

Have the Digital Media Changed American Youth?
Insights from a MacArthur-Sponsored Convening of Researchers

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Introduction

The MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative recently sponsored a convening of researchers that focused on the role of digital media in young people's lives. Hosted at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation in Princeton, New Jersey, the December 10, 2009, meeting brought together researchers from a variety of disciplines and research methodologies who share a common interest in the changes over time in youth's interests, experiences, and development that appear to be associated with their digital media practices.

The meeting gave researchers the opportunity to share their research and reflections on the ways in which digital media may be reshaping various aspects of young people's lives. In the realm of youth's social lives, we discussed the positive and negative effects of digital media on youth's developing sense of self and interpersonal relationships. In the realm of youth's civic lives, we explored digital media's influence on youth's civic literacy and public participation. While we recognize that young people may not themselves distinguish between the social and civic realms, my colleagues and I honor here the traditional distinction between the social and the civic spheres. Different opportunities and challenges arise when one assumes the role of friend as opposed to the role of citizen.

Perhaps the most intriguing outcome of the meeting was the realization that, despite our different disciplinary backgrounds and research agendas, we have arrived at many of the same conclusions with respect to the potentials and perils associated with young people's digital media activities. At the same time, an important shift in our thinking on this topic occurred during the course of the day's discussions. Upon laying out both the promises and perils of youth's online engagements, we started to explore how we might use the promises to address the perils. For instance, we considered how to increase youth participation in interest-driven networks as a means to reverse the trend of declining youth civic engagement. Educational initiatives such as Nichole Pinkard's Digital Youth Network, an after-school program in Chicago, and Katie Salen's Question to Learn school in New York City strike us as promising interventions.

In attendance were Diane Dean of Illinois State University who, with Arthur Levine of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, has been studying current college students and comparing them with earlier cohorts from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; Paul Starr, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, an expert on the history of American journalism and a commentator on

¹ I wish to thank my colleagues at Project Zero, Howard Gardner, Carrie James, and Margaret Weigel, for their assistance in preparing this report and for their feedback on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank the other attendees of the convening, Morgan Arenson, Diane Dean, Heather Horst, Arthur Levine, Paul Starr, and Celka Straughn, for their helpful feedback.

contemporary uses of the media; Heather Horst of the University of California at Irvine, who, with Mimi Ito and others, conducts research on youth's informal learning with digital media; and Katie Davis, Howard Gardner, Carrie James, Celka Straughn, and Margaret Weigel of Harvard's Project Zero who, with the generous support of Judy Dimon, investigate digital media's impact on youth development. Also in attendance was Morgan Arenson, Program Officer at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, who helped to organize the meeting and also participated in the day's discussions. Unable to attend were digital media experts Mimi Ito of UCI and Sherry Turkle of MIT.

In this report, we document the most notable of the potentials and perils associated with youth's digital media use and summarize participants' thoughts on moving forward in the areas of research, practice, and policy.

Digital Media and Youth's Social Lives

Research conducted by the groups at UC Irvine and Harvard reveals the opportunities that digital media provide youth to express themselves and connect with their peers. Social network sites like Facebook offer youth a personal space that they control and can use to display their interests, daily activities, and network of friends. Because such communications are asynchronous and directed towards a computer screen rather than physically present people, youth may feel less wary of sharing aspects of their personalities and activities than they otherwise would if they were addressing the audience in-person. With such digital affordances, young people are encouraged to express and explore their identities, an important task of adolescence and emerging adulthood.

While certain features of online communication may lower individuals' inhibitions, Diane Dean noted that, because of the immediacy, uncontrollable dispersion, and permanence of digital imprints, there is actually far more room for youth to make mistakes online than in offline contexts, and far less room for their indiscretions to be overlooked, lived down, or forgotten. We alluded to danah boyd's four properties of networked publics – replicability, scalability, persistence, and searchability – that make the information youth post online widely visible and potentially long-lasting. Personal conversations or digital images shared with one's close friends may one day be viewed by a college admissions official or potential employer. Young people seem to understand the public nature of their online activities, although it is not apparent how many of them actually change their behavior as a result.

The veteran teachers that Margaret Weigel and Celka Straughn interviewed offered a possible clue to this question. They characterized today's youth as far more risk-averse than their predecessors. However, these teachers were primarily referring to their students' approach to schoolwork and other school-based activities. It is not clear whether this risk aversion applies to online contexts as well, or, by contrast, whether youth believe online spaces provide them with opportunities for increased risk-taking.² It may also be the case that risk-taking has more to do

² We are mindful of the possibility that what we might perceive as risky behavior online may not be perceived as such by youth.

with the particular individual than it does with his or her context. That is, some youth may be more prone than are their peers to taking risks regardless of whether they are offline or online.

Whether youth are more or less inhibited online, they are certainly careful about the selves they present in online spaces. Research conducted at Project Zero suggests that young people devote a high degree of time and attention to shaping their online personas. In listing their tastes in popular culture, posting pictures of themselves and their friends, and writing public messages to their friends, they make carefully considered and strategic decisions that are intended to convey a specific self-image. The teachers that Weigel and Straughn interviewed expressed concern that today's youth are so preoccupied with their outward appearance that they fail to direct equal attention to their personal beliefs, values, and goals.

Social network sites, instant messaging services, and cell phones have made it possible for today's young people to stay in constant contact with their friends – on family vacations, at night in their bedrooms, even under the table during dinner. While peer interactions play an important role in youth's developing sense of self, we noted in our conversations that increased connection does not necessarily translate into increased intimacy. In fact, 30% of the college students that Diane Dean and Arthur Levine surveyed in 2008-2009 reported feeling lonely – a figure likely to be under- rather than over-reported. Furthermore, the veteran teachers interviewed by Weigel and Straughn echoed Sherry Turkle's warning that constant connectivity may prevent youth from experiencing time for quiet reflection and developing a sense of personal autonomy.

In our meeting, we discussed how to encourage those aspects of youth's online activities that promote their developing sense of self and interpersonal relationships while discouraging those activities that may negatively affect their self-development and ability to form healthy friendships. First, it is important to recognize that each online space is unique and gives rise to specific norms and behaviors. Sites like Facebook and MySpace may place particular emphasis on self-presentation and public performance, but that does not mean all sites do. It would be a worthwhile endeavor to survey the sites that are popular among youth and compare them on this and other relevant dimensions. Similarly, whereas Twitter's 140 character tweets could be criticized for supporting exchanges that lack substance, blogging services like LiveJournal allow people to share their thoughts in greater detail and may actually enhance intimacy between friends as a result. More research is needed into the ways in which a site's design and rules of use shape the production of online norms.

Second, we agreed that youth would benefit from greater support (both from adult and peer mentors) in helping them make responsible decisions online. With some exceptions, notably Common Sense Media, educators and parents have been hesitant to engage youth in conversations about their online activities beyond warning them of online predators. This hesitation has created a vacuum that corporations like Google and News Corp have been only too happy to fill. As a result, to this point corporate entities have played a greater role in shaping youth's online behavior than have parents and teachers. We discussed the need for greater involvement on the part of all the adults (and older or wiser youth) in young people's lives as well as the possible utility of creating partnerships among research institutions, schools, parent groups, and corporations. Careful thought should be given to what these partnerships would look like and how they would operate.

Digital Media and Youth's Civic Lives

All participants recognized the vast amounts of information that digital media have placed at young people's fingertips. Prior to the widespread adoption of broadband Internet in the United States and other developed countries, access to information about current events was restricted to certain times of the day on television and radio, or it required the purchase of a book, newspaper, or magazine. Because these sources of information were subject to an editorial process and had high costs of distribution, their numbers were relatively small and the amount of content they produced was relatively modest. By contrast, today's youth can access, typically without charge, a wide variety of information sources, both professional and amateur, whose content is wide-ranging and continuously updated.

In theory, today's youth should be better informed about the world around them than any other generation of young people. In reality, however, the opposite appears to be the case. Paul Starr noted that surveys across developed countries show that in the 1950s and 1960s there was little difference by age in the degree of attention paid to news and politics. In the 1970s, young people started to show less interest in the wider world than older adults, and this gap has continued to widen in subsequent decades. From 1998-2008, 20-34% of young people aged 18-24 years said they consumed no news in an average day, compared to 14-19% of adults 25 years and older. This trend is reflected in Dean and Levine's 2008-2009 study of college students in the United States. Their study revealed high percentages of young people reporting a lack of even name recognition of many public figures. For instance, over 75% and 83% of survey respondents were not familiar with the names of former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulsen and Chinese leader Hu Jintao, respectively. In contrast, respondents to Dean and Levine's survey found it much easier to recognize entertainment figures like the performers Miley Cyrus and Pink, with whom only 8-10% of survey respondents were not familiar.

According to Starr, the idea that an abundance of information could have the paradoxical effect of creating a scarcity of attention is not new. With hundreds of television channels offered by cable providers and millions of websites available on the Internet, the news has largely been displaced by other sources of entertainment. Even if young people do find time to visit Internet sites or television channels covering the news, they are unlikely to stay for very long, since so many other, more entertaining, sites and channels are vying for their attention. Indeed, the fracturing of attention emerged as one of several themes in the day's discussions. The veteran teachers that Weigel and Straughn interviewed have observed a marked decline in students' focused and sustained attention over time. One teacher described today's students as "the perfect cocktail guests," since they know basic facts about a wide variety of issues but are unable to focus their attention long enough on any one issue to arrive at a deeper understanding of its dimensions. It should be mentioned that youth living in Northern and Western European countries likely display a deeper understanding of current events than their counterparts in North America and other parts of Europe. In these countries, the government has implemented deliberate policies intended to promote the public's awareness and understanding of civic issues. Starr noted that the opportunities for "incidental learning" made available by hourly news reports

broadcast on radio and television and shared by a broad audience are largely absent in the United States and other countries.

If the abundance of information made available by digital media technologies has not led to greater interest in or understanding of current events among young people, it should come as little surprise that the new opportunities to connect with like-minded people and form issue-oriented groups do not seem to have led to greater youth civic participation. While it is true that recent presidential elections have seen an increase in voting among young adults, Starr believes that this presidential level increase is not translating to an increase in voting in other elections – for example, at the state and local levels. With respect to other forms of public participation, Heather Horst shared findings from the Digital Youth Project such as the distinction between friendship-driven and interest-driven genres of participation. Whereas friendship-driven participation dominates most youth’s casual, unstructured communications among friends, the Digital Youth project found that only around 10% of the youth studied engaged in interest-driven activities, such as fan fiction or multiplayer role-playing games. Interest-driven activities often bring together youth and adults of various ages who share a common interest. While some scholars believe that engagement in such forms of participatory culture can eventually lead to engagement in participatory democracy, the researchers gathered at the Princeton convening acknowledged that the likelihood of this transition is far from clear. Furthermore, Howard Gardner noted a parallel between Horst’s 10% figure and Bill Damon’s research showing that only 16% of youth display a sense of purpose in their lives. Gardner wondered whether highly involved and interested youth will be so whether they are on- or offline, or whether digital media encourage participation in youth who would otherwise remain uninvolved.

During the convening, we asked ourselves how we might use our collective knowledge to promote youth’s understanding of and participation in public life. For instance, it appears that young people demonstrate a greater interest in local rather than national or international events, since these are the events that impact them directly. Perhaps this focus on the local might ultimately be used to attract youth’s attention to farther-reaching issues by connecting the former to the latter in a more explicit and compelling way. This strategy would require a better understanding of youth’s patterns of news consumption, including how they locate and engage with news sources and, indeed, what they consider to be news. Even if such an effort were to prove successful, however, it appears that young people need help in uncluttering their minds so that they can focus their attention on an issue long enough to arrive at a nuanced understanding of it.

In the realm of public participation, we contemplated how to alter the 90/10 ratio of friendship-driven to interest-driven networks in favor of the latter. Horst described findings from the Digital Youth Project indicating that “messaging around,” characterized by casual, low-stakes exploration online, may be one trajectory that can lead youth from friendship-driven “hanging out” to the “geeking out” genre of participation associated with interest-driven networks. In the second phase of their study, Horst and her colleagues will turn their attention to understanding more fully the progression from hanging out to messaging around to geeking out, as well as alternative trajectories and triggers for interest-driven learning. Even with this pathway uncovered, considerably more research is needed before we are able to know if, when, and how interest-

driven participation leads to civic participation. And, to answer this group of questions, the field must agree on how to define civic participation and identify appropriate strategies to measure it.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the meeting, Gardner asked participants to consider, as a result of the day's exchanges, what policy recommendations they would offer. Levine felt we have not made sufficient progress in our research to enter the policy arena at this time. Indeed, we all recognized several areas where knowledge is still lacking, such as the connection between participatory culture and participatory democracy and the extent to which the changes we are observing in youth are developmental versus generational. Such areas of inquiry require our attention if we are to succeed in marshaling the positive aspects of digital media to surmount the negative. In addition, further research will allow us to identify those aspects of youth's digital media practices that follow common historical patterns of moral panic and those aspects that represent a true historical turning point. In the case of the former, we can look to history for insight and guidance. In the case of the latter, however, we will need to invent new strategies for supporting youth development in this digital era.

To this end, Levine suggested that our efforts would be better spent if we were to continue with our research agendas and draw on our emerging knowledge to intervene in the realm of practice. Acknowledging the merits of this argument, some researchers nevertheless felt that we have important knowledge to share with policymakers right now. For instance, we discussed the merits of creating partnerships among different constituencies, such as corporations, educators, parents, and researchers; providing youth with adult and peer supports to help guide them in their online activities; and lowering the age at which media literacy and digital ethics are introduced into the school curriculum. If we fail to offer such empirically-supported proposals, an important voice will be missing as legislators make decisions that will shape how youth encounter and engage with digital media.