

Executive Summary

According to a recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life project,¹ more than one-half of all teens have created media content, and roughly one-third of teens who use the Internet have shared content they produced. In many cases, these teens are actively involved in what we are calling *participatory cultures*. A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others' opinions of what they have created).

Forms of participatory culture include:

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.

A growing body of scholarship suggests potential benefits from these forms of participatory culture, including opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, a changed attitude toward intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered conception of citizenship. Access to this participatory culture functions as a new form of the hidden curriculum, shaping which youths will succeed and which will be left behind as they enter school and the workplace.

Some have argued that children and youths acquire these key skills and competencies on their own by interacting with popular culture. Three concerns, however, suggest the need for policy and pedagogical interventions:

The participation gap The unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youths for full participation in the world of tomorrow.

The transparency problem The challenges young people face in learning to recognize the ways that media shape perceptions of the world.

The ethics challenge The breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants.

Educators must work together to ensure that all young Americans have access to the skills and experiences needed to become full participants, can articulate their understanding of how media shapes perceptions, and are socialized into the emerging ethical standards that should shape their practices as media makers and participants in online communities.

A central goal of this report is to shift the focus of the digital-divide discourse from questions of technological access to those of opportunities for participation and the development of cultural competencies and social skills needed for full involvement. Schools as institutions have been slow to react to the emergence of this new participatory culture; the greatest opportunity for change is currently found in after-school programs and informal learning communities. Schools and after-school programs must devote more attention to fostering what we call the *new media literacies*: a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape. Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement. The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy and research, technical, and critical-analysis skills learned in the classroom.

The new skills include:

Play The capacity to experiment with the surroundings as a form of problem solving.

Performance The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery.

Simulation The ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes.

Appropriation The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content.

Multitasking The ability to scan the environment and shift focus onto salient details.

Distributed cognition The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities.

Collective intelligence The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal.

Judgment The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources.

Transmedia navigation The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities.

Networking The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information.

Negotiation The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.

Fostering such social skills and cultural competencies requires a systemic approach to media education in the United States. Everyone involved in preparing young people to go out into the world has valuable contributions to help students acquire

the skills necessary for becoming full participants in society. Schools, after-school programs, and parents have distinctive roles in encouraging and nurturing these skills.

Note

1. Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden, *Teen Content Creators and Consumers* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005), http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/166/report_display.asp.

