is more like a mall than a library; it resembles a gigantic public relations collection more than it does an archive of scholars.”<sup>31</sup>

Increasingly, content comes to us already branded, already shaped through an economics of sponsorship, if not overt advertising. We do not know how much these commercial interests influence what we see and what we do not see. Commercial interests even shape the order of listings on search engines in ways that are often invisible to those who use them. Increasingly, opportunities to participate online are branded such that even when young people produce and share their own media, they do so under terms set by commercial interests. Children, Seiter found, often had trouble identifying advertising practices in the popular *Neopets* site, in part because the product references were so integrated into the game. The children were used to a world where commercials stood apart from the entertainment content and thus they equated branding with banner advertisements. This is where the transparency issue becomes especially dangerous. Seiter concludes, “The World Wide Web is a more aggressive and stealthy marketer to children than television ever was, and children need as much

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information about its business practices as teachers and parents can give them."<sup>32</sup> Children need a safe space within which they can master the skills they need as citizens and consumers as they learn to parse messages from self-interested parties, and where they can separate fact from falsehood as they begin to experiment with new forms of creative expression and community participation.

### The Ethics Challenge

In *Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work*, Wendy Fischman and her coauthors discuss how young journalists learn the ethical norms that will define their future professional practice. These writers, they find, acquired their skills most often by writing for high school newspapers. For the most part, the authors suggest, student journalists worked in highly cohesive and insulated settings. Their work was supervised, for better or worse, by a range of adult authorities, some interested in promoting the qualities of good journalism, some concerned with protecting the reputation of the school. Their work was free of commercial constraints and sheltered from outside exposure. The ethical norms and professional practices

they were acquiring were well understood by the adults around them.<sup>33</sup>

Now, consider how few of those qualities might be applied to the emerging participatory cultures. In a world in which the line between consumers and producers is blurring, young people are finding themselves in situations that no one would have anticipated a decade or two ago. Their writing is much more open to the public and can have more far-reaching consequences. Young people are creating new modes of expression that are poorly understood by adults, and as a result they receive little to no guidance or supervision. The ethical implications of these emerging practices are fuzzy and ill-defined. Young people are discovering that information they put online to share with their friends can bring unwelcome attention from strangers.

In professional contexts, professional organizations are the watchdog of ethical norms. Yet in more casual settings, there is seldom a watchdog at all. No established set of ethical guidelines shapes the actions of bloggers and podcasters, for example. How should teens decide what they should or should not post about themselves or their friends on *LiveJournal* or *MySpace*? Different online communities have their own norms about what information should remain within the group and what can be circulated more broadly, and many sites depend on self-disclosure to police whether the participants are children or adults. Yet many young people seem willing to lie to access those communities.

Ethics become much murkier in game spaces, where invented identities are assumed and actions are fictive, designed to allow broader rein to explore (sometimes darker) fantasies. That said,

unwritten and often imperfectly shared norms exist about acceptable or unacceptable conduct. Essays such as Julian Dibbel's "A Rape in Cyberspace," Henry Jenkins's "Playing Politics in Alphaville," and always\_black's "Bow Nigger" offer reminders that participants in these worlds understand the same experiences in very different terms and follow different ethical norms as they face off against each other.<sup>34</sup>

In *Making Good*, Fischman and coauthors found that high school journalists felt constrained by the strong social ties in their high school and were unwilling to publish some articles they believed would be received negatively by their peers or that might disrupt the social dynamics of their society. What constraints, if any, apply in online realms? Do young people feel that same level of investment in their gaming guilds or their fan communities? Or do the abilities to mask real identities or move from one community to another mean there are fewer immediate consequences for antisocial behavior?

One important goal of media education should be to encourage young people to become more reflective about the ethical choices they make as participants and communicators and about the impact they have on others. In the short run, we may have to accept that cyberspace's ethical norms are in flux: we are taking part in a prolonged experiment in what happens when barriers of entry into a communication landscape become lower. For the present moment, asking and working through questions of ethical practices may be more valuable than the answers produced because the process will help everyone to recognize and articulate the different assumptions that guide their behavior.

As we think about meaningful pedagogical intervention, we must keep in mind three core concerns:

- How do we ensure that every child has access to the skills and experiences needed to become a full participant in the social, cultural, economic, and political future of our society?
- How do we ensure that every child has the ability to articulate his or her understanding of how media shapes perceptions of the world?
- How do we ensure that every child has been socialized into the emerging ethical standards that should shape their practices as media makers and as participants in online communities?

To address these challenges, we must rethink which core skills and competencies we want our children to acquire in their learning experiences. The new participatory culture places new emphasis on familiar skills that have long been central to American education; it also requires teachers to pay greater attention to the social skills and cultural competencies that are emerging in the new media landscape. In the next sections, we provide a framework for thinking about the type of learning that should occur if we are to address the participation gap, the transparency problem, and the ethics challenges.

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