Chapter 16

Children and Youth Making Digital Media for the Social Good

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how children and youth are using digital media to address inequity in their schools, communities, and in society. The chapter begins with a review of the historical and cultural roots of children making digital media for the social good, and situates the approach in the context of other civic and community-based movements. The next section focuses on the range of ways that children and youth are making digital media, including who is participating, and the social and institutional factors involved. The next sections describe the benefits for the participants and for society, as well as the barriers to broader participation. Two case studies highlight key strategies for engaging marginalized youth in making digital media for the social good, and ways to expand the popularity of this approach. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research, and the broader implications for education, civic engagement, social practice and policy.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter builds on a long history of youth-led movements to address issues of social justice in their schools, communities, and beyond. Efforts to reframe youth in terms of their agency and impact have had a profound effect on how they are viewed and on what researchers study (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Giroux,

2003; Tuck & Wang, 2013). This view of youth has become increasingly relevant as we witness a growing access to opportunities to create content with and for large and diverse audiences, which has exploded with the digital media outlets now available through mobile devices. Although these two movements--social justice and digital media--have some obvious points of intersection, they are rarely talked about together.

In this chapter, we focus on the implications of children and youth making, not just using digital media. Our approach extends a long history of media studies that shows the way that media production is not neutral. For example, Morrell (2002) describes how the critical teaching of popular culture makes it a site for resisting injustice, an approach that is now captured in the DIY (do-it-yourself) movement in digital media and technology. Lankshear and Knobel (2008) describe DIY as a movement where novices reclaim the authority previously held by trained experts, as they express themselves through mechanisms that include podcasting, photography, music videos, and animation. In school settings the DIY movement has explored ways to use activities that include blogs, videos, and game making to engage youth and promote new literacies (Guzzetti, Elliott, & Welsch, 2010). Outside of school, DIY media creation often provides an outlet for creativity and self-expression through animated stories and e-textiles (Kafai & Peppler, 2011; Kafai & Peppler, 2014). To a great extent, the DIY movement has focused on artifacts produced by "everyday people to meet their own goals and personal satisfaction" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 10). However, the excitement about DIY digital media is also about its potentially transformative role.

When youth create, not just use digital media, they are engaging in what others have called authentic learning experiences, which can have a transformative role for both the learner and the society that they aim to impact. Creating new media can take the form of questioning mainstream media using animated storytelling (Kafai, Fields, & Burke, 2010) and creating disruptive technologies such as encryption software for text messages (Milberry, 2014). For some, DIY digital media involves taking action without the gaze of those in power (Ratto & Boler, 2014), while others rely on adult guidance and access to resources. In a seminal article, Blikstein (2008) built on the work of Paulo Freire and Seymour Papert to explore the ways that digital media can be used for emancipation, particularly among youth from less privileged communities. He describes how social transformation happens when youth go beyond using technologies to designing personally meaningful devices, using the example of youth in Brazil who created a newspaper and a video documentary to raise awareness about issues of social justice in their community that they believed were important to address.

In this chapter, we shine the spotlight on the transformative power of digital media for addressing issues of social inequity, particularly when put in the hands of young people. While the use of digital media for the social good is thriving in adult populations, the review that follows shows that it is also growing among children and youth, who have increasing access to mobile and child-friendly technologies. In particular, there is a growing interest in the ways in which youth are making digital media for the social good. For the purpose of this chapter, *making* includes youth using digital tools for a range of activities, such as to write stories, make games, create online communities, build apps, create blogs, contribute to crowdsourcing sites, and produce images. Our focus is on pre-college students, so in most cases, the young people are not doing these activities themselves—they are working with peers, teachers, and adults. Thus, we include within the DIY acronym activities that involve making digital media in collaboration with other people. This chapter will both summarize research and provide general and specific examples of how children and youth are working together to make digital media for the social good, how this connects to and departs from a history of social justice movements, and the social conditions that foster engagement.

The following questions will be addressed:

- What are the historical and cultural roots of children and youth making digital media for the social good?

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