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Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture

Media Education for the 21st Century

By: Henry Jenkins

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Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century

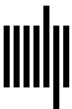
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The Challenge Ahead: Ensuring that All Benefit from the Expanding Media Landscape

Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Bill Ivey, the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and Steven J. Tepper, a professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University, described what they see as the long-term consequences of this participation gap:

Increasingly, those who have the education, skills, financial resources, and time required to navigate the sea of cultural choice will gain access to new cultural opportunities. . . . They will be the pro-ams [professional amateurs] who network with other serious amateurs and find audiences for their work. They will discover new forms of cultural expression that engage their passions and help them forge their own identities, and will be the curators of their own expressive lives and the mavens who enrich the lives of others. . . . At the same time, those citizens who have fewer resources—less time, less money, and less knowledge about how to navigate the cultural system—will increasingly rely on the cultural fare offered to them by consolidated media and entertainment conglomerates. . . . Finding it increasingly difficult to take advantage of the pro-am revolution, such citizens will be trapped on the wrong side of the cultural divide. So technology and economic change are conspiring to create a new cultural elite—and a new cultural underclass. It is not yet clear what such a cultural divide portends: what its consequences will be for

democracy, civility, community, and quality of life. But the emerging picture is deeply troubling. Can America prosper if its citizens experience such different and unequal cultural lives?¹²¹

Ivey and Tepper bring us back to the core concerns that have framed this essay: how can we “ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, [creative,] and economic life?” How do we guarantee that the rich opportunities afforded by the expanding media landscape are available to all? What can we do in schools, after-school programs, and the home to give our youngest children a head start and allow our more mature youths the chance to develop and grow as effective participants and ethical communicators? This is the challenge that faces education at all levels at the dawn of a new era of participatory culture.

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