Title
Making It Better: LGBT Youth and New Pedagogies of Media Production

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9pm6q2v1

Author
Berliner, Lauren Samara

Publication Date
2013-09-11

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
Making It Better: LGBT Youth and New Pedagogies of Media Production

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in

Communication

by

Lauren S. Berliner

Committee in Charge:
Professor Lisa Cartwright, Co-Chair
Professor Brian Goldfarb, Co-Chair
Professor Zeinabu irene Davis
Professor Nitin Govil
Professor Roddey Reid
Professor Shelley Streeby

2013
The Dissertation of Lauren S. Berliner is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego
2013
DEDICATION

For Sophia Arredondo and the youth of Changing Reels.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.................................................................................................................. iv  
TABLE OF CONTENTS................................................................................................... v  
LIST OF IMAGES............................................................................................................. viii  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS................................................................................................. ix  
VITA............................................................................................................................... xiii  
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION............................................................................. xiv  

## Introduction................................................................................................................. 1  
  Contributions................................................................................................................ 8  
  Method: Situated Research............................................................................................ 16  
  A Note on the Use of Language.................................................................................... 19  
  An Overview of the Chapters....................................................................................... 25  

### Chapter One: The Mobilization of Viral Video in Anti-Gay-Bullying Projects....31  
  The Emergence of the Anti-bullying Viral Video......................................................... 39  
  “It Gets Better”.............................................................................................................. 40  
  Spreadability.................................................................................................................. 44  
  Legibility, Visibility, and Identity Management............................................................ 53  
  LGBT Youth and Visibility............................................................................................ 57  

### Chapter Two: Re-thinking Digital Media Empowerment Discourse in Scholarship and Practice......................................................67  
  The Limits of the ‘Digital Generation’ Concept............................................................ 73  
  From “Digital Natives” to “Participatory Cultures”:  
    Situating Media Pedagogy............................................................................................ 87  
    Problematizing ‘Youth Voice’ as Inherently Empowering........................................... 100  
  Conclusion..................................................................................................................... 128  

### Chapter Three: ‘Vernacular Voices’: Business Gets Personal in Public Service Announcements..................................................130  
  The Business of Public Service Advertising.............................................................. 138  
  Even the Doctor is an Amateur:  
    YouTube PSAs and Vernacular Voices....................................................................... 159  
  Conclusion..................................................................................................................... 183
Chapter Four: Authentic Voices, Institutional Prompts: Negotiating Expression in a LGBT-Youth-Produced Anti-Gay-Bullying PSA

Prompting Production

The Expression Paradox: The Tension Between Live Connections And The Imperative to Produce

Who can Represent Bullying?

The Vocational and Professional Discourse Inherent in PSA Production

The Challenge Of Non-Productivity

Conclusion

Conclusion

The Conflation of Digital Media Participation with Identity

Against Digital Media Empowerment

Toward a Process-over-Product Approach to Production

Youth Digital Media Empowerment in the Age of Online Education

References
LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1.1: Google Trends comparison of terms in news media..................23

Image 1.2: A comparison of Google Trends search terms between January
2008- January 2013.................................................................24

Image 2.1: South Park Elementary students produce an anti-bullying music
video in the episode “Butterballs”.............................................33

Image 2.2: Dan Savage and Terry Miller’s inaugural It Gets Better Project
Video.........................................................................................41

Image 2.3: Jamey Rodemeyer’s It Gets Better Project video,
May 4, 2011...............................................................................60

Image 3.1. Yul Brynner addresses smokers in an American Cancer Society
PSA,1985..................................................................................131

Image 3.2. Pam Laffin in "I Can’t Breathe" Massachusetts Department of
Public Health, 1999.................................................................151

Image 3.3 Dr. Clarke raps about how to prevent H1N1.........................165

Image 3.4 Screen shot of Sascha Sternecker in “I am…”.......................176

Image 3.5 Sascha Sternecker threatens her scale with a hammer in
“goodbye, Scale!”.................................................................179
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If I have learned anything through this process, it is that it takes a village to write a dissertation. Here’s to mine!

I am thankful for the support of many of my colleagues who have nourished me with stimulating conversations and excellent feedback on drafts and presentations. But more than anything, it was their friendship and encouragement that sustained me. Thank you Pawan Singh, Andy Rice, Maggie Levantovskaya, Jaimie Baron, Michaela Walsh, Marisa Brandt, Toby Beauchamp, Kara Wentworth, Susan Pearlman, Kelli Moore, Jennifer Hsu, L. Chase Smith, Suzanne Stolz, Jonathan Cohn, Katrina Peterson, Erin Cory, Deniz Ilkbasaran, Monica Hoffman, Camille Campion, Robert Lecusay, Patricia Montoya, Dolissa Medina, Mark Walters, Stephen Mandiberg, Chuk Moran, Lyn Headley, Kate Hoffman, Laurel Friedman, Kristine Vandenberg, Aimee Bahng, Kyla Schuller, Elizabeth Steeby, Lauren Heintz, Jodi Eisenberg, Dixa Ramirez, Tania Jabour, Eun Smith, Emily Cohen, Amanda Keil, Cathy de la Cruz, Elliot Montague, Michael Jo, Karen Carniol, and Pooja Rangan. I feel especially bolstered by such a strong and supportive cohort: Kate Levitt, Reece Peck, Sam Martin, Carl McKinney, James Perez and Deborah Downing-Wilson. Together we will always be “the seven deadly sins.”

I consider myself very lucky to have had the opportunity to be a part of UCSD Communication department, where I have been challenged and inspired. In addition to the graduate students I mentioned above, I am grateful
to many UCSD faculty and staff who have supported me and paved opportunities and connections for me along the way. I am particularly indebted to David Serlin for guiding me through a significant portion of my graduate career. His generosity of time and spirit drove much of the thinking that led me to this project. I also wish to thank Patrick Anderson, Boatema Boateng, Kelly Gates, Christo Sims, John McMurria, Kalindi Vora, Denise McKenna, Marion Wilson, and Elana Zilberg for their advice and support. I am grateful to Chandra Mukerji for facilitating the graduate writing group that helped me to begin to find my voice and the confidence to pursue academic writing. Gayle Aruta, combination graduate coordinator and guru, provided the resources and optimistic perspective I needed to thrive in graduate school; Stacie Walsh was equally supportive in that role. I am also deeply appreciative of Adriene Hughes, her colleagues in Media Services, and undergraduate coordinator Jamie Lloyd for their support of my work in the classroom and the Hillcrest Youth Center.

I am thrilled to have a committee of faculty who I not only deeply respect as scholars and artists, but as mentors and committed educators. Thank you Shelley Streeby, Roddey Reid, Zeinabu irene Davis, Nitin Govil, Brian Goldfarb and Lisa Cartwright for engaging with my work and helping me to piece together where I have been with where I am going.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the dedicated mentorship of my co-advisors Brian Goldfarb and Lisa Cartwright. Their
commitment to my progress has been above and beyond what any graduate student should ever expect from their mentors, and I appreciate their tremendous patience with my development as a thinker and a writer. Lisa rescued this project from the ether, finding an entire dissertation in a chapter draft. Brian was instrumental in providing me the tools and advice to start youth media programs in the community. Together they supported the many youth media screenings that I have facilitated— one of the countless ways they have “shown up” for me over the years. Their expectations and hopes for me have always been higher than I have had for myself, and I am better off because of it. Their insistence that I could simultaneously pursue a career as a maker, teacher, and academic, helped me to believe it to be true. They understood the kind of scholar I was becoming before I did, and made every possible effort to introduce me to myself.

I am deeply grateful for the support and love I receive from my family: my parents, David and Donna, my siblings, Debra and Robby, my brother-in-law, Josh Rosenau; my grandmothers Miriam and Gloria, who, both in their 90s, plan to travel across the country to be with me at my graduation; and my nephew Miles, who didn’t exist when I started writing this dissertation and will never fully know how much he kept me going throughout.

This project was driven by the creativity and spirit of the youth at The Hillcrest Youth Center, the volunteers, and Sophia Arredondo, the HYC’s program coordinator. I honor their trust in me, and am grateful to have had the
opportunity to share so much time together. Over the past three years, they have become my San Diego family and have taught me that connecting is always the most important work. My deepest gratitude to Diana Fisher and The Collective Voices Foundation for making our workshop possible.

Most of all, thank you Minda Martin, for believing in me and providing the comfort, support, and encouragement that keeps making it better.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Degree and Field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and English, Wesleyan University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Master of Arts in Visual and Media Art, Emerson College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy in Communication, University of California, San Diego</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fields of study: Cinema and Media Studies, Digital Media Studies, Critical Pedagogy, Queer Studies, Cultural Studies, American Studies, Communication History
Youth media pedagogy has always been bound up with questions of agency and concerns about the impact of structural demands on what is produced. Recent constructions of this problematic suggest a tension between institutional funding structures and discourses that position the millennial generation as inherently skilled to use and benefit from working with digital media production technologies. LGBT youth in particular have been positioned at the center of a variety of public health, social justice and educational campaigns that encourage them to produce public service announcement videos (PSAs). These videos are often used as a technique of empowerment, which is predicated on the assumption that participation in the production process engenders self-expression and self-reflection. Yet, the practices of
production suggest that what drives youth to make such videos is structured as much by professionalizing discourses as the desire to express.

This dissertation turns a critical eye toward the common utilization of digital media production as identity work, community building and as part of an ongoing effort to garner resources for LGBT youth in the early 2000s. Working directly with a community of LGBT teen filmmakers in a weekly media workshop that I designed, I examine the dynamics of their video production choices in response to a national corporation’s prompt to produce an anti-gay-bullying public service announcement. This in-situ approach enables me to detail how adult expectations for youth to produce media content may ultimately mask resource needs and homogenize representations of the LGBT youth population. Contrasting prominent discourses that describe this generation of young people as “digital natives” who express themselves most naturally through their media use, and youth access to media production technologies as a primary concern, I suggest new approaches to youth media pedagogy that account for a more complex relationship to production. The study offers a nuanced theorization of media practice that emphasizes intersubjective exchange during the production process as a priority over the creation of specific types of content thought to be empowering for its producers.
Introduction

The fall of 2010 marked a moment of crisis in which the country was beset with particular anxieties surrounding LGBT youth suicide. For a period of months it seemed as though every week another teen suicide was announced in the news media, with at least 10 reported in September alone.

Billy Lucas (15) Indiana; Cody J. Barker (17) Wisconsin; Seth Walsh (13) California; Tyler Clementi (18) New Jersey; Asher Brown (13) Texas; Harrison Chase Brown (15) Colorado; Raymond Chase (19) Rhode Island; Felix Sacco (17) Massachusetts; Caleb Nolt (14) Indiana; Zach Harrington (19) Arkansas.¹

The widespread media coverage of the deaths brought attention to public health and education research studies that showed that LGBT youth are more likely to experience suicidal ideation compared to the general youth population.² The apparent increase in the rate of LGBT teen suicides was quickly linked to the teens’ common experience of having been harassed by their peers.³ Indeed, bullying was continually cited as a key motivating factor in

¹The list of names was taken from “Breaking: ELEVENTH September Anti-Gay Hate-Related
²A 2009 study by the Trevor Project found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth are up to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Another study looked at the relationship between family relationships and suicide attempts of lesbian, gay, bisexual-identified teens and found that those come from highly rejecting families were eight times more likely to attempt suicide than those who come from families with low levels of rejection. Trevor Project, “Suicidal Signs and Facts,” 2009, www.thetrevorproject.org/suicide-resources/suicidal-signs.
³Examples of headlines linking LGBT suicide and bullying include, NBCNEWS.com article “Suicide surge: Schools confront anti-gay bullying” on October 9, 2010 (http://www.nbcbnews.com/id/39593311/#.UV6JNqWkJD8) and the New York Times article “Suicide Draws Attention to Gay Bullying” on September 21, 2011 (http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/21/suicide-of-gay-teenager-who-urged-hope/)
the suicides, discursively linking a perceived crisis of LGBT teen suicides to an epidemic of teen-on-teen bullying.\(^4\)

The crisis in bullying-related LGBT youth suicide not only captivated the attention of national media outlets, it elicited national governmental concern. On October 1, 2010 the United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan released a statement calling for action:

…These unnecessary tragedies come on the heels of at least three other young people taking their own lives because the trauma of being bullied and harassed for their actual or perceived sexual orientation was too much to bear. This is a moment where every one of us - parents, teachers, students, elected officials, and all people of conscience - needs to stand up and speak out against intolerance in all its forms…\(^5\)

The list of names quickly became a rallying call for youth advocates, educators, legislators, celebrities, academics and community organizers, who scrambled to make sense of the suicides and to find tools and methods to support the well-being of LGBT youth.\(^6\) It was during the very same week of

\(^4\) I refer to this as a “perceived crisis” because there is not sufficient data to suggest that at present more teens identifying or perceived to be LGBT commit suicide than in prior decades. The lack of comparative data has to do with the fact that it is difficult to know how many of the teens that committed suicide in the past actually identified as LGBT, as until the mid 1990s, comparatively few young people publically identified themselves as queer and there has been no reliable method for gathering that kind of sensitive population data. To boot, the heightened media awareness around the suicides in 2010 perhaps enhanced perceptions that more suicides were occurring in greater numbers. With this in mind, it may be more useful to think of LGBT teen suicide as an ongoing problem that must be urgently addressed.


\(^6\) Several queer studies scholars collectively published “Queer Suicide: A Teach-in” in Social Text online journal Periscope (http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/queer-suicide-a-teach-in); GLSEN, PFLAG and the Trevor Project released a joint statement on the tragedies, followed by targeted research and media campaigns from each of the organizations
this national call-to-action that self-produced online video emerged as a primary tool for establishing contact and channels of support for LGBT youth.

It began with the *It Gets Better Project*, launched by columnist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller. The campaign utilized YouTube as a space for posting and circulating short, testimonial-style videos intended to deliver messages of hope to struggling youth. The project’s immediate and remarkable popularity not only garnered mainstream media attention, it inspired thousands of user-produced videos. While adults (many of them public figures and celebrities) were the primary contributors of early campaign videos, soon many LGBT teens were posting too. The growing involvement of teens in the campaign paired with the predominance of adult testimonials, prompted many educators and youth advocates to encourage more youth to contribute their own *voices* to the anti-bullying discourse through the production of their own online videos.7

(https://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/2634.html), The White House held an anti-bullying conference, while several states (such as New Jersey and Michigan) adopted anti-bullying legislation; the pop star Lady Gaga launched her anti-bullying foundation *Born this Way*, in partnership with Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, with grants from major funders like the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The launch of the foundation was announced at an inauguration that featured Lady Gaga, esteemed faculty and the President of Harvard University, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, writer Deepak Chopra, and United States Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius. This list barely scratches the surface of the widespread, international response to the suicides.

7 See the *Make It Better Project*, initiated a week after the *It Gets Better Project*. On its website the organization describes its purpose as “filling in the gaps—and the action’ of the “it gets better” narrative with personal stories from youth about their personal stories of what they do to “make it better,” in the context of helping to change circumstances for LGBT youth in their schools. http://www.makeitbetterproject.org. Another project that emerged at this time was the singer Cyndi Lauper’s “Give a Damn” project sponsored by her organization the *True Colors Fund*. http://www.wegiveadamn.org/
An explosion of online video media projects aimed at engaging LGBT youth as producers soon commenced. In community centers and schools, through national contests sponsored by government, nonprofit organizations, and corporations, LGBT youth were encouraged to create and circulate personal, message-oriented videos. Many of these organized video projects specifically called on youth to produce videos in the style of public service announcements (PSAs), a message-oriented form designed to encourage attitudinal and behavioral change on the part of the audience.

Youth-produced anti-gay-bullying PSAs soon peppered the digital video landscape, buttressed by a discourse of youth digital media empowerment. In the last several years, it has become common for philanthropic organizations and foundations to put money into these PSA projects, especially ones that encourage youth to produce, themselves. The easy access of the Internet, combined with the increased affordability of media production technologies has helped this kind of PSA project become the central technique for addressing the concerns of LGBT youth. These projects engaged youth in a praxis-oriented approach that seemingly made good on the legacy of media activism and self-representation that has been fostered by decades of scholars and educators seeking to center self-produced media as a tool for producing agency and power. But looking closely, the self-produced video production was not the panacea it seemed.
Take for example, the highly-publicized suicide of 14-year-old Buffalo teen Jamey Rodemeyer, who killed himself a month after contributing a spirited testimonial-style video to the *It Gets Better Project*. His suicide marks the limits of the video empowerment approach. Despite the claim he makes in his video that he was no longer being bullied for being gay and that he had overcome his suffering, the details surrounding his death suggest a very different reality. We are left to question the narrative he presents on camera, and by extension, compelled to examine the function and role of viral public service announcement video production and reception in the lives of LGBT youth, particularly around this area of what is commonly referred to as “anti-gay-bullying.” Technologies like viral video and Twitter are often celebrated as providing opportunities for expression and a sense of liberation for LGBT youth, so how and why did they fail Jamey?

*Making it Better: LGBT Youth and New Pedagogies of Media Production* seeks to understand how could someone like Jamey could make a PSA video that may have moved many people, and perhaps changed the lives of other LGBT youth, but was ultimately not at all helpful to him. His suicide suggests the limits of viral video as a tool of empowerment and problematizes the discursive and material investments in the articulation of authentic youth voices through digital video production and circulation.

This dissertation puts pressure on the intersections of a politics of queer visibility and the valuation of LGBT youth video production as an inherently
emancipatory practice to examine what we, as scholars, educators, parents, and youth advocates are missing when we promote digital media campaigns and other social media use as a route for youth expression, connection and problem-solving. This project interrogates the deep imbrication between a politics of visibility, forms of publicity, and personal expression as a route to empowerment.

This dissertation challenges the perspective that when youth are enabled and encouraged to produce and circulate digital video, their circumstances, or their sense of self, necessarily improve. I interrogate discourses that naturalize the connection between digital media use and power while I seek to locate where social difference matters for youth in their experiences with media technologies. I am critically concerned with the notion of empowerment, which is so often leveraged in the promotion of media production work with marginalized people. The widespread enthusiasm for youth media production projects as a tool of empowerment obliges us to evaluate the value of such an approach. Thus, this project turns a critical eye toward the common utilization of digital media production as identity work, community building and as part of an ongoing effort to garner resources for LGBT youth.

As noted scholar of youth media production Mary Celeste Kearney has argued, research on production and technology necessarily entails close
attention to both text and practices. This dissertation examines what values undergird the media empowerment approach as it seeks to identify factors that motivate youth to produce. I foreground three manifestations of this approach. One, I examine historically situated assumptions about the so-called *millennial* generation’s comfort and ability to have meaningful interactions with and through digital technologies. Two, I historicize the self-produced PSA as a particular modality that is deeply imbricated in a history of the use of broadcast media as a tool for reproducing social norms. Finally, I turn to the youth media production context to examine the practices and choices that are involved in the execution of these kinds of media campaigns. My analysis draws on participatory action research I conducted with LGBT youth media producers in a media production workshop I facilitated at a San Diego community center over a period of two and a half years (2010-2013). Specifically, I discuss the teens’ production of a corporate-sponsored anti-gay-bullying PSA. I use the case study to illustrate some of the problems in the assumption that PSA production inherently empowers the youth who make them. To wit, I elucidate how seemingly entwined pedagogical priorities—encouraging youth to express themselves and motivating them to participate in production—are actually often at odds with each other. Studying the process of production also enables us to see social divisions that emerged through production that I believe are indicative of larger social arrangements that made some youth more prepared

---

to participate (behind or in front of the camera) by virtue of their background. These dynamics are also rendered invisible in the circulating video, and thereby feed the dominant pedagogical discourse that PSA production is uniformly empowering for youth.

Contrasting prominent discourses that describe this generation of young people as *digital natives* who express themselves most naturally through their media use, or as empowered through new media to participate in areas of civic and social life previously closed off to them, my goal here is to point to new approaches to youth media pedagogy that account for a more complex relationship to production. My in-situ approach enables me to detail how adult expectations for youth to produce media content that carries particular expressive and thematic objectives may ultimately mask resource needs and homogenize representations of the LGBT youth population.

**Contributions**

For over two decades significant scholarly research has been conducted into the educational benefits for youth when various forms of digital media production activities are integrated into the pedagogical and community spaces they inhabit. While in the area of development and human rights and critical pedagogy there is a long history of a critique of the idea that someone or something external (whether that be a teacher, or a technology) can help to give voice or power to a group or individual, in the study of digital media
pedagogy, the relationship between youth media production and power is often naturalized. This is, I argue, because it assumes a relationship to a tradition of media praxis, where participation is treated as democratic decentering of mass media power.⁹

This project helps to bring cultural studies of media praxis into the realm of digital media studies, while it contributes to our understanding of what empowerment means in the age of digital video pedagogy. Indeed, the idea that participatory media production is inherently empowering did not emerge with digital video—rather, it has deep roots in cultural studies and media studies traditions. It should not be surprising then, that participation in these campaigns would be widely considered beneficial to the youth involved. As scholars Sarah Benet-Weiser and Leslie Regan Shade instruct in their analyses of girls media production practices, it is critical to foreground the disciplinary logics that work to contain young producers and their creative expression using digital media production technologies.¹⁰

While much of the research and scholarship pertaining to youth digital media use has emphasized learning, rarely has a critical pedagogy framework

---

⁹ Media praxis refers to the merging of media, practice and politics. It entails a project of self and world-changing through interactions with media. The concept of praxis originated with Marx but was popularized by British Cultural Studies, who brought it into the realm of media production and consumption. For an excellent discussion of the history of the concept and examples of media praxis, see Alexandra Juhasz’s instructive website http://www.mediapraxis.org.

been applied. The emphasis has instead been primarily on skills-building, training and access to necessary technologies. Following media scholar Julian Sefton-Green, this project shares the perspective that studying forms of media culture can help us to understand wider notions of learning beyond education or school systems. I am primarily concerned with examining LGBT youth digital media production in relationship to access to power (real and imagined). At the core of this discussion are questions concerning young people's access to digital technologies and how their socio-economic and cultural identities may affect possibilities for their empowerment. I offer a critique of the ways that even the attempts to promote digital media access and media literacy describe participation in generic terms that don't fully address which subjects are able to participate and which are not. In a similar fashion, educational and funding institutions are treated as neutral factors in youth digital media pedagogy. Bringing the specific context of sexual and gender identity into the overall investigation of digital media pedagogy, I identify several ways that real opportunities for LGBT youth may in fact be foreclosed by the power dynamics inherent in adult-authored video assignments. In doing so, I show how

---

11Here I am defining critical pedagogy as co-intentional education that insists on transforming the world. As Paolo Freire, the foremost theorist/practitioner of critical pedagogy explains, it entails teachers and students as “co-intent on reality” where both are Subjects “not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement.” Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000, 69.

institutions that fund, teach, and encourage this kind of production are fully implicated in a model of empowerment that may not be as honed to the needs and rights of LGBT youth as one might think.

In this dissertation I consider pedagogy to be the connective tissue between the personal and interpersonal experiences of LGBT youth, advocacy and educational institutions, culture, and social structures. Critical pedagogy as an approach helps me to identify some of the forms of education that occur both within inside and outside of classrooms and where learning and culture coincide. Feminist approaches to critical pedagogy are particularly useful in my examination of digital media production and youth empowerment because a central tenant of this approach is to investigate assumptions of empowerment and voice. These concepts are often taken for granted in the broader literature and discourse around youth and digital media production. By bringing a feminist critical pedagogy approach to bear on my examination of how digital media use has been imagined as the antidote to LGBT bullying and suicidal ideation, I seek to problematize understandings of youth digital media production as inherently empowering to youth. I draw on feminist critical pedagogy critiques of efforts to elicit authentic youth voices as a method of empowerment. These approaches help us to think about the ways that that discourses on student voice in fact may limit youth. If empowerment is the ability to have one's voice heard, how does this affect LGBT youth, who may

---

not experience power through visibility and other forms of expression of their sexual identities?

Many contemporary educators, scholars, and policy makers agree that fluency with new media technologies now functions as a key component in young people’s identity formation. Concerned with what has been called the digital divide, or the participation gap since the 1990s, tremendous focus has been placed on the question of how to close what has been believed to be a divide that exists between those youth who have regular access to information and communication media technologies and those who don’t. Areas of inquiry in education and media studies have tended to center around whether or not youth have the access to technologies necessary to fully participate in production activities. Media scholar Jean Burgess has historicized this shift, noting that anxieties over a digital divide “has shifted to concerns around social inclusion and the unevenness of access to ‘voice’ in the global mediascape.”¹⁴ Scholars of youth media such as Sonia Livingstone have argued that media content creation is a key component to media literacy that is ‘crucial to the democratic agenda,’ positioning everyday media producers as ‘not merely as consumers but also citizens.’¹⁵ Yet these sorts of studies treat learning, social connection and civic and social empowerment as the expected outcome of participation once access and the conditions for critical reflection

are provided. This dissertation seeks to add complexity to our understanding of how empowerment functions in youth digital media production, emphasizing the structural demands to what is produced. I argue that youth participation in participatory media production projects must always be understood in terms of both the social and institutional context from which they originated and broader trends in content production across professional and nonprofessional spheres.

One of my aims is to consider how pedagogical approaches of youth media programs result from a chain of negotiations that lead from funders to community organizations, or educational institutions to educators and students—who each recast production projects in various ways. Another objective is to examine individual and community-produced online videos in the context of broader media campaigns. This project is concerned with how those technologies got there in the first place and asks ‘what do the funders and media pedagogues who promote production imagine as its value?’ What is expected of the producers, and how might that impact what they produce? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what is it that these youth producers understand they are making?

Another goal of the project is to explicate continuities between the history of broadcast advertising (which is responsible for advancing the public service announcement genre), and self-produced video, showing the entanglements between social issues marketing and media praxis. Extending our knowledge of the PSA as a normalizing technology to the realm of user-
generated content, might we come to understand how factors such as 
messaging and publicity relate to the expression and action that is encouraged
of youth producers? I seek to understand how an ethos of participation, voice,
and visibility interacts with the vocational and professionalizing motivations
that often undergird participation.

This project also has potential value to production studies, a burgeoning
disciplinary area of media studies which focuses on how “media producers
make culture, and in the process, make themselves into particular kinds of
workers in modern, mediated societies.” While production studies typically
focuses on the structures of industrial practice and production cultures that
emerge in the making of professional films and television, my project aims to
understand how the people involved in nonprofessional production are
enmeshed in production discourses that entwine with those of professional
production cultures. As I argue in the case study, youth media makers are
never outside of professionalizing discourses. In this way, the study of
nonprofessional youth production is a contribution and expansion of the
research conducted in this area.

Part of my argument in this dissertation is that self-produced anti-gay-
bullying PSAs create archetypal narratives of bullying that exclude the
heterogeneous lived experiences of queer youth. In this way the project also
contributes to queer studies research that aims to critique the homogenizing

16 Mayer, Vicki, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, eds. Production studies: cultural
forces of neoliberalism. I argue that participation in anti-bullying discourse allows LGBT youth to leverage themselves as visible—both in their identities and as successful media makers; but it’s a professionalism that colludes with a neoliberal marketplace where certain kinds of identities can be permitted visibility and others are not. In this way the prerogatives of image management and professionalization mingle with a politics of queer visibility and a rapid movement towards what Lisa Duggan has called homonormitivity, the liberalization of social and legal attitudes towards homosexuality since the early 1990s.17 Kevin Barnhurst explains the stakes:

A simple acknowledgement that difference is inescapable is the first step toward understanding what is at stake in queer visibility. That acknowledgement is also the first step toward knowing what to do about queer visibility. The necessary action is to reject the question of visibility, to set it aside, and to choose something other then focusing on queer difference.18

Barnhurst cites a play between media popularity and personal innuendo and calls being seen without inherent contrast popularity.19 My study calls attention the self-produced PSA as an instance wherein the sexual politics of neoliberalism are refracted through youth media practice; where a politics of identity-based visibility gets conflated with expression and giving voice and

19 ibid, 13.
technologies of self production blur with technologies of (self)promotion and publicity.

While much scholarship since the late 1980s has discussed the ways that neoliberalism promotes individualized responsibility for social well-being through consumption practices, I draw attention to the ways in which digital media production is now also imagined as a site of self production and self-care. As Nikolas Rose argues in his critique of the engrained notions of self-actualization and self-discovery that have pervaded Western thinking and social life, “the autonomous self, freed from the burden of the past can say, “I’m OK, and you’re OK.”20 Rose argues that the collective emphasis on self-protection and individual behavioral adjustment that is symptomatic of neoliberalism, distracts people from the realities of their oppression with the hopes of achieving a perfect state of contentment and autonomy. I pivot off of Rose to argue that the well-being of youth producers is often imagined to be achieved and sustained both through their production and consumption of media messages that ascribe a teleological and prescriptive self-oriented narrative that en folds them in the positivist discourse to which Rose refers.

Method: Situated Research

A key component of my analysis is the case study that appears in chapter four. The example I discuss represents a small portion of my three-
year involvement with the community at the Hillcrest Youth Center. This component of the research is critical for understanding how particular youth engaged with media production technologies and initiatives within the context of an LGBT community center. Unlike the majority of media ethnographies which focus on a given audience’s reception and of particular media and its presumed effects, this approach “radically de-centers media” as the focus of study.\textsuperscript{21}

For this portion of the research I have utilized participatory action research methods. This means that I worked collaboratively with the community to identify issues of concern and to determine strategies for affecting change.\textsuperscript{22} As action researcher Geoffrey Mills explains, the method is about “incorporating into the daily teaching routine a \textit{reflective stance}—reflecting on one’s teaching in order to improve or enhance it.” Action research nicely complements critical pedagogy’s focus on dialogical methods of learning. It is participatory and democratic, socially responsive and takes place in context. It is inherently a reflexive method, which has been described as helping “teacher researchers examine the everyday, taken-for-granted ways in


which they carry our professional practice. In this case, I would extend the notion of “professional practice” beyond my teaching and mentoring in the community space, to the network of resources and guidelines that the youth and I interacted with in our work together.

Action research enables me to approach to the undertaking of collaborative production from simultaneously a critical and practical perspective. I see this dissertation as one method for determining meaningful uses of digital media production in LGBT youth community contexts. As the title suggests, my overarching goals are to examine how media production pedagogy has been operationalized in attempts to support LGBT youth while suggesting new approaches. In a sense, action research is not simply my chosen methodological approach for the one chapter in which it was clearly utilized—the action research approach undergirds the entire purpose of the project.

While this dissertation is intended for a scholarly audience, its content is rooted in ongoing situated practices, which shifts the imperatives of the research towards identifying pedagogical applications that extend beyond the academy. Indeed, the goals of this research reach beyond the dissertation, and will only be actualized when the findings of this project are communicated within communities of practice. The ultimate objective of the project then, is to forward an approach to media production pedagogy that re-centers the

---

process of production as the site of potential learning and exchange, while reframing the digital videos as the site of performance and intention, not the evidence, of power.

A Note on the Use of Language

Taking an approach similar to scholars Mary L. Gray and Susan Driver, this project is less interested in theorizing queer identity than it is examining the co-production of technologies and identities.24 For the reader who comes to this dissertation familiar with queer politics and queer studies, it may seem odd to that I have chosen to consistently use the phrasing LGBT youth rather than queer youth.25 Queer youth, the preferred term in queer studies literature at the time of my writing, is generally considered by scholars of gender and sexuality to be a more inclusive term that refuses strict gender and sexual identity categories in favor of a spectrum of identity. The term also carries important sociopolitical connotations, evoking the efforts of anti-assimilationist activist groups like Queer Nation.26 As Siobhan Somerville explains, “to ‘queer’ becomes a way to denaturalize categories such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ (not to mention ‘straight’ and ‘heterosexual’) revealing them as socially and


25 I also switch between using the terms “anti-bullying” and “anti-gay-bullying” to refer to bullying discourse. My vacillation is meant to mirror the somewhat interchangeable usage of these two related terms in popular discourse. Chapter one further explicates my rationale for this lack of distinction.

historically constructed identities that have often worked to establish and police the line between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal.’ In contrast, LGBT, the term most often by the mainstream news media and anti-bullying campaigns, has been set aside by many scholars, educators and activists in favor of more inclusive nomenclature that resists the associated identity politics. I could have also opted to use LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and Ally), which is increasingly preferred by youth advocates and many youth themselves. I chose to use the phrase LGBT youth for two reasons that I feel illuminate important threads of the overall argument I am making about youth and media production.

The first reason is simple: it was the term that the community at the Hillcrest Youth Center used to represent themselves and others during the period that this study was conducted. When I first met the youth at the center, I took my cues on language from them. Some of the teens were quick to point out that my use of the term queer marked me as someone from outside of their community at the center, and, as one teen put it, from “another generation.” To these youth queer was a word that adults in the broader community used, and they did not identify with it. It became clear to me that there was some disconnect between the language used in the academic literature about youth, 

---

28 “Generation LGBTQIA” The New York Times, January 9, 2013. In this article, cultural studies scholar J. Jack Halberstam argues, “In the next 10 or 20 years, the various categories heaped under the umbrella of L.G.B.T. will become quite quotidian.”
and the ways they refer to themselves. I soon began to feel as if my using the term _queer_ was an expression of my aspiration for a shared politics more than the product of true exchange. In the space of the youth center my use of the term _queer youth_ was the outcome of an adult gaze I had unknowingly inhabited. To use the term _queer youth_ in this dissertation, therefore, would be to map my own discursive framework onto theirs.\(^{29}\) I do however use the terms _queer_ or _queer youth_ when quoting scholars who themselves favor this term in their work.

The second reason for choosing to use _LGBT Youth_ is more complex. I should begin by noting that _LGBT youth_ was not the dominant term used by the youth when I began working with them in 2010; it increased in use in tandem with the proliferation of mainstream news coverage of issues concerning the community.\(^{30}\) In mainstream coverage of the debates in the

---

\(^{29}\) It is worth noting that in 2012 there was a change of adult leadership at the youth center that resulted in an increased politicization of the group of teens. Many new activities and discussion groups were organized to familiarize the youth with expansive and inclusive terminology as well as queer history and politics. Activism was encouraged, and as the youth center became a more politicized space, the term _queer_ began to be used by some of the youth.

\(^{30}\) When I began working at the youth center in early 2010, I heard many of the youth refer to themselves and others (regardless of gender) as _gay_, which I found to be curiously anachronistic. I had assumed their usage to be a conscious re-appropriation of the word; perhaps an ironic reclaiming of the liberationist history, or an intentional diffusing of the more derogatory usage of the word (as in the insult “that’s so gay!”). I was wrong. As these teens informed me, their use of the _gay_ instead of _queer, LGBT, LGBTQ_ or _LGBTQIA_ was their response to terms they felt were either too academic or convoluted jargon, used by adults to refer to them. _Gay_ struck them as an inclusive and accessible umbrella term that could encapsulate a spectrum of sexualities and gender. For these youth, who by and large appeared not to be familiar with queer history, _gay_ was the term they used within their families and that they heard in their communities. They described it as organic and unadulterated, and a common denominator. As Sarah, an 18-year-old female explained, “it’s just that I’m gay, you know? I’m not LGBTQ, I’m gay, he’s gay, you’re gay.” Yet by early 2011, the dominant terminology used at the youth center had shifted from _gay_ to _LGBT_. The move away from _gay_
United States over same-sex marriage, the repeal of the United States military's *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy, and the highly publicized suicides of teens who were presumed to be gay, among other issues, *LGBT* was the dominant terminology used in reporting. A Google Trends analysis of news headlines during the period from 2008-2013 makes evident this claim.\(^{31}\) As the following chart indicates, the use of *LGBT* has increased in news media usage, as the term *queer* has remained low. As it turns out, one of the news headlines associated with a major increase in the use of the term is related to an announcement of celebrity video contributions to the *It Gets Better Project*.\(^{32}\)

---

*Image 1.1: Google Trends Comparison of Terms in News Media*

was due in part to the simple fact that a number of the teens that preferred that term had stopped attending the youth center.


\(^{32}\) The Los Angeles Times news headline that Google Trends attributes to the October 2010 peak in the usage of *LGBT* reads “Anne Hathaway, Jenny McCarthy among latest to join the 'It Gets Better' campaign to help LGBT teens.”
As the trends report indicates, search terms that included the word *queer* were most often linked to words relating to culture, such as theory, and the titles of television shows with *queer* in the title. On the other hand, *LGBT* was most often searched for in relationship to terms that related to sociopolitical alignments. Terms like “community,” “center,” “rights,” “pride,” and “youth” appeared most often. It should not be surprising then, that a youth center advocating for the rights and inclusion of youth would want to align themselves with broader discourses.


In her research with rural youth in the early 2000s, Mary L. Gray noticed a similar trend in language use, which she explains is linked to the politics of queer visibility and rights. For Gray, the youths use of the term *LGBT community* “speaks to the power of nationally mass-mediated conversations to manifest an ‘imagined community’ of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
people whether L, G, B, and T-identifying people are present or not.” These references, she explains, represent their striving towards a “coherent and tangible ‘LGBT community.’”

the social-service parlance of ‘LGBT’ has become commonplace in the politics of visibility and indexes how deeply steeped some of these youth are in that political culture. So the pervasive use of ‘LGBT’ as a phrase among youth commuting to social-service agencies like urban-based youth groups is not surprising.

Drawing on Gray, I would propose that the youth with whom I worked also used the terminology strategically, intentionally aligning themselves with the identities in the eye of news headlines and national debates. My choice to retain the phrase LGBT youth throughout the dissertation is meant therefore as a constant reminder to the reader of the teens’ situatedness in the intertwining discourses of the news media, the law, social services, education, youth advocacy and community centers. In my use of the term LGBT youth, I seek to point towards possible occurrences of what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak has termed strategic essentialism, in which members of a minority group intentionally align themselves with each other along the lines of (often reductive) hegemonic discourse with the objective of securing rights and resources. For Spivak it is possible to participate in maintaining possible counter-hegemonic self-identification. This was true for the PSA producers in

33 Gray, Mary. Out in the country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America. NYU Press, 2009, p 27
34 ibid, 27
35 Gayatri Spivak first coined the term in a 1984 interview. It should be noted that since her
my case study, who produced media that recapitulates essentializing discourses, but who were otherwise crucially concerned with difference and resistance.

An Overview of the Chapters

The chapters of this dissertation provide the foundation for the case study that is the focus of the final chapter. The earlier chapters offer an historical and theoretical framework; the case study situates the processes I examine in action. So while the bulk of the dissertation is concerned with youth as media producers in the abstract, the case study considers the production experiences of particular LGBT youth, situated in a community context.

Chapter one presents online digital video as central to the emergence of the discourse of LGBT youth empowerment. In this chapter I examine the uptake of media production as a response to the phenomenon of anti-gay-bullying in order to argue that the phenomenon and the approach are co-constitutive. I describe how the It Gets Better Project viral video campaign has precipitated a discourse of anti-bullying that posits viral video as a tool for addressing the needs of LGBT youth, as well as a technique for circumnavigating the legal and logistical barriers that have historically

introduction of the term, she has moved away from using it, claiming that it has been misused to the point of no longer standing for what she intended to mean when she introduced it. For an excellent article that explains the geneology of Spivak’s use of the term, see Mridula N. Chakraborty’s “Everybody’s Afraid of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Reading Interviews with the Public Intellectual and Postcolonial Critic.” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, Vol. 35, No. 3. (1 March 2010), pp. 621-645
prevented adults from being able to provide direct support. I discuss how the success of user-generated video campaigns is contingent on the *spreadability* of videos, which is believed to be achievable when producers follow the dominant stylistic and messaging conventions that are consistent with the campaigns that they contribute to.\(^{36}\) These normative practices have limiting effects, as they promote particular representations of LGBT youth lives and experiences with bullying that are inherently normalizing and risk further marginalizing youth who do not fit the picture.

Next I expand the discussion to examine the ways the campaign has been utilized by public figures, educators, and youth alike to enact what I call a performance of “conspicuous concern” for LGBT youth. I contend that the viral video approach, championed for the expressive and connective opportunities it appears to provide struggling LGBT youth, is limited in its potential to address the complexities of their lives. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the constraints of the viral video approach in order to make a case that viral video production might be best thought of as a tool for specific forms of publicity and image management more so than a technique for mobilizing the most potentially impactful sets of human and financial resources.

Chapter two examines scholarly and pedagogical approaches that treat youth participation in digital media production projects as inherently

---

empowering. The objective of my analysis in this chapter is to disentangle the threads that tie together media and empowerment and to expose areas where young people's needs might be overlooked when they are brought into that fray. I begin by discussing prevailing discourses that posit youth as more equipped and comfortable with digital media than other generations. I then examine the ways in which scholars of digital media have engaged with these discourses, advancing media production projects as if they were inherently empowering. In particular, I focus on the way these discourses equate media participation with the mobilization of youth voices. I challenge this framework by integrating critiques from feminist critical pedagogy and visual anthropology that challenge assumptions that for youth, having a voice, visibility and recognition is necessarily equivalent to their gaining rights and resources.

In chapter three I continue to critique the ways in which youth-produced online videos and PSAs are presented as novel forms of youth expression and self-advocacy. I do this by emphasizing continuity between youth-produced videos and those created by advertising agencies and advocacy organizations in traditional broadcast public service campaigns. Comparing PSAs across time periods makes evident the fact that although the producers and distribution strategies have changed, the messaging tactics have not. I trace the development of a mode of appeal that is presented as coming from inside an identity group to others as insider individuals. I suggest that this mode, which I call the vernacular voice, is integral to the PSA’s history, and emerged
as a form in tandem with deregulation and the rise of a neoliberal model of individualism that characterizes the cause-related advertising and charity tactics that have been adopted to promote the causes of LGBT youth. I argue that like traditional broadcast public service advertising, contemporary user-generated PSAs homogenize complex social issues into singular experiences and easily digestible messages. I use this discussion to argue that LGBT youth-produced anti-bullying PSA videos must be understood as social norming strategies more so than solely as forms of expression and connection.

Chapter four puts into play the questions and concerns of the previous chapters through an action research case study with LGBT youth producers. In this chapter I provide a narrative account of my experience as an instructor in a video production workshop at a San Diego LGBT youth community center, where at the height of the an anti-gay-bullying public campaigns I was charged with the task of leading youth in the production of PSA for online distribution. Through a detailed analysis of the production choices made by the group, I illustrate how the process of producing the PSA laid bare some of the limitations of this model of video production and of the PSA form in particular. I show how seemingly entwined pedagogical priorities—encouraging youth to express themselves and motivating them to participate in production—are actually often at odds with each other. Examining the different objectives of the participating youth emphasizes the ways in which for them participation is
simultaneously structured by expressive and vocational drives. I argue that while the production process opened up opportunities to identify the needs of the youth involved, on its own the video could neither represent nor mobilize the necessary support for the youth involved. Moreover, the project emphasized the difficulty, perhaps even the impossibility, of making bullying visible.

This chapter traces the misalignments of adult assumptions against the diverse ways teens already use digital technologies to produce and reflect on their identities and experiences, allowing us to re-imagine what media empowerment might mean for LGBT teens. A close examination of the empowerment discourses that underwrite PSA production also elucidates the constructive uses of the PSA as a pedagogical exercise, also allowing us to recuperate an otherwise problematic mainstay of media pedagogy and social action.

In the conclusion, I offer some final thoughts about digital media production pedagogy projects and marginalized youth. I reiterate the value of participatory media projects in community contexts but offer an alternative approach to the popular PSA prompt examined in earlier chapters. Developing my findings from the action research case study, I outline best practices in media production pedagogy that emphasize the production process over the final video product as the site of connection, intersubjectivity and mutual understanding.
In sum, while many scholars have studied youth digital media production pedagogy, far fewer have considered the relationship between discourses of youth digital media production and empowerment. The aim of this study is to provide a more robust conception of youth digital media empowerment, while it offers insight into the potentials and pitfalls of the digital media empowerment approach.
Chapter One: The Mobilization of Viral Video in Anti-Gay-Bullying Projects

In 2012, during the height of the anti-bullying viral video movement, one of the most seen youth-produced anti-bullying videos was a PSA music video called “Stop Bullying.” Yet unlike the tens of thousands of similar anti-bullying videos made by youth around the world that have been posted and circulated online, this one appeared in an episode of the farcical television cartoon comedy South Park. The show pushes the phenomenon of youth-produced anti-bullying videos to its ironic limits, but like all good satire, it successfully identifies some of the inherent contradictions and ironies of the cultural practice it mocks—in this case, encouraging students to produce viral videos as a means to directly address their experiences with intimidation and abjection. The episode usefully illustrates how youth PSA video production plays a central role in the propagation of the dominant discourse of bullying. In this chapter, I leverage and expand upon this critique to examine the limitations of a viral video approach to addressing bullying and youth empowerment.

The South Park student’s PSA video opens with a skit, which evolves into the students breaking into song... “Let’s all put an end to bullying, right now! ...5, 6, 7, 8...!” A tracking shot moves through the school, revealing its entire student body singing, dancing, and holding signs with popular anti-

---continued---

bullying slogans such as “bully-free zone.” The video at first suggests utopian collaboration in which the school bullies and bullied kids have come together under one auto-tuned pop anthem. But when the students reach the chorus, the anticipated spoof finally becomes apparent.

Let’s all get together and make bullying kill itself! Bullying is an ugly thing, let’s shove its face in the dirt, and make bullying kill itself!

The lyrics describe an aggressive and violent approach to abolishing bullying, and in the choice to personify “bullying,” there seems to be real confusion over what it is exactly the students are hoping to eradicate. The video they have made can only be read as frivolous and hypocritical; a bad imitation of an ineffective genre.

While the PSA video itself was produced and performed by the students, it is important to mention that it was initiated at the behest of an anti-bullying expert who had pressured the school’s guidance counselor into implementing his specialty program, “Bucky Bailey’s Bully Buckers™” into the curriculum. Both Bucky Bailey and the video’s student director Stan each imagine that the video’s circulation on the Internet in grandiose and self-serving terms. Butters may have been the inspiration, but is no longer the true focus of their anti-bullying efforts.

Their video does indeed circulate widely, garnering the students an appearance on a special bullying episode of the Dr. Oz show, and even attracting the attention of a Hollywood executive who is interested in
distributing the video.\textsuperscript{38} When a struggle over the rights to the video emerges between the executive and the anti-bullying counselor, the executive wins the argument by claiming that no one will watch the video if they learn it was initiated by an adult. “America… wants to believe that kids did something on their own!”

![Image](image1.png)

**Image 2.1: South Park Elementary students produce an anti-bullying music video in the episode “Butterballs”**

Through this episode we can see how the video becomes the conduit for students, educators, anti-bullying organizations, and the media to perform their investment in the issue of bullying. We learn this has much more to do

\textsuperscript{38} Here South Park is spoofing two film projects that were released within weeks of the episode’s airing: the documentary film *Bully*, directed by Lee Hirsch, which was acquired by the Weinstein Company and released in theaters across the United States, and Jason Russell’s viral video *KONY 2012*, which was made on behalf of the nonprofit organization Invisible Children, aimed at protecting Ugandan children from the warlord Joseph Kony. Both projects have received criticism for raising awareness about social issues for the profit of its producers.
with adults fulfilling administrative and funding objectives and performing a kind of image management through their public expression of concern than it does finding the most effective way to change the circumstances of the most vulnerable kids.

The punch line of the episode resides in the fact that the grandiose gesture of attempting to conquer bullying through a simple media project reveals the ubiquity of bullying in the community of South Park and the culture at large. The point only becomes stronger with the revelation that the worst bullying in the episode in no way relates to the student-on-student bullying that the music video poses as the problem. Indeed, the video production has not improved anyone’s circumstances—the student whose bruises prompted the school administrators to launch the program returns home to violence, and multiple forms of bullying continue to persist throughout the community. In this regard South Park’s parody accurately locates bullying and violence where it is most prevalent in our society: at home and within the family. It also underscores the cultural investment in youth as media producers, emphasizing a widespread perception that when youth themselves produce media on social issues, their circumstances will necessarily change for the better.

While South Park is in fact directly parodying an actual anti-bullying music video public service announcement that was made and posted online by
students at Cypress Ranch high school in Texas, the episode goes beyond a simple send-up to present a larger critique of what to what developmental psychologist Helene Guldberg has termed an “anti-bullying industry,” of which youth-produced video production is very much a part. Guldberg, along with many educators, psychologists, legislators and parents, is uneasy about the prodigious legislative and pedagogical investments that have been made in response to a perceived epidemic of bullying and feels there is unnecessary labor, funding and time being put towards “raising awareness” of the issue instead of directly addressing the root causes of violence and aggression in society. These critics see the issue of bullying not as an emergent behavioral trend, but as a cause célèbre that lacks the scientific data necessary to pinpoint and more accurately address the social dynamics it describes. They call for a more nuanced examination into the structural dynamics that promote violence and intimidation and scientific evidence that there is indeed a causal link between victimization and suicide.

41 For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon, see psychologist Izzy Kalman’s article, “South Park Exposes Hypocrisy of Anti-Bullying Industry: Trey Parker and Matt Stone Understand Bullying Better Than the Experts” which is part of his ongoing series of articles critiquing the anti-bullying movement in the law and education. Psychology Today, August 1, 2012. Other sources include an October 4, 2010 article in Newsweek magazine called “The Booming Anti-Bullying Industry” and Stephanie Hanes’ “Anti-bullying laws: A mom dares to critique the social trend” in The Christian Science Monitor (September 25, 2012). In these articles, the authors present longitudinal data that suggests that bullying in the 2000s is no greater of a phenomenon than it was in decades past; rather, it is the media “representation of bullying as an epidemic that has made it appear to be a new social crisis.
While “bullying” is not the first social issue to be associated with a generation of American youth (drunk driving and drug use, for example, dominated educational and public health discourse in the 1980s and 90s respectively), it is perhaps the first to be articulated, and in some respects, experienced through digital social media. In particular, producing viral video—media produced expressly for intensive online circulation through networked publics--has become a central method through which people perform their concern and investment in the issue of bullying.  

In this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, I will examine how the cultural logics of bullying discourse intersect with the logics of viral video production and circulation, which relies on marketing and publicity tactics. I consider how the discourse of bullying and the social media approach often used to address it reinforce one another. Through a discussion of the ways in which youth media production has been mobilized in response to the phenomenon of anti-bullying, I suggest that youth-produced anti-bullying videos may ultimately function more to propel the discourse of anti-bullying.

42 For more research on the subject of online networked publics and connections I suggest the following key texts:
then to affectively resolve the issue(s) they aim to address.

My particular concern is in what the spread of the anti-bullying movement means for LGBT youth, who have been at the center of anti-bullying discourse since 2010. Indeed, the anti-bullying discourse emerged out of the viral video response to a string of suicides of teens (including Billy Lucas, Raymond Chase, Tyler Clementi, Ryan Halligan, Asher Brown, and Seth Walsh) all of whom were bullied for their actual or suspected sexual orientation. The suicides, represented in the national news as evidence of an epidemic of LGBT teen suicide, were thrust even further into the media spotlight after the release of public health and education findings from the Pew Research Foundation and the Kaiser Family Fund that suggested that LGBT youth are more at risk for suicidal ideation compared to their heterosexual peers, in part due to their increased exposure to bullying. As I will elaborate in this chapter, with the expansion of bullying discourse the focus has shifted away from core concerns about the needs of LGBT youth that initiated the movement in the first place, and towards the publicity of a *movement*, thus further abstracting and reifying their specificity.

---


In what follows I elucidate how anti-bullying viral video media production has become central to the emergence of the discourse of LGBT youth empowerment and is bound at the nexus of identity politics and the bloated promises of participatory media. I begin by discussing the *It Gets Better* Project (IGB) viral video campaign’s role in proliferating anti-bullying discourse while promoting viral video as a technique for addressing the needs of LGBT youth. I argue that in order for the IGB campaign (and the many derivative anti-bullying PSA campaigns and videos it inspired) to thrive, it requires that videos achieve narrative coherence, legibility within the discourse of anti-bullying or anti-gay-bullying, and what media scholars Jenkins, Ford and Green call “spreadability,” meaning that viewers will want to pass the videos on to others within their personal networks. My aim is to illuminate how these prerogatives interfere with the emancipatory intent of the videos, ultimately advancing a type of LGBT visibility that threatens to sanitize or distract from the more urgent concerns of LGBT youth. This includes issues such as homelessness, domestic violence, depression, and forms of intimidation and humiliation that are not as legible within anti-bullying

---

45 Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford and Joshua Green. *Spreadable Media*. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2013. The authors make a point to distinguish between “viral” and what they call “spreadable” media. “Spreadability” takes agency into account. They write, “we use terms such as ‘spread,’ ‘spreadable’ or ‘spreadbility’ to describe these increasingly pervasive forms of media circulation. Spreadbility refers to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes, 3.
discourse, which focuses primarily on in-school acts of bullying. I will conclude the chapter by considering the story of 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer, who in 2011 committed suicide only six months after having made a video for the *It Gets Better Project*. His account is a powerful illustration of the shortcomings of the social media approach.

**The Emergence of the Anti-bullying Viral Video**

Since 2010 when self-produced anti-bullying videos were first circulated online, much has transpired. I would like to offer some historical context to index how from its beginnings viral video was offered as a technique for intervention and as a form of cultural agency. To offer a brief overview, the movement began with the *It Gets Better Project* (IGB) campaign.

Launched in late September 2010 by syndicated columnist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller, the *It Gets Better Project* self-produced viral PSA video campaign was the couple’s response to the string of highly-publicized LGBT suicides that had been reported in the few months prior. The campaign prompted an entire discourse around the phenomenon of anti-gay-bullying and popularized the idea that creating and circulating video online is an effective

---

46 While *bullying* is often cited as a driving force in LGBT teen suicidal ideation, scholars such as sociologist Jessie Klein, author of *The Bully Society* has noted that the contemporary bullying epidemic is really an epidemic of the culture as a whole, not just adolescents. Cultural Studies scholar Roddey Reid has described this as an overall American culture of public bullying which traffics in “intimidation and disrespect.” To wit, bullying is not necessarily the issue for LGBT youth, who make up 20-40 percent of the homeless population in the United States (http://www.pslweb.org/liberationnews/news/lgbt-youth-empowered.html)
technique for eradicating the pain that leads so many LGBT youth to suicidal ideation. The campaign popularized the idea that online video (specifically imagined as “viral”) can be an affective way to empower struggling LBGT youth and generate awareness as well as alliance. Arguably, it also advanced a particular form of participatory culture in which participants are encouraged to utilize messaging strategies that have long been used in traditional broadcast public service advertising in order to perform their investment in the well-being of LGBT youth and demonstrate their concerns over the impact of bullying. In what follows I will illustrate the ways that the campaign relies on the logics of marketing and image management, and how its promotion, funding and circulation imperatives entwine with the personal objectives of the individuals who contribute videos. Understanding the *It Gets Better Project* as a *campaign* that has certain promotional objectives and relies on forms of publicity and reproducibility can help us to understand the underlying publicity priority of the many online anti-bullying video projects intended for viral distribution that followed suit.

“*It Gets Better*”

The *It Gets Better Project* began on September 21, 2010 with a simple testimonial-style YouTube video featuring Savage and Miller.⁴⁷ Speaking into the camera in a two-shot, they talk about their painful experiences growing up

gay and how much better things got for each of them after high school.

“Honestly, things got better the day I left high school,” Miller explains.

I didn’t see the bullies everyday, I didn’t see the people who harassed me everyday, I didn’t have to see the school administrators who would do nothing about it everyday. Life instantly got better.

Image 2.2: Dan Savage and Terry Miller’s inaugural “It Gets Better Project” Video

Using their own life trajectories as evidence, Miller and Savage urge LGBT teen viewers that no matter how much pain and humiliation they may face in their teen years, their circumstances will inevitably improve. Then, over a montage of family photos the couple describes how they first met, the acceptance they eventually received from their families, the joy they experience in raising their adopted son, and the happy memories they share from snowboarding trips and late-night strolls in Paris that Miller claims have
made it “so worth sticking out the bullying and the pain and the despair of high school.”

Following the structure of a traditional public service announcement, the video closes with an appeal to the target audience (LGBT youth). Savage declares,

If there are 14 and 15 and 16 year olds...13 year olds, 12 year olds out there watching this video, what I’d love you to take away from it really is that IT GETS BETTER [emphasis taken from the video’s subtitles]. However bad it is now, it gets better. And it can get great. It can get awesome. Your life can be amazing, but you have to tough this period of your life out and you have to live your life so you’re around for it to get amazing. And it can and it will.

The video concludes with a call to action, directing youth to the It Gets Better Project website where they will find links to more information on suicide prevention as well as anti-bullying resources. At the time, the website invited other adults to share their stories of overcoming bullying by contributing a video aimed at LGBT youth. It was later revised to solicit videos from producers of any age who wish to contribute a message.

The campaign quickly comprised some of the most circulated online content. In just one month IGB became the second-most popular channel on YouTube, with over 11,465 subscribers.48 Two years into the campaign, IGB

claimed over 50,000 online videos posted and more than 50 million views.⁴⁹

“The “It gets better” tagline became something of a rallying cry for the anti-bullying movement.

In interviews Savage has celebrated the campaign’s ability to circumnavigate barriers that had formerly prevented the direct outreach of concerned adults to LGBT youth.

We can't help them...we can't barge into these schools...Because of technology we don't need to wait for an invitation anymore to speak to these kids. We can speak to them directly.⁵⁰

This intervention, he suggests, is made possible by using the "tools we have at our disposal right now" such as digital video technologies, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media. He imagines these technologies to be in the domain of youth and operating outside of the realm of formal education, the family and the law. From Savage’s perspective, the campaign has had the effect of bringing "the old order" (of how adults used to be able to support youth) crashing down."⁵¹

Savage claims that he was motivated to create IGB as a way to help make up for the scarcity of anti-bullying programs and Gay-Straight Alliance

---

⁴⁹ This data appeared on the IGB website in late 2012-early 2013, and is mentioned in Savage’s voiceover narration in the trailer for the documentary It Gets Better 2. <http://www.mtv.com/videos/misc/842600/trailer.jhtml#series=2214&seriesId=37920&channelId=1&id=1694958>


⁵¹ Ibid, 5
clubs in most K-12 schools and the absence of legislation to protect youth from anti-LGBT discrimination.\textsuperscript{52} He attributes the lack of such programming and legal protections to the high incidence of LGBT youth suicide.\textsuperscript{53} He positions viral video as offering something of a subterranean lifeline that can facilitate cathartic exchange between struggling youth and adults who can "give 'em hope."\textsuperscript{54} In this way, Savage imagines that online social media might mediate connections that were not otherwise possible. Absent from this discourse of hope rooted in a belief in the ability for meaningful exchange through viral video is an articulation of the need for the work of these media practices to be sustained by relationships or face-to-face interactions between youth, their peers, and supportive adults. What's more, as with much uncritical appraisal of social media forms, high saturation or numbers of hits is facilely equated with social impact or efficacy.

**Spreadability**

As a result of the unprecedented level of participation, viral video production quickly came to be seen by educators and community leaders as a particularly valuable tool for supporting LGBT youth. The format of the viral

\textsuperscript{52} Savage, Dan, and Terry Miller. *It gets better: Coming out, overcoming bullying, and creating a life worth living*, p7.

\textsuperscript{53} Another main goal of the campaign is to raise money for The Trevor Project (aimed at preventing LGBT youth suicide), GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network), and the American Civil Liberties Union LGBT Project's Youth and Schools Program--organizations that all have established histories of working to support LGBT youth.

\textsuperscript{54} When using this phrase, Savage gestures to a famous quote from the preeminent gay rights activist Harvey Milk. *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*, 4.
video PSA campaign has predominated over other ways of reaching youth while encouragement to produce "anti-bullying PSAs" has become the dominant means for addressing the issue in community groups, formal and informal educational environments and action groups. The popular enthusiasm for viral video projects and the assumed efficacy for outreach precipitated a proliferation of calls from organizations, film festivals and educational institutions for LGBT youth to produce videos that address the perceived epidemic of "anti-gay bullying." For instance, the Make it Better campaign, initiated only nine days after the It Gets Better Project and endorsed by over 90 organizations nationwide, encourages teens to produce videos in which they can express their needs and describe what their schools and communities can do to support them.\footnote{GSA Network Presents: Make it Better Project, http://www.makeitbetterproject.org. On their website they address what differentiates their campaign from the It Gets Better Project: “Columnist Dan Savage started the “It Gets Better” video campaign to send a message of hope to LGBT youth who are experiencing bullying and contemplating suicide. His project, along with a swell in media coverage of youth deaths by suicide in the fall of 2010, ignited dialogue across the country about the epidemic of bullying in our schools. But it left an important question unaddressed: what can we do to make it better? GSA Network launched the Make It Better Project to let students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and adult allies know that there are concrete actions they can take right now to make schools safer for all students.} The campaign pivots off of IGB, specifically soliciting youth-produced videos in which youth producers are encouraged “to let students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and adult allies know that there are concrete actions they can take right now to make schools safer for all students.”\footnote{Make it Better Project. http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/about} In Chapter 4 I illustrate an example of a
similar prompt for LGBT youth to produce an anti-gay-bullying PSA video that could achieve viral circulation.

The IGB campaign’s popularity initiated a sudden ubiquity of the self-produced PSA genre as a mode of expression and style of public discourse for addressing the concerns of youth. Contests encouraging youth to make anti-bullying PSAs soon peppered the philanthropic landscape, as classrooms and community groups adapted their agendas and curricula to enable their students to produce relevant PSA videos (like the one parodied in the South Park “Butterballs” episode). Educators, community organizations and foundations writ large turned to viral video PSA production as a method for engaging the general youth population in the issue of anti-bullying, particularly because of the enhanced reach that the sharing function of viral video enables. The presumed efficacy, ease, and reach of the viral video approach of addressing LGBT issues has been considered so successful that in a response to a perceived need to bring youth voices to the fore, many other sites have begun to encourage youth to make produce their own.57

Encouraging youth to produce videos themselves is an approach that assumes that agency and voice are engendered through the production process. The youth video approach is presumably a self-perpetuating pedagogical model that expands learning outside of the school context, by leveraging the widespread use of digital media technologies. This

57 Some key examples include Make it Better Project http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/about
student/youth-centered “hands-on” production approach has roots in the progressive Children’s Rights Movement and in the tradition of critical pedagogy, which I explore in greater depth in Chapter 2. A central question that I raise is whether the fact that placing the means of production in the hands of youth necessarily makes viral video PSA production an ideal method for identifying and addressing their needs? I argue that this equation persists due to the convenient coincidence between the popularity of engaged pedagogy and the inexpensive, fundable, reproducible nature of digital video projects. As I show in Chapter 4, the completed PSA video is an effective tool for evidencing student engagement and online video streaming and sharing capabilities enable educators and funders to claim impact and outcomes beyond the scope of the smaller group they support. In this way, youth-produced anti-bullying videos could be said to fall into what some scholars of social justice movements have termed the “nonprofit industrial complex.”

In the years since IGB’s emergence, it has become common for American youth to participate in an anti-bullying video projects (either as producers, viewers, or both). Many of the anti-bullying videos produced by

---

youth adopt the generic conventions of the *It Gets Better Project* campaign, including the specific language, while not necessarily overtly referencing or linking to the campaign. Significant changes also occurred for the *It Gets Better Project* as the number of teen contributors to the campaign began to soar. This effectively changed the nature of the campaign from one of adults delivering messages of overcoming bullying based on many years of life experiences and hindsight, to one in which youth also claim distance and perspective. This claim collapses two temporalities LGBT youth: an imagined future in which they share life experiences with the adults they have seen in videos; and their lived present in which they still have to go through the growth, maturation and sheer distance that that such hindsight is based on.

Without a doubt, anti-bullying campaigns have championed viral video as a powerful means of expression and connection that is paralleled by unquestioned embraced of notions of the empowering dimensions of social media, but to this point we have not examined exactly how viral video functions. The relevance and affective impact of a viral video is typically assessed in terms of the rate that it circulates. At present, the “success” of youth-produced anti-bullying videos is measured more by the extent of their circulation than their ability to address the needs of the youth who produce and view them. When videos circulate widely through peer networks and achieve notoriety on a global scale, as many of the most famous anti-bullying videos have, one might assume there to be a straightforward connection
between the video content and its social, cultural, and personal significance. We might, as Dan Savage and many educators and community leaders have, go a step further to imagine an equivalency between the level of circulation and the impact on the person or people directly involved or depicted in the videos. If broad reach is at once the strategy and goal of viral video campaigns like the *It Gets Better Project*, we must ask, what is it that makes such videos “viral,” or, to borrow Jenkins, Ford and Green’s term here, “spreadable”?59

I would like to turn our attention toward how video production that is intended from the outset for viral distribution (as in the case of the anti-bullying videos mentioned above), obliges video producers to participate in a system of professionalizing practices that requires them to produce particular kinds of media in order to ensure circulation and legibility. While in chapter three I elaborate in greater detail the constraints that are presented by the public service announcement form, here I am most interested in examining just how the prerogatives of viral or spreadable media shapes, and potentially impedes, an individual’s narrative and expressive possibilities. At risk is the masking of young peoples’ actual struggles, as in the case of Butters in the South Park episode. Specifically, what must participants understand about how to participate online in order to encourage visibility? What symbolic resources and shared meanings must be mobilized in the pursuit of legibility and publicity? What is happening on the level of production to ensure

59 Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013.
spreadability? Finally, how might these intuited expectations about what makes a video spreadable impact self-representation?

While Dan Savage insists that streaming video technology enabled a paradigm shift in the way outreach and connection with LGBT youth is accomplished, media scholars Jenkins, Ford, and Green suggest that the rise of participatory circulation of online material cannot be explained solely (or even primarily) by a rise of technological infrastructure, “even as these new technologies play a key role in enabling shifts.” They claim, “media industries and marketing worlds are moving toward a model of circulation based on the logic of spreadability.” It might seem like a fit to think of the anti-bullying viral video as an example of a *meme*, a term introduced by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to describe cultural reproduction. Internet memes (like genes) rely on repetition and variation for their propagation and survival. But whereas memes often take unexpected and creative turns in their organic, rather rhizomatic developments, winding up altogether different than how they began, youth-produced anti-bullying videos remain strikingly similar in their content, style and form, and most importantly, message. Jenkins, Ford, and Green find the concepts of viruses and memes

---

60 Jenkins, Ford, and Green, p3.
61 Ibid, 44.
particularly limiting, as they “often distort the human agency involved in spreading media content”. The spreadibility of online media, they suggest, is instead determined “by processes of social appraisal rather than technical or creative wizardry and on the active participation of engaged audiences.”

Indeed, people circulate texts based on the perceived social value for their social circle, and how the circulated text may reflect upon them. In their words,

> Spreadability assumes a world where mass content is continually repositioned as it enters different niche communities. When material is produced according to a one-size-fits-all model, it imperfectly fits the needs of any given audience. Instead, audience members have to retrofit it to better serve their interests.

Yet whereas Jenkins, Ford and Green describe the spread of online material as motivated by audiences who retrofit to serve their interests, I would like to suggest that many videos have repurposed the anti-bullying, pro-LGBT youth messages that originated with IGB in ways that do indeed suggest a “one-size-fits-all” model. Across the numerous anti-bullying videos that exist online, there are striking consistencies in the message (‘stop bullying!’ or ‘hold on if you’re being bullied, life will get better!’), the positive tone, the call to action, and the digestible, sanitized, approach to the topic of violence and oppression. We can see normalization explicitly encouraged by the *It Gets Better Project* in the guidelines it provides contributors. These guidelines

---

63 Jenkins, Ford, and Green, p44.
64 Ibid, 196.
65 Ibid, 27.
outline the visual and narrative parameters of successful (posts that won’t be blocked) video contributions. These sanitizing guides and requisite “positive tone” are likely motivated by practical concerns, such as a perceived danger of posting videos that suggest justifications and techniques for LGBT youth suicide. But beyond this, there is a clear desire on the part of the foundation to maintain consistency across the campaign’s style, tone, and message. So despite the fact that the It Gets Better Campaign is comprised of videos from thousands of non-professional producers, the consistency across the videos aligns the campaign with traditional public service campaigns produced by advertising agencies and advocacy organizations.

For instance, contributors are offered advice on how to achieve the highest quality sound and lighting for their video. These aesthetic norms are based on a normative framing and style--the testimonial, seated, medium shot documentary style that Savage and Miller first initiated. It is assumed that contributors will be shooting in a similar fashion and tacitly encourages such emulation. In addition, the IGB website suggests “talking points” that contributors should cover. The broad categories include “Positive Messages of Hope for LGBT Youth,” ‘Using Safe Messaging Practices,’ and ‘Suggest Resources, Help, and Support.’ The campaign requests that contributors seek to “inspire” young people, while staying “positive” and “uplifting” and avoiding any “language that could be interpreted as negative or that specifically

---

mentions self-harm.”

In sum, message coherence and legibility seems to take precedence in ways that suggest that these videos and the campaigns they are a part of in fact have more in common with top-down traditional broadcast advertising than the techno-utopian discourse around them suggests. This is perhaps because the PSA, similar to commercial advertisements, takes a uni-directional approach to a target audience about an issue and offers one discreet, often hard-hitting, uncomplicated message. Perhaps more than any other genre, the PSA seeks to homogenize a diversity of voices and experiences. To produce within this structure (even loosely) means to foreclose the possibility of ambivalence or contradictions in perspectives, which further shuts down possibilities for grappling with the trauma associated with bullying. Disqualified subjectivities or pathologized subject positions cannot be contained by this dominant narrative form. One’s participation in an anti-bullying or anti-gay-bullying video, therefore, inevitably becomes a performance of a particular position with regards to the pain associated with (LGBT) youth pain and suicidal ideation. When one films, views, or circulates anti-bullying PSA videos, one identifies as the “not-bully,” “the ally,” or “the survivor.”

**Legibility, Visibility, and Identity Management**

Examining the outgrowth of the *It Gets Better Project* to offline channels
illustrates the campaign’s trajectory and establishes its role in the evolution of mainstream anti-bullying discourse. Tracing these connections clarifies the connection between online anti-bullying videos and the role of anti-bullying discourse in public identity management. We can see how the videos function as cultural objects that perform public legibility and can be commodified into a form of public relations capital as well as (acceptable) spectacle.

Soon after it had established an online presence, the *It Gets Better* Project extended its efforts into offline media. With several prominent funding backers, the campaign garnered the resources to advertise on prime time network television, most notably during the Fox network’s hit show *Glee*, which had featured storylines about anti-gay bullying. The tie-in was reinforced by *It Gets Better* videos featuring actors from the show, including Max Adler who portrays the closeted football player who bullies Kurt, a beloved gay student.67

The campaign continued to expand in the form of clothing merchandise and a book, *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying and Creating a Life Worth Living*; a compendium to the online campaign designed to reach youth who lack reliable Internet access.68 The book includes expanded testimonials and essays from dozens of prominent LGBT adults and allies, such as Ellen DeGeneres and Senator Al Franken. In 2012 the campaign also delved into broadcast distribution with two *It Gets Better* documentary specials.

67 “Glee’s Max Adler: It Gets Better” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHfM_iV-554>
68 Savage, Dan and Terry Miller. *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying and Creating a Life Worth Living.*
that aired on MTV and LOGO. These programs featured stories of three LGBT young adults in the process of coming out to their families and friends.\textsuperscript{69} The MTV-hosted website that now streams the documentaries describes the specials as the network’s way of contributing to the “worldwide movement” initiated by Savage and Miller.

Now, it’s MTV’s turn to add to the movement with the It Gets Better special, a reminder to teens across the country that it will get better, and we’re standing right by them until it does.\textsuperscript{70}

In its notoriety, the \textit{It Gets Better Project} quickly became something of an obligatory passage point for expressing support for LGBT youth, to the extent that appearing in a video for the campaign seems to have become compulsory for politicians, actors, professional athletes and employees of corporations like Google and Pixar who wish to be included on this public roster of individuals and institutions who care.\textsuperscript{71} The \textit{It Gets Better Project} encourages participants to perform their support for LGBT teens, while it also provides an opportunity to identify themselves as “not the bullies.” Savage insists that the campaign forced straight people--politicians, teachers, preachers, and parents--to decide whose side they were on.\textsuperscript{72} It arguably became what I would call a campaign of “conspicuous concern,” in which

---

\textsuperscript{69} http://www.mtv.com/shows/it_gets_better/series.jhtml
\textsuperscript{70} ibid
\textsuperscript{72} Where did Savage say this? Find source again.
participants and funders alike could register their support for LGBT youth.

Participation became, as one Salon.com columnist put it, “hip,” “de rigueur” and for some public figures, a facet of their image management.\(^{73}\)

IGB’s objective of rallying support from as many people as possible perhaps worked too well, as by 2013 it became clear that there were people contributing videos to the campaign whose interest in publicity eclipsed their intent. The most notable example is the *It Gets Better* video that was made by players from the San Francisco 49ers football team in 2012. When players were interviewed in the locker room following homophobic remarks that had been made by a teammate after a former 49er was revealed to be gay, the team had to be reminded that they had had publicly offered support to LGBT youth through the video they had made.\(^{74}\) Players Ahmad Brooks and Isaac Sopoaga who appear in the video, disavowed their participation in anything of the sort. Brooks insisted to reporters that what he had participated in was “an anti-bullying video, not a gay video.” Soon after, Dan Savage removed their video from the site. When shortly after this scandal the team lost in the SuperBowl, headlines read “It Gets Worse,” connecting their defeat on the field to their fumbles in public relations. What this highlights is that the *It Gets

\(^{73}\) D’Addario, Daniel. ‘It Gets Better’ Pulls 49ers’ PSA after Players Deny Their Involvement.” February 1, 2013. http://www.salon.com/2013/02/01/it_gets_better_pulls_49ers_psa_after_players_deny_their_involvement/

Better Project campaign has resulted in a cultural performance that assumes that there are only two sides; the bullied and the bullies, rather than allowing for a more complex understanding of how the 49ers were trying position themselves. It became necessary to see their distancing themselves from the It Gets Better Project as effectively siding with the bullies.

LGBT Youth and Visibility

LGBT visibility (in social life and the media), widely understood to be the pathway to queer liberation and social justice, gets deployed in several ways through youth-produced viral video anti-bullying campaigns. These campaigns offer the opportunity for LGBT youth to connect with others around their gender and sexual identities, while potentially adding to the visibility of LGBT people in society. Video clicks and favorable comments from viewers seemingly affirm their social value. Yet, as I argue throughout this dissertation, we must not assume that there is an equivalency between the perceived social value of the spreadable media that LGBT youth produce about bullying and the ways they internalize their own social value through the distribution of their videos.

As the South Park creators have astutely noted, the popularity of a video does not necessarily correspond to the effectiveness of improving the life of its producer. We must look at the ways in which viral videos depend on already extant hegemonic and market techniques that work to reinforce power
structures even when their stated purpose is to challenge them. Altogether, what is reinforced by LGBT youth-produced anti-bullying videos are normalizing narratives about LGBT youth experience that often belie the realities of the individual lives they represent. What get eclipsed are the specific sets of issues and intersectional identities that impact their lives. Class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion and disability get shut out of the framework that IGB presents, and concerns such as dating anxieties, abuse, homelessness, and financial struggles do not have a place in the narrative that the campaign.

Reading LGBT youth participation in campaigns like It Gets Better through the lens of identity management and performance can shed light on discrepancies on a young person’s motivation to participate and the benefits to their lives. If we can understand celebrities and public figures’ participation in anti-bullying campaigns to be (at least partially) a form of identity management, might the same motivations apply to the youth who participates in the campaigns? Spreadable media may appear to offer the LGBT youth similar cultural capital and a form of authority. At the very least it provides a way for them to imagine and perform their own successful survival of the challenges that can come with being young and LGBT. By posting a video that resembles those of celebrities, youth producers can seemingly align themselves with the stars. It endows them participants with what Howard Rheingold calls a “public voice”—one that can be utilized towards the
projection of a coherent, self-confident, reflective self. Media scholars Peter Levine and Tara McPherson have both noted the ways in which participation (through media that is participatory in nature) is often cast as evidence of a healthy citizenry. Taking this position into account, might we also understand participation in anti-bullying video production as the performance of a compliant, legible citizen? In other words, as someone who belongs.

In her ethnographic research on LGBT youth and popular culture, Susan Driver emphasizes the value and importance of informality and spontaneity in youth connections and feelings of belonging. She writes,

> For queer youth, informal public modes of community are especially valuable in the face of a lack of social recognition and support within both formal public institutions and private family realms. Queer youth are often in a predicament of having literally nowhere to go in order to physically experience the pleasure of feeling at home with others. And it is precisely those improvised, casual, and open forms of sociality to which young people turn for a sense of laid back, spontaneous belonging. 76

Might we understand online anti-bullying video as a form of sociality that facilitates the sense of belonging that Driver describes? The story of one teen It Gets Better Project contributor helps to illuminate the potentials and limits that the anti-gay-bullying viral video presents.

Fourteen-year old Jamey Rodemeyer's voice trembles as he speaks to

---


the camera from his bedroom in Buffalo, New York. He sits straight in front of
the lens, nervously pushing the hair from his forehead, often looking down and
askance as he tells viewers of his experience overcoming being bullied by his
peers after he came out as bisexual at school.

Hi, this is Jamey from New York. And I'm here to tell you that it
does get better. Here's a little bit of my story...When I came out I
got so much support from my friends...I have so much support
from people I don't even know online, I know that sounds creepy,
but they're so nice and they don't ever want me to die. And there
is so much support for me. So listen here, it gets better! Look at
me, I'm doing fine.77

The content and phrasing of Jamey's speech is consistent with the style and
testimonial motif of the thousands of videos on the It Gets Better Project
YouTube channel, where he posted his video in May 2011. Like most other
videos on the site, his two minutes contain a familiar formula; a direct address
to the viewer, a personal story about having been harassed and feeling
alienated, a proclamation of hardship overcome by self-acceptance, and a
plea for viewers to believe in themselves.

77 “It Gets Better, I Promise!” www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Pb1CaGMdWk
In his video Jamey smiles often, focuses on the positive, and refers to his feelings of oppression in the past tense. And like many others do in their *It Gets Better* videos, he concludes by shaping his hands into a heart, which he offers to the viewers, presumably other LGBT youth.

The *It Gets Better Project* aims to reach struggling LGBT youth through videos made by people who have had the life experience to illustrate to viewers "what the future may hold in store for them" when they have trouble imagining their own possibilities, Jamey's video is one of many made by an LGBT teen himself. Understanding the function of Jamey's video in the context of his own life experience becomes all the more complicated when read against the other online postings he made during the same time period. Just five months after he contributed his video to the *It Gets Better Project*, Jamey left a very different kind of message about his experience with bullying on the
Twitter feed of his proclaimed muse, the pop star Lady Gaga. “I always say how bullied I am but no one listens, what do I have to do so people will listen to me?” The following morning, on September 12, 2011, Jamey's parents discovered his body in front of their family home. Using his blog posts and his final Tweet to Lady Gaga as evidence, investigators determined his death to have been a suicide.78

Jamey’s death leaves us to question the narrative of bullying he presents in his *It Gets Better Project* video. What role might its production and circulation have played in his experience of homophobia and bullying? How might this production have figured into his self-acceptance, formation and understanding of his sexual identity or imagined participation in a larger LGBT community? More than a representation of his lived reality, his video seems to communicate a desire to be included in an increasingly popularized teleological narrative about LGBT lives and an aggregate of supportive voices.

While the *It Gets Better Project* has been commended by many youth advocates and educators for helping to bring attention, inspiration, and resources to struggling teens, the campaign has been also been critiqued, particularly in the area of queer studies, for forwarding homogenized, sanitized representations of LGBT life possibilities, and propagating what Cultural

Studies scholar Sara Ahmed calls “compulsory happiness.” To such critics, the *It Gets Better Project* suggests that teens should somehow *endure* rather than confront the social and institutional structures that produce homophobia or take practical steps to improve one’s circumstances and self-esteem. A common criticism is that the experiential and emotional trajectory that Savage and Miller suggest—bullied and feeling worthless to enjoying a good life—cannot be universally applied because it is predicated on their whiteness, high socioeconomic status, and choice to distance themselves from their communities of origin to move to urban centers already populated with queer adults. Jasbir Puar, a leading thinker in the area of queer theory has faulted the campaign for proffering a mandate to fold into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves, a form of liberal handholding and upward-mobility that echoes the now discredited ‘pull yourself up from the bootstraps’ immigrant motto.

According to Puar, IGB shifts the onus of overcoming onto the youth themselves, while advancing the idea that queer youth can survive by assimilating to a particular brand of queer life and identity. Such a lifestyle, they argue, is not only inaccessible to all queer people; but it is not even

---

necessarily desirable. Rather than opening up opportunities for LGBT youth, it is possible to see the campaign as foreclosing opportunities and life trajectories. Queer studies scholar Heather Love has made a similar intervention, arguing that the *It Gets Better Project* compels participants, particularly LGBT teens, to invest in and identify with a dominant narrative of positivity and happiness. She writes,

> Given the fact of Savage’s fame as an out gay columnist and his exemplary life with his beautiful blond boyfriend and their child, one has to grant that in his case it has gotten A LOT better. Toward the end of the video, Miller says, “Living well is the best revenge.” He means that being happy is a form of revenge against the people who tormented you in high school—but if you are watching the video and are not living as well as Savage and Miller, you may feel like a target rather than a co-conspirator in this revenge plot. 81

While I share some of the concerns of these critiques, I seek to pivot from them to address the media production practices and choices that are involved in the execution of the *It Gets Better Project* videos. Rather than casting aside the IGB campaign for promoting narrow (normative gender, raced and classed) representations of LGBT life, we might ask why contributors are compelled to submit videos to the campaign in the first place. By placing emphasis on what compels youth and adults to contribute to the campaign as well as to view and circulate videos, we may begin to see the

developing relationship between the articulation of LGBT youth identity, empowerment and digital media.

We may also consider LGBT youth participation as the production of a form of visibility that facilitates online social connections for the participant. The *It Gets Better Campaign* leverages the ubiquity of online social media in LGBT youth search for connections.\(^\text{82}\) We may also borrow Jenkins, Ford and Green’s notion of a participatory “media franchise” to explain the work of the campaign does in acting as “a cultural attractor, drawing like-minded people together to form an audience, but also a cultural activator, giving that community something to do.”\(^\text{83}\) Media studies scholar Larry Gross argues that electronic media have always played a central role in helping to forge connections between LGBT people. He refers to these networks as the “submerged archipelago of queer life across the United States.”\(^\text{84}\) Other media studies scholars who have also studied the relationship between queer identity formation and online media use such as Mary L. Gray, David J. Phillips, Christopher Pullen and Susan Driver have described the existence of queer communication networks that are made possible through social media as


simply just more visible extensions of already-mediated queer networks. So even if the anti-bullying videos do nothing to perform the social change they purport to make through awareness building and connection, they may provide new opportunities for young people to seek out and be in touch with other youth and possibly build alliance.

In the following chapters I will continue to draw attention to how producing forms of visibility and “awareness” centered around the issue of bullying through the production and circulation of viral PSA videos has become marked in mainstream advocacy and pedagogical discourses as an efficient—one might even say liberatory--tool for establishing contact and channels of support for LGBT youth. Inherent in the idea of youth video making as empowerment is a certain telos, in which teens’ creative activity is the site of emergent shared consciousness that facilitates a transformation from less empowered to having more power and control. Their movement from one position to another is tied up in certain ideas about youth as queer subjects who need assistance to be emancipated from the pain of homophobia and to enable them to become closer to their "true selves," queer subjects who will eventually fully participate in (adult) LGBT communities where, the suggestion is, bullying doesn't exist.

---

Chapter Two: Re-thinking Digital Media Empowerment
Discourse in Scholarship and Practice

Are you between the ages of 15-25? Do you like making
videos with your friends? Submit your short PSA video (15- or
30-seconds) based on Change the Conversation's current PSAs/
posters or web content. Keep the message positive and show us
how you, your friends, your family and your community say no to
drinking and driving.\textsuperscript{86}

During the course of my research I encountered hundreds of online
calls like this through simple Google searches, advertising local and national
competitions designed to encourage youth to produce videos. Most of these
campaigns were launched by non-profit organizations that had partnered with
major business sponsors. The campaigns featured topics including public
health, national politics, and other very general “issues youth care about.”\textsuperscript{87}

Commonly, these solicitations specified that video submissions take the form

\textsuperscript{86} Contest prompt from “Change the Conversation: Speak Your Mind!”
http://www.videocontest.changetheconversation.ca/about_the_program/home.php (accessed
March 7, 2012).
\textsuperscript{87} Some examples of online youth-produced PSA campaigns include Mothers Against Drunk
Driving, backed by Sony Electronics and Cox Communications which called for videos in a
campaign called “Empowering You(th) to Speak on Underage Drinking
(http://www.madd.org/local-offices/ca/san-diego/2012-MADD-PSA-Contest.pdf), The National
Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration solicited 90-second video solutions
to U.S. public policy problems as part of the “Speak Truth to Power Public Policy Challenge”
(http://www.naspaa.org/youtubechallenge/), and the National Crime Prevention Council hosted
an anti-cyberbullying PSA contest with support from sponsors that include Sony Creative
Software and the Ad Council (http://www.ncpc.org/topics/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-psa-
contest).
of the PSA. In 2012 alone at least four national media campaigns were launched that solicited youth-produced digital videos on issues faced by LGBT teens (such as bullying, hate speech and homelessness). The *It Gets Better Project* viral video campaign discussed in Chapter One and the Hillcrest Youth Center’s anti-gay-bullying PSA video project that is at the center of my case study in Chapter Four are examples of this kind of programming.

My goal in this chapter is to examine the position taken among many writers, media producers, and activists that these kinds of online youth video projects are inherently empowering to the youth who take part in them. One of my chief assertions is that some media scholars, educators and activists have too uncritically advanced the perspective that when youth are enabled and encouraged to produce and circulate digital video, their circumstances, or their sense of self, necessarily improves. As previous chapters suggest, I share this interest in the potential of digital media when placed in the hands of marginalized youth and other disempowered subjects. However, as I have already suggested, I believe the dominant discourse about youth production is in many cases over-exuberant, and naturalizes the connection between digital

---

88 Since the early 2000s, hundreds of thousands of calls for youth-produced PSAs have been advertised online. A simple search on YouTube in the spring of 2012 for youth produced PSA contests turned up over 7,000 videos, which of course only represents those that were posted on that particular site and not the projects like MakeItBetter.org and ItGetsBetter.org that are hosted on their own websites. To boot, umbrella media organizations like Adobe, Inc. sponsored ListenUp.org boasts over 4,000 PSA videos made by youth from across the U.S. 89 LGBT youth-oriented projects include Make it Better Project (http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/), The It Gets Better Project (http://www.itgetsbetter.org/), and The Anti-Homophobia Youth PSA Competition (http://www.outinschools.com/content.php/PSA_Tips/24)
media use and power. The arguments put forth by writers such as Mark Prensky, Don Tapscott, Howard Rheingold, Henry Jenkins and Mizuko Ito have in common the premise that media production in itself is empowering. I propose below that this connection between media and empowerment is unsubstantiated by the evidence of what actually happens in the lives of the youth who make these videos. More importantly, the media empowerment view may in fact obscure the structural conditions that inform what youth produce, and why they make the production choices they make. As I show in what follows, when educators and activists take the link between media and empowerment at face value, they may miss troubling issues such as misdirection of resources and the influence of funding institutions on the choices made by youth in the production process. When media educators and activists uncritically embrace the concept of media empowerment, they risk overlooking nuanced pedagogical relationships and institutional contexts that shape what youth produce and more importantly, what the producers learn. Distracted by the allure of a final video product, and the empowerment claims made within it, educators too often fail to assess the outcomes for youth involved.

The objective of my analysis, then, is to disentangle the threads that tie together media and empowerment and to expose areas where young people's needs might be overlooked when they are brought into that fray. I begin by situating and analyzing prevailing threads of discourse that posit youth as
more equipped and more comfortable with digital media than other
generations. I examine the ways in which digital media scholars have engaged
with this discourse, advancing media production projects as if they were
inherently empowering, often using the discourse of mobilizing “youth voices.”
Here I am particularly interested in the impact of institutional structures in the
promotion of digital youth empowerment discourse. I bring the work of feminist
scholars Mimi Orner and Jennifer Gore into the discussion to provide a
framework with which to critique the calls for “voice” made by supporters and
organizers of youth video productions and the prevalent discourse of
empowerment in pedagogy. Finally, I use the theoretical approaches
introduced by media educators Elizabeth Soep and Nicole Fleetwood and the
collaborative work of visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen with public health
researchers Michael Rich and Laura Sherman to help me to problematize the
phenomenon of scholars, educators, and activists eliciting youth “voice”
through digital media production. By bringing these critiques to bear on the
scholarship on digital media and learning, I challenge the assumption that for
youth, having a voice, visibility and recognition through viral video can be
equated to their gaining rights and resources.

Contemporary digital media empowerment discourse has led to trends
in youth video production pedagogy that have enmeshed young people's
identities and experiences with institutional goals to educate and
professionalize them.\textsuperscript{90} My challenge to this approach grows out of an interest in developing an attentive form of pedagogy that engages youth in a reflexive dialog with their roles as media producers and the social and institutional contexts in which they operate. I advocate for an alternative approach to media pedagogy that places more emphasis on the contexts and dynamics of media production as a meaningful site of expression than in the ultimate video productions.

An important foundation of my argument in this dissertation is the critique of the model of the self-actualizing, self-empowered youth that is precipitated through empowerment discourse. I suggest that this ideology is transferred and perpetuated through institutions that are poised to aid and educate youth. Throughout this chapter I seek to show that when educational and funding institutions create opportunities for youth media production, institutional priorities inevitably commandeer youth expression in ways that are projected as representative of the agency of young subjects. My concern is that well-intentioned institutions and individuals that fund, teach, and encourage LGBT video production collectively forward a model of

\textsuperscript{90} In the 2009 MacArthur study \textit{Living and Learning with New Media}, Patricia Lange and Mizuko Ito have observed that emerging youth media programs have been motivated by the belief that engaging in media production should be the cornerstone of media education and lead to youth empowerment through the development of self-expression. They note that several educators who have furthered this perspective "believe that shifting youth identity from that of a media consumer to a media producer is an important vehicle for developing youth voice, creativity, agency, and new forms of literacy in a media-saturated era. Compared to programs that focus on critical engagement, production-oriented programs are still relatively sparse in media education. In at least some contexts, however, there seems to be a growing recognition of their importance."
empowerment that may not address the needs and rights of the youth they support.

The prevailing notion among media pedagogues that media empowerment involves giving "voice" and visibility to youth through production presents a particular challenge for many LGBT youth, whose security and safety is sometimes predicated on their delicate negotiations of what they can and cannot express about their identities, in which contexts, and to whom. When asked to make public expressions that identify them as LGBT, some youth expose themselves to possible harassment, alienation or compromised comfort. Furthermore, when media pedagogues encourage LGBT youth to produce content along universalizing, identity-based themes, they risk overlooking the particular needs of the individual participants. These needs can be related to health, housing, legal and emotional concerns, as well as other forms of identity-based discrimination that the youth may be experiencing. I would also like to extend this concern beyond a protectionist position to suggest that these types of projects also can redirect youth away from opportunities to experiment with media form and content in ways that may be more appropriate to their particular sensibilities, concerns, and motivations for communicating through media production.

Although my project is concerned with LGBT youth in particular, much of my argument will be pertinent to media theorists and educators who use the media empowerment model in their work with other identity groups or
demographics. As I contend in chapter one, the question of identity is itself at the center of the problem of youth empowerment that I am trying to foreground here.

**The Limits of the ‘Digital Generation' Concept**

My first aim in this chapter is to examine the ways that youth have been described as inherently empowered through digital media production. Looking at texts that have contributed to digital youth discourse, I consider the ways in which youth have been discussed in terms of generation--a concept that continually undergirds pedagogical assumptions about their distinct relationships to media. Indeed I am not arguing against the existence of generation-specific relationships with media. Quite to the contrary, my situated research with youth has led me to believe that youth who have grown up with digital media production technologies tend to have a much more casual and intimate relationship to production. However, I seek to show how generalizations made about their relationship to media tend to mask the nuances of these relationships, threatening to obscure opportunities for more meaningful engagement.

In the groundbreaking 2000 polemic, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Digital Media*, prominent British media scholar David Buckingham suggests that a protectionist position has dominated political, popular, and scholarly discourses about youth and media for over a century.
He makes a proposal that is foundational to my own argument here: in the
digital era, media scholarship has represented youth engagement with media,
and particularly with media production, as inherently empowering.

Buckingham criticizes the protectionist position for characterizing young
people as pre-social, apolitical, non-agential beings—individuals whose
“cognitive development proceeds through a logical sequence of ‘ages and
stages’ towards the achievement of adult maturity and rationality.” In the
protectionist progressive model of development, youth are excluded from
many areas of ‘adult’ civic and social life. Buckingham’s alternative model
builds on existing historical and sociological approaches to childhood, situating
youth as beings who are constructed through adult discourses. Buckingham’s
critique emphasizes the constructedness of the idea of generation, and the
resulting impact on expectations for youth participation in civic life.

Buckingham sees a kind of recursivity in the way that youth are represented
through adult discourses and their behavior. He writes,

Defining children in terms of their exclusion from adult society,
and in terms of their inability or unwillingness to display what we

---

91 At the same time, 21st century youth are thought to be remarkably savvy about media as
compared to past generations, as well as media consumers who can be habituated into critical
approaches to media. Educational policy makers have also pushed for the integration of media
literacy programming in mainstream education as a means to educate youth about the
construction of media and meaning making, described by proponents as a method for
offsetting the impact of media exposure. An example of this is Geena Davis and
Congresswomen Kay Hagan and Tammy Baldwin’s 2011 The Healthy Media for Youth
Act, aimed to "improve media literacy for youth and encourage the promotion of healthier
media messages about girls and women." The bill proposes to create a grant program to
support a National Taskforce on Women and Girls in the Media, fund media effects research,
set standards for representation, and buttress media literacy and youth empowerment
programs.
define as ‘adult’ characteristics, actively produces the kind of consciousness and behavior which some adults find so problematic.\(^{92}\)

Cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg has also noted that the existence of the category of youth and the concept of media are inextricably linked. He suggests “perhaps more than any other social identity, youth always exists, as a style, with and within the media.” Grossberg echoes Dick Hebdige’s work on subcultures in which Hebdige introduced the now commonplace idea that young people’s self-styling through fashion and music performs their responses to dominant societal structures, with this performance constituting a visible political reproach to adults. According to Hebdige, media representations of youth who exhibited subcultural style (mods, punks, etc) worked to define notion of a category of youth.\(^{93}\) Buckingham pivots off of Grossberg and Hebdige’s earlier accounts to argue that in the electronic age, media blurs boundaries between adult and youth, while at the same time it develops and sustains notions of youth through media representation. He observes that since the early 2000s there has been a significant reorientation toward representing youth as empowered by media and argues that this rhetoric is reflective of a shifting of categories of modern childhood and youth in which children and young people are positioned as “active” and “agents” of societal transformation.

---


Don Tapscott’s 1998 *Growing Up Digital* and Mark Prensky’s 1999 *Don’t Bother Me Mom—I’m Learning* are key examples of texts that have contributed to the emergence of digital youth discourse. Tapscott, a business scholar, pundit and member of the World Economic Forum, is best known for introducing the terms “Net Generation” and “Digital Divide.” Through his writing and prolific public speaking career, Tapscott has contributed to a reification of youth’s relationship to digital media technology, overemphasizing their uptake. According to Tapscott, youth find using digital technology to be “as natural as breathing”—indeed, they even "possess an intuitive, spontaneous relationship" with it. He differentiates what he calls the “net generation”) born after the early 1990s from the “television generation” born after the late 1940s. He describes the latter as having grown up to become isolated, passive recipients of monolithic messages created by a small number of producers. The television generation’s members struggle to be active participants in an interactive, democratic sphere.

Tapscott introduces a point that is central to my argument in this chapter: Whereas the television generation *experienced* the world through a highly centralized production/reception model, the net generation *creates* the world through their democratic uses of media. He explains:

Children today have new powerful tools for inquiry, analysis, self-expression, influence and play. They have unprecedented

---

94 Other such texts include Nicholas Negroponte’s *Being Digital* and Neil Howe and William Strass’ *Millenials Rising: The Next Great Generation*.
95 Tapscott in Buckingham *After the Death of Childhood*, 47
mobility. They are shrinking the planet in ways their parents could never imagine. Unlike television which was done to them, they are the actors in the digital world.\footnote{ibid}

Here Tapscott suggests that digital technology’s capacity to enable play and expression is inextricably linked to youth mobility and power. It is easy to see how this might make sense, given the new possibilities for creative/productive activity and multidirectional communication offered by the digital media technologies and environments that are voraciously consumed by youth. At the same time we need to ask how this can be true if the explosion of digital media correlates to a period in which U.S. social and economic mobility was attaining all-time lows (both domestically and in international comparisons with regions with less internet access)\footnote{Deparle, Jason. "Harder for American's to Rise From Lower Rungs." The New York Times, January 4, 2012.} Tapscott's rendering of a utopian present/future implicitly responds to a history of media education and activism yearned for in the work of a generation of scholars engaged with low cost and accessible film and analog video technology as Sol Worth, John Adair, Richard Chalfen, Dee Dee Halleck, Ellen Seiter, Steve Goodman, Mary Celeste Kearney, and Brian Goldfarb who, prior to the introduction of digital media, have been strong advocates for teaching media production as a technique for encouraging situated literacy practices and democratic participation. But while these scholars have suggested that empowerment is achievable through a process of engaging youth in critiques
of power through hands-on approach to understanding media practices, Tapscott suggests that youth access to power is immediately conveyed through their use of digital technologies which he describes as less passive forms of activity. Tapscott's position is a further articulation of an established mythology concerning the utopic democratic potential of digital media dating to the first theorists of internet communities, including Howard Rheingold, who, since the early 1990s has argued that technology “has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost – intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage.” Prophetic and descriptive, Tapscott's approach to youth media use doesn't address the specifics of how political and social engagement might be developed through hands-on approaches to media. His is a largely technological determinist analysis that understands digital media technology in itself as the harbinger of new forms of social and political empowerment.

One way in which Tapscott supports his broader argument is by glossing connections between specific technical affordances of networked media and their social values. For example, he believes that the distributed nature of the Internet and the international makeup of its users has engendered a generation that is globally minded and therefore more tolerant, concerned and empathetic towards other people and the environment. He

takes this tenuous formulation further, arguing forcefully that it will lead youth to civic action.

In 2001, education pundit Marc Prensky further codified the digital generational rhetoric by introducing the terms “Digital Natives” and “Digital Immigrants” as part of a framework for educators considering to integrate media in the classroom.\textsuperscript{99} Echoing Tapscott, Prensky describes "Digital Natives" as those people who were born into an already digital world and are assumed to possess fluency with technology. This fluency must be \textit{acquired} by the "Digital Immigrants," who, born before digital technologies, must consciously and continuously work to acculturate and familiarize themselves with new technologies. These terms entered the popular lexicon through John Palfrey and Urs Gasser’s best-selling book \textit{Born Digital}, which helped them spill over into popular discourse.

It is worth mention that the metaphor equating new media use and belonging did not originate with Prensky. It dates back to the early 1970s, when the emergence of home computers was at the center of prognostications about the potential impact on youth empowerment. In 1971, computer programmer and educator Seymour Papert made the widely heralded claim that computer science should be taught as a grade school subject so that children would learn to think about what they do with machines rather than to be “processed” by them. He saw computers “as something the child himself

will learn to manipulate, to extend, to apply to projects, thereby gaining a greater and more articulate mastery of the world, a sense of the power of applied knowledge and a self-confidently realistic image of himself as an intellectual agent."100 A decade later, in 1982 a trend report conducted by the American council of life insurance called *The Shape of the American Family in the Year 2000*, the authors project that home computing technology would both empower and sediment generational shifts. They write, "Like the children of immigrants learning the language of the new land, the first generation of children to have home computers may develop a literacy and an ability to communicate that their parents cannot match or even understand."101 So as we can see, the notion of an empowered electronic generation is not such a new concept.

In the last decade several media scholars have begun to express concern about the limitations of framing a "digital generation." A percolating scholarly skepticism towards the "digital natives" concept is most apparent in a 2008 article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called "Generational Myth," in which media scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan brings together the concerns of many of his interlocutors, including Buckingham, Susan Herring and even Henry Jenkins, who was one of the first scholars to advocate for the value of

---


101 The shape of the American family in the year 2000, *Volume 22 of TAP (Series)*
studying the impact of digital media on youth in their education, civic and social lives, an early proponent of digital natives discourse and a prominent figure in the digital humanities. By threading together their remarks, Vaidhyanathan successfully makes a case for a shifting scholarly discourse around youth and digital media.

Buckingham is perhaps the most outspoken critic in this area. Here I return to his argument about the shortcomings of the generational approach:

ultimately, like other forms of marketing rhetoric, the discourse of ‘the digital generation’ is precisely an attempt to construct the object of which it purports to speak. It represents not a description of what children or young people actually are, but a set of imperatives about what they should be or what they need to become.¹⁰²

Jenkins takes issue with describing digital skills as part of a "native" sensibility, claiming that it threatens to undermine attention to participation gaps based on access to certain skills and competencies, cultural experiences and social identities. He writes,

Talking about youth as digital natives implies that there is a world which these young people all share a body of knowledge they have all mastered, rather than seeing the online world as unfamiliar and uncertain for all of us.¹⁰³

For Jenkins, the "digital natives" rhetoric discourse stands in the way of more complex thinking about the impact of digital media. The digital natives formulation, which he claims to have once seen as "a powerful tool for rethinking old assumptions about what kinds of educational experiences or skills were valuable," he now feels has become "a rhetorical device that short circuits thinking about meaningful collaboration across the generations."\(^104\) Furthermore, he warns that the rhetoric may dangerously obfuscate the particularities of young people's lived realities, making it more difficult for educators to determine how to best address their needs.

Unfortunately there is a paucity of work that effectively takes up this call to attend to particularities and radical variegation in the practices of young people of different demographics, regions, class, etc. It is precisely the filling of this gap that my project aims to achieve. A central tenant of the argument of my dissertation is that while anti-gay-bullying PSA videos may provide certain kinds of visibility to the existence of and challenges of being an LGBT youth, they ultimately do so in constrained ways that are shaped by the publicity needs of the institutions and organizations facilitate these youth productions. Opportunities to convene resources for the complex needs of the individuals and groups of youth who lend their voices in their production are sometimes overlooked in the attempt to contain the identities and needs of this heterogeneous group.

\(^{104}\) ibid.
Susan Herring, a linguistics and information science scholar who has published alongside Jenkins in the area of Digital Media and Learning, suggests that these commonly asserted claims, that youth possess unique abilities to use technologies and as a result are self-reliant and ‘in-charge,’ emerges from (adult) media producers and researchers in academic and other institutions who have indeed constructed the internet generation as such.\(^{105}\) For Herring, this age-based generational digital divide that casts young people as having greater access and abilities is a symptom of what she calls "technological exoticism" and a belief in technological determinism that overshadows the contextual factors and social motivations that shape youth behaviors and attitudes and the roles of these technologies in their lives. My ethnography will illustrate technological exoticism in context through the example of an adult-authored anti-gay-bullying youth video PSA assignment that was funded by a foundation seeking to aid in LGBT youth empowerment.

Like Buckingham, Jenkins, and Herring, Vaidhyanathan agrees that the conception of a generation of digital natives is bound up in several problematic presumptions about youth. He claims that the rhetoric ignores the needs of those who may have limited access to technologies, limited time, few chances for skill building and as well as other opportunities to acquire knowledge necessary to take full advantage of participatory media. In

\(^{105}\) Herring, Susan. “Questioning the Generational Divide: Technological Exoticism and Adult Constructions of Online Youth Identity.” *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 71-95
particular, he is concerned with the ways that the unifying identity of digital natives obscures the realities of young people's differences in financial privilege. For Vaidhyanathan, what is most concerning about this construction of youth is that it "presumes an equal playing field and equal access to time, knowledge, skills, and technologies." These presumptions, he suggests, stem from biases about ethnicity, nation, gender, and class, and further cast those with less access to digital media technologies as outside of zones of participation, knowledge production and civic participation.

Building from Vaidhyanathan's critique, I would add that the conceptualization of the digital native also ignores differences in sexual identity and the ways in which freedom, power, and voice may not always be equally available to particular subjects. For LGBT youth in particular, there is often the need to carefully and cautiously manage certain aspects of their identities for their own safety and choose to reveal or hide their sexual or gender identity depending on the context, access to easy-to-use digital technologies may make certain kinds of freedom and mobility possible, but at the same time, present other limits on self-presentation and expression. If what is deemed to be empowering about digital media use is that it allows for new forms of participation, collaboration, and connections, we must ask, what barriers exist for those youth for whom identity is highly negotiated?

---


One significant pedagogical concern in working with LGBT youth is that encouraging open participation in public discourse regarding their sexuality may leave them vulnerable in unanticipated ways. As media educators we need to take this into account. Visual communication scholar Kevin Barnhurst suggests that the rhetoric of freedom may be encouraging an approach to digital media that could have serious repercussions for LGBT people in general, but particularly LGBT youth. According to Barnhurst, the promise of digital freedom may be structurally linked with increased dangers of repression when people with marginal identities make their identities public online. He argues,

The rise of new communication technologies at the end of the millennium may have raised hope for queers, especially the young under the control of heteronormative families and communities but also those under repressive national regimes around the world. The paradox, of course, is that the same persons expecting digital freedom experience physical attacks and discrimination. The existence of high expectations changes the tenor of the dangers, so that both states exist in simultaneous contrast to each other.¹⁰⁸

For Barnhurst, the celebratory rhetoric around digital media participation marks particular kinds of freedom and empowerment for LGBT people, but stands in contrast to the embodied and material realities of LGBT people's lives. While this is clearly not a paradox specific to LGBT people, his example emphasizes that mobility and free expression in online spaces doesn't

necessarily translate to offline realities. At the same time, it is important to temper Barnhurst's argument by noting the potential benefits of increased representation. I would suggest that the success of shows like Fox's musical hit *Glee* which features several "out" LGBT characters and devotes entire episodes to issues regarding their sexual identities, provide examples that should lead us to a more qualified and nuanced understanding of Barnhurst's critique. As Queer Studies scholar Larry Gross has argued, representation offers a visualization of what it means to be LGBT. While it may not always map onto lived experience, LGBT media icons can offer a sense of a life that exists beyond social structures. Perhaps, in an era where YouTube videos receive more hits than most broadcast television shows have viewers, the everyday LGBT youth video producer can offer possibilities to others.\(^{109}\) We might then ask, what types of pedagogical approaches would best benefit subgroups of youth in exploring how they regulate modes of self disclosure as they use digital media to engage in public discourse?

It is important to consider the ways that the negotiation of online identity is part of LGBT youth's everyday participatory media activity--for them, participating in online spaces such as chat rooms, video sites and social networks as open LGBT people often requires them to practice what David J. Phillips calls "context management and identity management" as a means of

self-protection.\textsuperscript{110} Managing when and how to reveal their sexual and/or gender identity to match the social context is as necessary online as it is offline. So while digital media may provide new points of connection and community, as well as additional channels for resources, support and expression for LGBT youth, it can also be a site of violence, alienation, and (negotiated) anonymity. Expanding from Phillips' analysis, my work argues for the non-universal version of civic participation through digital video production. I pivot away from viral video production as a catch-all approach to serving LGBT youth, and seek for ways to engage multiple public spheres that relate to diverse modes of citizenship and positionalities.

From “Digital Natives” to “Participatory Cultures”: Situating Media Pedagogy

In his turn away from the broad-sweeping "digital natives" framework, Henry Jenkins has been prolific in his advocacy for what he calls "participatory culture," a model of digital media use that shifts the focus from individual expression and experience to community involvement and processes of learning, connection, and social engagement. He describes participatory cultures as having

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).  

For Jenkins, these skills extend from traditional literacy and research, technical, and critical-analysis skills learned in the classroom and therefore are issues concerning critical pedagogy. In the 2009 Digital Media and Learning [DML] MacArthur report *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins et al posit that participatory culture is directly connected to empowerment, as it offers opportunities to participate in civic and social life not formerly available to youth. Whereas Buckingham sees youth disengaged from political life

---


112 In the 1960s and 1970s the DIY video movement seemed to offer youth the opportunity to learn “not only how films are made or why they are art” (as was the emphasis of media literacy education in the early to mid century), but, as Sol Worth argues, “how to manipulate images in his head, how to think with them, and how to communicate through them.” Despite resistance from those who saw media production as a threat to the cognitive and creative skills gained through reading and writing literacies and as more aligned with technical skill and vocation than expression and education, media literacy education was increasingly recognized as a critical practice taken up in formal and informal educational environments not only as a technique of inquiry, but as a “critical practice of citizenship, part of the exercise of democratic rights and civic responsibilities.” Influenced by the work of education scholars like Lev Vygotsky and Paulo Freire, media literacy education of the 1970s emphasized the power of literacy as a socio-cultural practice in which power relations could be examined and manipulated. As Postman and Weingartner argue, at stake is the authority of the educator, as peer-peer education is encouraged, and a space is created for a multiplicity of truths and opinions about social and political issues that doesn’t follow a logical progression outlined by the educator or institution’s curriculum.
because political debate has been conducted “almost entirely over their heads,” Jenkins et al see youth becoming active citizens through participation:

Empowerment comes from making meaningful decisions within a real civic context: we learn the skills of citizenship by becoming political actors and gradually coming to understand the choices we make in political terms. Today’s children learn through play the skills they will apply to more serious tasks later. The challenge is how to connect decisions made at local, state or national levels.¹¹³

Jenkins and his co-authors point out the flaws in what they call a "laissez-faire" approach to digital cultures in which youth are expected to acquire skills without intervention or supervision and use them toward meaningful participation in society (civic participation, community dialogues, etc). These flaws include an underestimation of the gaps in access that exists, an assumption that youth are actively reflective and can articulate what they learn from their participation, and that youth can develop the necessary ethical norms to cope with social environments online. The authors argue for a paradigm shift away from earlier approaches to education and digital technologies that "stressed tools above all else," toward providing contexts for youth to "evaluate their own work and appraise their own actions...helping them to situate the media they produce within its larger social, cultural and legal context".¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ ibid, 15
For Jenkins and his co-authors, technological access can only be meaningful for users who have developed the critical skills necessary to use technologies in ways that will enrich their lives. And even when provided access, young people may not always be actively reflecting on their media experiences or possess “the ethical norms to cope with a complex and diverse social environment online.”

Therefore, the authors suggest, any meaningful media education must also include guidance toward developing these faculties. Specifically, they advise that schools and after-school programs should devote more attention to fostering what they call "new media literacies" which they describe as "a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape."

The skill sets the 2007 MacArthur white paper describes is reflected in other central media pedagogy texts, most notably the 2007 publication *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States*, a document that was commissioned by the National Commission for Media Literacy Education and authored by a team of scholars and practitioners, meant to serve as a common ground for the field. Media education scholars Renee Hobbs and Amy Jensen suggest the document is meant to reconcile what they call the “protectionist” and “empowerment” wings of media literacy, the goal being to not only create informed consumers of mass media and popular culture, but to

---

115 ibid, 15
116 ibid, xiii
encourage and enable active democratic citizenship.\textsuperscript{117} The publication refers to earlier, related conclusions of Jenkins'. Meanwhile, the 2009 MacArthur report makes reference to the Core Principles. Taken together, these cross-references create something akin to suggested best practices or standards, creating something of an echo chamber of agreement. Altogether these kinds of texts have helped to articulate a valuable set-list of core competencies that explicitly counter the framework of "digital natives" that assumes all youth be inherent masters of new media technology. At the same time, the focus of this work runs the risk of being used to forward normative conceptions of competency, especially within the climate of public education in the US which has been increasingly dominated by policies aimed at enforcing educational standards. Though the work of these scholars has been strongly at odds with standards-based education [especially insofar as they embrace Freierian student-centered approaches and advocate for the value of popular culture and vernacular knowledge forms], their guidelines paradoxically mirror the goals of standardized literacy programs. Circulated to educators with the aim of empowering students, these national media literacy guidelines help to institutionalize pedagogy that does little to account for the "diverse social environments" that different students will encounter depending on their distinct backgrounds, interests, and persuasions. Specific positionalities require

\textsuperscript{117} Hobbs and Jensen, "The Past, Present and Future of Media Literacy," 7.
distinct competencies that are acquired through direct experience. The guidelines treat knowledge as a priori rather than situated.

So, why is empowerment described in terms of "active citizenship"? Suggesting that youth media participation is most empowering when it lines up with a vague notion of civic participation does little more than to place value on particular modes of expression, community building, and connection while holding up citizenship as an ideal state. The idea of a "global citizenry" comprised of many diverse participants who are empowered to contribute their ideas and values, is a noble concept, but ultimately tends to obscure inequities in lived possibilities for participation. While there is much value in this advocacy for new sets of competencies, I would suggest that these guidelines need to be supplemented by a set of pedagogical principles and approaches that attend to the radical diversity of experiences of participation as well as modes of learning.

Turning our attention to modalities of instruction, it is worth considering how some principles of critical and feminist pedagogy could help us in recasting some of the approaches to teaching that been forwarded in these digital media education guidelines. The guidelines emphasize the need for adult involvement as an important step in developing forms of youth criticality considered necessary for their empowerment, but do not address the power relations inherent in pedagogy. Critical pedagogy scholars Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore have advocated that such dynamics define the classroom,
students and teachers, as "we are inscribed as either student or professor: students take exams, teachers don’t; students are graded, teachers grade. Such inscriptions are key in the production of subjectivity, identity and knowledge in pedagogical encounters. In short, we might argue, subjectivity, identity and knowledge are the work of schooling." These guidelines have helped to popularize critical media pedagogy in a period when state and national agendas like the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind act are pressuring educators to be more focused on score results than on developing students' critical capacities. Yet despite what may seem like a complement to traditional, limited schooling, they introduce other kinds of problematic standards.

Finally, I would argue, the guidelines celebrate participatory cultures and new media literacies without sufficiently problematizing their integration in particular community environments. The spaces where pedagogy is assumed to occur are non-specific and homogenous, presented without attention to the institutional contexts in which they are situated. Moving from the general emphasis on participation, it is possible to envision educational practices that respond to and build upon the experiences of power within the local setting and across the spaces and relationships that our students are engaged in.

Jenkins and his co-authors argue that schools, as institutions, have been slow to react to the emergence of participatory culture and feel that "the

---

greatest opportunity for change is currently found in after-school programs and informal learning communities." Their study and the companion MacArthur-funded white paper, *Living and Learning with New Media*, also published in 2009 and directed by cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito, promotes the pedagogical value of what they frame as spaces where youth can engage with participatory cultures on what seem to be their own terms. These settings include homes, after-school programs, and online spaces. In focusing their research outside of schools, these researchers sidestep attention to the pedagogical role that adults play in shaping youth’s interaction with new media in informal learning environments. And by not attending to the function of adults in the operations and activities of informal learning sites, these scholars, intentionally or not, also put forward something like a "digital natives" approach to learning with new media in which they further an assumption that youth are shaped by and through their interactions with digital technologies.

Notably, Ito, along with other researchers who contribute to the MacArthur funded Digital Youth project, have contributed a nuanced analysis that begins to unpack the "digital natives" framework by distinguishing various positions that youth take up in relation to new media knowledge/practice. In their white paper *Living and Learning with New Media*, as well as the edited volume that followed it, they describe participation with new media as either

---

119 Jenkins et al, xiii
"friendship-driven," in which they use new media to interact with peers and negotiate the everyday, or "interest-driven," which is characterized by activities that bring youth together around specialized "interests, hobbies, and career aspirations" and often through "niche or marginalized identities." Within these genres they describe three distinct genres of youth participation with new media that describe the "differing levels of commitment and intensity" among youth. They call these categories "Hanging Out," "Messing Around," and "Geeking Out." "Hanging Out" is participation that happens mostly in friendship-driven networks during social time. It can involve using new media technologies such as instant messaging (IM), smart phones and text messaging as a means to communicate, interact, play games with others or arrange social activities. "Messing Around" represents a deeper level of engagement and interest in the workings of the technologies themselves and experimentation with different forms of media. "Geeking Out" is a genre of participation that is defined by deep investment and commitment in interest-driven forms of media activity. These media activities are intensive and require specialized skills or knowledge, an awareness of social and technological rules, as well as willingness and interest in breaking them.

Ito and her co-investigators understand these three genres as a continuum, with "Messing Around" as the "transitional genre" on the road to "Geeking Out." They believe that all three genres enable youth to engage in

---

Ito, et al. *Living and Learning with New Media*, xvii
peer-based-learning and that the type of social action that is necessary for determining social and behavioral norms needed to participate in today's media ecology. In their parsing of these categories they describe a universal sphere of participation in which access to technologies is considered a priori, and movement between friendship-driven to interest-driven participation is simply the outcome of time and exposure. My own educational work with youth bears out their observations, though one could come easily come up with additional categories that articulate other relations to media shaped by the situated identity of various young people. More importantly, I would like to suggest that analysis like these are made more useful when paired with careful consideration of how these categories are filled out. It is not arbitrary who occupies these positions, as they often directly map on to class and social position. A structural analysis into how the different public spheres relate is an important tool in developing effective pedagogical approaches to bridging and drawing connections among these positionalities. Further, we might consider whether the hierarchical trajectory from superficial to deep engagement by itself is the most useful way to conceive of diversity in media learning.

Brian Goldfarb’s scholarship on the role of the visual in media education of the early 2000s provides useful insight into the reality that alternative work with new media in education is and has always been institutionally situated. Hence, the viability of the kinds of programs encouraged by these new media literacy and pedagogy advocates is dependent on a network of institutions
rather than a commonly assumed trickle-down scenario whereby educational programs outside of schools proper adopt or re-imagine educational objectives that were initially designed in formal education institutions. Goldfarb suggests that they are instead products of a longer history of intertwining missions to entertain and to educate that has deep roots in the public education system. In this way, “the voice of new youth media is institutionally situated and is thus subject to the same forces of the market as adult media production.”¹²² This is not to say that youth voices are inherently compromised, but that they are indeed bound up in the social and economic forces as adult media production.

I would add that the particular "grassroots" quality of youth digital media production also obscures its location in the established political economic order of traditional media production. Goldfarb refers to these as “market forces,” which is appropriate for the circulatory pathways of the anti-gay-bullying viral video PSA, which has simultaneously driven and expanded a particular kind of media market, one which doesn’t generate any kinds of visible profits but is deeply enmeshed in the funding structures and flows of several institutions.

The rise in popularity of youth digital video production in both informal and formal learning contexts has inverted what in the mid-1980s media education scholar Len Masterman called the “technicist trap” to describe what he believed a sense of “inferiority” students were likely to feel when they

learned how to use media production tools only to find their productions to be weaker than the commercial media they were used to consuming.\textsuperscript{123}

Masterman encouraged media educators to teach students about the relationship between economic constraints that structure the media and culture industries and the way that comes to bear on meaning and representation. Rather than an “inferiority” complex, digital youth producers now find themselves working within an economy of media amateurism that intersects with commercial media, assigning value to work that is explicitly non-professional. Not only are prizes available through the myriad of video contests and youth film festivals, according to Google’s video monetization policies on their user-content driven site YouTube, young producers may receive income from videos they post that receive a minimum number of views.

The judging criteria for online video contests and the production guidelines posted on channels like the \textit{It Gets Better Project} site emphasize that videos are valued for presenting “authentic youth perspectives” and “youth voices” more so than aesthetic production value. Yet what constitutes an “authentic youth voice” in the context of online video is typically overdetermined by what the organizations making the calls specify. Most sites are very specific about video content, length, and style. For instance, The University of California San Diego Women’s Center holds an annual video contest.

contest called 'Cute or Creepy: Where is the L.I.N.E?' in which participants are asked to create videos in which they reflect on sexual harassment and dating violence, two issues at the core of the Center's service mission. This contest is a major component of a campaign that is sponsored by the Avon Foundation for Women's "Speak out Against Domestic Violence" initiative. Participants are given a list of thematic guidelines and videographers are encouraged to have a "positive tone that seeks to educate and inform." Here we see the institution has a strong hand in determining both the content and the way in which perspectives on the topic are expressed. Suggesting that a "positive tone" be used in videos that take on the controversial and painful topics of sexual harassment and dating violence is an obvious imposition on expression. The additional requirement that video submissions seek to "educate and inform" requires that the videographers not only imagine their ultimate audience, but also imagine the institution's ultimate mission in order to reflect it in their message. The final video submissions may be more reflective of the educational goals of the Women's Center and their contest sponsor, the Avon Foundation than of the range of affective responses to women's experiences with sexual violence among the center's constituents. Moreover, the resources required to produce video submissions are not provided by the Women's Center. The expectation is that participants already have access to the skills and technologies needed to produce. At UC San Diego, students who are not already enrolled in video production courses typically have limited access to
video production equipment. The question of who is able to participate is ultimately shaped by who has both access to the technologies needed to produce and an interest in responding to the particular guidelines provided by the organization.

**Problematizing ‘Youth Voice’ as Inherently Empowering**

The prevailing discourse on digital media literacy programs and youth-produced media contests emphasizes a connection between youth media production, the mobilization of “youth voice” and empowerment. In the early 1990s feminist scholar of pedagogy Jennifer Gore asked her contemporaries, "what is the vision of empowerment anyway?" Here Gore was addressing what she saw to be an unproblematic use of the term “empowerment” in activities that involved critical approaches to youth learning and identity development. Though she was writing nearly a decade before digital media production technologies would really take hold as pedagogical tools, I find her provocative question to have deep resonance with questions I am asking in my own research and useful for making sense of the approach of the empowerment philosophy that is so prominent in digital media pedagogy. I contend that while digital youth media “empowerment” projects now proliferate, their ubiquity may actually be evidence that on a collective level, we really

---

have no clear idea of whether or how they function. The term “empowerment” is employed so often in descriptions of youth video program outcomes that it has lost specificity and power. Additionally, I have observed that many of the existing digital youth media production projects and programs in the United States describe their philosophies, pedagogical and philosophical approaches in ways that suggest that they aim to contribute to a legacy of progressive learning and, one might argue, feminist critical pedagogy itself, as that is the scholarly area where the notion of “empowerment” and “youth voice” first emerged.

Gore explains that the meaning of “empowerment” is contingent on the specific discourses that construct it. Yet while their particular meanings must be identified within discourses, she argues that that discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy construct empowerment to more generally presuppose "(1) an agent of empowerment, (2) a notion of power as property, and (3) some kind of vision or desirable state." Gore sees this approach as perpetuating a dangerous dichotomy between empowerment and oppression "through a level of abstraction which mystifies the meanings ascribed to either term (empowerment or oppression)." She notes that discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy tend to decontextualize empowerment and express concern for youth at "the broad level of societal relations and institutions and ideologies (be they capitalist and/or patriarchal)" rather than focusing on specific contexts.
and practices. Following Foucault, Gore suggests that instead of treating power as a possession or a commodity, a thing to be held or exchanged, it is important to look to where power is exercised. To do this she advocates for more attention to the "microdynamics of the operation of power as it exercised at particular sites." As discussed in the previous section, in the contemporary context of critical pedagogy, empowerment is now understood as available through specific contexts and practices that involve digital media production while it is also believed to impact social relations, institutions and ideologies. Contemporary critical pedagogy that pertains to digital media tends to collapse both the specific practices and broad ideologies, uncritically grafting notions of empowerment in pedagogy from the prevailing pedagogical perspectives that Gore was critiquing. So rather than building from critiques of empowerment in pedagogy, it appears that contemporary critical pedagogy has reproduced earlier, problematic conceptions of youth power in which a simplistic dichotomy between youth power and oppression prevailed.

Mimi Orner offers an intervention into the pedagogical limitations of “liberatory” and “emancipatory” educational traditions by using frameworks and concepts derived from feminist appropriations of poststructuralist discourse. Arguing that “calls for ‘authentic student voice’ contain realist and essentialist epistemological positions regarding subjectivity which are neither acknowledged specifically nor developed theoretically,” Orner calls out and

127 ibid, 58
challenges the ways that student voice is often mobilized in the service of pedagogical and political goals designed and articulated by adults.\textsuperscript{128} Her argument was published two decades ago, but the message is perhaps even more salient (and necessary) now than it was then. Pedagogical imperatives to include “student voice” have become even more institutionalized as we have seen in the United States through the efforts of DML and similar projects and educational policies that seek to mobilize student expression in the service of learning. While Orner’s examples point mostly to scenarios in which youth are asked to perform speech acts (such as telling personal stories in class or participating in a "talking circle" as part of the practice of a democratic classroom), her argument can clearly be extended to include situations in which youth are asked to articulate and represent themselves through technologically mediated practices like video contests and online video sites that encourage youth voice.

Orner questions what rationales motivate adults to solicit youth voices in pedagogical practice. This is a provocative inquiry, as the notion of youth giving voice or having a voice is generally taken for granted as a technique used to de-center unjust power relations, which is one of the reasons it has been so embraced by the DML initiative, community programs, and forms of critical pedagogy that exist in informal learning environments. Orner suggests that the phenomenon is grounded in essentialized notions of youth. She claims

that while the reasons students are being called upon, and what they are being asked to talk about represents a variety of social, political, economic commitments as well as a range of research and teaching agendas, these calls for youth voices all share a "deeply entrenched and less examined" pattern of relating to youth as 'Other'.\textsuperscript{129} She expresses deep skepticism about the way that student voice has been conceptualized and solicited by people who claim to empower students. She goes as far to suggest that student voice in itself is “an oppressive construct-one that [I argue] perpetuates relations of domination in the name of liberation.”\textsuperscript{130} For the purposes of my argument, I would like to further develop her point by applying it to the case of youth media production pedagogy designed to “empower youth.” My intent is to interrogate essentializing notions of who youth are, and by extension, what they want and need to express about their lives and experiences. These are assumptions that drive many of the programs that exist and inform expectations of how youth might ideally use media technologies in their everyday lives.

Following Orner we might begin to consider the ways in which calls for youth to give voice through video production may be interpreted by youth producers as something closer to a prompt to perform particular aspects of their identities and demonstrate formal media skills rather than as flexible, open opportunities for expressions of their feelings and needs. Moreover, as

\textsuperscript{129} ibid, p76
\textsuperscript{130} ibid, p75
video production programming has become an increasingly popular way for organizations to engage youth in their particular institutional agendas, and prizes and professional opportunities are generally offered as rewards for successful submissions, we must question if the power lies entirely with the youth producers.

According to Orner, much critical pedagogy calls for student voices as a corrective to the lack of power teachers and mentors imagine that students and youth have in culture at large. She notes that many pedagogues seek to empower students to find and articulate their silenced or delegitimated voices while aiming for youth of various social, political, and economic groups to come to see how they have been dominated by those with power. She warns that instead, discourses on student voice in fact limit youth, as they are "premised on the assumption of a fully conscious, fully speaking, 'unique, fixed, coherent' self" that "ignore[s] the shifting identities, unconscious processes, pleasures and desires not only of students, but of teachers, administrators, and researchers as well." Orner's approach can help us think more critically about how the particular framing and structure of types of youth media empowerment projects may require that youth participate as particular types of subjects.

Online digital video contests in particular overtly call specific youth voices to the fore. For instance, when a PSA contest invites LGBT student

\footnote{ibid, 79}
activists to tell their stories of how they improved their communities and schools through their activism, the sponsor is essentially asking these youth to produce a video in which they represent themselves in terms of particular frames of identity. The PSA prompt in particular has had a strong life in recent decades as a way in which commercial as well as non-profit organizations make claims to doing educational and justice work. PSA videos that are produced as part of assignments or contests are also often used as public relations material and do other forms of legitimating work for the organizations that sponsor them.

Drawing on Belsey, Orner advocates for more scrutiny towards the way that "liberatory" educational discourses actually may work against the intentions of those who produce them. She argues,

Liberatory educational discourses call for the transformation of 'reality' through a consciousness of one's social position through the articulation of one's voice. Little or no attention is given to the multiple social positions, multiple voices, conscious and unconscious pleasures, tensions, desires, and contradictions which are present in all subjects, in all historical contexts.\textsuperscript{132}

To boot, the question of “voice” is inextricable from forms of student competence in talking and listening, not the least of which includes students’ desire to speak or be heard.

Without denigrating the intentions motivating this the pedagogical approach she criticizes, Orner offers an alternative to thinking about the place

\textsuperscript{132} Belsey cited in Orner, 79
and function of power in pedagogy, which she models off of Foucault's articulation of how power operates. Following Foucault, she aims to re-direct focus away from "questions such as 'Who is powerful?' or 'What are the intentions of those with power?' to questions regarding the processes by which subjects are constituted as effects of power." Working with a model of power as circulating through discourse rather than enacted through hierarchy and overt oppression, she shows how pedagogues are implicated in reproducing systems of domination through the discourses and social interactions that they too are part of. In a Foucauldian framework, the act of asking students to talk, confess, or share information about themselves and their experiences in the presence of authority figures such as teachers puts a "hidden curriculum" into action, one in which a student's divulgence is automatically subject to disciplinary power. Orner urges pedagogues to consider the extent students to which students self-monitor as they imagine themselves as seen through the eyes of others, including those who called for student voice in the first place. Ultimately, she suggests that "voice" be thought of as inextricable from other forms of student competence in talking and listening, not the least of which includes students' desire to speak or be heard. One might even argue that the video version of student voice poses the possibility of added injury, as the video file, link or tape can be used to archive and reproduce the student's response over time, even long after that student

\[133\] ibid, 82
has left the educational or community environment in which they were once encouraged to produce their voice. For students seeking control over the storage and circulation of their video files, digital video technologies present an increased challenge compared to the analog video technologies that were in primary use in youth video production pedagogy in the early 1990s when Orner was writing. Unlike analog video, which is a magnetic format in which content is bound to the physical tape, digital video is a code-based system that allows for videos to be edited, replicated and distributed using software that is available on many personal computers and stored on hard drives and digital clouds where access is not bound to specific tapes and their existing copies. Over the past two decades there have also been significant developments in file sharing software that has made it possible to post video on the Internet for others to see. Digital videos made available on the Internet can be circulated for free and at significantly faster rates than analog, which requires specialized technologies for mass reproduction, degrades in quality with every generation of reproductions, and often requires shipping for wide distribution. The distributive capacities of digital video present an enhanced concern for youth who chose to reveal sensitive, personal information that might put them at risk, as is the case for youth who experience ongoing bullying or LGBT youth who may not be open about their sexuality with friends and family and may be risk of further alienation or violence for going public.
Orner suggests that educators who are concerned with changing power relations “must continually examine our assumptions about our own positions, those of our students, the meanings and uses of student voice, our power to call for students to speak, and often unexamined power to legitimate and perpetuate unjust relations in the name of student empowerment.”

Accordingly, I would urge that Orner’s proposed reflection on how unjust relations of power are perpetuated through calls for and uses of student voice also be applied to calls for youth voice through video production (in both formal and informal educational contexts). How might the specific requirements, rules or narratives styles suggested by program organizers introduce or reaffirm relations of power? Who has the power to solicit videos and what is their relationship to who is being called on to produce? What does the youth producer have to gain from producing a video? The case study I provide in later chapters addresses these questions as it examines some of the challenges to calling for LGBT youth voice as a means of empowerment. Additionally I offer suggestions for engaging video production in ways that emphasize the communicative possibilities of production while de-centering the video as the ultimate site of authenticity, liberation and catharsis.

Youth Radio Education Director and scholar Elizabeth Soep, whose direct involvement youth digital media production has been formative of her critical writing, echoes the work of the feminist critical pedagogy scholars in

---

134 ibid, 77
her writing of the 2000s.\textsuperscript{135} She is skeptical of the emphasis on “youth voice” expressed through media production as a “site of free expression and social critique.”\textsuperscript{136} Citing a 2001 study of the youth media field in which Campbell et al revealed that "youth voice" as one of the primary goals that programs claim (alongside professional outcomes, youth development, media literacy and academic achievement), she calls for more attention to the actual language youth use when producing and evaluating their own projects. Drawing on the work of Nicole Fleetwood and her own ethnographic field work and interviews in over 20 media production programs, she argues that the discourse of “voice” dominates discussions about youth media literacy in scholarship and practical discourse but is underexamined. Whereas “literacy” is understood by scholars and practitioners to exist in a myriad of forms with multiple applications (e.g., multiliteracies, popular literacy, critical literacy, media literacy), the notion of “voice” is all too often used to support youth media projects without any qualification of what voice can really mean. Based on her experience as a media scholar and producer, she asserts “youth projects very often describe what they do as a process of ‘giving voice’ to young people, or helping them to ‘find their voice,’ or highlighting ‘silenced voices’ by providing teenagers with the skills and access needed to express their

\textsuperscript{135} Ironically, Soep's work with youth was featured in an April 2012 DML e-newsletter entitled "Lissa Soep: Empowering Youth Through Media Production, App Production," April 2, 2012.
\textsuperscript{136} Soep, Elizabeth. “Beyond Literacy and Voice in Youth Media Production.” \textit{McGill Journal of Education}, Vol 41, Fall 2006, 197
stories." For Soep, “voice” is too often used as a unitary and monolithic concept that gets employed in ways that are not only reductive, but border on paternalistic. Citing Janine Marchessault, Soep notes that video in particular holds apparent appeal as a resource for ‘dispossessed’ communities.\(^{138}\) Here, she suggests, we should turn to Fleetwood’s study of youth video programs for a cautionary reminder that media projects "have a tendency to purse the fantasy of 'authentic' youth experience, which itself often embodies a sensationalized portrayal [of racialized urban youth]."\(^{139}\) She observes, Literacy scholars, particularly those interested in multiliteracies as they form through media production, consider an analysis of power to be central to young people’s capacity both to make and interpret original media. It is not enough for many of these scholars that young people acquire the technical and aesthetic skills required to create within a given medium; there is often an expectation that they concurrently develop habits of considering implicit messages, assumptions, and biases within their own and others’ products, and to understand the social structures and tensions behind systems of media production and consumption.\(^{140}\)

The investment in having youth filming and circulate "raw" first-person video testimonies tends to stand in place of critical questions about the reification of inequalities within youth media products and processes. Soep argues that there is much more happening at the level of production beyond being merely a vehicle for testimony. Noting that video production requires constant

\(^{137}\) ibid, 198  
\(^{138}\) ibid, 201  
\(^{139}\) ibid, 201  
\(^{140}\) ibid, 208
collaboration and negotiation of intent, perception and judgment,\textsuperscript{141} she suggests that youth producers must inevitably engage with many kinds of voices in their production and post-production process. To make a collaborative media project, youth must engage in many forms of literacy, which depend on their ability to enter into different kinds of talk and intersubjective practices that require them to engage with other voices. She argues,

\begin{quote}
When we notice the varied voices young people use as they create work, especially at moments calling for judgment or evaluation, we can no longer limit ourselves to a focus on the redeeming value of youth media as a way to honor young people’s ‘true’ voices.\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

For one, young people often use "reported speech," young people often speak in the name of "we" rather than "I." In this sense, voices are often "crowded" rather than one-dimensional, authentic representations of the speaker's perspectives. Soep notes the extent to which individual young people "strategically leverage, dramatize, and experiment with varied real and imagined voices, even in a single utterance."\textsuperscript{143} Youth video testimonies often include what Bakhtin calls "double-voiced" discourse, in which a person "might report someone else's speech as a way to align with a voice of authority, or to mock another speaker, or to dramatize a scene or to convey a sense of empirical reliability, to name just a handful of pragmatic implications of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{141} ibid, 205
\item \textsuperscript{142} ibid, 208
\item \textsuperscript{143} ibid, 199
\end{itemize}
reported speech." She suggests that this speech often enters one's own speech in "concealed and ambiguous ways." Hence, youth video makers may be presenting the opinions and ideas and values of other people through their performances.

Soep's research emphasizes that youth video production is a site of "crowded" speech through which many voices come to the fore. Her work suggests that perhaps what is most valuable about youth media production programs is not that they that bring marginalized voices forward or teach hands-on skills to youth who might not otherwise have access (she notes that these skill sets may not have measurable social and educational outside of the short-term program), but that they provide opportunities for youth to bring other voices together for their own analysis of power. For researchers and educators involved with such programs, there appears to be an opportunity to leverage the collaborative practice of media production to engage youth in analysis of power based on their vocalizations of other voices of power that they imagine themselves in dialogue with.

Finally, Soep gestures to an important question: even if media programs have everything in place to elicit voices, do we have the necessary frameworks for interpreting them? This is a question that I believe the scholars of digital media and youth need to constantly weigh our theories and research findings against.

---

144 ibid, 202
145 ibid, 205
Visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen is a useful figure to turn to for approaches to interpreting self-made media that go beyond simply eliciting the voices of makers. His collaborative research with public health researchers Laura Sherman and Michael Rich in the 2000s offers a valuable listening-centered model to self-produced video that clearly develops out of his experience since the late 1960s eliciting ethnographic research subject’s perspectives through their self-made media. Chalfen’s early work as a research assistant to Sol Worth and John Adair on the Navajo Film Themselves project (which later became the seminal book *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology*) is credited as being one of the first ethnographic projects to put cameras in the hands of the research subjects. The research study, designed to examine what the shooting, editing and content choices made by the Navajo makers might reveal about Navajo culture and visual language more broadly, has been widely acknowledged by anthropologists as having catalyzed a turn in ethnographic practice towards the authority of research subjects, and helped to popularize a reflexive turn in research methods that has had wide influence across disciplines and inspired the types of youth-produced media projects that are at the center of my discussion. The Navajo project has also been

---

146 Worth, Sol and John Adair. *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology*, University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

147 Anthropologist Faye Ginsburg and other scholars of ethnographic and indigenous media have criticized the Navajo project researchers for prioritizing their inquiry into Navajo makers’
commonly, and as anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has argued, mistakenly, taken up as an empowerment project, which even Chalfen and the other Navajo project collaborators have denied as their intention. Chalfen’s work with the VIA project continues his sustained emphasis in the solicitation of video narratives to shift from one of *giving voice* to video makers to a process of *listening* to what makers have to say. Yet whereas the research findings of the Navajo project arguably had little benefit to the Navajo as compared to its value they had to the study of visual communication, Chalfen’s more recent work with the Video Intervention/Prevention Assessment (VIA) method, through which the researchers use audiovisual narratives of illness produced by patients to "reveal how subjects construct personal understandings of their medical conditions" is a more directed effort to improve the health of the research subjects. In their article "VIA’s visual voices: the awareness of a dedicated audience for voices in patient video narratives" Chalfen, Sherman and Rich emphasize the important role of *listening* to voices that have been elicited through digital video production under the auspices of empowerment in order to more thoroughly understand what producers wish to communicate. The authors offer a more generous and open approach to interpreting content

---

at the site of engagement, yielding a textured interpretation of the video text.

They explain,

The frequently heard justification for many projects that supply cameras to young people for their own photography and filmmaking is a simplistic and carelessly delivered cliche—namely, 'to give them a voice.' This phrase has been widely used, and more often than not, abused. Aside from certain paternalistic and politically awkward features, this noble calling of sharing cameras has seldom been matched by sensitive attention to the reception side of the communication process—namely, 'to lend an ear'. In truth, careful attention to what is 'said' is often a missing component in light of other harmful cliches—namely, 'the pictures speak for themselves' or even, 'every picture tells a story'. Thus the preferential attention to 'voice' might not be matched with attentive looking and listening to what first-time image-makers might be saying. In short, we may be seeing 'an uncritical celebration of representation' in the context of participatory media.

Here the authors underscore the dynamic relationship between video narrative elicitation and making meaning out of what has been produced while they call out the importance of understanding the descriptive and analytic frameworks within which video makers express themselves. Influenced by Pat Thompson, who has argued that an important principle of both communication and sociolinguistics is that "what one says and how one says it are significantly structured by knowledge of who is being addressed," the researchers conclude that one of the "primary variables" in the elicitation of voice and in the process of understanding the value of using those voices as research ibid comes from anticipating what kinds of audiences to which video

---

149 Thompson cited in Chalfen, Sherman and Rich.
producers imagine they speak. Using the five models of voice that Thompson outlines in *Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People*, the researchers found they were better able to evaluate the different kinds of expression at play. "The Authoritative Voice," in which participants made statements on behalf of people who share their illnesses; "The Critical Voice," in which the speaker challenges policies, practices, or stereotypical portrayals or attitudes; "The Therapeutic Voice" with which the speakers communicated their vulnerabilities in a more confessional mode; "The Consumer Voice," with which they stated their needs and preferences related to their lifestyles, and finally, "The Pedagogic Voice," which reflects the ways that the speakers have been "schooled" into certain modes of expression. This framework provides a model with which we can begin to ask, which kinds of voices are elicited through youth media production projects?

While it may seem that their analysis has limited applications because they are primarily invested in participant media as a research tool, their model does the important work of re-centering *listening and interpretation* at the center communication by underscoring that empowerment is not possible without meaningful communication. The model itself stands as a critique of the persistent links made between self-produced media, voice, and empowerment. So while the proliferation of communication technologies and increased ease of access for mediated expression may present more opportunities to hear

---

150 Chalfen, et al.
from vulnerable populations, without methods for interpreting what these people are trying to express, or who they are seeking to communicate with, they are not actually communicating to anyone who might be able to help them. The researchers working with the VIA method take it as a given that patient empowerment cannot be gained simply by producing and making public their personal narratives. They recognize production as a component of research into how to support populations of people who have had similar experiences with illness, never claiming that the production of a personal video will necessarily lead to the empowerment of the person who has produced it. This aspect of their approach has broad implications, as it suggests that expression within itself will not necessarily change the material conditions of the person who is doing the expressing. I develop this approach to the elicitation of voice in my ethnographic case study that appears in Chapter Five.

Howard Rheingold has made a similar argument concerning the elicitation of youth voices in the realm of civic engagement. An early proponent of the potential of digital media to catalyze political and civic participation, since the 1980s his research on the value and power of cybercultures has helped to foment scholarly discussion around the relationship between interactions with digital media and personal and civic empowerment. His significant body of scholarship has figured centrally in the development of the sub-field of Digital Humanities and has been taken up by many educators in
the developing of media pedagogy thought to enhance students' experience of power through digital media use. In a 2008 essay, "Using Participatory Media and Public Voice to Encourage Civic Engagement" he adds nuance to his earlier accounts of online participation as inherently empowering when he writes that for young people who put their thoughts and ideas online "'having your say' doesn't mean 'being listened to.'"\textsuperscript{151} Here Rheingold begins to sculpt an approach to youth participation that extends beyond simpler conceptions of "voice" that circulate in empowerment discourse in order to acknowledge that participation doesn't automatically confer to youth a sense that they are being heard and understood. Therefore, our understandings of their sense of power should not be limited to an analysis of what they make public.

Interested in leveraging young people's increased use of media tools for self-expression and connection with peers towards "active citizenship," he suggests that educators must help students to "communicate in their public voices" about issues they care about. The crux of his argument is that young people don't feel they have a voice because they think that despite their participation and presence in participatory media, no one is listening.\textsuperscript{152} Citing


\textsuperscript{152} In \textit{After the Death of Childhood} David Buckingham makes excellent arguments for why this perception of youth as politically apathetic persists. He notes that contemporary political and
a Pew Research study that found that more than 50 percent of today's teenagers have created as well as consumed digital media,\textsuperscript{153} he locates his concern with the 50 percent who are producing, asking how "rather than blaming young people for their apathy, the finger might instead be pointed at the online and offline structures of opportunity that facilitate, shape and develop young people's participation."\textsuperscript{154} Rheingold acknowledges that many youth producers are already making their perspectives and feelings known through blogs, vlogs, and social media sites they maintain or contribute to, and many utilize peer networks to engage with issues of concern in their lives. He believes more can be done to encourage youth to put these skills to work towards furthering the goals of democracy by bringing the discussion back to participatory media literacy as a goal for educating youth how to utilize technologies to become active participants in the democratic process.

Contributing to the critique of the digital natives generational rhetoric, media systems are structured to exclude youth participation, while youth tend to be discursively constructed as dependent, vulnerable subjects in need of protection by and from adult. Furthermore, age restrictions (such as voting, using certain participatory media, etc) position youth as outside the realm of real political activity and as such, the public sphere, suggesting that youth are treated as second-class citizens. For Buckingham it is clear why youth are not more interested in engaging with politics, as much of political life operates "over their heads." Sarah Banet-Weiser builds on this argument in her essay "We Pledge Allegiance to Kids: Nickelodeon and Citizenship" in which she illustrates how Nickelodeon television programming has worked to encourage youth voices through youth-targeted news programming.


\textsuperscript{154} Livingstone, Couldry, and Markham cited in Rheingold, 98
Rheingold argues that while this population is self-guided when it comes to technology use, they are also in need of guidance because "although a willingness to learn new media by point-and-click exploration might come naturally to today's student cohort, there's nothing innate about knowing how to apply their skills to the process of democracy." The solution Rheingold offers is for youth to be taught to develop their voices, which he defines as "the unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one's communications from those of others, can be called upon to help connect young people's energetic involvement in identity-formation with their potential engagement with society as citizens." He considers his an "activist approach," grounded by the hypothesis that "active use of networked media, collaboration in social cyberspaces, and peer production of digital cultural products has changed the way young people learn and that their natural attraction to participatory media could be used to draw youth into civic engagement." For educators to encourage youth to develop a "public voice" would mean to aid them in an effort of "consciously engaging with an active public rather than broadcasting to a passive audience." It is clear that Rheingold imagines youth broadcast as directly linked to their participation and place within the public sphere, and he is invested in the power of voices that have been trained to participate in

---

156 ibid, 101
157 ibid, 115
158 ibid, 101
debate, advocacy, criticism, persuasion, and politicking. Arguing that "the public voice of individuals, aggregated and in dialogue with the voices of other individuals is the fundamental particle of 'public opinion,'" he proposes that learning to use blogs, wikis, digital storytelling, podcasts, and video as media of self-expression within a context of 'public voice' should be introduced and evaluated in school curricula, after-school programs, and informal learning communities if today's youth are to become effective citizens in the emerging era of networked publics.\footnote{ibid, 103}

Rheingold builds off of Yochai Benkler who, in \textit{The Wealth of Networks} suggests that fundamental changes in media now enable today's individuals to participate in conversations rather than being limited to the role of passive receivers of information gleaned from news and opinions produced by designated experts, as well as that of danah boyd who, using ethnographic findings as evidence, argues that for youth, interest in participating in political and civic conversations begins at the level of the immediate issues they are concerned with. Combining these perspectives, Rheingold posits that youth can be habituated from participating in the blogosphere to the public sphere where he imagines consequential dialogue occurs. For Rheingold, the "power to publish" should be understood by youth as a power to participate. In other words, he imagines the blogosphere as something of a proverbial "gateway drug" to the public sphere. His whole argument rests on a few presumptions that, taken together, advance a position that threatens to diminish different
modes and means of youth production by determining what kind of expression and production is most meaningful.

He begins with the premise that all people inherently possess a coherent and singular voice that simply needs to be trained and amplified through education. I argue that this narrow notion of subjectivity and expression sets limits on what kind of expression is possible. In light of longstanding feminist critiques of the Habermasian public sphere that is rooted in nostalgia for the European salon and thereby privileges a particular public that is determined along racial, socio-economic, gendered and ethnic lines, it seems problematic that Rheingold chooses to uphold it as the ideal state of youth communication.\textsuperscript{160} Habermas imagined the public sphere as an intentional turn away from identity politics towards an imagined "rational" discourse, so for Rheingold to valorize the public sphere requires that he overlook the ways that certain kinds of perspectives are always already marked as less rational, not least of all those of young people. Finally, having established pedagogy as the site where youth media production and participation can be made to become more valuable to democratic society, Rheingold fails to account for the way the structures of the classroom and the

call for student voice, let alone a "public" student voice, might make certain forms of expression compulsory for a student's academic success. In this way he runs the risk of ignoring the ways that students are already using media to make connections that are meaningful to them. In other words, he assumes that because the ways that youth currently express themselves and connect with each other online is not as legible to him as within his model of how communication can facilitate civic participation, these ways of communicating have less social value.

Despite his well-intended efforts to engage and energize youth, Rheingold essentially advocates for the integration of pedagogical methods that introduce the same kinds of pressures and limitations on students that Orner identified two decades ago in her critique of the liberatory classroom. Recalling Orner's concern that in the space of the classroom in which students are encouraged to give voice there is often a tendency for students to self-monitor and project opinions and perspectives that they imagine their teachers and classmates will approve of, we are left to wonder what added pressures are placed on students when they are asked to not only produce a voice, but to use that voice to connect with others outside of the classroom in particular ways. Asking them outright to monitor and evaluate what they say, how they say it, and, now, where online they say it may prepare them to contribute to civic debates and action efforts that fit within models that have been established and used by adults, but fails to account for what such a
pedagogical move may foreclose. In his desire to make student voices public and by privileging particular forms of youth social and civic activity, Rheingold's approach could push other kinds of student voices to the margins. This is of particular concern for me in my work with LGBT youth producers, who have expressed to me that they sometimes feel excluded from communicating their perspectives and preferences in public, particularly in the context of the classroom. I am concerned that the way participation is being described here vis a vis “public voice” drives LGBT youth first and foremost towards contributing to already-existing debates on topics that are commonly addressed in mainstream political discourse. LGBT youth are ostensibly asked to participate within pre-existing frames already established through mainstream debates on popular issues, such as the legality of same-sex marriage, the U.S. Military’s former “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and anti-gay-bullying policies. It seems that for Rheingold, youth participation within these frames takes pedagogical precedence over frames that they might already be developing to make sense of their feelings and experiences. Institutions and educators who adopt the “public voice” model of youth participation risk tethering youth producers to pre-existing identity-based debates. While in my own pedagogical practice I have found that it can be very productive to engage youth producers in such debates as a way to begin thinking about their own commitments and concerns, but only when combined with a discussion of other issues that they are interested in responding to.
Furthermore, Rheingold assumes that when young people post comments or content online, they have already chosen to share with anyone and everyone. In this sense he perceives them as already conceiving of themselves as operating in a singular public and therefore perfectly primed for activities like podcasting, blogging, and citizen journalism. Yet as Patricia Lange has observed, many millennial youth who produce online content actively manage their presence and have a very nuanced sense of publicness online. For youth, she suggests, private and public spheres are not binaries, instead, they are mutually imbricated and constantly in play. Most youth who produce or participate in networked publics online (such as Facebook and MySpace) have developed very tactical approaches to controlling who their audience is at any given time, while many work to cultivate different online identities and personas that are intentionally distanced from each other in such a way as to work against the possibility of others ever piecing them together into one coherent profile. This is an argument I keep in play in my ethnographic chapter, in which the youth producers at the LGBT youth center cherry-picked clips and quotes from their group video work to re-post through social media for a variety of purposes, at the same time as they actively set up additional privacy settings on the accounts that they posted to put limits on how public their new "public" material would actually be.

161 See David Phillips' *The Digital Closet* for an excellent case study of the way individual Internet users negotiate different layers of their identities online.
Rheingold's suggestion that both young people and civil society as a whole will benefit from youth thinking of themselves as possessing a public voice, can in one sense be seen as empowering youth in that it affirms that they can and should participate in political and social life, but what are the risks if performing particular kinds of publicness becomes compulsory through pedagogy? What might students be compelled to reveal or mask in the service of going public for pedagogy or towards the purpose of performing an "active" stance towards a community or institutional goal? In particular it is necessary to question what the risks and stakes are for already marginalized youth who are in the process of developing their own identities. Rheingold overlooks how identity politics immediately get put in play when students are prompted to give voice to issues they care about. For LGBT youth in particular, some of whom may use participatory media in efforts towards understanding their own desires and preferences, to what extent might such a pedagogy compel them to make public (or to hide) their sexual identities?

When we assume the existence of normative subjects and practices in any media production environment, we risk missing opportunities to attend to the heterogeneity of the expressive modes of the individuals with whom we work. I see opportunities within media pedagogy to support the participation of youth who come from radically diverse positions and identities that exist within multiple public spheres. If we wish to truly model student-centered media pedagogy, we must abandon expectations of how or why youth use media
production technologies and initiate production experiences with youth by first identifying what types of media production might be most meaningful and useful in their lives. If we listen and learn from them about what drives their interest in production, we can design activities that flexibly respond to their goals and address issues that they wish to explore through their production activities.

A flexible approach to media pedagogy should be predicated on the expectation that some students may not wish to participate in production activities at all. The option for students not to produce content is something we must assimilate into our expectations of how the youth we work with engage with the media technologies and project ideas we introduce. This is particularly true in the non-school context, where students and teachers are less likely to be held to standardized sets of requirements and student outcomes. In addition to educators, the funders and program administrators who support media production curricula must also expand their expectations to include the possibility that the youth in their programs may have alternative routes to empowerment through their experiences with digital media that don't result in visible products.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to problematize the ways in which "youth voice" and "empowerment" often get deployed by scholars and
educators to promote youth engagement with digital media production in informal and formal educational settings. I have sought to complicate notions of empowerment as a viable process and desirable social and pedagogical goal, and emphasize how the burden of feeling a sense of belonging and experiencing power is often placed on youth, who, through digital media production are expected to produce their own conditions of freedom and develop core educational competencies through their (identity-based) expression and connections with each other and imagined global networks. I have advocated for attention to Digital Media Pedagogy in broad terms, as I believe that funders and policy makers have sometimes masked the complexity of how younger generations' relationship to digital media (which is certainly distinct) is formed. We need to be more attentive to their distinct and perhaps more intimate relationships to digital media and their production goals.

These critiques inform my action research in chapter four, which examines how the needs of particular LGBT youth were identified in the context of community project meant to empower them through the production of digital video. Looking at how associations between digital video production and empowerment play out in practice allows me to illustrate many of the tensions presented in this chapter.
Chapter Three: ‘Vernacular Voices’: Business Gets Personal in Public Service Announcements

In a January 1985 commercial slot, during the height of the deregulation period of the US media industry, American broadcast television stations aired an interview with actor Yul Brynner, a figure beloved by audiences for his performance in the leading role of Rogers and Hammerstein’s *The King and I*. The appearance of Brynner chilled viewers; at the time of its first airing, Brynner had been dead for months. The spot opens with the epitaph “Yul Brynner: 1920-1985” as a male voice announces, "Ladies and Gentleman, the late Yul Brynner.” White type dissolves to black as Brynner’s face fades up into a close-up. Famously aloof, Brynner now emotes up close and personal into the camera, stern and pleading:

I really wanted to make a commercial when I discovered that I was that sick and my time was so limited. I want to make that commercial that says simply ‘now that I’m gone, I tell you, don’t smoke. Whatever you do, just don’t smoke.’

An American Cancer Society logo fades up to replace the image of Brynner as he continues empathically in voiceover: “If I could take back that smoking, we wouldn’t be talking about any cancer. I’m convinced of that.” It was no doubt startling to audiences accustomed to authoritative talking heads to

---

162 Brynner had first made these statements during an appearance on Good Morning America nine months prior to his death and agreed to let The American Cancer Society posthumously release his statements in the form of a public service announcement. The PSA is available for viewing on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNjunlWUJJI&list=LLceYX13VlyDaLQPLrXpZ0nQ&feature=mh_lolz> (last accessed August 12, 2012).
encounter this image of the typically private and dispassionate Brynner returned from the dead to confess personal regret about smoking, and to passionately urge viewers to individually give up the habit.

Image 3.1: Yul Brynner addresses smokers in an American Cancer Society PSA, 1985

The Brynner public service announcement was remarkable for its time because it relied on the authority of a different kind of first-person perspective from that which viewers were accustomed to hearing in commercial and cause-related advertising of the era.¹⁶³ This new voice was vernacular and personal, not distant and authoritative. The PSA puts forth Brynner not just as a lofty spokesperson performing a script for a venerated national society. Rather, he speaks subjectively about his personal experience and feelings, and he gives a personal message to others smokers like himself, bypassing

¹⁶³ - The majority of public service announcements and commercials of the time utilized an authoritative (typically male) voiceover or an actor speaking scripted lines directly to the audience.
institutional signifiers of authority and scientific knowledge. Through this spot, the American Cancer Society leveraged a new strategy in the use of the individual person and the iconic figure to convey a message. The persuasive power inherent in the trusted authenticity of someone famous is compounded by the unscripted, personal appeal Brynner makes to the audience. A more direct connection is formed through the urgency and vulnerability he presents.

The more direct relationship Yul Brynner was able to achieve with the audience can be understood through the advertising concept of *resemblances* or *perceived similarity*. This concept, which came into use in the 1980s, refers to "the extent to which individuals perceive a portrayal as realistically reflecting their own experiences or as similar to themselves based on different attributes." These attributes may include demographics, shared values and ideas, and common experiences. Industry research into advertising and affect shows that the more personal approach of the Brynner spot had a greater impact on viewers than earlier PSAs with similar messages but a less directly personal appeal. Advertising researchers noted a correlation

---

164 Austin & Meili 1994; Andsager et al. 2006
166 Goodwill, Bill. "Public Service Advertising Background and Future" on <http://www.pasaresearch.com/bib9830.html> (last accessed August 20, 2012). On their website PSAresearch.com, Goodwill Communications brings together current history and research on public service announcements. I am grateful to their organization for the service they provide through this site. It has inspired my research while pointing to avenues for deeper engagement with the topic.
between a drop in smoking rates and the airing of the specific PSA featuring Brynner’s personal appeal.

The Brynner PSA introduced a new element to the industry repertoire of resemblance. Not only did audience members find Brynner’s emotive image uniquely relatable, they sensed that the spoken message was from him personally and not a canned script—and in fact he had played a significant role in the conceptualization and scripting of the PSA. Brynner’s PSA testimony is an example of the advertising industry’s attempts in PSAs during this period to close the emotional gap between the subject on the screen and the audience. The success of this spot helped to popularize the advertising industry’s strategy of using documentary elements and testimonies of people who have real-life investment in the issues at hand to enhance resemblances in PSAs and other forms of advertisement.

I have chosen to begin with this PSA from the mid-1980s as a way to historically situate the rise of the use of vernacular voices in contemporary public service announcements. I use the term vernacular voices to refer to the personal message and subjective style of address used in PSAs that cast figures who explicitly identify themselves as being a member of the PSA’s target demographic, and who speak candidly from their experience and feelings as individuals, not as authorities from a place of objective knowledge and authority, and who interpellate members of the audience as individuals rather than as a generalized collective group.
In earlier chapters I discussed the popular phenomenon of testimonial-style anti-gay-bullying public service announcements that have been produced by nonprofessionals and circulate by way of user-to-user file sharing sites such as YouTube. The dominant discourse about these types of videos tends to treat the vernacular style as a novel form emerging organically as a result of the ubiquity of digital recording and file-sharing technologies. However, as we can see from the example above, the performance of the personal in the PSA has been in use for several decades. As I have noted before, by the 2000s it had become a dominant style taken for granted. It is precisely the contemporary banality of the use of the personal in the PSA that I would like to bring our attention to in this chapter in order to interrogate its function in public service announcements. In this chapter, I interpret the history of the PSA and its early development of this one-to-one mode of appeal from inside an identity group to others as insider individuals. I suggest that the vernacular voice is integral to the PSA’s history, and emerged as a form in tandem with deregulation and the rise of a neoliberal model of individualism that characterizes the cause-related advertising and charity tactics that have been adopted to promote the causes of LGBT youth.

Since the 1980s, an investment in the PSA genre as both a pedagogical and expressive form has emerged. Many educators, community leaders, and social issue activists have celebrated self-produced, self-distributed PSA videos as a venue for youth producers to share personal
experiences through messages that might resonate with others who are looking for information or advice, and in doing so, deepen their engagement with those issues with which they are concerned.\textsuperscript{167} In both popular and education discourse, the participatory nature of YouTube is often equated with democratic practice; producing social-issue-based content for the site has been conflated with forms of civic action and personal expression and heralded as a political shift to a more democratic model of media. Others have suggested that the proliferation of the PSAs in particular is evidence of an epistemological turn, where user-generated content performs a reproach to the pre-digital, more centralized production of knowledge about social issues, and

\textsuperscript{167} Youth media pedagogy in particular has long been a site where non-professional PSA production has been encouraged. In fact, PSA video production as a classroom or community group activity has been popular as far back to the late 1970s when video cameras and VCRs first became commercially available and affordable. The simple, easily recognizable and reproducible message-oriented narrative style of the PSA has made it a particularly efficient tool for merging media into the curriculum. It is precisely the simplicity of the form and the blatancy of the desired response that has made it both such a useful introductory media production exercise and a method for engaging target youth populations around social issues. A simple search online reveals dozens of educators sharing curricula that integrates PSA production with goals that include teaching youth the language of media production, engaging them in critiques of media messages, and providing a platform for them to become more deeply involved in "issues they care about." PSA production has also become a popular assignment within humanities education more generally as education researchers have promoted PSA production as a way to engage students in a form of multimodal composition (podcasts, digital video, audio essays, etc) and an efficient way to teach students how to organize research and information in persuasive ways. Among media educators and increasingly in the area of composition studies, student PSA production is commonly thought to be a way to enable them to acquire multiple forms of literacy and engage in different composing modalities that are critical to contemporary communication. For Writing and Humanities scholars Richard J. Selfe and Cynthia L. Selfe who have published on the value of teaching public service announcement production in English and Language arts classrooms argue that the exercise is ideal for teaching persuasive communication and responsive action, which they see as necessary for learning how to participate as "effective and literate citizens of the 21st century." They believe that by producing PSAs, students learn a sophisticated understanding of audience expectations and needs so that they can "commit to ethical standards of persuasion."
replaces that authoritative mode with a diversity of first-person accounts. Yet while it may seem as if there has been a shift in authority from more authoritative to vernacular voices in public service campaigns, when we examine recent online PSAs in context of the institutional history of PSA media we can see how their content has been informed by a longstanding public service media business model that has evolved along with changing technologies and affective regimes.

Beginning with a brief overview of the history of the business of PSA advertising, I will illustrate how PSAs have always existed at the nexus of government initiatives, media regulations and commercial incentives. This historical context allows us to see the ways the form has transformed in accordance with changing media policies and regulations, as well as fluctuations in funding for particular public health and other social issues. The vernacular mode of expression in many contemporary, user-produced PSAs online reflects continuities across style and formal approach to content among PSAs historically. Examining contemporary self-produced PSAs in the context of PSA history allows me to explain how these kinds of PSAs are examples of the latest formal strategy in a century-long evolution of the PSA. It is a history where youth figure centrally, both as a target demographic of viewers, and more recently, as producers. In PSA advertising online it is not just the

---

168 David Serlin presents a strong argument for this perspective in *Imagining illness: public health and visual culture*. U of Minnesota Press, 2010.
question of *who speaks* within the spot that is perceived to be important to its success, but also *who produces* or *who circulates* the campaign message has become important for building message credibility. Through the history we can see how the ‘face’ of the PSA testimonial is no longer ‘just a face’; the face of the everyday, nonprofessional PSA producer is expected to mobilize herself through her message and her audience through her authenticity.

Just as Yul Brynner’s message to smokers was set up to be interpreted as from the heart and not from an objective authority, it dually served The American Cancer Society’s campaign goal to discourage smoking. Similarly, many self-produced online PSAs derive authority through the vernacular voice of the speaker, but acquire their ultimate visibility and circulation through alignments with existing institutions. Through a close reading of three user-produced PSAs on YouTube, I will illustrate how the production choices made by individual PSA producers entwine with institutional agendas. I argue that self-produced online PSAs, like the traditional broadcast PSAs that preceded them, inflect institutional forms of authority through the use of the vernacular voice. To be certain, I do not wish to disparage the messaging agendas of institutions that are invested in the public’s production of PSAs. I hold a high regard for many institutional social messaging efforts and have contributed to several campaigns myself. My goal here is to draw attention to the co-mingling of user-generated PSA production with the framing and messaging imperatives of institutions. Recognizing such imbrication prevents us from
automatically interpreting user-generated online PSAs as purely self-expression.

**The Business of Public Service Advertising**

Broadcast public service announcements first emerged in the United States during World War II in the form of home-front propaganda produced by the War Advertising Council, an organization of advertising agencies and broadcasters commissioned by the government to generate support for various war efforts.\(^{169}\) Towards the end of the war, the council evaluated its role and opportunities, sensing a need to transition its role to postwar campaigns that had would have a "'feel of the future." The documentation of this re-evaluation suggests that the council hoped that its members could leverage for the postwar commercial industry the already successful tactics advertisers had used successfully in wartime persuasion.\(^{170}\) In the wake of war, the council had identified the opportunity for the business world to identify its interests with the interests of the commonwealth, and to leverage media persuasion towards other ends. The document also suggests that members of the council took the position that if advertisers and broadcasters did not address the "human problems" wrought by the machine age, they would have to rely on centralized governmental solutions to those problems, at a

---


\(^{170}\) July 24, 1944 memorandum from T.S. Repplier, the executive director of the council to Chairman Harold B. Thomas. In Jackall and Hirota, p44.
perceived cost to the freedoms and liberties of both individuals and businesses. The council document also introduces the important notion of public service as a job explicitly in the purview of the advertising industry. The document proposes that advertising could continue to "help solve national problems" by providing information on issues such as public health and the conservation of the environment, thereby elevating the status of the entire advertising enterprise in the minds of various publics and the ever-dubious business community. The document further suggests that advertising plays a role in maintaining a free market ideology, a principle that would bloom in the later move toward a neoliberal free-market ideology: by providing information about the "free exchange of goods," it is suggested, advertisers and broadcasters could provide reassurance about the "stability of the private enterprise system." Indeed, this and other documents produced by the council suggest that rationalizing public service work to the business community was the council's postwar public relations strategy for bolstering the entire advertising enterprise, which at that time was still a growing industry with little esteem among other more established and financially commanding industries.

The postwar mission of the council coalesced around a surprisingly prescient idea captured in the statement that "the best public relations

171 ibid, 45
advertising is public service advertising”. In a 1945 speech to the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA), James W. Young, the newly elected chairman of the council, and consultant to the ad agency J. Walter Thompson, emphasized that the council’s mission was not to push advertisers and their agencies into “a Boy Scout program of doing a good deed daily,” but rather, to help the image of the advertiser who wished to enhance his corporate reputation. For contemporary historians Robert Jackall Janice Hirota, the act of consuming the PSA was, and continues to be, inextricably intertwined with the good-will payoff for the sponsoring company or organization:

Public service advertising, whether it advocates support for Liberty Bonds, victory, the Red Cross, or the United Negro College Fund, implicitly divides the world into sheeps and goats, into clusters of patriotic or compassionate souls, on one hand, and, on the other, clusters of unconcerned or selfish egoists unmindful of the sacrifice and plight of others. It triggers among those who choose to 'do the right thing" self-images of moral superiority complete with self-congratulation, a desirable goal for all advertising and public relations.

Through PSAs, businesses and advertisers could represent their industry as being on the side of good. Through strategic association with public causes such as health and the environment, advertisers and broadcasters were able

---

172 ibid, 45.
173 In The Citizen Machine (The New Press, 2010), Anna McCarthy provides thorough and engaging case studies that illuminate the payoff for companies that sponsored public service programming in the postwar era, including the DuPont Corporation and the Ford Foundation.
174 ibid, 63
to counter the profession’s stigma of mercenariness and rebrand itself as collaboratively philanthropic.

Major American opinion leaders informed the direction of the council. In 1946 the council’s leaders put together a Public Advisory Committee (later called the Public Policy Committee) which at various times included distinguished intellectuals and affairs leaders such as Eugene Meyer, chairman of the Washington Post; James B. Conant, president of Harvard University; and the gurus of public-opinion polling, George Gallup and Elmo Roper. The policy group helped link the council to a range of publics as they worked together to address non-controversial issues ranging from recruiting student nurses, preventing forest fires, and putting an end to drunk driving. In their account of the council's history, Jackall and Hirota argue that the organization helped play "a decisive part in shaping the contemporary apparatus and ethos of advocacy" while it welded "business and government interests into a single institutional complex through expertise with mass symbols…filling out public arena with highly emotional and moralistic ideals." Indeed, some of the same successful strategies and tactics used by advertisers to sell products were taken up by government agencies and charities (with the help of advertising agencies) to make emotional appeals

175 ibid, 47
176 ibid, 62
about social issues of the day.\textsuperscript{177} Topics included, for example, the prevention of forest fires: Smokey the Bear, the cartoon character who even to this day educates the public about forest fires, emerged during this period. The early success of this campaign convinced advertisers that commercial tactics could be applied to the realm of advocacy.\textsuperscript{178}

It was not just the messaging tactics of successful commercial advertising campaigns that the Ad Council sought to reproduce in public service campaigns; they also mimicked its distribution strategies. By the 1950s, this meant broadcasting PSAs on television. Taking advantage of the particularities of the American broadcasting system’s unique hybrid commercial and public service model, the Ad Council made use of the industry’s federal directive to provide evidence of its service to the community through “public interest” programming. This mandate, first established through the Federal Radio Act of 1927 (which was reinstated with the near-verbatim 1934 Communications Act that established the Federal Communications Commission), required that in exchange for the use of the electromagnetic spectrum, broadcasters were obligated to serve “public interest, convenience, and necessity” over profit maximization.\textsuperscript{179} Broadcast historian Michelle Hilmes claims that the definition of “public interest” was intended to be vague, making it difficult to ever fully enforce--for to enforce content would both violate First

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{177} Berger, Warren. “Public Service Advertising in America: An Overview,” in Shouting to Be Heard: Public Service Advertising in a New Media Age, Kaiser Family Foundation; 2002
\textsuperscript{179} Federal Radio Act of 1927, 44 Stat 1162 (1927)
\end{footnotesize}
Amendment protections and interfere with corporate interests and competition.\textsuperscript{180} It is what Robert Horowitz has referred to as an “irony of regulatory reform.”\textsuperscript{181} As Anna McCarthy convincingly argues in her history of the postwar broadcasting era, the public service model offered a way for the government to legitimize the corporate structure of broadcast.\textsuperscript{182}

The explosion of the public service advertising genre as we know it today had everything to do with the strategic partnership that The Ad Council formed with advocacy groups and broadcasters during the postwar era. Through PSAs, The Ad Council offered something of a marriage of convenience for advertising agencies, social issue advocates, and the broadcast industry. Non-profits or government agencies could seek out help from the Ad Council to help develop a public education effort to promote its message (often covering production costs), advertising produced ads pro-bono (thereby enhancing their corporate image) and media organizations donated space to run the ads, helping broadcasters to fill empty airtime and meet their public service obligations. The FCC defines public service announcements as

any announcement (including network) for which no charge is made and which promotes programs, activities, or services of federal, state, or local governments (e.g., recruiting, sale of bonds, etc.) or the programs, activities or services of non-profit


organizations (e.g., United Way, Red Cross blood donations, etc.) and other announcements regarded as serving community interests, excluding time signals, routine weather announcements and promotional announcements.¹⁸³

PSAs were not the only way that broadcasters met the public interest, but they were a widely used strategy. Easy to program, they were perceived by broadcasters to be well worth the donated time. At different times in broadcast history, this form dominated public interest airtime over, for example, discussion-based community programs. The success of early broadcast PSA model gave rise to the PSA format as a mainstay of broadcasting. Thus was born the PSA formula of a single-message, commercial-length ad explicitly devoted to public advocacy not commercial gain. While the business model of broadcast would change over the course of the following decades, the existence of PSAs has remained constant through the 2010s. I propose this is

¹⁸³ Berger, Warren. “Public Service Advertising in America: An Overview,” in Shouting to Be Heard: Public Service Advertising in a New Media Age, Kaiser Family Foundation; 2002. p2. Indeed, the FCC has always defined in terms of broadcaster’s responsibility to air them, but the U.S. has only twice evaluated that responsibility; the FCC inquiry in the late 1970s in which the FCC examined the role that PSAs had played or should play in fulfilling broadcasting’s public service requirement, and the Gore Commission, a presidential committee charged with examining the public interest obligations of broadcasters in the digital age (Berger, LaMay, Craig. “Public Service Advertising, Broadcasters, and the Public Interest: Regulatory Background and the Digital Future” in Shouting to Be Heard: Public Service Advertising in a New Media Age, Kaiser Family Foundation; 2002). Inquiry in 1978 was based on self-reporting of the broadcasting stations. It found that the average television and radio station aired one to two PSAs an hour, about 200 per week, the equivalent of one percent to two percent of advertising time (La May, 9). Through the study the FCC determined that “PSAs concerning controversial matters are usually not aired” Ultimately, all that changed were reporting procedures, broadening what kind of content licensees could receive public service credit for. During the Gore Commission FCC Chair Reed Hundt testified that “The FCC lacks the will to impose public service regulations and rules that are clear and specific and that apply equally to everyone. Instead, we’ve continued to rely on an unwritten agreement by broadcasters to run PSAs—an unwritten deals are bound to be broken, especially as the competition for eyeballs becomes more fierce” (Berger, 3)
in part due to the format’s perceived effectiveness, but also simply because more attention has been paid to introducing techniques for effectively executing PSAs messages than to studying the social value of the PSA itself.\footnote{Of course, there have always been skeptics when it comes to believing in the effectiveness of the PSA genre overall (Hyman, H. and P. Sheatsley. "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail," Public Opinion Quarterly, 11 (1947), 412-123) and concerns about the tendency for advocates to treat PSAs as a magic bullet, or what public health professor Lawrence Wallack calls a "media fantasy" (Wallack, Lawrence. "Mass Communication and Health Promotion: A Critical Perspective" in R. Rice and C. Atkin, eds. Public Communication Campaigns. Newbury Park, California, Sage, 1989, p 353-368.) Others have argued for less emphasis to be placed on PSA advertising in the course of a public health campaign, such as Wallack, L., L. Dorfman, D. Jernigan, and M. Themba, Media Advocacy and Public Health. Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1993. For a concise history of effects research in public service advertising see Atkin, Charles "The Impact of Public Service Advertising: Research Evidence and Effective Strategies" prepared for the Kaiser Family Foundation.}

A blossoming of advertising creativity and social activism in the immediate postwar years and through the 1950s met with changing broadcast legislation in the 1960s. This legislative challenge was organized around the promotion of media and specifically television for the public good, and it manifested in part in a surge of broadcast public service announcements. Much of the increase in PSAs in the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s can be attributed to a 1967 Federal Communications Commission ruling that upheld the “fairness doctrine” which required broadcasters to ensure a balance of perspectives in their programming.\footnote{Ford, Frederick W. "The fairness doctrine." Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 8, no. 1 (1963): 3-16.} To balance the glut of tobacco advertising, for example, broadcasters were required to donate time to anti-smoking messages. As a result, during the years 1967 and 1970, broadcasters aired one anti-smoking PSA for every three tobacco ads, with
anti-smoking ads comprising the majority of PSAs on television. With so much airtime mandated for public service messages, broadcasters showed spots produced by organizations such as The American Cancer Society, which worked with major advertising firms that volunteered their services, experimenting with a range of approaches beyond those used to promote commercial products. PSA messages during this time included warnings to parents who smoked about the role model they presented their children; an emphasis on the unglamorous aspects of smoking, such as smell and stains; characterizing cigarette smoke as an indoor pollutant; and satirizing some of the same aspirational images that the tobacco industry had used to sell cigarettes. During this period, the testimonial approach was put to use through hard-hitting and poignant messages that featured everyone from survivors of people who had died as a result from smoking-related diseases, to smokers who attested to the harms of smoking and their struggles to quit, to the terminally ill. These early testimonial ads were a precursor to the Bynner ad with which I began this chapter, and the first steps of a now-common strategy of explicitly linking the subject of the PSA with the viewer through perceived similarity.

The golden age of free air time for anti-smoking ads ceased in 1970 when the tobacco industry reactively withdrew all broadcast advertising, drastically reducing the corresponding requirement for donated airtime for anti-smoking PSAs. The form was relegated back to off-peak hours of commercial
Despite this change, the testimonial mode prevailed, and would continue to be used as a dominant messaging strategy in future PSA campaigns. During this decrease in media saturation of anti-smoking PSAs, researchers discovered a correlation between the drop in anti-smoking PSAs and an increase in smoking rates. This data boosted advertiser and advocates’ confidence in the effectiveness of PSA advertising, so much so that some charities and public health organizations determined that it was worth the cost to pay for PSA airtime, and at prime time, to boot. Advertising worked for promoting spending on charity and identification with public-good messages as well as for promoting consumption and brand identification. Over the course of the next few decades, media buys for PSA airtime would become more prevalent, to the extent that by the 2010s the majority of PSAs on the air inhabited paid not donated slots.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the PSA form continued to have a strong presence during commercial airtime, as independent charities and

---


188 Need to cite articles that discuss paying for ads, low rates of donated time. According to research conducted by the Kaiser Family Fund in 2008, at the time broadcasters donated 17 seconds an hour to public service announcements. The report was released on Thursday, January 24, 2008, at a forum that featured Federal Communications Commission Members Michael Copps, Jonathan Adelstein, and Deborah Taylor Tate along with representatives from News Corporation, CBS, Time Warner, Univision, the Ad Council and the American Legacy Foundation.
organizations started creating their own PSAs without the aid of the Ad Council, sometimes through in-house production staff and sometimes through contracts with advertising agencies, which now saw charity nonprofits as a client sector. Many of these charity organizations paid for commercial ad time to obtain spots that would ensure a high viewership and frequent repetition, using funds obtained by the increasingly successful model of private charitable giving to non-profit foundations and public charities that escalated during the same period of the 1980s during which media industry deregulation and privatization escalated. By the mid-1970s, Ad Council PSA production had declined to the point where their productions accounted for only a fraction of the total PSAs on air, yet throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s it was still almost impossible to watch an hour of television without encountering a PSA. The Partnership for a Drug Free America, which emerged in 1987, is a particularly noteworthy example of an organization that created highly successful and widely viewed PSAs independent of the Ad Council. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, The Partnership produced so many PSAs that they were second only to McDonalds in the number of ads simultaneously in circulation. Not only did The Partnership’s PSAs saturate the media market, they were quite popular and memorable. One of their most famous ads, “Fried Egg,” is reported to have been viewed by 92 percent of American teenagers during one period of the campaign. ¹⁸⁹ “This is your brain,”

informs a male voice over an image of an un-cracked egg. A hand then breaks the egg into a frying pan where it sizzles. “This is your brain on drugs,” he declares. “Any questions?” The impact of this ad helped to popularize the PSA strategy of visually depicting negative outcomes through shocking graphic association. Yet, whereas The Partnership used the egg as a metaphoric illustration for the human brain, anti-smoking advertising of the period went a step further, putting out ads that included people demonstrating against big tobacco and talking about the effects tobacco had on their bodies and psychological states. By the early 1990s, the prevailing anti-tobacco PSA strategy was, in the words of Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services Howard Koh, to “tap into the authenticity of true stories that were graphic, negative and emotional to capture the public’s attention.”¹⁹⁰ The strategy used in anti-tobacco campaigns was consequential because by the late 1990s, anti-smoking ads would once again dominate the PSA landscape and, as a result of the new paid PSA placement approach, had a very visible presence in broadcast advertising.

In the late 1990s through the early 2000s a sudden influx of funding for anti-smoking advertising, paired with advocates’ interest in paying to secure airtime led to impressive PSA circulation on both the local and national

level. Several PSA campaigns that had proven to be effective on the state level became very recognizable during this time as other states integrated them into their tobacco control programs and programmed the PSAs. Ongoing public health research revealed that young people and adults considered campaigns that portrayed the serious effects of smoking by “real people telling real stories” to be the most effective, and so campaigns that delivered this strategy were put in high rotation. Two such campaigns emerged out of Massachusetts, where at the time funding for anti-tobacco media was abnormally robust compared to other states. One series featured a man named Rick Stoddard whose wife had died from lung cancer at the age of 46. The other followed Pam Laffin, a young woman with emphysema awaiting her second lung transplant. The campaign followed her at different points over the course of several years, illustrating the physical and psychological toll that the smoking-related disease was taking on her life and

---

191 Koh, Howard, et al. Two important things changed during the late 1980s and 1990s that increased the circulation and visibility of anti-smoking PSA campaigns. Massachusetts DPH funding went up in 1992 when voters passed a tax on cigarettes to fund anti-smoking efforts, but the campaigns were later decimated by state budget cuts in the 2003 fiscal year when the program was defunded by 95%. Second, there was the redistribution of successful state campaigns and the establishment of The American Legacy Foundation to combat smoking, formed with money won when 46 states sued the tobacco industry in 1998 to for Medicaid costs due to smoking (called The Master Settlement Agreement). The American Legacy Foundation directed its efforts towards two target demographics--adult women and teens. The teen-specific effort was what became the “truth” campaign which sought to discourage smoking by vilifying the tobacco industry, thereby appealing to teens’ natural sense of rebelliousness.

192 Reid, Roddey. *Globalizing Tobacco Control: Anti-smoking Campaigns in California, France and Japan.*

193 According to Koh, et al, between 1993-2001 the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Tobacco Control program oversaw the production of approximately 150 thirty-second television spots.
her two children. Each spot had a different message conveyed within thirty seconds. Gregory Connolly of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health describes how Laffin’s story developed into a winning campaign strategy:

We tried humor...we had Roger Clemmons in a Red Sox uniform, and Pedro Martinez! And kids turned to us and said 'If you think this is a serious problem, you've got to treat it seriously. And so we came back and said, you know, maybe we've got to tell real stories talking about empathy and communicating real risk. Humor, no. Role models, no. What you have to do in the messaging is link the real people, real stories, negative emotion. We needed a face to make this work. So Pam became not only our face, she became our poster child.

Image 3.2: Pam Laffin in "I Can't Breathe" Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 1999

195 Interview with Greg Connolly, “Life Cycle of an Anti-Smoking PSA” <http:www.youtube.com/watch?v=EypLrQf3rAA> (last accessed on August 4, 2012). During the years 2000-2002 I worked directly on the advertising strategy and market testing for the campaigns mentioned here on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health anti-smoking campaigns, in my role as an Account Planner at Arnold Worldwide. My knowledge of the strategy to involve “real people” in the ads is something I acquired firsthand.
Based on the documented success the Laffin campaign had had with young people, the Massachusetts Department of Public health created a school curriculum kit that included a documentary about Laffin’s experience. When Laffin died at 31, the campaign continued, playing back clips of Laffin from earlier spots and revealing her fate as the ultimate tag line. The CDC then circulated the school curriculum to schools across the nation and the documentary was aired on MTV.¹⁹⁶

Through the PSAs, Laffin’s story went national. Laffin had exposed personal details about her life, confessed her fears, and described her pain, fulfilling the Massachusetts Department of Public Health’s strategy of presenting her as a negative role model for smokers and potential smokers. Her face became synonymous with a message of the hazards of smoking as it performed the vernacular voice for the campaign. Yet despite her divulgence and candor, her story has been structured by messaging strategies and agendas since the campaign’s beginning. Viewers can see the scar on her back where her lung had been removed; her photos from her youth; her children crying as they talk about her failing health. The campaign’s high rotation of ads led these aspects of Laffin’s life to be revealed, framed by taglines and calls-to-action. Through Laffin, the campaign successfully executed a strategy of resemblance with their target cohorts, but did very little to affect her circumstances. Nevertheless, the Laffin campaign was

¹⁹⁶ Koh, et al, 484.
determined to have been a successful public health case study by anti-
tobacco advocates and advertisers. But the success of the campaign also 
pointed to some of the limitations for supporting people like Laffin whose 
personal confessions and exposure perform the campaign message. The 
authority of the campaign message emerges from the apparent truth in Laffin’s 
story, yet its ultimate articulation was in the hands of the institutions and 
organizations that produced and circulated the ads.

**PSAs on YouTube**

Seeking to respond to the challenges to traditional broadcast 
dissemination presented by the introduction of digital cable and the growing 
popularity of online social media and video sharing, in the 2000s public health 
and other social issue advocacy campaigns have increasingly turned to 
websites that feature user-generated content as an alternative distribution 
model for PSAs. In 2008 the Ad Council released a research report based on a 
study of the effectiveness of PSA advertising with youth viewers that 
underscores the need to narrowcast this group through online media. The 
study notes a trend in broadcast PSAs to “not necessarily gear the 
advertisement to any one demographic,” but to aim for “an umbrella effect to 
all demographics,” they conclude that “narrowcasting [to] Millennials and 
constructing PSA messages that specifically speak to [these young
Americans] is crucial" for effectiveness. The Ad Council report follows online PSA dissemination since 2007, which first began when the Clinton Global Initiative first used YouTube as an official delivery video content channel. Other organizations have followed suit. For example, the U.S. government's National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign's 100 million dollar budget contained significant funding for Internet advertising, in order to pay "particular attention to youth social settings where pro-drug messages are increasingly prevalent."

The Ad Council report indicates that social media websites are the answer for PSA distribution, not just because they are where this demographic engages most often with media, but because the websites themselves traffic in the circulation of distinctive messages.

---

197 In a 2011 analysis of prize winning communication campaigns in Asia, Warc, the largest database of online advertising case studies, declared the “death of global campaigns.” The most successful, they declared, were ones that target their audience in specific ways, “speaking directly and distinctively to them.” In a 2011 blog entry giving advice to the social marketing community, The Noral Social Marketing Group observed that “the campaigns that increasingly work hardest are the ones that drive the most buzz and sharing — and these are almost without exception very local.” This information was gathered from the Noral Group International social marketing group blog. "User-generated PSAs: Creating a Distinctive Voice on the Internet." July 22, 2011. Web. August 15, 2012. <http://www.noralgroup.com/user_generated_psas/>. For a more extensive look at narrowcasted PSAs through YouTube, see: Bryant, Martin. “User Generated Content by the Numbers [Infographic].” The Next Web – Technology Blog Covering Tech News, Business and Culture Worldwide. TNW, 22 June 2011. Web. June 2011. <http://thenextweb.com/shareables/2011/06/22/user-generated-content-by-the-numbers-infographic/>.

Most respondents mentioned their indifference toward a public service announcement on the whole. However, behavioral changes may occur when Millennials receive information about social issues by word of mouth, making individual adaptation of particular social issues much more motivating in terms of action…

The Ad Council report suggests that in order to reach youth, public service campaigns need to not only gravitate to online spaces, but also seek to circulate through already existing peer-to-peer online networks. Like the perceived similarity model that drove campaigns like the one that featured Pam Laffin, the Ad Council's online recommendations emphasize the importance of the message source, while it takes the personal message a step further by having it passed on through personal connections. In PSA advertising online it is not just the question of who speaks within the spot that is perceived to be important to its success, but who produces or who circulates the campaign message has become important for building credibility.

Advertising researchers have offered theoretical models to explain how perceived similarity leads to persuasion. According to the source attractiveness model, introduced by Kelman in 1961, viewers evaluate messages based on how much they identify with the sources that are delivering the messages. Their likelihood to relate to messaging is informed

---


200 Kelman in Paek
by perceived similarity. The social influence process suggests that all people, and youths in particular, base their thinking and behaviors on what others think and how they behave. And according to reference group theory, perceived similarity leads people to assume others belong to their reference group and thereby respond to their opinions and messages.201 Young people in particular are thought to rely on others in their age cohort as having more significant influence. Since 2008, many public service advertisers have sought to engage everyday people of their target groups in the construction of online campaign messages.202

Advertisers have come to believe in the power of perceived similarity engendered through user-generated content to the extent that some have even attempted to simulate it.203 For example, the Canadian company NB Liquor created a series of video diaries by a teen named Paul Underhill who had killed his friends while driving under the influence. The campaign also featured video responses from Paul's friends. Only later was it made public that "Paul" was an actor, and that the scenarios were fictions intended to be perceived by viewers to be real-life confessionals.204

In 2011, advertising and public relations researchers Hye-Jin Paek, Thomas Hove, Hyun Ju Jeong and Mikyoung Kim of Michigan State University

201 Sherif & Sherif 1964; Hyman & Singer 1968 in Paek
203 ibid, 181
204 ibid, 181
designed a study to test the extent to which who produces a PSA has on its persuasiveness. Their article shifts the trajectory of PSA effectiveness studies by drawing attention towards the proliferation of youth-produced PSAs. In their study, in which they screened to college students a series of youth-produced PSAs on the topic of child abuse alongside those of professionally made PSAs on the same topic, they sought to measure the audience's perceived similarity of not just who delivers the message within the ad, but the their level of identification with the PSAs producers. The researchers concluded that compared to child abuse prevention PSAs produced by issue experts, those produced by perceivably similar peers were more effective in the enhancement of attitudes towards the PSA and issue importance.\textsuperscript{205}

Ultimately, the researchers found that audiences felt that the PSAs that appeared to have been made by nonprofessionals of their cohorts were more affective. The viewers who had the lowest level of involvement with the issue of child abuse were significantly more likely to look to the peer-produced PSAs for answers. While the researchers entered the study unsure of whether or not the question of who produced the ad would be of a concern to the audience, their mere interest in the impact of the PSA producer suggests that message effectiveness evaluation has shifted to include the PSA producer as a critical component of the credibility, authenticity, and persuasiveness of PSA messages. This marks a shift where the vernacular voice is no longer

\textsuperscript{205} Paek et al, 179
accessible to the audience simply based on who appears in the PSA spot; the vernacular voice in the age of digital video must now also represent the person or people behind the camera. Here we can begin to see the authenticity, believability, and persuasiveness of the vernacular voice entwining with modes of PSA production.

Overlooked in the study by Paek et al, and indeed in advertising literature on PSAs as a whole, is the relationship of the youth PSA producers to the subject matter they produce on. What are the producers' relationships to the topic at hand and how are these producers affected by their production experience? The sheer quantity of nonprofessional PSAs on YouTube and other file sharing channels accounts for a significant number of individuals who, through their production, have demonstrated involvement with the issues they are producing about, at the very least, by virtue of going to the trouble to make a PSA and post it online. It seems that nonprofessional PSA producers are being considered by advertisers to be on the producer side of the effects model, rather than on the side of those they hope will be affected by the ads. Yet it appears that youth PSA producers often straddle the role of being both a producer and a part of the target demographic. For many youth who have produced a PSA, identifying as part of the target demographic was precisely their impetus for production.

Researchers interested in ad effectiveness might find it useful to reframe their models for evaluating youth-produced PSAs in order to
understand the effects that the act of making PSAs may have on its producers. When advertising researchers measure professionally-produced PSAs against youth-produced PSAs, they tend to cast youth producers as an equivalent set of producers rather than addressing the complex motivations for their production. As I assert throughout the dissertation, the PSA production process can be utilized as a way for youth producers to confront and work through the issues that the PSAs are designed to address. This is precisely why so many pedagogues and community leaders continue to encourage youth to produce videos in this form. Yet we should ask, to what extent do youth and other nonprofessional PSA producers consciously present themselves as similar to their imagined audiences? Might youth PSA producers strategize just like advertisers have been for decades while taking their own subjectivity into account as a factor in their PSA’s persuasiveness? Answering these questions can help add complexity to our understanding of the relationship between youth PSA production, their personal expression, and power.

**Even the Doctor is an Amateur: YouTube PSAs and Vernacular Voices**

A 2009 PSA contest initiated by the United States Health and Human Services [HSS] agency to promote flu prevention measures exemplifies the strategy of migrating to YouTube to promote a perceived similarity between
PSA producers and their audiences. On July 9, 2009 HSS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius appeared on camera over YouTube to appeal to Americans to help her department create a PSA contest on flu prevention for a $2500 prize and the chance to have the video broadcast on national television.

We want you to help us to create a 15 or 30 second PSA. And I’m not talking another boring, educational video—this is your chance to be funny, dramatic, or whatever you think would make the most positive impact. I’m organizing an expert panel to evaluate submissions, and we’ll present the best ones back to the public, so everyone can vote for their favorite.  

Here Sebelius appeals to everyday Americans to encourage flu prevention by exalting their ability to “help” the government create a public health message, suggesting that the average citizen is uniquely qualified to develop a messaging strategy, appear on camera, and manage all aspects of video production towards affective and effective ends. Later in the video she refers to the contest as a way to “tap into the nation’s creativity.”

On the face of it, the flu PSA contest appears to be a departure from the dominant model of public health campaign advertising, historically the product of collaboration between state officials, medical experts, advertising firms, and the broadcast industry. But while the appeal for lay participation offers the impression that the government agency aims to channel the authority of laypeople, I would like to consider how the HHS harnessed nonprofessional video within a campaign that continued to involve all of those.

same institutions. This example signals the deep imbrication of institutional and vernacular voices in the production of online PSAs.

Indeed, the flu prevention campaign’s effectiveness was hitched to the success of the delivery of its message from a vernacular rather than an authoritative voice. HHS utilized a strategy that leverages perceived similarity in order to achieve the “look” and character of non-governmental intervention. In this way, the vernacular voice is appropriated as an extension of state authorized medical authority, the infrastructure of the national television broadcast industry, and the input of media professionals. By having the winning PSAs presented and circulated on social media platforms as the work of individual producers, the campaign appears to have been wholly directed by nonprofessionals. In this way the HHS communicates accessibility, distancing itself from an authoritative role.

The selection process and plans for distributing the winning PSA were key factors in pairing vernacular voices and HSS objectives. Participating producers were guided to articulate the agency’s key points about the issue in much the same way that an advertising agency would be called upon to do in the creation of a message for broadcast. Participants were required to use the government’s flu.gov website as the primary source of their information. The winning PSA would be aired on national television and the winner to appear in

---

207 These recommendations inherently possess a set of cultural biases towards illness-prevention methods, as they advance a particular model of hygiene that places the responsibility of prevention (and by extension, spread) on individuals. To boot, they obscure the role class and environmental conditions.
television interviews. All videos submissions, which were required to be uploaded to YouTube, were tagged as associated with HHS, and therefore were poised to do exponential advertising for flu.gov. The Health and Human Services department appointed a committee of communication and health experts to select the finalists from the 240 entries. These were specifically appointed “experts” represent areas of knowledge and skills that have historically been called upon to create strategy and execution in traditional public health media campaigns. I mention this only to point out that the same state and media institutions that had historically produced broadcast PSAs are still involved, albeit in the background, of user-produced online PSA campaign execution. This is not to suggest that these traditional PSA institutions ventriloquized the flu message through their video contributors, what I wish to emphasize is the intertwining of the vernacular and the institutional in the articulation of user-generated PSAs.

In their research on trends in the related area of health-care journalism, Briggs and Hallin have noted a shift away from traditional forms of medical authority that prevailed until recent decades, in which the public was encouraged to accept medical information only from physicians. The authors suggest that this model, which they refer to as “patient-consumer centered”, has been to a large extent displaced by one that de-centers medical authority, placing the onus on patients to seek out the appropriate medical information,
evaluate the sources they find, and govern their own health choices according to what they have discovered.\(^{208}\)

What is particularly noteworthy about HSS contest approach is that it utilized viral video strategies to affectively spread its flu message. The contest motivated the creation and distribution of 240 YouTube PSAs on the subject of the flu, in many different styles and tones, and featuring comic and artistic devices. It is easy to imagine these videos might have caught viewers’ attention for reasons other than the health-related information they convey. One of the entries features a girl in elementary school and her puppy, which she treats as her flu patient. Another includes homemade hand puppets. A third features animated, macabre imagery of animals and a foreboding warning about exposure to swine flu. With 240 videos, the chances that the information might have spread as a side effect of the videos that were circulated through peer networks, was promising. The information that HHS hoped to convey could potentially circulate to a wider net of health consumers than would have been possible through earlier forms of media distribution.

Turning to the winning entry, we can see how forms of authority entwine in this new mode of PSA production. As advertising researchers Cialdini and Perloff have argued, people sometimes favor experts in situations where they expect sources that are "higher in quality" or more "authoritative," for example,

a doctor delivering medical information as opposed to a patient. The winning entry, “H1N1 Rap by Dr. Clarke,” written, composed, produced, and performed by John D. Clarke, MD, FAAFP, hybridizes forms of authority in both form and content. The video opens on a medium shot of the name Dr. John D. Clarke, M.D. embroidered on a white medical coat. The camera zooms out to reveal that the coat is worn by a young African-American physician who, like many doctors, dons a tie and collared shirt underneath. But unlike many doctors, and certainly the majority of medical professionals who have appeared in traditional health-related public service announcements, this doctor is sporting sunglasses and rapping about the flu.

A handheld, low-fi video camera moves with him as he performs, New York City buildings framing him as he forms hand gestures that illustrate his lyrics about how to prevent the spread of the H1N1 virus.

H1N1, Swine Flu infection, For intervention, I bring prevention,
Dr. Clarke here I come, to make your head numb!
Health Hop, lesson one, to stop the bedlam.
If you think you're infected, seek attention,
If you have it stay at home, so you don't spread none,
Use tissues when you sneeze, 'cause you could spread some,
'Cause coughed-up germs is where it spreads from!
I'm recommending, washing hands for protection,
Front and back, real thorough, while you count 20 seconds.
Hand sanitizer, I advise you, get it, why?
It makes germs die, when you rub and let it dry.
Don't touch your eyes, your mouth, your nose, your face,
That's how you get infected so you'd better play it safe!

---

210 “H1N1 Rap by Dr. Clarke” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qwUdmPl0bU
Long-term outcome, we'll see the end come,
Never sick again from the H1N1!

The PSA closes with Dr. Clarke seated in a medical office with its staid maroon leather chair, fireplace, and mahogany desk. He has lost the sunglasses and no longer raps, but instead speaks in a friendly, familiar tone, instructing viewers to do as he did and go to the flu.gov website for “some great information” about H1N1. “Log onto Flu.gov, and together we can stop the H1N1,” he says.

Image 3.3: Dr. Clarke raps about how to prevent H1N1

While Clarke’s lab coat and formal office space point to his association with medical institutions, his performative style evokes forms of “street cred” typically associated with mainstream hip hop culture. He emphasizes his relatability to the layperson by disabusing his medical expertise, claiming that
he wrote his lyrics based on knowledge gained from reading the flu.gov website, as opposed to years of medical training and practice. Instead, he derives legitimacy to give advice about flu prevention through bravado. Playing on a popular motif from hip hop and rap in which artists brag about their skills and status, Clarke describes himself as someone who will “bring[s] prevention” to “bedlam.” Whereas most broadcast PSAs that feature actual doctors generally strike a sobering tone as they deliver advice, Clarke describes himself as a powerful force whose knowledge will overwhelm the viewer: “Dr. Clarke here I come, to make your head numb!” Clarke’s bombastic and playful performance paired with a video style that signals “amateur” artist and producer, conveys that he is more like the layperson than the professionals (the doctors, the government, etc).

Dr. Clarke’s active dissociation with the didactic, professional form of address helps HHS to actively work against the “boring educational” video message that Sebelius sought to define the 2009 flu.gov campaign against. The medical authority driving the overall campaign (HSS) is intentionally eclipsed by a style and aesthetic through which medical authority masquerades as the authority of the everyday person. Dr. Clarke's winning PSA is successful at presenting medical authority as emerging from the realm of the amateur/consumer/patient. It is not made explicit in the video, but Dr. Clarke is a practicing medical doctor. To boot, he has a side career professionally distributes his original, health-related songs. The considerable
press he received due to the HSS contest win must certainly have increased the number of visits his website, and may have boosted his recording sales. His win draws our attention to the user-generated PSA’s unique interplay between the nonprofessional and the professional, and formerly contradictory forms of authorial voice.

While the flu.gov campaign provides a very clear example through which to identify institutional messages are circulated through vernacular forms of authority, in other online user-produced PSAs, the line between institutions and everyday producer content is more opaque. The 2011 National Eating Disorders Association [NEDA] PSA Video Competition, established as part of the organization’s largest national outreach campaign called "It’s Time to Talk About It," provides another example of an organization that has utilized nonprofessional PSA production as a way to increase perceived similarity with their target population. The contest, established by NEDA as a way to "raise consciousness about the realities and seriousness" of eating disorders, prompted dozens of nonprofessional filmmakers to create YouTube PSAs about eating disorders. "The idea behind the PSA competition is to give entrants a voice and ask them, 'How would you talk about it?'" explains Lynn Grefe, president and CEO of NEDA in a press release about the contest. The NEDA competition specifically called for the filmmakers to use "all original

\[\text{ibid}\]
material" in order to respond to provide a "helpful, hopeful or informative message about eating disorders."

I would like to advance the critique of video "voice" and media empowerment that I developed in chapter two by examining how the NEDA competition rules, paired with what I have been suggesting are limitations of the PSA form, structure how the participants "talk about it [eating disorders]." Examining the structure of the contest as well as the video submissions allows us another way to see how the organization's initiatives, paired with YouTube's business model, combined with traditional public relations efforts work to popularize the PSA formula and further the organization's messaging strategy. But this is not just a case of an institution bearing down on a young video maker's expression. By comparing one entrant's NEDA submission alongside another video she made on the same topic, we can begin to see some of the ways that participating in the campaign and framing her message and style according to their framework might appear to her as a way to leverage her visibility as a video artist, aspiring actor, and as someone with thoughts to about eating disorders. NEDA offers the chance for publicity, perhaps more so than personal expression.

NEDA incorporates traditional media distribution strategies to popularize the personal PSA style. The contest required all participants to submit their PSAs on DVDs or tapes, but also asked for signed release forms, which gave NEDA permission to freely distribute the videos through YouTube
and other outlets. While the number of hits for the three winning videos that are hosted on YouTube is not especially impressive (a year after the videos were first posted they had each received approximately 2,000 views each), the NEDA organization has extended viewing possibilities by circulating the PSAs offline as part of their "It's Time to Talk About It" national outreach campaign, presumably extending viewing exponentially. By circulating the PSAs beyond Youtube through their website and on DVD, the NEDA organization has been able to extend the reach of their message beyond both what was possible with broadcast television PSAs or YouTube by itself. Even over a year after the close of the competition, the NEDA website still advertised that the winning PSA videos were available to any interested media outlets or organizations for further broadcast and distribution. Additionally, NEDA used the 2011 PSA contest to enhance their publicity efforts for the overall campaign. Press releases and online advertisements announced lavish prizes (a round-trip, expenses paid trip to New York City, recognition at NEDA's annual benefit dinner, and cash prizes), a promise of extended media exposure (videos screened at the annual NEDA conference, featured online, etc) and the existence of a "celebrity media" judging panel, which included George Larrimore, managing editor of Access Hollywood.212

All three winning PSAs rely on vernacular voices to convey the "It's Time To Talk About It" message. Two videos feature kids in a school context while a third features a family who tell the story of learning of their daughter's eating disorder. The generic conventions of the PSA formula that is promoted through the YouTube PSA business model become most apparent when compared to non-PSA videos on the same topics. By generic conventions of the PSA, I am referring to the genre's orientation towards singular, brief, simple and positive messages with memorable taglines. Through this comparison I aim to elucidate the ways in which the traditional PSA's tendency towards sound bites limits the possibilities for what can be said.

By comparing a 2011 NEDA YouTube video PSA called “I am…” that was produced by and features 23-year-old Sascha Sternecker, to another of her short YouTube videos called “goodbye Scale!” in which she departs from the PSA structure but delivers the same message about recovering from an eating disorder, we can see the ways that the PSAs generic conventions bare

---

on her expression.\textsuperscript{214} I am not suggesting that Sternecker was necessarily constrained by these conventions, rather, I would like to consider her participation in the PSA formula as part of the campaign as a strategy of visibility that is part of her overall self-expression. With this in mind, we might move away from thinking of the institutionally prompted PSA as a vehicle for youth expression in-and-of itself.

I would suggest that institutional factors that affect video circulation are key factors that determine the visibility and relative popularity of these two videos, more so than the differences in the content or form of the individual videos. With only 75 views at the time of this writing, “goodbye Scale!” has had little more circulation than the average home movie on YouTube. Conversely, “I am…” has received over 800 hits, which, while still relatively low compared to famous YouTube videos, represents a number that likely exceeds Sascha’s personal network. While it is impossible to know exactly what reasons motivated those 800 plus people to click on “I am…,” it seems plausible that its inclusion in the NEDA competition increased its circulation. We might consider how meta-data on YouTube (how users title and tag their videos with keywords that effect its place in the archive) effects where those videos will appear in searches. The fact that “I am…” is tagged with the NEDA name

already increases its standing in the hierarchy of search terms related to eating disorders.

Media historian Pelle Snickars notes that despite the common use of metaphors of "sharing" to refer to user-generated video distribution on YouTube, it is perhaps more useful and appropriate to consider the mechanisms for how "sharing" occurs and how technological, business, and social factors determine which files are circulated and to what extent.\textsuperscript{215}

Critical legal studies scholar Lawrence Lessig suggests that what most people call "sharing" is indeed a "new mode of production" that has emerged through a "non-market economy" as opposed to a purely social endeavor, as the term implies. Rather than dichotomously separating the "commercial" from "sharing," he suggests we may benefit from thinking more deeply about what factors govern video exchange on YouTube.\textsuperscript{216} Baring this in mind, we may consider the role that YouTube's search engine infrastructure plays in promoting the circulation of some videos more so than others. In other words, instead of thinking of YouTube as a digital archive in which videos are seen simply because they have been shared (which implies generosity or a democratic forum), we should keep in mind how video sharing is motivated by


already-established personal and business networks that effect which particular videos get circulated most often.\textsuperscript{217} 

It is not just social networks that shape which videos prevail and predominate on YouTube. As Siva Vaidhyanathan reminds us in his polemic tome \textit{The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Care)}, the business model of YouTube's parent company Google is designed to algorithmically categorize user-generated content.\textsuperscript{218} Like Google, the YouTube search engine sorts videos based on how recent the video is and the total number of hits it has received, as it also censors out videos that have been deemed "offensive" by Google employees whose job it is to weed such content out. According to Vaidhyanathan, video's views are also increased when links elsewhere on the Internet connect back to it on YouTube. Videos also receive greater circulation when they are tagged and titled with keywords that link them to popular videos. In effect, one video's popularity begets a related video's popularity. And like any popularity contest, popularity is not necessarily commensurate with the quality of the object in question as much as it is with how often and where it circulates. The popularity of a YouTube PSA video can be achieved when a producer links it to social issue organizations and causes that have a presence both on and off YouTube. The circulation of Sascha Sternecker's “I am…” video has likely benefitted from its

\textsuperscript{217} For a compelling discussion about the limited possibilities for democratic forum on YouTube, see Alexandra Juhasz's 2011 e-book, \textit{Learning from YouTube}.  
\textsuperscript{218} Vaidhyanathan, Siva. \textit{The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Care)}. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011.
association with NEDA and the NEDA PSA competition. The official NEDA website links to the winning entries, while in turn, those videos are algorithmically linked to other NEDA entries that have been uploaded and tagged by their producers as related to the contest. Cumulatively, the NEDA PSAs popularize each other, and in doing so, they advance the common PSA form that was tacitly promoted by the competition that inspired their creation. The generic conventions are ultimately reinforced through popularity. As Alexandra Juhasz, Siva Vaidhyanathan, and José Van Dijck have argued, this is also true in general of content on YouTube, Facebook and other social media.219

Comparing the two videos will make apparent how the PSA testimonial presents a homogenized style of address that ultimately provides the viewer with less information about Sascha’s experience and arguably has less direct impact on her own relationship to the issue. If the goal of the PSA contest was to encourage producers and viewers to “talk about” eating disorders, we should evaluate how discourse is produced through the institutionally-prompted youth-produced PSA.

"I'm just a girl next door," are the first words that appear in the video titled ‘I am...” They appear in lower-case, lilac-colored script font over a black screen as an upbeat jazz piano refrain plays. We then see a black-and-white

shot of a white woman in her early twenties. She sits confidentially with her legs dangling over an arm of the office chair she is sitting on. "I want to be on Broadway," she says with gusto. We then cut to a head-on close up of another young white woman who also speaks directly into the camera. "I am a future social worker," she says. Her statement is followed by that of a third young woman, who smiles widely as she tells us "I love to play guitar." Text appears again. "But I have a secret," it reads.

We return to the three women, who again appear one at a time to speak. The camera angles have remained the same as the earlier shots, but now each woman has shifted her body so that she is leaning in towards the lens. "I am in recovery from an eating disorder," confesses the first. "I am currently struggling with an eating disorder," says the second. "I'm recovering from an eating disorder," says the third. "It's time to talk about it" all three say in syncopation and with conviction over a screen that provides information about how to contact NEDA for help.
In contrast to the rather formulaic “I am…,” Sascha’s video “goodbye, scale!” which she posted on YouTube months after her NEDA PSA, offers a more creative and personal approach in her continued effort to reach out to her peers about eating disorders. While “goodbye, Scale!” also shows its maker clearly devoted to inspiring open discussion about eating disorders, it would likely not have qualified for the NEDA competition for which she entered “I am…” earlier that year. Unlike other winners selected by NEDA, it breaks from the traditional PSA formula in many ways. Even though it resembles “I am…” in terms of its message, it ultimately has more in common with a tradition of feminist performance art video than the PSA genre.

In “goodbye Scale!” Sascha appears seated in front of a white curtain photography studio backdrop. “I’m Sascha, I’m twenty-three years old and I’m from Lafayette, New Jersey,” she tells us. A title card appears with her
signature color lilac font, “because of thirteen years spent battling anorexia nervosa, I will be smashing my scale.” We cut to a deck at nighttime, a white and grey digital scale centered in the frame. All we can see of Sascha are her pink sheepskin boots as her hammer swings down on the scale. "That was a fail!" she says in a humored but self-effacing tone when her first swing only produces a chip the size of a dime. She curses as little pieces of plastic fly off. “Oh shit!” she shouts when the force of her second swing sends her sunglasses flying to the ground.

At this point in the video, the link between Sacha’s anorexia and her act of scale-smashing is only implied. Unlike in the rote and predictable “I am…” PSA, the viewer must work to understand the connection between Sacha’s her experience with anorexia and her message. We are caught up in the physicality of the act, her raw energy, and the intimacy of the moment that we have been given access to.

Offscreen we hear the voice of an avuncular male camera operator (perhaps her father) who makes wisecracks while he gives her advice and encouragement. “Did you break your glasses?” the man asks in a protective tone. As her hammer swings upwards for a second try he interrupts: “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Close your eyes while you do it!” She swings again, and remarks that she’s not making much headway. “Close your eyes,” he demands. “I AM closing my eyes!” she says defiantly. She continues to aggressively swing the hammer, and then gently puts a foot on the scale to test to see if it is actually
broken. "Damn it!, it still works!" she declares in frustration. "Go for the LED meter! Close your eyes." advises the man.

Sascha continues to hit the scale with great vigor. Upbeat instrumental music fades in. It is riff that comes with Apple Computer’s iMovie editing package and gets used often in nonprofessional videos. Pieces fly everywhere. She steps on the scale again, asking “does it still work?” The numbers don’t move. “Yes! I broke it!” she exclaims. "Now leave it there as a warning for all other scales," he says. "Ha! Victorious!" Sascha sings with great pride. The camera tilts up as she rises while holding the hammer over her head under the porch's flood light. She takes a bow. "Point down to your kill," says the man. "Take that, fuckerhead! Take that!" she says with a mock-angry face. The segment ends with her holding the hammer like it is a smoking gun. The video doesn’t end there. We then cut away to Sascha facing the camera in a brightly-lit bedroom. Her tone is both casual and sincere as she continues to encourage others like her to "rise against eating disorders":

"To anyone who has ever experienced an eating disorder, I urge you from the bottom of my heart to do what I've done tonight. Take a step that propels you in the direction of your values an makes life worth living. So take my advice, and take up your hammers [she raises her right fist in the air] and rise against eating disorders" “Why? Because eating disorders? We can do better than that,” reads a title card. And, then, as her other videos have
prepared us to expect, the Broadway-bound Sascha returns on camera for a brief moment to sing those same words in a voice fit for the stage.

Image 3.5 Sascha Sternecker threatens her scale with a hammer in *goodbye, Scale!*

With a message and a call to action, “goodbye, Scale!” shares characteristics with the traditional testimonial style PSA, but it also departs from the PSA formula in significant ways. Drawing out these distinctions helps us to recognize how the traditional PSA format limits and directs the way the personal perspective and voice is expressed. A significant marker of the voice of *goodbye scale!* is its pacing and duration. The total running time is almost twice that of the longest PSA. At 1:41 minutes in length (as opposed to the standard 30 or 60 second length) there is time for a developed interaction
between Sascha and the man offscreen. We get a sense of their rapport and mutual investment in breaking the scale. It is unclear when and how the scale will break and what their reactions will be. The scale-breaking scene seems unscripted and in the moment, which promotes a less presumptuous overall viewing experience. Through their intimate exchange we learn that the symbolism of the scale seems to mean as much to him as it does to her. Their relationship allows us to imagine the ways that Sascha’s eating disorder must have affected people beside herself. Indeed, the relationship between Sascha and this male figure brings to life the NEDA “It’s Time to Talk About It” message. Their moment over the scale suggests that they have talked about it at great length and as a result, Sascha has had support throughout her recovery. The emotional impact of their shared experience with her eating disorder is only implied; unlike “I am…” and other formulaic message-based PSA videos where the testimonial style tends toward the predictable and rote, in “goodbye, Scale!” the viewer must work harder to make meaning out of the relationships between signs onscreen.

Compared to the didactic It’s Time to Talk About It message and tag that Sascha was required to use in her NEDA PSA video submission, “goodbye, Scale!” offers a more complex message about eating disorders. Sascha doesn't explain the symbolism of breaking the scale. There is no need, as it references symbolic acts of defiance, from rock stars smashing guitars to 70s feminist demonstrators burning their bras. The breaking of the scale is an
action that has clear significance and magnitude for Sascha. Her visible thrill at having been "victorious" over the scale suggests how much power the scale once had over her. The significance of her scale-smashing may perhaps be best understood by viewers who have experienced their own weight-related struggle. Whereas “I Am…” speaks to a nonspecific audience (people in general need to “talk about it”), “goodbye, Scale!” speaks more directly to people who have been or are troubled by their weight.

Indeed, like the more formulaic PSAs, “goodbye, Scale!” includes a personal appeal. But this appeal appears after the scale scene, through which Sascha established herself as having a more casual, genuine affect than is typically conveyed in formulaic, message-based testimonial PSAs that tend toward the earnest. The juxtaposition of the scale and appeal scenes undercuts the potential for the appeal to read as overly earnest or dramatic. Her exhibit of spontaneous emotion in the scale scene establishes a foundation that helps the viewer to read her appeal as genuinely passionate and, as she suggests, “from the heart.” Further, calling on viewers to "raise up your hammers!" could be read as a play on the PSA call-to-action formula, or possibly an attempt to start a movement of scale-breaking as a way to throw a wrench (or a hammer, as the case may be) into popular discourses around body weight. Unlike the It Gets Better Project videos discussed in earlier chapters, or the NEDA campaign that she participated in with “I am…,” Sascha’s message in “goodbye, Scale!” is unconnected to a broader campaign
or narrative framework. Her message and her call-to-action is original, and exists outside of any institutional campaign agenda. Likewise, her message and tone are not tethered to any institutional expectations.

This comparative analysis allows us to identify two distinct kinds of online testimonial-style PSAs. On the one hand are PSAs like H1N1 Rap and “I am…” that are connected to and promoted by institutions (such as those prompted by non-profit organization like Health and Human Services or NEDA, funded by a grant, or the product of a school assignment). In these, institutions promote a set of desired messages through these nonprofessional videos and the amateur aesthetics that authenticate the message as coming from everyday people. On the other hand are message-based testimonial videos like “goodbye, Scale!” that do not seem to have been created in response to an institutional call for a PSA yet the producers have nonetheless used elements of the PSA form. In “goodbye, Scale!” Sascha appears to use the testimony and call-to-action features of the PSA formula that NEDA and other non-profits have promoted as a narrative device that intentionally mimics the authorial frame that the formula has come to represent. In other words, while in “I am…” NEDA draws its authority from the PSA form and the perceived authenticity of Sascha’s expression about her eating disorder, in her independent project “goodbye, Scale!” Sascha seems to derive authority from the PSA form. These separate forms of authority have different potentials. In “I am...” Sascha becomes an object of the NEDA campaign. Like Pam Laffin and
the many testimonial voices of PSAs past, she is the mouthpiece and face of the message, working for the organization to reach the audience. In “goodbye, scale!” Sascha becomes a subject, drawing on traditions outside of the PSA form, re-mixing styles and experimenting with many inflections of her own voice. Whereas her choice to make a video for the campaign evidences her desire to contribute to the NEDA effort to combat eating disorders, her actions within “goodbye, Scale!” appear to be a part of her actual recovery process.

“goodbye, Scale!” breaks from the PSA form in important ways that point to the range of expressive possibilities for youth who produce videos on issues that concern them. When young producers like Sascha Sternecker depart from the often-recycled PSA-style testimonial style, they challenge the longstanding PSA media model, producing videos that are more likely to circulate and have meaning within their peer-networks rather than to operate in the service of larger organizations or hosting media sites. Whether such videos have influence or effects may not matter. If the video is meaningful to the producer and her chosen community of viewers, perhaps that is what will matter most towards affecting change around the issue at hand.

**Conclusion**

The content and circulation of nonprofessional online PSAs is determined by more than just producers’ imagination and viewer interest. I have been suggesting that a combination of intrapersonal, organizational and
business agendas have driven the popularity of the nonprofessional, confessional, and ultimately, formulaic, PSA style. I have proposed that the self-produced YouTube PSA is not necessarily an altogether new form of media, but rather, an evolutionary development in the century-long history of the public service announcement. While the production of nonprofessional PSAs may often be used to fulfill some of the publicity prerogatives for cause-related organizations and aid pedagogical efforts in educational and community settings, it must also be acknowledged that it is ultimately the producers as agents who make choices about the style and content of their videos. I have attempted to identify some of the factors that influence what kinds of PSAs are produced, but this has not answered the question of why non-professional producers continue to use so many of the tropes that have existed for decades, particularly in an era where the PSA genre has been lampooned to the point of threatening to cast all recent PSAs in an ironic light.\(^\text{220}\)

We might consider how using the generic conventions of the PSA may authorize the producer with a sense of authority that is not as available

\(^{220}\) Examples of plays on the PSA can be found in decades worth of televised sketch comedy (*Saturday Night Live* and *MadTV* have each provided dozens of examples); in experimental video (in the 1990s Laurie Anderson produced a particularly affective series called the "Personal Service Announcement" in which she performed the testimonial PSA formula to make political commentary; and on YouTube itself, where there are hundreds of mock PSAs, such as those warning people against the dangers of "Vertical Video Syndrome" (the tendency for people with iPhone cameras to shoot vertically instead of adjusting in order to shoot the standard 16x9 aspect ratio). There is even a PSA of Looney Toons cartoon characters advocating for the protection of the hapless pig characters in the popular video game Angry Birds. At this point in time it would be surprising if any media consumer has managed to miss one of the many existing PSA spoofs.
through producing in other generic forms. Performing the authoritative voice under the auspices of using a vernacular voice is the particular address of the PSA and perhaps part of what has made it such an accessible and attractive model to new producers and pedagogues alike. The ethnographic case study that follows in the next chapter will allow us to examine these questions in depth.

The first step towards understanding why so many nonprofessionals continue to advance the common PSA formula may in fact be made evident through the history I have outlined in which the ‘face’ becomes mobilized as not just a sign of the “real” but a sign of the production of the real. If, as I have argued, the public service announcement has always been a technique of authority (whether it be the state, non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, etc) that seeks to persuade viewers, then we must consider the work that youth producers perform when they contribute to campaigns, and utilize the PSA structure as a way to authorize their experiences and right to communicate a message or idea. But if we look to videos like “goodbye, Scale!” for direction, we will see that when youth producers step aside from the PSA structure and add more complexity to their exploration of the topic at hand, they engage in ways that imbue them with an authority that is derived from the creative content of their videos rather than the generic conventions of the PSA.
Chapter Four: Authentic Voices, Institutional Prompts: Negotiating Expression in a LGBT-Youth-Produced Anti-Gay-Bullying PSA

Youth media pedagogy has always been bound up with questions of agency and concerns about the impact of structural demands on what is produced. As discussed in chapter two, the recent constructions of this problematic suggest a tension between institutional funding structures and discourses that position the millennial generation as inherently skilled to use and benefit from working with digital media production technologies. Yet whereas chapter two critiqued an often-presumed one-to-one correspondence between youth production and empowerment that is evident in media education discourses, this chapter examines these concerns as they play out in the context of an actual PSA production within a community context. The following account of my participatory research in which I served as the instructor for a media production workshop at an LGBT youth community center suggests the need to more closely consider the ways in which young media producers take up and transform pedagogical sites and utilize new media technologies in the face of adult and institutional framing of their needs and abilities. Through a narrative re-telling that draws from my participant observation, interviews with youth and adult staff, and analysis of the video produced, I describe the specific production choices the youth producers made in the process of assembling an anti-gay-bullying PSA video at the Hillcrest...
Youth Center over the course of a six month period. The PSA has emerged as a social tool that optimally exploits the affordability of digital technology and amenability of anti-gay-bullying discourse to a publicly meaningful format that highlights personal experience. Youth-produced PSA videos, situated at the forefront of media empowerment discourse, offer only partial access to the experiences and perspectives of the youth, which I argue is not only constituted through their own personal stories but by their roles in the production process. LGBT youth in particular have been positioned at the center of a variety of public health, social justice and educational campaigns that have utilized youth-produced PSA video production and circulation as a technique of empowerment. Consequently, the PSA video has become the ultimate site of investment of creative, technical and intellectual energy in a bid to tell the most effective story about LGBT youth experience. Educators and social justice advocates often take youth-produced PSA videos as representative of the sum of the discourse on the social issue at hand. Yet, focusing on the social value of the ultimate video product comes at the expense of overshadowing the process of its production and the ways in which youth participate. The PSA production process, I argue in this ethnographic narrative, is worthy of examination as a way to understand more deeply how youth PSA producers must negotiate their relationships to the social issue they are responding to, their instructors, their viewers, and each other. It allows us
to see how two seemingly-entwined pedagogical priorities—youth expression and participation in production—are actually often at odds with each other.

For the administrators, educators, and to the greatest extent, students involved in the production of the anti-bullying PSA video, there was an implicit expectation that the video would contain a message that would be legible to outside audiences and would possess the strongest possible production values given the technologies available to us. Yet, while the final PSA video may have met these expectations, ultimately it is a weak representation of what occurred within the time and space of its making, which was a more pedagogically and emotionally-complex approach to the topic and personal experiences related to anti-gay-bullying. Comprised of talking-head interviews with LGBT youth from the broader community, the final video speaks more to the our pre-conceptions of what formal and content-driven components a PSA must consist of than it succeeds in making visible the critical discourse about the phenomenon of anti-gay bullying that occurred during, and I would suggest, by virtue of, the process of production.

Studying the process of production also enables us to see social divisions that emerged through production that I believe are indicative of larger social arrangements that made some youth more prepared to participate (behind or in front of the camera) by virtue of their background. These dynamics are also rendered invisible in the circulating video, and thereby feed the dominant pedagogical discourse that PSA production is uniformly
empowering for youth. It has become commonplace to think about PSA production exercises as a way for youth to express feelings and thoughts on a social issue that concerns them. Examining the youth makers’ discussions and negotiations with what to include in the PSA against adult assumptions about the social benefits reveals misalignments between the discourse around the social, emotional and pedagogical benefits of youth making PSA videos and the benefits I perceived to be real for the youth producers.

**Prompting Production**

Michael stares intently at the LCD screen of a handheld video camera. His rigid posture and stern expression speak to the intensity of his engagement. He squints his eyes to see the video image as it plays, presses the pause button with his left hand, then furiously scribbles on the scratch pad next to him with his right: “Here’s the thing about being gay….” He labels this quote “A” to indicate it should go in the section of the video called “coming out stories.” The face on the screen is his own.

Jo sits across the room on a plush blue footstool that looks like it belongs on the soundstage of a children’s television show. Slumped over her laptop with one hand on the keyboard and the other on a super-sized Amp energy drink, Jo shifts in place, using her tee-shirt to cover places where some of the holes in her ripped jeans have become too big to cinch together with their array of large safety pins. “If I want to make the clip bigger I think I press
ʻcontrol z,” she says tentatively. She tries those keys and it works. “YES!” she cheers, and proceeds to edit down a sound bite from an interview she had conducted with another teen during the prior week. “I think this one goes in the section on bullying stories,” she declares confidently. She uses the track pad mouse on the Mac laptop to pull the clip down into the sequence. This is only the second time she has ever used video editing software and she makes this move slowly and deliberately. Michael brings Jo his sheets of coded interview quotes for her to locate and digitize to be included in their edit. Pieces of kettle corn and fragments of chile limón flavored potato chips are sprinkled on the carpet around their workstations. Towards the front of the youth center space an episode of The Simpsons is playing on a giant television screen. No one is watching.

Michael and Jo wear headphones while they work to block out the noise of other people who may drop in at the three-room Hillcrest Youth Center, a recreational center for LGBT teens and their allies. No matter where they sit, Michael and Jo are likely to get caught with other people talking or hovering over them. But it is Wednesday, which is typically a slow night at the youth center, and it’s still early, so they happen to be the only two there. When Michael and Jo are concentrating it is quiet enough to hear the florescent overhead lights hum. Along with the muted TV and the occasional anxious sigh, there is a quiet symphony of tension building in the room. The teens are on a deadline, with only two weeks until April 20, the date by which they have
agreed to have complete a video public service announcement on the topic of anti-gay-bullying. Waiting for the video are administrators at the San Diego LGBT community center (The Center) who plan to upload the PSA online (with hopes it will go viral and be seen by LGBT teens everywhere), screen it at a local film festival, and provide DVD copies of it to Gay/Straight Alliance clubs throughout San Diego’s high schools. I had been the one to convey the assignment to the youth after several discussions with The Center’s Director of Public Affairs who had invited our newly established media workshop to participate in a $20,000 grant that had been awarded by the communications utility company AT&T to establish an anti-bullying program. An anti-gay-bullying PSA video was to be the grant’s key deliverable.

It helped that there already happened to be in operation an established video production group at the youth center. In this way the center could help to sustain the group's continued work. From an administrative point of view it had the twofold benefit of allowing the program to be reframed to allow them to recoup overhead for facilities and staffing they provide, and it provided a new pedagogical goal for the group that could also provide exposure for the organization. The production group was part of a weekly media production workshop called Changing Reels that I had started with donated equipment and outside start-up funds in January of that same year.221 Changing Reels is

221 Start-up support came from Collective Voices Foundation out of Pasadena, California. The Foundation covered incidentals, such as tapes and batteries, weekly snacks, Final Cut Pro software, and a new iMac for the group. For more information about Collective Voices, see
one of the only organized activities at the youth center, which is centrally a
drop-in space and resource center. The fluid and casual culture of the place is
not conducive for an optional, ongoing project that requires focus and an
intensive time commitment. The youth center is first and foremost a
community space and the goal of the workshop has always been to provide
opportunities to enhance the activity already happening in the space rather
than to impose some sort of pre-professional or scholastic environment or
staged opportunity to interact with new media for educational purposes.
Legalities and logistics prevent us from filming or editing offsite. Participation
in the workshop was free and open to any teen visitors to the youth center.
While over 50 teens had been casually involved in the workshop’s activities up
through the PSA production, a group of ten teens from diverse backgrounds
had established themselves as core participants through their activity over the
many months. These ten teens had joined the workshop with an already-
established interest in audiovisual media production. Michael and Jo are part
of this group.

http://www.collectivevoices.org. The University of California, San Diego Department of
Communication also provided a loaner computer and their Media Center provided loaner
cameras and audio recording equipment. California State University, San Marcos also
generously loaned HD camera and lighting equipment for several of the group’s video shoots.

The Hillcrest Youth Center hosts approximately 300 visits from youth each month. They are
80% youth of color -- Latino, African-American, Asian and Pacific Islanders, Native American -
- and 20% Anglo-American. They are youth from all over San Diego county, representing
almost every zip code. Some come from affluent homes, some are homeless and living in
transitional housing run by The Center. More than 70% are low-income and underserved. The
media workshop includes a cross-section of this population.
The specific date for the launch was significant, as it marked the
*National Day of Silence*, an annual day of action founded and promoted by the
Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). On this day, per
GLSEN’s directive, LGBT youth and allies are encouraged to perform some
form of self-silencing as a way to “call attention to the silencing effect of anti-
LGBT bullying and harassment in schools.” This typically takes the form of
silent marches, performances, and other activities that enhance the visibility of
LGBT youth. In the 15 years since the day was first observed, April 20 has
become something of a national holiday to honor the lives of LGBT youth.
Initially established as a way to bring awareness to perceived common
wounds in the LGBT youth community, it is also often used by educational
institutions that support youth as something of a catch-all day for celebrating
LGBT youth. For LGBT-specific educational and community groups that serve
youth, there is an expectation that they will host activities to mark the day.
Historically the Hillcrest Youth Center has organized a silent march on April
20. This year, the administrators have decided to also kick off a county-wide
initiative meant to educate and empower LGBT youth and their allies about
their legal and civil rights and the resources available to them. The public
service announcement is at the center of this initiative.\(^{223}\) Able to be circulated

---

\(^{223}\) The Center administrators described the program as follows, “The San Diego LGBT Community Center will seek to enhance the educational experience and involvement of LGBT high school students between the ages of 14 and 18 working with them to design and execute proven campus-based intervention strategies, including training and education, policy
like the literature typically distributed to advertise The Center’s youth resources, the PSA is a visible representation of The Center’s investment in LGBT youth, and a calling card of sorts.224

Administrators at The Center had pitched a youth-produced video to AT&T in their bid for a grant to establish anti-bullying programs for youth called *The Bullying Awareness and Harm Prevention Campaign*. While the original proposal specified an education program in which community leaders, lawyers, policymakers and youth advocates and media production specialists would hold workshops with area LGBT youth to teach them how to prevent and respond to bullying, once the grant was won, The Center administrators decided that making a video would not be merely a component of the proposed anti-bullying program, but might replace the entire proposed program. They had determined that there was interchangeable pedagogical and social value between the previously proposed mentoring workshop and LGBT youth producing a PSA about anti-gay-bullying and circulating it to their peers. AT&T agreed. It was a practical response to limited resources. I note this because one of my aims is to consider how pedagogical approaches of youth media programs result from a chain of negotiations that lead from funders to community organizations or educational institutions to educators and students—each responding and recasting the project in various ways.

---

224 The initiative is an example of what I have referred to in my dissertation as a “campaign of conspicuous concern.”
From an administrative perspective, it made a lot of sense for The Center, which had endured funding losses due to significant California state budget cuts and a drop in donor contributions, to have the teens make a video using established and outside resources. This was a cost-effective way to proceed and one commonly pursued by social and cultural nonprofit organization that find educational programs to be attractive to funding agencies. At the same time, since much of funding available to nonprofit agencies is targeted for "new" project and not for sustaining established programs, not to mention operating expenses, there is a strong incentive if not a necessity to repackage or roll existing activities or programs into new deliverables. Not only would the AT&T grant support the project and the youth center itself, it could also be tapped to funnel portions to other vital areas of the organization where funding holes urgently needed to be plugged. Having a small group of youth produce a PSA was going to be a lot easier and more cost efficient for The Center to pull off than a coordinated, multi-faceted, multiple-day workshop for youth across the county. According to the The Center administrators, asking youth to use video to respond to the phenomenon of anti-gay-bullying was a strategy for addressing and working to solve the problem. In the administrators' eyes, the program seemed to have tremendous potential reach. And, once their PSA was posted and circulated online, they hoped that their LGBT youth constituents would affect other LGBT youth.
As the facilitator I could see some of these potential benefits that the administration was suggesting, and understood how popular discourses of digital media pedagogy made this seem unproblematic. At the same time I was aware that this approach eclipsed some of the objectives that shaped my approach to teaching the workshop and certainly imagined the needs and desires of the youth participants in ways that were not derived from interaction with them. So when I agreed to guide the PSA production I understood it would entail additional work and rethinking to merge the needs of the administration with my goals of developing a pedagogy that emerged from sensitivity to my interactions with the youth.

The simple, message-bound form of the PSA made it an especially good first project for new makers, so, from a pedagogical perspective, it seemed like a good challenge for the group, who up until this point had been primarily learning how to use equipment while becoming familiar with the language of cinema through screenings, production exercises and discussions. The workshop participants had not yet endeavored to make a complete video, so why not have the first one be one that was commissioned by our parent organization? For all of us in the Changing Reels media workshop, the PSA assignment felt like an honor and a responsibility to the community. The PSA gave us a focused objective and suggested an avenue for continued support from The Center. It was key that our workshop goals be as closely aligned with the direction of The Center as possible. We shared a
dedication to supporting the youth and to helping them to forge connections within the greater LGBT community. Our location within the space of the youth center was one way we had already established this link; producing the PSA at our parent organization’s request was another important way to enact our affiliation and unified commitments. The youth could presumably go on to make projects of their choosing once the PSA was complete.

Together the program administrators who had written the grant to make the PSAs and I had decided that the project prompt should be conveyed to the youth in an open-ended way so as to encourage creativity and original expression on the issue. The only requirements were that the final video should be under six minutes long (a standard maximum length for viral distribution and incorporation of video into in-school presentations) and focused centrally on the topic of anti-gay-bullying. The particular message, style and execution would be at the discretion of the youth producers. I had also hoped that the youth would take a creative stylistic approach to the public service announcement, and so instead of reviewing other PSAs as an introduction to the project, I engaged them in discussions about their feelings about the phenomenon of anti-gay-bullying and, for inspiration, screened films and videos that conveyed the different forms of anti-gay-bullying that were mentioned.

The feeling that I could possibly convey a PSA assignment without outlining or modeling conventions of the PSA form speaks to my (and perhaps
our group’s collective) assumption that PSA conventions are commonly understood. This approach is reflective of trends towards integrating PSA into activities and agendas with youth where the pedagogical emphasis on the content rather than the form. My choice to refrain from giving more explicit guidance regarding the video’s and content structure was intentional, as it made it necessary for the youth to make explicit their own interpretation of both the issue and the PSA form. As it turned out, their interpretation of what a PSA should contain and look like was very much in keeping with conventional broadcast public service announcements—brief, emotionally-triggering, and aimed towards delivering one simple, explicit message. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the PSA, similar to commercial advertisements, takes a unidirectional approach to a target audience about an issue and offers one discreet, often hard-hitting, uncomplicated message. To produce within this structure means to foreclose the possibility of ambivalence or contradictions in perspectives. Perhaps more than any other genre, the PSA seeks to homogenize a diversity of voices and experiences. In this way the PSA production assignment in fact worked against some of the pedagogical goals intended by the adults (funders, administrators, staff, and myself) who put the project into action. When we examine the process of creating the PSA, it becomes clear that the production was fueled by a range approaches to the issue of anti-gay bullying and a constant shifting and often conflicting group emphasis between engaging the complexities of the topic of bullying in the
space of the center and generating coherent and appealing media. The goal of executing a PSA video incited deep engagement with the issue of bullying at the youth center, but, ironically, the obligation to produce the video at times placed limits on expression and connection.

The Expression Paradox: The Tension Between Live Connections And The Imperative to Produce

The youth in the workshop decided to begin the project by interviewing each other on camera about their personal experiences with anti-gay-bullying. The interviews, they claimed, could help to reveal some common themes on the subject of bullying. From there they would determine their message for the video. The filming of these initial interviews would also double as a way for the group to become more proficient with how to use the camera, lighting and sound equipment. Once those in the group of core participants who had agreed to go on-camera had been interviewed (three people), they actively sought out other youth at the center to interview. Only one other person agreed, so they began recruiting new people who walked through the door. This resulted in the collection of interviews from an array of teens, many of whom were completely new to the space and didn’t know anyone. The teens in general seemed very eager to expand their community and the majority of the group was very sensitive to new-comers’ comfort. All production stopped as the new focus became welcoming the person and attempting to integrate
them into our activities. The interview tapings became something of an “icebreaker” for the new person and the group, and the workshop participants now found that they had interviews from people who were coming from a variety of backgrounds, schools, and communities within San Diego.

The workshop group had devised a list of questions they wanted to ask the interviewees about their experiences of having being targeted for identifying as LGBT. While the interviewers would typically stick to the discussion guide during the interviews, the filmmakers and subjects would often continue the on-camera discussion once the camera had been shut off. They would ask the new person more questions about the stories they had told and would often pivot off details mentioned during the interview to get to know the new person better. Phone numbers were exchanged, and the newcomer often returned the following week as a participant in the media workshop, there to help make the PSA. As the size of the group ballooned, the two and a half hours of workshop time came to be dominated by interviewing and discussion. Suddenly there were more people visiting the youth center on Wednesday nights than there had been in a year. Meaningful conversations were beginning to emerge out of the interviews and intense group discussions began when the camera was turned off. The video project seemed to be helping to enliven the space and enhance interpersonal communication amongst the youth. At this point in the production process there were clear benefits that matched the intentions of the grant. Yet social connection took
time away from our deadline, and at a certain point, as the facilitator, I had to cut short discussions in order to keep the youth producers on track with our production timelines.

The core group of workshop participants decided it was important to find a way to engage the other youth who weren't initially inclined to be involved in the project. As they saw it, anyone not directly involved in the PSA project was a possible obstacle to finishing the video. In the name of efficiency, the youth asserted the need for the group to identify who was committed to producing the PSA and who was not. This explicitly constituting an “us” within the youth center. The program coordinator Jen, who was the only other adult present besides myself, had begun to refer to the “Changing Reels kids” and “you guys” as if the workshop was a separate entity from the rest of the youth center. I also had to often call the producing teens away from other activities at the center to get the project done, interrupting their interactions with youth who were not part of the production. Jen, who was responsible for keeping us conscious of the institutional directive to meet our designated PSA production deadlines, helped to make sure that the teens that were involved in the workshop were given priority access to technologies and space within the youth center. As a result of these configurations, being seen as a producer conferred privileged status among the youth. Hence, a certain productive instinct or interest to produce was tacitly rewarded by Jen, by my
approval, and by other teens in the space, and we might have imagined, a future audience of appreciative viewers.

The expectations of producing a final project also imposed time constraints that made it difficult to take on approaches to teaching that demand attention to unforeseen issues that might have been valuable to work through. As one might imagine, this was all the more true in the case of working with this particular population of teens in a community context because many of them come to the youth center expressly to engage in conversations about their identity-based issues, which is not always best facilitated through production exercises. Yet we may also consider the ways in which the interviewing process itself revealed opportunities to enhance the lives of the specific teens at the youth center. In his on-camera interview, Michael spoke about a traumatic experience of being rejected by family. When the cameras were turned off, the group of us moved in closer to Michael to show our support. Other teens who weren’t involved in the shoot but had been listening from across the room came to join us. People asked concerned follow-up questions and applauded Michael for his strength and courage. Keisha, a close friend of Michael’s, tells him that she had never heard that whole story. Michael mentions that he is especially sad because his birthday is coming up and he doesn’t think his mother is going to call him. We asked him when his birthday is. A few weeks later, on his birthday, we surprised him with a cake. The interview clearly had affected those of us who were at the youth
center that night and provided an impetus for a type of sharing that had apparently not happened there since a few years back when there weekly “coming out” support groups. At the time of the interview the youth center was primarily a recreational space with very few organized activities other than holiday parties and the occasional Friday night open mic. The post-interview discussion brought the need for more youth support groups (or at least some more organized discussions) to the attention of Jen, the youth center coordinator, while it also helped us to identify some of the specific needs of the youth who frequented the center.

While the video interviews dynamized relationships and interactivity at the youth center, they were inevitably each evaluated by the makers not just on the level of content, but on technical merit. Decisions on which interviews to include were sometimes based on sound and image quality and compositional elements. The youth had determined that the first few interviews that had been recorded had several technical problems and were therefore “unusable.”

---

225 Some of the causes of compromised video and audio quality had to do with the fact that the youth center is a less-than-ideal setting to conduct interviews. The electrical outlets needed to plug in adapters and lights are located behind heavy furniture and the giant television and it takes a person who is both brave and of slight physique to burrow behind things in order to plug in the equipment. Michael is the only one who fits these requirements, so set-up generally takes twice the time it would in a location that has been set up for production. Everyone sits back and watches Michael carefully string the cords along the wall. He grimaces as he performs this specialized task on our behalf. Another challenge to production quality is our lack of ability to adjust and reposition the overhead lights, of to turn them on independently from each other. There are only two choices for lighting—on, and off. This leaves the youth with the option of shooting with a very controlled lighting set-up or a flood of florescent lights that make the video appear grainy and the people on camera look jaundiced. There are also noise constraints. A security alarm beeps every time the front door is opened, and often the people entering are talking loudly to
These “unusable” interviews were in fact extremely useful towards providing the pretext for the teens’ meaningful engagement around their experiences with bullying and harassment. They directly enhanced the level of expression in the space of the youth center. New personal connections were formed and relationships were deepened. One could say that in this way, the PSA assignment did in fact encourage youth expression and was therefore potentially empowering to the youth (and adults) involved. Yet by virtue of their exclusion from the final cut, these interviews only remained beneficial to the participating youth within the context of the liveness of the center.

**Who can Represent Bullying?**

As Educational Video Center Executive Director and youth media educator Steven Goodman has noted, it is precisely during the process of reviewing and logging interview tapes that youth producers become more critical about the content they have produced. In his work with students who make videos in a community setting he has found that through discussing what they have shot and where to place their footage in their editing timeline, his students are able to achieve some distance from their subjects, shifting their social position “from being a participant in the community to a participant-
observer of the content. In other words the youth gain critical distance by holding members of their community up to a “critical light” and comparing the stories on the screen to their own experiences and having to reconcile the narratives with their own experiences. While the Changing Reels group, like Goodman’s students, certainly struggled to find coherence in the interviews they had collected, it became apparent that they were also weighing the experiences of the people in their interviews against the presumed value to creating a message that would be legible within the frame of messages about anti-gay-bullying. Despite the variety of perspectives and range of affect represented in discussions about bullying at the youth center, the group tended away from including more complex stories or a range of ways of representing the issue of bullying in their edit. The differences between their in-person discussions and their editing choices points to the constraints of working within the PSA form. The public service announcement structure, which does not typically have room for pauses, counter-narratives, and exceptions to a dominant and persuasive narrative, placed particular limitations on forms of expression and representation. These constraints were understood at every level of the production, from the administrators and staff, to me, and to the youth. Though they were never directly articulated by anyone, they were reinforced through general discussions of the video’s need

---

to present a cohesive, legible narrative of LGBT youth experience that would resonate across different populations of San Diego youth.

The group was having trouble deciding which interviews to include in their edit. Jo, who lives in The Center’s housing project for 18-24 year old homeless LGBT youth, had taken a camera home with her one week and had returned with interviews of several of the residents. The subjects all seem comfortable in their spaces and answer questions naturally, clearly engaged in a casual rapport with Jo. Most of Jo’s interviewees spoke honestly about their experiences being out LGBT youth, often touching on the ways their LGBT identities are intertwined with their ethnic, racial, religious, class and gender identities. The interviewees spoke candidly, and using her instincts, so did Jo, who later nervously apologized to her collaborators for abandoning the interview script.

When the editing group was reviewing the over twenty interviews they had collected during the course of the project, Jo’s interviews were often rejected or pushed aside to the point of being forgotten about. This had partially to do with the fact that the production values of her taped interviews (which she shot handheld while she was interviewing) were less strong than those that were filmed at the youth center by the larger crew using professional lighting and sound equipment, but primarily because there aspects of the interviews that the teens found hard to place in their over-arching narrative. A very thoughtful interview with a Latino male was initially
rejected by the core teen producers who felt his accented English was unclear, as was another interview with an African American male in his early twenties whose interview was deemed useless after they determined it lacked soundbites. Similarly another of Jo’s interviews with a Latino male who gave an account of his friend having been harassed and threatened by other riders on a San Diego trolley for wearing an effeminate Halloween costume. The speaker used Mexican Spanish slang and references to San Diego gay club culture. The story took some time to tell and the teens found it difficult to cut it down to a length that didn’t make it disproportionately long. They also considered the particularities of the story to be too much of a deviation from the narrative they were constructing and ultimately “hard to relate to.”

The teen producers were especially pleased when their interviewees referred to experiences of abjection because these moments made the harms of bullying explicit. At the same time, they rejected the performance of abjection. Interviewees who wore the signs of having lived difficult lives, but were not able to articulate their experiences in ways that resonated with the explicit PSA message structure, were more difficult to place. These interviews introduced a complexity to the issues at hand that we were unprepared to fully understand and incorporate into the overall story. They needed context and explanation. Interviews that told stories of experiences of overt intimidation and rejection were determined to be helpful towards shaping the overall story. Stories of incidents, such as one teen having been called a “faggot” and
having a milk carton thrown at her, and another having been excluded from participating in after-school activities, performed an unspoken indexical reference to San Diego schools anti-bullying legislation that had recently been established. The problem of anti-gay-bullying that such interviews outlined had already been articulated within the schools and the local legislature. The producers therefore already had a measuring stick for determining to what extent viewers might interpret the incidents as harmful and worthy of attention.

The group’s initial interview of Michael was ultimately not included in the final cut of the video. For one, there were problems with the audio, but the reason given by the youth was that it because the group felt that it didn’t directly address the topic of bullying or fit within their narrative arc. Michael had talked directly about his humiliation and feelings of intimidation within his family but it had nothing to do with his experience with other teens or school. Even though he had clearly found a place in the LGBT community, he chose not to focus on that aspect of his experience being an LGBT teen in his interview responses. Unlike the kinds of stories the teens (including Michael) sought to include in the final PSA video, Michael’s “coming out” story was not at all uplifting. They wanted to position being “out” as the antidote to the pain of bullying. His interview was long and included a lot of detail. There were no sound-bites. His video interview, conducted for the end goal of inclusion in the PSA, was ultimately deemed to have little to no ultimate value to the project. Yet, the teens and the adults at the youth center were brought together
through his story and some of us were moved to share our own painful experiences with “coming out” as LGBT.

Ultimately, stories that overtly addressed bullying as a teen-on-teen phenomenon, occurring within the confines of school that could be easily linked to suicidal ideation, stayed in. The teens wanted their interview subjects to articulate the phenomenon, impact and effects of bullying, but they could not or did not seem to want to place the visible artifacts of pain, isolation, and discrimination that remained in certain interviews unless it came in the form of explicit emotionality. There seemed to be no place for the more subtle expressions, the banal and everyday. The teens wished to present the drama of bullying in an equally spectacular register. “I want it to be dramatic, you know?!” Michael exclaims. He was determined to create a soundtrack to score the video and spent the week combing through film soundtracks he had downloaded to his iPod and brought to the workshop. With his urgings, the group agreed to include an instrumental soundtrack from the films District 9 and 127 hours, films about impossible obstacles, otherness, isolation, and ultimately, triumph. Michael got the group excited about his choices by suggesting that the music would “make them [the viewers] cry.” Michael’s choice for music mirrored the narrative arc the group had chosen for the piece—“I was bullied, I came out, as a result I got support, I’m happy now.” While there are certainly many more ways to interpret Michael and the rest of the group’s tendency towards this kind of dramatic rendering of the anti-gay-
bullying experience, as I am not suggesting that their related choices were motivated solely by genre constraints, what I aim to emphasize is the team’s choices were impacted by their presumption of viewers’ expectations.

Another example of this is when some of the filmmakers advocated for the inclusion of a very long interview in which a 16-year-old female becomes visibly emotional as she speaks about her best friend’s suicide attempt after he was bullied by another boy at school. The teens decided that this video should be included in its entirety because the interviewee speaks very clearly and articulately, and she specifically describes an example of teen-on-teen bullying and the impact on the bullied person. In a clip that the group included in the final cut she says:

There was a certain incident in which, um, a boy wrote on his hand ‘I love you’ to another boy—one of my good friends. And he, of course didn't mean it. He was just trying to mess with him. But, the boy believed him. It went on like that for quite awhile. And this boy developed feelings for him and it was really hard to watch because I knew, I knew that it wasn’t true. I don’t know what his intentions were, that bully, that boy, but the results...were not good. Um [anguished sigh], there was an attempt to take his own life, which was unsuccessful, thankfully. And I’ve been there myself and it is a dark place. And one of the things that can bring you there is other people’s discrimination. And as much as you don’t want to let it affect you, it affects you. And it builds up.

The youth videomakers were compelled by the potential for the audience to make visceral emotional connections to the topic of bullying through her account. The interviewee had discussed an incident of intimidation and explicitly
named it as bullying, and they were so taken by this interview that they wanted to let it run in its entirety for almost three minutes of their six minute rough cut. “This is perfect! She says exactly what we need her to say!” exclaimed one of the group members. “This is it!” Michael rejoiced. “That, right there. What she says. It could be the whole video. All we need to do is find more people who say some of these things. Can’t some of us just get on camera and make the points that need to be made? That would be a lot easier.” Heather, a newcomer to the group, decided to team up with Jo to see if they could get her Jo reproduce talking points on camera. Jo, who had spoken very honestly and poignantly about her experience of coming out to her unsupportive family in one of the first interviews that had been recorded by the group but was rejected because of the poor audio and video quality, now froze in front of the camera. “You guys, just tell me what to say,” she pleaded. “This is so weird. I can’t talk when I’m supposed to say something, you know?”

Their decision to reproduce the moments of sharing and the direct quotes that they felt best conveyed their message, speaks to their expectations of form and content, and perhaps their awareness of the common practice of reenactment in non-fiction production. Their approach directly challenges media literacy and empowerment models that tend to emphasize the expressive and liberatory nature of producing. Here I wish to emphasize that the PSA production process should not be conflated solely
with youth expression, but instead be understood as guided by some of the same directives that motivate professional production projects.

The Vocational and Professional Discourse Inherent in PSA Production

While the core producers were all already frequent visitors to the youth center, their commitment and investment of time and significant labor towards the PSA seems to have been significantly driven by their interest in pursuing media production for a career. These particular teens came from class backgrounds in which they had little to no access to media production technologies and higher education. The PSA project offered a kind of vocational and professional development that they would not necessarily have found elsewhere. The project was therefore often discussed in terms of the opportunities it offered.

The introduction of the anti-gay-bullying PSA assignment into the workshop further solidified the commitment of these group members, but it also attracted new ones, who expressed excitement about the opportunity to make video work that had been commissioned and would be circulated to their peers. Amy, a 17-year old straight-edge vegan, was the only youth producer who had access to any video equipment outside of the workshop. A small handful of the youth had access to cameras and editing software at home, but the youth who were most involved in the PSA production did not. Amy was also the only one with access to a car. Everyone else took at least two buses
to get to the youth center. Sometimes when Jo didn’t have bus money, she rode her skateboard for the three miles to get there, mostly uphill. Often these youth talked amongst themselves about the production workshop in terms of the “opportunity” it presented, in the form of skills development and towards building a portfolio to promote their work to colleges and potential jobs. Regardless of how committed these youth may have been towards contributing to a message about anti-gay-bullying, their initial motivations were very routed in a drive towards learning and professionalizing.

Amy, joined the media workshop to learn more about editing in order to enhance the aesthetic and technical quality of the music videos she makes for her favorite band. She was planning to graduate high school in June and was building a portfolio to submit as part of her college applications when she would eventually try to transfer from community college to a four-year university that focuses on the arts. She frequently asked to borrow the hard drive to edit the footage on her laptop during her spare time at home, using a copy of the editing software that had been obtained through our funding. 18-year-old Keisha was also a high school senior and was set on becoming an on-camera political pundit like Rachel Maddow of MSNBC or Jon Stewart of The Daily Show. She had even created an email signature that appeared at the bottom of every email she sends that read “Aspiring Political Analyst and Filmmaker.” She hoped the workshop would help her get a foot in the news media field and took it upon herself to help direct the activities of the rest of the
group, making sure that we stayed on schedule. 18-year-old Jo came to the program wanting to be a professional cinematographer. She had an exceptionally keen eye and was eager for formal training. Living in transitional housing for homeless LGBT youth, she planned to start at a local city college the following semester. She had limited access to a computer and no access to video technology other than at the youth center. 16-year-old Michael was trying to get his GED so he could leave high school as soon as possible to pursue acting. He was drawn to the workshop because he desires to appear on-camera and wants to build his reel. Yet during the workshop he discovered he had an interest in operating the camera and directing, and began talking about pursuing video production as a fallback career. Michael, Amy, Jo and Keisha were the most committed to seeing the PSA through to completion and in putting the work in to see it through. the majority of the core members of the workshop had come to the group with an already-established interest in media production. The typical participant had former classroom experience with digital media production technologies, and was also more involved with extra-curricular activities than the teens who chose not to participate.

Many other youth had become casually involved in the shoots and editing critiques, and some, like Layna and Marianne demonstrated a strong work ethic in their participation, which seemed to be a side effect of their being exceptionally responsible and eager to work hard at anything they participated in. Both are leaders at school, recipients of several merit-based scholarships,
and found it challenging to find time for the youth center between athletic practices, music lessons and school activities. Participating in the workshop was their chosen way of socializing with other youth at the center, perhaps because it was the only structured activity. They each expressed that they didn’t feel any particular ownership over the content and were just participating “to help.”

A vocational drive was also evident through the group’s negotiations of how to credit themselves and their funders in their final piece. To produce a successful public service announcement it is important to make legible not only the message of the campaign, but also who is responsible for it. In the case of our group’s PSA, the funders expected that the logos of their organizations be tied into the project and that it be made explicit that LGBT youth had produced the video. Completing the PSA video required the group to make decisions about how precisely to call attention to the fact that it had been made by LGBT youth in the context of the community center. The Center and The Collective Voices Foundation had each requested that their logo be included at the end of the final cut of the PSA. When I delivered this news to the teens I suggested that we also create our own logo for the workshop to be our tag on the PSA and all of our videos to come. It also served as a way to encourage Olivia, an aspiring graphic designer, to get involved in the workshop. An 18-year-old, genderqueer Chicana, she had recently graduated from a public high school that is well known for having a strong media
production component. She had been on a broadcast media and design track
during her senior year, and now as a graduate was living with her lower-
income family earning her living working minimum wage at a restaurant chain,
she had little opportunity to use the skills she gained in high school.

The following week Olivia returned with a design she had made using
her older brother’s computer. It was a picture of a film spool and a clapboard,
traced from a photo she had seen online. I asked her if she had ever seen an
actual film spool. She hadn’t. “I just thought this looked like the kind of image
that groups like us usually use,” she said. In large script letters she had written
Changing Reels (a name that she had come up with) and underneath the reels
she had included a tag-line: "Building San Diego's New Media Professionals."
When I suggested to the group that the tagline might confuse people into
thinking we were more of a school than a community group and asked if they
felt it was important to mention that they are LGBT youth, Olivia quickly
snapped back, "but that's really what we are! You're training us to be
professionals. And we are making a professional video." Other youth in the
group suggested we change the tagline to “San Diego’s LGBT Youth Media
Group.” A debate ensued over whether to call ourselves a "group" or a
“workshop.” The people advocating for the word “group” felt it sounded more
professional and liked that. Ultimately, the name “workshop” prevailed
because they agreed it sounded more creative, and creativity, they had
determined, had more cache in the world of new media production.
Including the words “LGBT” and “Youth” in the tag-line was also suggested during the discussion. Certain youth advocated for the inclusion of these words because they felt that it would make their work stand out. In particular they liked the idea that the viewers of their video might be surprised to learn that it had been made by youth. At first they resisted the idea of identifying themselves as “youth” because they feared being tokenized as "youth" producers, but then, one of the teens suggested that doing so might be lead to access to opportunities usually reserved for adults. The teens intuited that presenting a video that calls out that it was made by youth would give the project an additional value in the media market. Here they had something in common with those who had initiated the PSA project. Both the youth PSA makers and The Center administrators were seeking to build interest and support based on the perceived authenticity and perhaps even precociousness of the youth as media makers. But in all other ways, the way the youth described themselves was in direct conflict with the way their work was being described by the adults around them.

The Challenge Of Non-Productivity

Professional directives become most apparent when resisted. The teen who chooses to be involved in the kinds of interactions that the production process established in the community space, who enjoys using the digital technologies that have been brought into the space by project funding, but
who is not interested in working on producing videos to be publically circulated, calls attention to certain productive prerogatives that were assumed of youth in this case. The story of 16-year-old Jaime, who started coming to the youth center during the media workshop time weeks after the anti-gay-bullying PSA had been wrapped up, helps to illuminate these concerns.

Every Wednesday Jaime started off in the media workshop by giving the impression to the group that he was going to be very involved, yet whenever the group began to execute on their production plans, he would typically would leave the activities to go use the computer to take photos or for Facebook chat. He sought opportunities in the discussion to tell stories about his week, but would change the subject when asked about his ideas for projects and acted distracted when others talked about theirs. On one particular Wednesday he ended a story about his day at school by suggesting that he would like to make a documentary. The goal of the video would be to expose how little the teachers and administrators at his school do to address the homophobia he encounters at school. “I want to make a video about bullying!” he says. A chorus of workshop participants respond in what sounds like exasperation—“we just made one!” After months of production on the PSA, no one wanted to make another video about bullying. They had begun new projects and bullying is a topic they feel they have already addressed. But the five or so youth around him engage with this story and get into a heated
discussion. The conversation included two youth who spent Wednesdays at the center but generally chose not to participate in the media workshop.

Jaime held court as he spoke excitedly about his experience at school. His voice quivered and he talked so fast that he only half-finished some of the words. His tone was at once vulnerable and angry.

Jaime: We’ve got laws about saying things to blacks and whites. Why can’t we have that for gay people too? I’m getting sick and tired of being called a faggot. This one girl called me a faggot and I said, ‘you’re lucky I’m not getting up (cause I was sitting with my friend) and go rip out your freakin’ weave out strand by strand…seriously, if you are gonna call me a faggot, I’m not going to play around.’ I got sent to the school counselor and I said ‘wait, I get called a faggot and I get sent home but nothing is happening to her?… if she calls me a faggot one more time, school rules or not, I’m gonna beat her ass. I’ll go to county. I don’t give a damn…you guys want to lose more money? You want to go broke? Do you want to lose your paycheck?…

Veronica: …very few teachers actually put down the rules. That’s a…

Jessica: …Do it Martin Luther King Style!

Jaime: I want to get a lot of gay people to go along with me. I want to post it on YouTube where everyone can see it. Then we’ll have Ellen Degeneres call us up and say, ‘I love your documentary, I want to have you on our show.’

The group decided that Jamie should use undercover cameras to record meetings and interactions to show that these people “really don’t care” about how he is being treated by his peers. He is angry that he was called “faggot” and is incensed that the teachers and administrators don’t treat the incident as hate speech and punish the other student. Jaime believes his
classmate’s use of the word “faggot” should be treated as equivalent to the physical threats he made in response. His idea for a video in which he confronts teachers and administrators appears to be an extension of the anger he feels towards them and implicates them in his experience of feeling targeted for being gay. Jen, who overheard the conversation, offered Jaime legal defense resources as well as information that GLSEN and other LGBT youth education groups have published that explain what his rights are.

His account complicates the neat story of the passive, enduring bullied gay student that is so often depicted in mainstream media representations of LGBT youth. His video idea and the complex portrayal of bullying is a radical departure from the PSA that the other teens in the workshop had produced. It centered on confrontation and raised more questions about oppression and blame than it provided answers. It was certainly not uplifting. Instead of raising awareness, as so many PSAs purport to do, this video’s purpose was to agitate, and possibly even incite action. In ways it speaks to the intersecting oppressions he faces, including being a person of color, learning disabled, having a police record, and occasionally finding himself living on the streets. Overlapping risk factors make it hard to see this as an instance of bullying or evidence of the kinds of experiences that other LGBT youth are most often reported to have killed themselves over.

By the time the issue at hand had been resolved at school a week later, Jaime had lost interest in making his anti-bullying video. He now wanted to
make a documentary in which he would interview the mother of a lesbian-identified friend of his who had killed herself. He hoped that the mother would speak out to parents who reject their LGBT children. The workshop participants were excited about this new idea and started strategizing with Jaime, but soon he was back on the computer with his headphones on, taking photo booth pictures and videos of himself to post online. This continued for several weeks. He would talk for a few minutes of the workshop, each time with a new idea that the group would help him develop, and then, when it came time to plan out the production, he would leave the group and start another activity or simply socialize with others. At the same time, he considered himself very much a part of the media workshop. Jaime, it turns out, wasn’t so much interested in making a movie as he was in holding the adults in his life accountable for the pain he experiences when his peers use anti-gay slurs against him or make fun of him for being gay. His style of participation was frustrating for me as an instructor trying to help the group produce meaningful work.

Jaime was enjoying and clearly benefitting from his engagement with the workshop. He had a space and forum to air his grievances and this helped him make new friends and form bonds. Ideas were what seemed to compel him. For Jaime, the video technology provided a means for enacting a fantasy of confronting power. It provided an apparatus and script for confrontation. At the same time, Jaime never saw any aspect of his projects through. Even with
video production and editing equipment readily available to him and a crew of friends willing to help, his interest was in the sociality of preproduction planning. The structure of planning a video required talking about important stories and in the group he was encouraged to talk about his life in a way that he was able to imagine would be meaningful to others outside of his everyday life.

In every way, Jaime seemed to be experiencing the benefits I had designed the workshop to provide. He was reflecting, sharing, relaxing, connecting, grieving, expressing anger, and he didn’t need a finished video to achieve this. He had repurposed the means of production for his own development and gratification. Jaime was absolutely interested in using video technology, evident in his use of the group’s iMac computer to make videos for social purposes; he was just not that interested in using them for the purposes designated by the workshop structure.

The paradox of Jaime’s enthusiasm for the idea of using video to address anti-gay-bullying (not just through the finished video, but through the act of filming) and his ultimate lack of involvement with video production towards an end video that could be circulated stands in productive tension with the final product of the anti-bullying PSA video that was produced by the other youth. Jaime’s interest in using video to talk about bullying paired with his ambivalence about seeing his project through to fruition, challenged the already-established workflow in the group. His chosen mode of participation
made visible a certain imperative to produce that had been tied to my understanding of what made for a meaningful experience in the media workshop environment. Jaime’s refusal to produce a video product laid bare the vocational directives that the funders, staff, and I had assumed to be a natural part of the production. It raised the question, ‘what would have happened if the youth who had made the anti-bullying PSA had taken the same approach as Jaime and were not interested or unwilling in producing?’ What if there had been no final product to show the center’s administrators, or the community, or the funders? Jaime’s participatory style made it apparent the extent to which the PSA production had been fueled by the youth producer’s professional goals and our collective sense of obligation to the community and our funders.

Jaime had used the video technologies in unintended ways. He had chosen to stand outside of the rationale of the philanthropic economy that had led to the technologies to be in that space. No visible or tangible products emerged from Jaime’s involvement—no tapes or online videos— and there was probably little impact on his schooling or career opportunities. While Jaime certainly seemed to benefit from the structure of the workshop, his ultimate lack of participation in producing a video stood in contrast to the foundation’s imperative to perform conspicuous concern for LGBT youth. Jaime’s experience in the workshop suggests that perhaps where our funders and The Center’s administrators had really gotten a return on their investment
in their support of LGBT youth was in the form of benefits yielded through the process of making the PSA video rather than in the produced video in and of itself. Perhaps the PSA, meant to be a resource for LGBT youth other than those at the youth center, was most meaningful in the making.

Conclusion

The production of the PSA video emphasizes the difficulty, perhaps even the impossibility, of making the impact of bullying visible. The video on its own could neither identify the needs nor mobilize the necessary support for the youth who were involved in its production. What’s more, the project made these teens and I complicit in the reproduction of normalizing narratives about LGBT experience. In effect the project threatened to undermine the very hopes and possibilities the mainstream anti-gay bullying campaigns aspire to. Yet, while it is unclear the extent that the finished PSA video in and of itself could improve the lives of the LGBT youth at the Hillcrest Youth Center, the process of making the PSA helped to open up a mode of sociality and intersubjectivity among the participants that had not been as available through other uses of digital media in the workshop or through other activities at the youth center.

The goal of producing together encouraged the youth at the center to engage in a level of sociality that had not formerly existed there outside of the organized discussion groups. In their off-screen discussions and negotiations over which content to include, the youth identified tools for imagining and
working toward an understanding of what “gets better” and a resistance to the mainstream anti-gay-bullying discourse. Having the end-goal of creating a semi-professional quality video product, designed for online and DVD distribution served the important function of giving some of the youth at the center a shared focus. But this focus should not to be automatically taken as proof of the teens’ investment in addressing anti-gay-bullying. Nor should the PSA text itself be taken as evidence of catharsis among the youth who participated in its making. AT&T had funded The Center to promote youth expression and connection through the production of a PSA, but the PSA itself should not be mistaken for the evidence of that expression. It is important to understand the PSA production as not simply an outlet for youth expression, or as an opportunity to teach and reinforce technical skills, or even as the key framework for engaging youth in social issues; we must think of how all of these factors are intertwined and impacted by external and structural factors.

The making of the PSA prompted an opening to a much larger conversation amongst the youth about the phenomenon of bullying and the range of social factors that contribute to low self-esteem, suicidal ideation and the other affects of humiliation, rejection and intimidation that AT&T and The Center sought to address through their initiative.
Conclusion

This is not an anti-bullying foundation; this is a youth-empowerment foundation. This is about changing the climate of the school environment and not putting the power in the hands of the teachers or the government. It is about the bubble effect. I don’t believe they have the answers; I believe that you do.\textsuperscript{227}

Speaking to teens from the stage of Harvard University’s Sanders Theater, the pop cultural icon Lady Gaga used these words to inaugurate her \textit{Born this Way Foundation} on February 29, 2012.\textsuperscript{228} Surrounded by a pantheon of esteemed public figures including media giant Oprah Winfrey, United States Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, and Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust, she passionately described the foundation’s initiative to foster a youth-driven empowerment movement aimed at changing a culture of bullying by encouraging youth to celebrate their identities and be “brave.” A highlight of the event was a panel discussion about the foundation that included author Deepak Chopra, Harvard faculty of law and psychology, the openly gay actor David Burtka, and teen activist Alyssa Rodemeyer, sister of 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer, whose bullying-related

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{228} \textit{The Born this Way Foundation}, \url{http://www.borthiswayfoundation.org}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
suicide has been discussed throughout this dissertation.\footnote{The inclusion of Alyssa Rodemeyer is significant because Jamey’s suicide is intimately tied to the creation of the foundation. Shortly before his death, Jamey had posted on Lady Gaga’s twitter feed, and had also expressed his admiration for the singer in his \textit{It Gets Better} video. The name of the foundation, \textit{Born this Way}, stems from the name of Lady Gaga’s top-ten song that she dedicated to Jamey. The song has reached number one in 25 countries.} In short, it was a media extravaganza of epic proportions, drawing on the best and the brightest celebrities and scholars to highlight the issue of bullying and to rally in support for youth.

Lady Gaga had a strategic reason for holding the launch at Harvard. Part of her purpose was to announce the foundation’s partnership with the university’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society.\footnote{This is not a random or accidental pairing: The \textit{Born this Way} foundation is connected to the Berkman Center through a shared funding source, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur foundation.} The center would be funding and facilitating research on how to best meet the foundation’s goals of addressing youth issues such as “self-confidence, well-being, anti-bullying, mentoring and career development,” by teaching “advocacy, promoting civic engagement, and encouraging self-expression.”\footnote{Some of this language has been lifted from the \textit{Born this Way} Foundation mission statement on their website: \url{http://bornthiswayfoundation.org/pages/our-mission/}.} Citing “digital mobilization as one of the means to create positive change,” Lady Gaga was less specific about what uses of digital media would enhance the forms of empowerment celebrated by the foundation’s supporters that day.

In this dissertation I have sought to complicate notions of \textit{empowerment} as a viable process and desirable social and pedagogical goal. The foundation’s assumption that young people are both willing and able to provide
“the answers” to their own needs through their digital media use echoes the dominant discourse surrounding digital youth media discourse that I have drawn attention to throughout. I have argued that through digital media production, youth are often expected to produce their own conditions of freedom and develop core educational competencies through their (identity-based) expressions and connections. I have claimed that the support for the media empowerment approach is rooted in historically situated assumptions about the so-called *millennial* generation’s comfort and ability to have meaningful interactions with and through digital technologies.

Using a feminist critical pedagogy approach to highlight the ways that calls for authentic youth voices assume what Mimi Orner has called “essentialist epistemological positions,” I have argued that digital youth empowerment often shifts the responsibility of acquiring a sense of power onto the youth themselves through the presumed benefits of their technology use.\(^\text{232}\) While there is little doubt that it is common for teens to use digital technologies for creative and personal expression and connection, my study shows that when media production is prompted by adult educators, community leaders and philanthropists with the express purpose of empowering young participants, what they produce becomes highly structured in ways that do not necessarily correspond with what might be most pleasurable, meaningful or beneficial for them. We must, therefore, continually ask, where is power

located in media empowerment projects? How is empowerment being defined, and by whom?

Despite the growing number of scholars and educators critiquing the digital natives framework and calling for more in-depth qualitative studies of how youth use digital technology, large-scale efforts to support youth continue to foreground digital media technology use. The Born this Way Foundation is an example of this. I draw attention to the foundation’s launch event because it underscores the enormous symbolic and financial capital reinforcing youth digital media and empowerment discourse. The foundation’s mission and strategy reaffirms the widely held belief that there is something inherently transformational in young people’s digital media use.

As I have argued, despite the undeniable ubiquity of digital media technology use among teens, it remains highly problematic for us to automatically equate their digital media use with their empowerment. As we saw in the case study in chapter four, the participants’ desire to create a video that would be legible to the funders and in keeping within mainstream LGBT rights discourse paradoxically obscured their actual lived experiences and perspectives. This made it more difficult for the adults who sought to empower

---

them to identify their needs and determine methods of support. Hence, when we uncritically embrace the concept of media empowerment, we risk overlooking nuanced pedagogical relationships and institutional contexts that shape what youth produce and more importantly, what the producers learn about themselves, each other, and the work they are engaged in.

The Conflation of Digital Media Participation with Identity

As I have discussed throughout the dissertation, the media empowerment framework becomes particularly concerning when applied to identity-based projects like the *It Gets Better* campaign and the many similar online anti-gay-bullying PSA campaigns that followed suit. These projects not only interpellate queer youth into fixed, homogenous, subject positions, they conflate video visibility with action, expression, and power. The rationale behind these projects is bolstered by what performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan calls the "ideology of the visible," in which subjects’ visibility is considered evidence of to their acquisition of power.\(^{234}\) At stake when we assume that visibility equals power is that we risk "erase[ing] the power of the unmarked, unspoken, unseen."\(^{235}\) At stake is a further marginalization of subjectivities and practices that do not neatly align with dominant conceptions of mainstream LGBT identity.


\(^{235}\) Phelan, *Unmarked: The politics of performance*, 7
There is a similar collapsing of youth voice, visibility, identity politics and digital media enthusiasm in the efforts of the *Born this Way* Foundation. Named after Lady Gaga’s international chart-busting song that encourages marginalized youth to be proud of their identities, its entire campaign message quite literally necessitates an embrace of the idea that subjects are *born*, not made. In this way the foundation further sutures the digital media empowerment discourse to a discourse of identity politics in which empowerment is hitched to and expected to emerge from identity categories that subjects are presumably born into. Digital media becomes the means with which to claim or defend identities and identity categories. Exclusions and oppressions are represented as necessarily identity-based, reinforcing the idea that youth simply need to be brave about defending those identities, rather than working to understand their places within larger histories and structures of oppression.

Truly supporting youth may require us to divest in grand media empowerment events and campaigns in order focus on learning about what youth need in order to feel supported in their particular communities and in their homes. To wit, we must also take into account that when youth produce digital media as part of larger campaigns that have major celebrity tie-ins and opportunities for some level of fame, there are incentives in place for them to reproduce particular styles and messages. In this way, forms of *political visibility* entwine with forms of *publicity*, ultimately diluting the power of building
support for marginalized subject positions and the structures and conditions that contribute to subjugation. We might imagine that any youth production made in relationship to the campaign will inevitably always be in play with the foundation’s particular style, messaging strategy, and political and ideological framing. The personal is no longer (just) political; it is also good public relations.

We are left to ask, is it possible to encourage forms of self-expression among youth that have little to do with how youth define themselves or are defined? What are the possibilities if, instead of encouraging youth to produce media along identity lines, or presuming that they will want to make videos about issues that concern them, we orient them more toward open-ended forms of creativity? Might we re-frame digital media empowerment as the connections, intersubjective exchange, and reflection made possible during the process of production, regardless of what kind of video is produced?

Against Digital Media Empowerment

Throughout this dissertation I have suggested the need to determine new pedagogies of youth media production in the context of empowering marginalized youth. But what would such a pedagogical approach look like? How might we extend this idea past the pages of this dissertation towards actionable change?
I offer four concrete suggestions. The first is on the level of theorization. While scholarship in digital media studies and education studies is increasingly concerned with studying how youth utilize digital media technologies towards civic action and self-empowerment, what scholars mean by *civic action* and *empowerment* is often unspecified. Clearly, more nuanced theorization is needed, particularly analysis that is based in participant observation or action research methods.

Second, there is a need for more research on the part of funding organizations into the specific needs of the communities and individuals they hope to serve. It is imperative that philanthropists foundations that wish to support youth at community centers like the Hillcrest Youth Center, first speak to the youth and adults in the community to determine what the needs (and wants) actually are. Providing digital media production equipment or incentives to produce may in fact be an imposition to the community, who must then find uses and the institutional support to sustain practice and maintain the equipment. In the case of the Hillcrest Youth Center’s production of a corporate-sponsored anti-bullying PSA, there were fewer participants in the production than there were at crafts nights and movie nights that the center put on during same period of time. With the $20,000 the sponsor spent to support the production of what turned out to be a marginally-circulated public service announcement that only a fraction of the youth at the center were invested in making, they could have housed and fed one of the homeless
youth for a year, provided college scholarships, or paid a therapist to be on call.\textsuperscript{236}

Third, if the goal is to promote expression, we must put aside rubrics, formulas, guidelines, and talking points that impart particular frameworks on what and how youth produce. Empowerment through digital media may come in unanticipated forms, at unexpected moments. It may be in the outtakes, or in the small victories during the editing process that will only ever be recognized by the youth themselves. This leads us to the final, and perhaps most vital finding of this study, which is that teachers, administrators and funding organizations must emphasize the \textit{process} of making videos as more valuable and important than the final projects produced. A final video, such as an anti-bullying PSA, can be used to \textit{prompt} the production process, but if we truly wish to provide youth with opportunities to experiment, express, and reflect on what they are making, we must be willing to let go of the idea of the finished video as the ultimate marker of a given project’s success.

\textbf{Toward a Process-over-Product Approach to Production}

One of the major concerns I have raised in this dissertation is the widespread emphasis on finished video products within youth media production pedagogy. I have advocated instead for media practices that

\textsuperscript{236} One year after the PSA “Finding Strength: LGBT Teens talk about Bullying” it had been viewed on YouTube only 163 times. Also, contrary to the original plan, it had not been circulated to more than a handful of Gay/Straight alliance clubs. This had mostly to do with a change in leadership at the youth center.
highlight intersubjective exchange during the production process as a priority over the creation of specific types of content thought to be empowering for its producers.

In the case of the anti-bullying PSA production at the Hillcrest Youth Center, I outlined how the goal of making a video that could cohere with the funders’ philanthropic goals to circulate beyond the center placed certain constraints on what could be produced. Examining the production process enabled me to identify some of the limitations inherent with this liberatory model of video production and the PSA model in particular, it has also encouraged me to seek concrete ways to re-center the production process.

When we think back to media pedagogy practices that were common prior to the introduction of digital media technologies, we can identify valuable approaches to production that may be worth resurrecting. We might begin by thinking of the emphasis on final media products as a by-product of the digital age, where in just a few clicks students and teachers can upload and circulate their material. When producing with digital media, there is always an audience online (no matter how small). Prior to digital media, media teachers needed to actively seek out audiences and contend with the reality that there were few venues showcasing youth media work. With few people beyond the filmmakers ever seeing the final films, teachers had little choice but to de-emphasize the value of the final media product. “Process, sure,” writes media activist and educator Dee Dee Halleck in a 1976 essay about teaching film to
teens. “But what about the product? I’ve got closets full of it. And so do all other film teachers I know. What do we do with it?”

Halleck describes the value of the process, which resonates strongly with the connection and pleasure that occurred during the PSA process at the Hillcrest Youth Center:

The film that came back from the lab never quite captured the brilliance and group energy of those moments. Or even in the editing: it was watching those kids with film draped around their necks, hanging from their knees to grab that close-up shot off the clothespinned improvised trim barrel, and shouting with glee when it fit perfectly. Those were the moments we worked for—the actual film was only a by-product.

Halleck’s account underscores the potential pedagogical and social value of the production experience. For the community of youth and adults at the Hillcrest Youth Center, and for the funders and administrators involved in the anti-gay-bullying PSA video they made, the value was discussed as located in the final video. But as my research indicates, the process helped to open up a mode of sociality and intersubjectivity among the participants in the workshop. What might it look like to shift the emphasis to the process?

To begin, perhaps rather than thinking of the PSA an end on to itself, we might instead re-imagine the process of making the PSA as the center of the pedagogical exercise. A process-oriented approach encourages criticality and forms of liveness that can help develop individuals who can be habituated

---

238 Halleck, *Hand-held visions*, 55.
into forming critical communities. Hence, there is an opportunity to capitalize on the fact that youth already ‘get’ the structure of the PSA and it is therefore presents a relatively simple task that anyone, regardless of media experience, can be involved with. One might use the process as an opportunity to work with youth to deconstruct hegemonic discourse and representation. In the case of the anti-bullying PSA at the Hillcrest Youth Center, that would have meant investing more time in discussing the goals of the project, and coming to understand where we saw it situated within other circulating discourses. In sum, my research leads me to recommend that the PSA production process be leveraged as an opportunity for dialogical exchange and reflection. If we are serious about empowerment, than the first order of business should be reflection, with an eye towards transformation.

**Youth digital media empowerment in the age of online education**

The findings of this research are not intended to be limited to the domain of youth digital video production in community contexts. Casting aside the idea of young people as inherently equipped to benefit from engagement with digital media technologies has significant implications for the future of education. As institutions of higher learning are increasingly turning to online education as a lower-cost alternative to in-person instruction, it is imperative that educators and students alike consider the value of the space of pedagogy and the value of learning and communication that happens when students and
teachers have the opportunity to experiment, dialogue, and deconstruct materials and ideas together. In closing, I wish to recall Dee Dee Halleck’s cautionary that

learning by doing isn’t enough. We have to think about what we’re doing. We need to become more aware of the social and historical contexts of our work. We need to talk about our experiences and our goals so that we aren’t so vulnerable to the fickleness of educational fashion.239

Indeed, we must think about what we are doing and making. And this is best accomplished through dialogue, reflection, and critical reckonings with the media processes we engage in and promote.

239 Ibid, 63.
References


Burgess, Jean E., Marcus Foth, and Helen G. Klaebe. 2006. Everyday creativity as civic engagement: A cultural citizenship view of new media.


D'Addario, Daniel. Feb 1, 2010. 'It gets better' pulls 49ers PSA after players deny their involvement. Salon.


GSA Network. Make it better project. in GSA Network [database online]. Available from http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/about.

243


Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. 2007. *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex*. South End Pr.


Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. 2013. *Spreadable media: Creating meaning and value in a networked culture*.


Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, Aaron Smith, Kristen Purcell, Kathryn Zickuhr, and Lee Rainie. 2011. Teens, kindness and cruelty on social network sites. *Washington, DC, Pew Research Center*.


Muñoz, José Esteban. 2010. Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity. NYU Press.


O'Riordan, Kate, and David J. Phillips. 2007. Queer online: Media technology & sexuality. Vol. 40 Peter Lang Pub Incorporated.


Pullen, Christopher. 2012. LGBT youth identity and online new media: Agency, vulnerability, and physical space.


248


