

5 Conclusion

The main aim of this report has been to make a case for broadening common perceptions about who is counted among digital youth. I have brought together a wide range of research across disciplines (e.g., communication, sociology, anthropology, and human-computer interaction) on how youth with disabilities adopt and use media at home as well as part of their household activities. I have placed terms that dominate the conversation about children and media in the United States—such as screen time (chapter 2) and age-appropriate media (chapter 4)—under the metaphoric microscope to examine the assumptions about children and ability on which these ideas are based. Chapter 3 captures how disability is a dynamic factor shaping how families relate to media, one another, and society at large. The remainder of this report outlines clear parameters for future research on the experiences that youth with disabilities and their families have with media in the age of digital, mobile, and networked technologies.

Areas for Future Research and Development

Connected Learning

More research is needed on how learning that takes place through media use at home might be leveraged across the different social

settings (e.g., school, clubs, and community groups) in which youth with disabilities learn. This encompasses a range of physical, digital, and more hybrid spaces. According to the “connected learning” framework (Ito et al. 2013), learning is most successful when it is reinforced in multiple contexts and embedded within a strong network of social relationships, can support young people’s interest-driven learning, and that learning can be directed toward traditional educational, economic, and political opportunities. Intergenerational partnerships, mentoring programs, and learning communities can be particularly impactful for young people with disabilities.

Social Media Use

Parents need carefully vetted information on the social benefits and drawbacks of specific types of information and communication technologies for children with various disabilities. For example, little is known about young people with disabilities’ engagement in virtual worlds (Stendal 2012). While there has been some research done on how texting can be a crucial mode of communication for deaf and hard-of-hearing youth, little is known about their use of other increasingly popular mobile platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram. In addition to mainstream social network sites, there is much to be learned about young people’s sociality within online communities specific to various disabilities, including Squag, a social networking site for autistic children, and Asperclick, a site founded by a young woman with Asperger’s syndrome.

Market Analysis

Snapshots of the children’s digital media industry are helpful tools for tracking trends along with holding the developers of

apps, software, Web sites, and games accountable to their educational claims (see, for example, Guernsey et al. 2012). At present, there has been no substantial evaluation of the rapidly growing special education category in Apple's iTunes App Store, which showcases some of the most expensive apps in the entire App Store. While changes in technology are swift, it is important to understand how this market is evolving and if parents are being taken advantage of.

Active Video Gaming

Youth with disabilities are at a higher risk of childhood obesity than typically developing children (chapter 2). Among typically developing youth, there have been mixed results regarding whether or not active video games or "exergames" (e.g., Wii Fit) can increase overall physical activity levels. Outside rehabilitation settings, there is limited research on the casual use of active video games among children with physical or cognitive disabilities (Biddiss and Irwin 2010). Motion-sensing devices such as the Kinect for Xbox may be particularly helpful for use at home because they are easily customizable and can provide individualized feedback through the games.

Creative Computing

A number of technologies for creative production are designed in ways that take into account natural variation in how children learn, play, move, and think. These include Scratch, a visual programming environment (Resnick and Silverman 2005), and MaKey MaKey, a tangible interface that can be used to adapt previously inaccessible technology such as video game controllers (Silver, Rosenbaum, and Shaw 2012). Little is known, however, about how youth with disabilities and their families make

use of these technologies (Leduc-Mills, Dec, and Schimmel 2013; Peppler and Warschauer 2012).

Multiple Dimensions of Difference

While we know that diverse populations of young people have taken up digital media (Everett 2008b), it is unclear how race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class factor into the use (and nonuse) of digital media by youth with different disabilities. For example, Peg Lindstrand (2002) found that parents of children with disabilities reported having gendered expectations of their child's interest in computer-based activities, resulting in more limited opportunities with technology for girls with disabilities. More work is also needed on activist work by youth with disabilities, and how this work is facilitated by networked communication technologies and digital media.

Summary

Young people with disabilities are not waiting idly for others' permission to use new media in interesting and unexpected ways. As they have been historically, youth with disabilities are drivers of technological change, media makers, and innovators themselves (see, for instance, Lang 2000). Many are taking part in Kickstarter and Change.org campaigns, hosting their own YouTube channels, exploring animation and filmmaking, and creating Tumblr sites showcasing their creative endeavors (see, for example, DiBlasio 2014; NBC News 2014). As with other young people, they engage in friendship- and interest-driven uses of media outside the classroom, laboratory, and therapeutic setting (Ito et al. 2009).

While advances in media and technology have enabled a wider range of possibilities among youth with disabilities, these options exist among various institutional, educational, cultural, economic, and social constraints. As Mizuko Ito and her colleagues (2013, 41) write, “Without a broader vision of social change, ... new technologies will only serve to reinforce existing institutional goals and forms of social inequity.” Young people with disabilities are at great risk for being isolated from educational, economic, and political opportunities, preventing them from competing and contributing as adults with disabilities in the twenty-first century and beyond. Because so many of the quickly evolving technologies we interact with every day are lacking applied research, finding and exploring the factors underlying how media shapes and is shaped by learning communities of those with disabilities is key.

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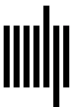
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