**Youth media production in the digital age:**
**some reflections – and a few provocations**

*This short article looks at the growing 'youth media' sector – community-based projects where young people come together to make their own media. I originally wrote it as an 'afterword' for a book edited by JoEllen Fisherkeller entitled International Perspectives on Youth Media (Peter Lang, 2011). It was intended to promote some critical questioning among youth media practitioners. I've slightly tweaked it here.*

For those of us who are old enough to remember the bygone age of analogue media, the advent of new digital technologies can sometimes appear to have precipitated a revolution. My own earliest experiences of youth media production in the late 1970s involved the endless untangling of super 8 cine film and reel-to-reel black-and-white videotape, and the frequent inhalation of photographic chemicals. The technology was expensive, cumbersome and often very difficult to obtain. In the world of digital editing, disposable camcorders and online video sharing, such experiences seem almost prehistoric. Yet many of the questions that were beginning to be raised at that time are still relevant – and in some ways take an even more urgent form in the age of digital media. To what extent does the experience of media production represent a form of 'empowerment' for young people – especially as it has now become so much more commonplace in their everyday lives? What assumptions do we make here about young people's understanding and relationships with media, and how accurate are those assumptions? How do young people learn to communicate through media, and how does creative production relate to the development of a critical perspective on media? What difference does youth media production make, either for young people themselves, or in terms of the wider social and cultural environment?

These are not only pedagogical questions: they are also political ones. How we might answer them depends very much on the social and cultural contexts in which youth media projects take place: there is no 'one size fits all' approach. The field of youth media production includes a wide range of practices, with some quite diverse motivations and approaches. In different local and national settings, different political, cultural and social imperatives may dominate, which sometimes bear little if any relation to young people's own perspectives and experiences. Youth media production is not a neutral process, a matter of simply providing young people with the tools for self-expression. On the contrary, all such practices inevitably rest on assumptions about media, about young people and about learning, and they always entail implicit social, moral and political agendas. Indeed, youth media projects are frequently undertaken and supported not on the grounds that media production may be a valuable and enjoyable activity for its own sake, but rather on the grounds that it can facilitate *other* objectives – objectives which may range from promoting civic participation and community development through to inculcating particular moral or religious beliefs, preventing violence or substance abuse, or providing training for employment.

Even so, youth media has often had to struggle against the odds. In the context of formal education, it is almost always restricted to the margins of the curriculum, or confined to very limited, sanctioned forms. There are still comparatively few countries that have

specialist Media Studies courses in schools; and even here, media production has often tended to take second place to media analysis – although this is certainly changing. Outside such contexts, media production is likely to be perceived as an occasional 'treat', or as an instrumental aid to subject learning (the video of the geography field trip, the record of the drama production). School magazines, TV production clubs and school websites tend to follow fixed routines, and often amount to little more than official public relations exercises. School timetables, curricular structures and codes of discipline rarely permit the long-term, student-centred engagement and inquiry that is indispensible for meaningful, creative media production.

Beyond formal education, youth media projects are forever dependent on the vicissitudes of government welfare funding and the shifting priorities of charitable foundations (and, in some cases, of commercial companies' *pro bono* activities). In this context, youth media practitioners are constantly having to reinvent themselves (or at least repackage themselves) to accommodate to the changing imperatives and fashions of the times. Funding is always precarious, and there are particularly limited opportunities for the professional development of staff. Anyone can, in principle, set themselves up as a youth media organisation and apply for funding: there is little by way of recognised training or certification in the field. As such, it is difficult to build up a body of expertise, to promote critical reflection on practice, or to monitor the quality of what is provided.

In recent years, however, youth media production has begun to gain some traction, both in the UK and around the world. The increasing interest in youth media projects – and hence the increasing amounts of funding that are available to support them – is not only a consequence of the growing accessibility of digital production tools. It also needs to be understood in the context of broader concerns about the changing social position of youth, about generational change, and about the need to re-engage young people in the public sphere. As such, youth media practices inevitably define 'youth' – as the target or focus of their interventions – in particular ways, which both produce and yet also constrain what it is possible for young people to do. Implicitly or explicitly, they purport to provide some kind of response to the 'problem' of youth; and the ways in which we imagine youth in this context may say rather more about our own adult hopes and fears than it does about young people themselves.

From this perspective, the notion of media production as a form of 'self-expression' or 'empowerment' for young people needs to be questioned. Rather than offering a neutral space for communication, youth media projects inevitably
construct specific positions from which it is possible for young people to 'speak' or to represent themselves: they actively promote particular forms of speech or (self-) representation, and restrict others. Youth media production cannot, in this sense, be seen as simply a matter of enabling young people to 'express themselves', to be 'creative' or to 'find their voice'. Such notions seem to imply that, once given the opportunity, young people will instantly and spontaneously 'speak', and that they will automatically speak the truth. Apart from anything else, this approach effectively marginalises the significance of institutional settings, the role of educators, and the need for learning.

Similar questions can be raised in respect of notions of 'youth voice', 'citizenship', 'creativity', 'empowerment' and 'inclusion', which are particularly prevalent in the rhetoric of youth media projects. These seemingly contemporary terms often mask an older moral rhetoric of 'child-saving', in which activities such as media production are seen as useful means of distracting young people's attention from the more dangerous temptations of peer-group or 'street' culture. The implicit attempt to rescue disadvantaged or disaffected youth from their circumstances stands in a long tradition of paternalistic social intervention. Youth are somewhat paradoxically defined here, both as a *source* of social problems and as somehow 'at risk' from wider social pressures. They are frequently regarded in rather sentimental terms, as being uniquely able to 'speak truth to power': there is an assumption that youth media production will necessarily provide an 'alternative' to the mainstream, and that it will always be challenging or politically radical. While such views and assumptions are necessarily shared by all youth media practitioners, they are certainly implicit in the perspectives of many of the key organisations – both governmental and charitable – that support such work.

There is also a danger of technological determinism here – of assuming that access to technology will somehow automatically 'set young people free' to express themselves, to register their needs and thereby to take power. Rather than seeking to understand wider failures in political institutions, we look to media – and particularly digital media – to address and resolve these problems. Of course, such claims about the potential of media in terms of democratisation and empowerment are by no means new: one can look back to the arguments being made about cable TV in the 1970s, or about portable video in the 1980s – although in fact most new media technologies have arrived amid claims about their inherently radical potential. All of these media were apparently going to bring power to the people, to undermine the control of knowledge by elites, and enable ordinary people to express themselves and have their voices heard, in precisely the revolutionary ways that are now being seen as characteristic of digital media. And in each case, their ultimate effects were much more complex and equivocal than their advocates proclaimed.

Of course, this rather inflated rhetoric has its uses; and a little utopianism, or at least idealism, is a necessary dimension of any new social movement. Nevertheless, there is a risk here that looking to media technology as a means of social or cultural 'empowerment' may distract attention from much more fundamental social structural problems. We may assume that youth media production can make a difference to people's lives in ways that are much more profound or far-reaching than is ever likely to be possible. And there is then a danger that this can lead to disillusionment and even cynicism – not least among the young people themselves.

Furthermore, the easy circulation of this kind of rhetoric may well disguise a lack of precision and indeed debate about basic aims. We can probably all agree that 'participation' and 'creativity' are Good Things, but until we define what they really mean, and until we critically examine how they work out in practice, they are merely empty slogans. It is extremely difficult to develop and improve practice if one is driven

by the constant need to justify oneself to funding bodies, and to present oneself in the best possible light. In addition to documenting and explaining good practice, it is vital to look at the situations where youth media does *not* succeed in motivating young people or promoting its wider aims. Without clear-sighted and rigorous evaluation, the ability to develop expertise over the longer term, and sustained professional training and development, youth media will forever remain in its infancy.

These arguments have implications for the institutions that fund and support youth media work. There is an obvious and urgent need for consistent and longer-term financial support, for professional training, and clear and coherent processes for identifying outcomes. Yet these things may not be an imperative for funders, who are often more interested in simple measures of effectiveness – as though getting more young people through the door (and hence, perhaps, off the streets) is in itself a meaningful indicator of success. In a precarious and insecure funding environment, practitioners themselves will understandably find critical evaluation (or even self-evaluation) risky and threatening. Yet there is a difference between objective evaluation and public relations; and if the field of youth media is to develop and mature, practitioners need to have the space to reflect upon and to debate the assumptions that inform their work, and to assess its outcomes in a more rigorous and unsentimental way. Funders need to acknowledge the difficulty and complexity of youth media work, and provide sufficient support to enable it to flourish; but practitioners also need to beware of the temptation to celebrate the apparently autonomous self-expression of young people.


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