Detours through Youth-Driven Media: Backseat Drivers Bear Witness to the Ethical Dilemmas of Youth Media

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Abstract

In media made by young people, we witness a realm of media practice where it is possible for youth to intentionally adopt positions as cultural. In these acts, young people are seen to confront the deep and proliferating ways in which corporate mass mediated culture constructs and exploits young people as consumers. For young people to assume the stance of media maker is widely held to be a resistive, agentive act. This paper stands in solidarity with media researchers whose scholarly activity attempts to fortify youth media making programs while tracing the political economic pressures that shape and constrain the possibilities of young people’s media production. Drawing on long-term documentary research within a youth media program involving poor and minority teens from the urban community east of the college where I teach, I examine the particular ways in which marginalized youth experience media making. To be sure, the mediatized stories young people share are often compelling expressions of injustices and longings they daily encounter. The social meaning of those stories, however, can be more fully discerned when they are situated within close analysis of the specific local conditions—political and economic—which structure youth media programs, and the human social relationships which mediate these activities. The methodological challenge at hand, then, is to listen to and observe not only the stories produced by young people, and to attend to the very contexts and practices in which those stories are conceptualized, researched, and constructed

Keywords: Youth-driven media, ethical dilemmas; mediatized stories.

Scholarship on youth media in the last decade has done much to identify the social justice dimensions of youth media practices and cultural productions. While youth media production varies in relation to the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which it occurs, social justice frames much of this field of activity.¹ There are diverse and clear social justice issues at stake in providing media education and technology resources to young people who are systematically silenced and excluded, and whose stories confront the unjust representations of youth in corporate consumer culture. At the most basic level, the very work of providing access to the technologies

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and practices of media-making to young people who are systematically marginalized and silenced in/by commercial media is social justice work. Most youth media programs are local grassroots efforts waged by advocates who aim to redress the exclusion of youth voices from the public sphere.ii As one practitioner notes, “Those of us who come to this field have done so because we know at our core that working with young people, identifying issues of relevance for them, and guiding their media productions to be powerful tools of change is unmistakably a radical and essential movement in education.”iii Then there are the unmistakable questions of social justice at the heart of media content produced by marginalized young people. Across a range of media--radio, video, and Internet--young people are producing stories that document sufferings, losses, and traumas based on class, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality that they directly experience or witness within their communities.iv

This qualitative study is broadly interested in the media practices and productions of Latino and African-American youth participating in Healthy Youth Peer Education (HYPE), a summer program for urban, minority high school students in Allentown, Pennsylvania. In their young lives, these teens already have extensive lived experience of everyday injustices--in their schools, their neighborhoods, and their homes. This chapter considers the social relationships between young media producers and the adults who ally with them in their cultural productions and organize the resources and conditions for their making. While a burgeoning scholarship pays close attention to digitally mediated texts produced by at-risk youth and, in particular, to issues of voice, identity, and agency forged through new media tools, the social relationships that support these cultural productions constitute an important and largely overlooked site for analysis in the context of media and social justice. Documentary fieldwork conducted with HYPE over a year underscores the important fact that providing young people access to new technologies and practices will have limited potential or meaning unless participants intentionally construct social relations more just and humane than the inequities that frame adult/youth relations in the community and culture at large. In their cultural productions, HYPE youth have documented those inequities as they play out in their mistreatment by local police, school authorities, neighborhood residents, and commercial mass media. But at another level, HYPE youth remind us of the imperative to build healthier, more just and equitable relationships within the activity of youth media production itself.
HYPE: Context and Method of Study

HYPE is a collaboration between a hospital, a college, and other community arts partners. The program offers high-school-age youth opportunities to engage in social change and public advocacy through leadership development, digital storytelling, the performing arts, and documentary work. Participants live in the predominantly low-income and racially diverse neighborhoods of center city Allentown. Our study focuses on program activities during Summer 2009, when eleven youth--six Latino and five African-American--between the ages of 15 and 20 participated in HYPE. The group consisted of three young men and eight young women. We also gathered qualitative data during the yearlong after-school program with a smaller group of continuing HYPE students. One of us (Taub-Pervizpour) is chair of the Media and Communication Department where HYPE is located and has partnered with HYPE for five years; the other author (Disbrow) is a recent college graduate who served HYPE as a media education assistant from June 2009 to May 2010. The study draws on the qualitative methods of participant observation and documentary fieldwork, and includes data from field notes written by the researchers and other HYPE staff members, a range of documentary sources, and unstructured interviews conducted by Disbrow with three HYPE students (Alysia, age 16; Jessie, age 16; and Shaniqua, age 18). In-depth interviews were conducted with Jenna Azar, the HYPE program coordinator, and with education scholar Michael Carbone, who, as chair of the Education program at Muhlenberg, has extensive knowledge of the Allentown School District. We also look closely at the documentary video produced by the HYPE teens in Summer 2009, Roots of Change, which provides important insights for considering the limits and potentials of youth media in Allentown.

Power and Powerlessness Behind the Camera

HYPE provides a safe and supportive context for learning and development where young people have possibilities to voice their concerns about the community issues that matter to them most. Disempowering relationships with adults figure prominently in these conversations. HYPE students unanimously view the community as unwelcoming to young people in general, and adults as distrusting of youth of color in particular. Person-on-the-street interviews conducted by HYPE on a summer morning...
confirmed this perception: “What do I thinka teenagers? Buncha hoodlums, that’s what I think.” No experience better demonstrated how disempowered HYPE students feel in the face of adult authority than their formal interview with the principal of the largest public high school in the Allentown School District.

The interview team--Amanda, Dahlia, Shaniqua, and Sheridan--accompanied by Disbrow and Azar, travelled the eight blocks between HYPE and the high school by car, equipped with a camera, microphone, and a list of carefully worded interview questions. As the interviewers sat in the principal’s waiting room, their anxiety was visible. When the principal--a large and gruff-looking man with a thick grey walrus mustache wearing a school jersey--stepped into the room, all of the girls sat silently. Doing nothing to put them at ease, he coughed, “Well?” Urged by Disbrow, they mumbled their names without making eye contact, and then filed behind him into an office crowded with school spirit paraphernalia. The girls quickly sank into their seats, leaving Disbrow to set up the camera. Amanda held the sheet of interview questions, and positioned her chair next to the principal, but out of the camera frame, more reticent and nervous than she had been conducting person-on-the-street interviews earlier in the week. Disbrow asked many of the follow-up questions, hoping to provide a model for the teens to adopt. But they said very little, and the principal made no visible effort to engage them or put them at ease. Close scrutiny of nearly sixty minutes of interview footage reveals to us some of the issues of power and ethics that emerge when young media-makers turn their cameras on the adults who have very specific forms of authority over their everyday social lives.

Early in the interview, when asked about the difficulties of his work, the principal reports that his greatest struggle is “getting kids involved” in extra-curricular activities. He barely mentions lack of resources before turning to speak at length about the importance of non-academic after-school activities--band, football, theater, music. This was one of the few times that Amanda veered from her interview script to ask (with evident disbelief and with her own young awareness of larger issues at stake), “Do you think the reason they’re not involved is because they choose to be or because the resources aren’t there?” The principal replies, “It’s a choice thing. These opportunities are there. It’s just a matter of kids choosing.” Amanda presses on: “Do you think they are motivated [to participate]?” “Well, that’s a deeper question. What is motivation?” It is, of course, a rhetorical question that Amanda does not challenge. After an awkward
silence, the principal at last acknowledges that “it’s tough for our kids. A lot of them have commitments after school, a lot of things beyond their control,” but emphasizes that “it’s up to each individual student to make the most of the opportunities we provide.”

Despite the principal’s claim that “fun kids” are the best part of his job, the girls present during the interview experience the school as anything but fun, and deeply unwelcoming. What is striking in the footage is the complete absence of any conversation about academics. “He doesn't see these kids as potentiating into anything, as emergent adults,” explains Muhlenberg’s Carbone, who oversees student teachers placed in the district. “It’s disingenuous to talk about the kids’ participation. If I were a kid, I’d be thinking, ‘this is my responsibility?’ No, it’s the responsibility of the school to be inclusive of all young people and to create a space and activities that are responsive to students’ academic needs and interests.” This underlying injustice shaped the teens’ interview with the principal. Initially eager to conduct the interview, the teens stated after the fact it was really a waste of time, meaningless, and ultimately disempowering.

In the institutional context of the school, the “principal’s office” is, for inner-city students, almost always marked as a space of conflict, punishment, and—above all else—control. Azar recalls the interview experience: “The kids were quiet, they were compliant, they weren’t asking any questions that were harder than what they wrote down. They weren’t pushing at all, and so in terms of the way that urban institutions are set up to educate youth—that is what you saw. They were maintaining order.” One of the interviewers, Shaniqua, sat captivated by the principal’s power: “I was thinking about while he was talking [how] there are so many kids in that school and it’s just him that has the authority over them and that’s it.”

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Reviewing and editing the interview sequence offered a second opportunity for the teens to critically engage the issues they felt the principal had dismissed and to assert some creative control in how the principal’s voice would be included in their
video. Back in the editing studio, implicit and explicit struggles over what to include and exclude from this segment began to emerge. Amanda sat to review the footage with Sylvia, a HYPE college intern and former student at the high school presided over by this principal. Sylvia recalls the complexities of that task:

> When I listened to [the principal] talk, I tried to be as objective as possible because we had just talked with Lora [Taub-Pervizpour] about representing someone's voice as true as possible. However, when I heard some of his answers to questions concerning a possible relationship between HYPE and Allen or his alleged openness to hearing student opinion, I couldn't help but think it was just a show because there was a camera on him. Having come out of [that high school], only a few students know that it is even possible to start a new club/program in the school and he favors AP/honors and sports teams. If you are not in those two groups, you are pretty much forgotten about. Despite these feelings, I still dragged the clips down and left them as possible ones for the final cut. I knew I probably wasn't going to do the final cut, so I left the clips for others to decide. xii

Decisions about what to include and exclude are always subjective, and in this case reveal some of the tensions between adult and youth perspectives. xiii

Working from clips identified by Amanda and Sylvia, a small group extracted a sound bite that triggered Azar’s concern over representing the principal in the documentary. In her role as program coordinator, she was alert to the potential backlash the young filmmakers faced if they were perceived to be portraying him in a bad or unfair light. Many of the HYPE filmmakers attend the same school as the principal and have to face him in the corridors daily. She also raised the risk of turning the principal against the program, which could potentially undermine wider community support. Azar advocated that the wider context of the clip be restored to the sequence and the teens did so without protest.

Clearly, taking away young people’s creative control over their cultural production runs counter to the goals of the youth media movement. Youth media educators share a responsibility to expand young people’s right to communicate, not to impose further limitations upon that right. But Azar’s concerns reflect her awareness of our responsibility to ask the students critical questions that challenge them to think through the implications of their production choices. The teens were disillusioned by the
outcome of the interview with the principal, and although they weren’t particularly concerned about a negative depiction, they accepted Azar’s concern about the bigger picture. Locating conversations about the ethics of representation at the center of our work can empower youth to make production choices that serve the larger social justice objectives at stake.

The Rough Cut: “This is Our Call to Action”

With just two days until the public screening of the HYPE documentary, the HYPE crew gathered to watch a rough cut. The rough cut was assembled during the weekend by the program’s technology assistant from four distinct segments created by four production teams. Prior to that moment, there was but a vague shared sense of how the four segments would come together. All eyes were on the large screen. All watched the eighteen-minute video intently. When it was over, after a very long silence, the first to speak was one of the program’s founders, an educator, who was struck by an overabundance of adults onscreen. “I just don’t get the sense of HYPE,” she explained and asked with passion, “Where is my HYPE?” Her question is a reminder that documentary is always a partial representation of reality, neither neutral nor objective. It also underscores the multiple and sometimes competing visions/narratives held by adults and teens collaborating in youth media work. This was evident as HYPE teens weighed in: Jessie disappointedly shared that it was not at all what she had envisioned; Jamie called it “boring and unimpressive”; even the ever-optimistic Rashid looked dismayed as he offered his characteristic “thumbs up” and a worried reassurance that “it’s going to be okay.” With the public screening two days away, things did not feel like they would be okay.

From her location as program coordinator, Azar questioned how the film reflected on HYPE itself and what kind of image would be portrayed to the community. If it were poorly received by the public, would the teens be vulnerable? Concerns about backlash and youth vulnerability are not unique to HYPE. There was reason for Azar’s concern. When HYPE media productions were featured at a city event the year before, a short video on unfair treatment by local police angered an assistant police chief who blamed event organizers for not forewarning him of the content.

The rough cut certainly raised the teens’ voices and reasserted their role at the center of the media-making process. They spoke passionately about their vision for the
documentary, and committed themselves to doing the hard work ahead to make it “their own.” Those who could stayed after HYPE ended in the afternoon, working until midnight over the next two days. In the fast-paced and high-pressured environment leading up to the public screening, relationships between youth and adults were again renegotiated. As the teens looked to Disbrow for direction, she worried at times that she was assuming the role of director rather than ally or assistant. As she helped the students fill in gaps in the video, she also questioned if we were unwittingly leaving unfulfilled the promise of genuinely youth-led media-making. In some ways disappointment over the rough cut was a call to action, compelling the youth to participate more actively. They were now able to sit for long stretches of time at the computers editing in Final Cut Pro, ignoring their vibrating cell phones and the pull of other online pursuits.

Disbrow’s interactions with the teens during this time were shaped by her awareness of the need to deliver a completed documentary video that would meet the diverse expectations of youth and adult stakeholders alike. Steven Goodman speaks of the responsibilities shared by adults and students in the production process, based on his pioneering work at the Educational Video Center:

> Students need to take ownership of their project and create something they will be proud of to show in public. But they can’t be expected to move the project through all phases of production unassisted and on schedule. The teacher bears the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the group meets its deadline and the production results in a finished product.\textsuperscript{xv}

As we came closer to the end of the production schedule, assistance and support from the adult educators was vital. Revisiting these last stressful moments of HYPE, Shaniqua recalls,

> I think some of us just started giving up because it was just too much. Everybody was stressed, everyone was getting attitude with each other, people were crying. If we didn’t have the adults there then I don’t know what would’ve happened.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Shaniqua and her peers leaned heavily on Disbrow during these final days, as the students worked at the edges of their digital-editing knowledge. Anyone who has edited in Final Cut Pro appreciates how frustrating and complex the program is, and Disbrow tried hard to maintain the students’ role driving the production process. During a short afternoon break, we took the opportunity to refocus and articulate our collective
understanding of what was meant by “youth-driven/adult-supported” media production. On the chalkboard, we made a diagram of one circle embedded in another circle. The teens were asked, “What does youth-driven look like to you?” Their answers and descriptions filled the inner circle. We then asked, “What does adult-supported look like to you?” Their ideas and definitions of the kind of support they were expecting filled the space of the outer circle. This jointly produced artifact became an important guide in the remaining hours of HYPE, particularly in navigating the blurry and shifting boundary between adult participation and adult control. Azar highlights this ambiguity as she considered those final days and hours:

Would we [adults] be doing a disservice to the partnership [with the teens] if we were to sit back and watch and let them be creative but knowing in many senses that they wouldn’t be successful . . . or maybe they would be and we’ve never given them a chance? When are we taking control because we need to and when are we taking control because we don’t know how else to respond? Is it simply that we are not comfortable waiting to see what they come up with because it represents us as much as it represents them?  

It is clear that as adults we need to take stock of what may be contradictory impulses and responsibilities. We want to encourage youth participants to take ownership of their work, to raise their voices and visions, and make media. This goal may at times collide with our obligation to protect the youth who participate in our programs, or at the very least, to do nothing that might make them more vulnerable than they already are within the community.

**Youth Cultural Production: Limits and Possibilities**

The rough-cut screening was tough on youth and adults alike. HYPE educators left the conversation with conflicted responses: excitement, on the one hand, that the teens were roused to claim ownership of the documentary making process; frustration, on the other, that this newfound determination had not surfaced earlier in the five-week program. What responsibility did the teens bear for the disappointments of the rough cut? Some had simply not “shown up” for the documentary work, preferring instead to hang out, or at every opportunity to engage with other online digital media practices—Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, gaming, and texting with cell phones.
Not only does this unsettled tension provide another site for examining the ethical dilemmas that emerge when adult and youth agendas collide, it also raises important issues of class and race embedded in the social conditions of HYPE. For many of the Latino and African-American participants, at school and at home, high-speed access to the Internet is limited. While survey data from the Pew Hispanic Center and the Pew Internet & American Life Project suggest the gap in home Internet use between white and Latino households may be shrinking—given the rising percentage of Latino households with broadband connections from 2006–2008—disparities in access in households with annual incomes under $30,000 persist. Access to computers in urban public schools is similarly limited, by an absence of infrastructure and support, and by the current organization of the environment around standardized curricula and testing. Compared to suburban public schools, computers in urban city schools are often older, and Internet access is both slow and heavily restricted. By contrast, at HYPE, youth enter a college environment infused with new digital media tools. The room where most of the collective work takes place is encircled by sixteen state-of-the-art Apple computers with high-speed broadband access, two printers, and a scanner. The multimedia production studio is similarly well-equipped, with multiple high-definition video cameras, a mobile laptop system, and other production tools—the value of which far exceeds the annual income of a high school teacher in the district. The draw of the technology for the students is undeniable. This social context makes it difficult to dismiss the teens’ online activities as mere distraction from the “legitimate” media-making goals at hand, and is a reminder of the need to listen closely to the meanings the students make of these disparities.

Cell phones were ubiquitous at HYPE. All twelve students kept their cell phones close by, if not on them physically at all times. Like their peers nationally, HYPE students own and carry with them an array of digital media devices, including cell phones, Nintendo DS and other handheld gaming systems, iPods, and other MP3 players. Upon these devices they download and share music, text messages, participate in Internet social-networking sites, play games, and view and share YouTube videos. While the teens mostly observed the rule prohibiting talking on their phones during HYPE, they were almost always connected and online via texting and Internet social-networking sites. While at the computer editing in Final Cut Pro or iMovie, or doing
Internet research, teens had multiple windows open where they would jump between HYPE work and MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and gaming and fan sites.

For some scholars, these digital media practices signal a new kind of creative production for youth. This perspective unites chapters in the edited volume *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out*. In one chapter, “Creative Production,” Patricia Lange and Mizuko Ito argue that new online media practices constitute a kind of creative production in the digital age. Writing about MySpace and the particular process of constructing a user profile, the authors suggest that, “for most youth, profile creation is a casual activity in defining a personal web page and graphic identity, pieced together with found materials on the internet. This is a form of messing around that can provide some initial introductions to how to manipulate online digital media.” At HYPE, we also recognize that beneath the surface of this casual “messing around” is an excitement to connect with new media that can be mobilized to engage youth in other forms of media-making. As Lange and Ito point out, “Personal media creation is often a starting point for broadening media production into other forms . . . ” New digital opportunities to create personally and socially relevant content may be particularly meaningful for youth of color, in the context of an Internet that is, as Ellen Seiter argues, “so heavily skewed toward white, English-speaking professionals who are interested in making purchases online.”

Henry Jenkins and his colleagues at MIT argue that social-networking sites and other online spaces where youth create and share content provide them with possibilities to engage in a “participatory culture.” Within this conceptual framework, digital and online media are seen, in Lange and Ito’s summary, to open up “new avenues for young people to create and share media,” and comprise a “new media ecology” that has the potential “to reshape the conditions under which young people engage with media and culture, moving youth from positions as media consumers to more active media producers.”

We question some of the exuberance in these calls to focus on Facebook, MySpace, and other online pursuits within youth media education. As a program, HYPE values the knowledges and experiences that youth bring to the table—and this includes, increasingly, their experiences online. But as media educators, we also have a responsibility to provide them with information about the limitations of these practices, situated as they are within a context of commodification that is notoriously relentless in
targeting urban Latino and African-American youth. It matters that the new avenues for young people to create and share information online are paved by profit motives, and, as Seiter insists, media educators and researchers bear a responsibility to “teach children about the economics of the Internet,” including making transparent the “hidden forms of commercialism” implicit in the business of mining and profiling based on user-generated content. There are huge differences between online avenues and the streets one walks down to get to school or to the store, a playground, or work.

In the context of HYPE, cultural production serves larger social justice aims. That is, documentary media-making involves a set of practices that help teens from center city Allentown become agents of change within the community. We have witnessed the deep learning and community engagement that opens up when we walk slowly with HYPE teens through center city, mobile GIS devices and video cameras in their hands--mapping information about public safety, housing, health, and environmental concerns, and systematically gathering visible evidence for their documentary productions. Community screenings of Roots of Change, at a center city restaurant, a college campus, and a public library, opened up vital avenues for dialogue in which youth who are regularly silenced by community institutions are positioned--position themselves--and recognized by adults as part of the solution, rather than the problem. In other words, youth become agents in transforming their relationships within the community, as well as their relationships to media systems, critically exercising their right to communication.

Rather than signaling a new era of possibilities in how young people communicate, online activities like Facebook do not radically transform urban youth’s relationship to media in particular, and consumer capitalism more broadly. Beneath the hype of transforming them into “producer-consumers” in a “participatory culture,” the value of their participation is that Facebook’s owners and the advertisers on its site profit from the steady stream of content that users generate in the form of posts, photos, links, friends, and personal profile information. “While these sites can offer participants entertainment and a way to socialize,” observes Nicole Cohen, “the social relations present on a site like Facebook can obscure economic relations that reflect larger patterns of capitalist development in the digital age.” In the context of digital capitalism, Facebook and other Web 2.0 ventures are best understood as a continuation of the commodification of urban youth. Undeniably, HYPE students, like other youth,
find meaning in their online communication. However, a theoretical understanding of the free labor these activities provide, and the wider context of capitalist accumulation in which they are situated, puts them in direct conflict with youth media’s goal to engage young people in forms of meaning-making that offer alternatives to the meanings made available within dominant consumer culture.

Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube are very much a part of the institutions of media that form what Goodman describes as a system of authority, one that contributes to the criminalization and commodification of the urban working class and youth of color. Indeed, social-networking sites dramatically expand the cultural surveillance of urban youth by market research firms heavily invested in tracking this “taste culture.” As Cohen rightly argues,

While there may be an element of agency present as members navigate Facebook, social networking sites created from the Web 2.0 business model should not be misunderstood as open, “democratic” spaces in which people can act as they please. While there is room within the website to construct an online identity, interact with people in various ways, and generate a sense of empowerment or fulfillment, the structures (in this case, site design, functionality, privacy settings) are set according to the economic imperative of the company, and participation is constrained or enabled by the economic goals of the site.

Engaging young people in critical dialogue about these social processes is an important part of supporting their development as media-makers. HYPE teens have good reason to look for alternative sites of communication and participation, given the unwelcoming environments they encounter at school and in the community, where they have no voice. “At school, it’s like I’m mute,” says Jamie, whose experience is echoed by his HYPE peers. But creating social networks online, meaningful as they may be, is no substitute for the daunting work of constructing a more inclusive community for these youth in Allentown. The longing for a more just social world in their community is deeply held by HYPE teens. This longing is articulated by Jessie, a 16-year-old Latina student, who has been in the HYPE program for three years.

**Jessie’s Intro: “In a Short Couple Bars, It’s like Exactly the Point”**

Things never stay the same
They constantly change
When one looks at the past
It just rattles your brain
The way things take form overtime
What will it take to form it
The way we envision it
In our minds
Teens are the future
So trust me enough
To let me shape the city with a mentor’s touch
With the help of children and adults
We will work together
To achieve results
A beautiful place with so much potential
If we took a stand
We’d sell the plans
And the way it looks states
That we can create
A healthy community that we aren’t seein’
That can accommodate
All Allentonians to be in

Jessie composed the above lines two days before HYPE ended. They are the first words uttered in Roots of Change. If the hope of “reclaiming their video” was to be realized, this rap, along with an introductory sequence created by the teens, offered a model for “making it their own.” The sequence itself featured the students onscreen in ways they were absent elsewhere, and--crucially--the production process that shaped the intro sequence came as close as anything to HYPE’s collectively defined ideal of youth-driven, adult-supported media.

Roots of Change opens with shots of center city Allentown: row homes, storefronts, gas stations, an art museum, abandoned buildings, interspersed with introspective close-up shots of Jessie and Shaniqua gazing at their community from the car window as they drive through center city. Much like a music video, the scene is driven by a rap of Jessie’s lyrics performed by Jessie and Rashid. This is the opening they had envisioned.

Jessie was outspoken in assuming responsibility for reshaping the introduction, although she had little experience working with Final Cut Pro. For two days, Disbrow sat with Jessie while she reconstructed the intro, providing just enough guidance with the program so that Jessie could render visually the ideas about which she was so excited. From a youth media educator’s perspective, this was rewarding work, with a
student passionate and actively involved in the production. At one point, Jessie beamed, “I could do this forever.”

Midway through her rap, Jessie asks, “What will it take to form it / The way we envision it / In our minds?” She is speaking of the community of Allentown, but the question is worth asking in relation to youth media. What does it take, in the context of HYPE and youth media more generally, to create conditions of possibility that empower young people to realize their cultural productions with greater autonomy and agency? A good part of the answer, to be sure, rests with Jessie herself, who demonstrated throughout HYPE a deep engagement and understanding of what it means to be located in this community, and to locate oneself, as a Latina, a teenager, and an advocate for social justice. Jessie exhibited a heightened awareness of, and ability to negotiate, the various systems of power pressing down on her life. For example, she articulated the struggle to apply skills learned in HYPE in the classroom, navigating between two learning contexts separated by a wide divide. She was aware of the differing power dynamics at play that shape and constrain the possibilities for action and engagement within these contexts:

It’s hard. The way school is set up, it’s like a dictatorship. Even teachers say, “This is not a democracy, it’s a dictatorship.” At HYPE, I feel like we learn how to have relationships with adults and we work with them and then at school we have to work for them. Jessie managed to locate herself in relationships with HYPE adults as an active participant and partner in creating a community unique to HYPE. We recognize, however, the difficulties HYPE students may encounter when they are challenged to rethink their view of themselves and their relationship to the community beyond HYPE.

Jessie felt these pressures acutely in the context of her homelife:

Disbrow: How does HYPE affect other areas of your life?

Jessie: Well, actually, it gets me in trouble a lot with my Dad because we get into arguments and he tells me not to talk back and I’m like, “I don’t go to HYPE to learn how to be quiet! I have my own voice!” And then he tells me to shut up [laughter]. But the way we practice stuff [at HYPE], it’s really comfortable. It’s not like at school where we have to [sit there] and take notes.

Disbrow: What was your favorite memory from HYPE this summer?
Jessie: Filming the intro. I was just really excited and I had a vision. Filming it was really fun because it was like exactly what I had in my head, and then adding the rap—it just made it that much better. That was my favorite part, like every time I watch it I just tell everybody, “This is my part! I did this!” I do love that rap too . . . I feel like in a short couple bars, it’s like exactly the point.

Support from Disbrow did not diminish Jessie’s sense of ownership over this sequence: “This is my part! I did this!” Disbrow provided just enough technical instruction to enable Jessie to drive the production process. The trust between collaborators is vital here, but so too is a sociocultural, theoretical understanding of the context shaping this meaning-making encounter between Disbrow and Jessie. Our analysis is informed by a theoretical model developed by the Russian psycholinguist Lev Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development. Briefly, the zone of proximal development (or ZOPED) is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving with guidance from an adult or a more knowledgeable peer. In other words, Disbrow created a situation in which Jessie was able to accomplish complex editing tasks that she could not yet complete independently. But Jessie slowly took over the editing process and could eventually perform the work independently. In Vygotskian terms, Disbrow and Jessie were co-constructing knowledge in the zone of proximal development. The power of this model can be witnessed in the film’s concluding sequence. The sequence was edited by Alysia, who mastered the basics of Final Cut Pro through instruction and guidance from Jessie. Jessie’s ability to teach the editing software to her peer is evidence of her own degree of mastery over the task.

Years of experience at Educational Video Center have demonstrated to Steven Goodman that media educators must constantly manage and assist the media production work with youth without overstepping their boundaries, by “leaving little room for youth decision making or ownership.” The collaborative meaning-making process driven by Jessie and supported by Disbrow is a promising response to Jessie’s refrain: “What will it take to form it / The way we envision it / In our minds?”
Conclusion

Jessie and her peers completed *Roots of Change* just in time for a community screening attended by family, friends, college professors, public officials, and community leaders. It was received with much praise; one young girl in the audience asked the HYPE filmmakers, “How can I be like you?” The film’s message was powerful and the filmmakers’ voices were impossible to ignore. As Azar points out,

> These teens are out there challenging stereotypes, challenging assumptions that the community has about them, challenging the assumptions that people have about other people and how people think about their community or what actually happens in their community. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard from people, “Racism doesn’t exist.” Challenging those things—and that’s where it becomes absolutely a social justice issue, when these teens are heard, because they are the ones that experience so much of [the stereotyping and racism] on a regular basis.

The broad objective of HYPE is to create a space where local youths’ voices are not only heard, but linked to critical practice. Their desire to shape community change infuses the multi-voiced narrative in the documentary’s final sequence, edited by Alysia:

> There need to be more opportunities for us to go and advocate and be the mentor that we were trained to be. [Jessie]

> It’s so when you guys leave—you meaning the audience—you don’t just say, “Oh yeah, that documentary was nice,” and then go outside and just think about it for two minutes and you’re changed for that two minutes you go outside, but to help us because we can’t do this alone. Teens too—don’t go out and be like, “Yeah, I saw this cool doc and then went home and nothing happened.” You can be a part of something like this. Do something you know is going to positively change Allentown—that’s why were making this doc. [Clarice]

> We wanna go out into the Allentown community and start changing it—start shaping it—start working in it to create a better tomorrow, but we can’t do it without the help of the citizens. [Jessie]

If youth media is to fulfill its promise as a force for community change, it will require us to constantly reflect on our objectives, methods, and, crucially, the social relationships that shape youth cultural production. Whether we call it youth-driven,
youth-made, or youth-created, it is up to media educators and students to collectively articulate what is meant by these terms and how their meaning is instantiated in our media-making practices. And then, to work hard at constructing relationships that do justice to the ideal of young people realizing their identities and strengths as cultural producers. This work is hard and it is never finished. As Goodman observes, after more than two decades building the field of youth media, “We have come quite far. But damn, we still have a long way to go.”

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2 While some high-profile national and even global corporate-driven youth media campaigns have emerged, the complicated relationship of this development to the history of youth media is a subject for another paper. See, for example, Adobe Foundation, “Adobe Youth Voices,” http://youthvoices.adobe.com.


4 Much of this work is represented in the Youth Media Reporter, the leading multimedia Web journal for practitioners, educators, and academics working in the field of youth media. See the Youth Media Reporter website, http://www.youthmediareporter.org.

5 This area has been the focus of significant community development initiatives and funding efforts, through which it has been designated a “Weed & Seed” area and, more recently, through a collaboration among various philanthropic foundations in the region, “The Youth Empowerment Zone.”


7 We conceive of this as a “third space,” as theorized by Kris Gutiérrez, Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz, and others—a site where different activity systems (school, community, family, university, for example) collaborate to create a context that promotes the formation and negotiation of new roles, relationships, learning, and identities. Kris Gutiérrez, “Developing a Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space,” Reading Research Quarterly 43, no. 2 (2008): 148–64; and Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz, School’s Out! Bridging Out-of-School Literacies with Classroom Practice (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001). A discussion of the genesis and application of this theoretical construct to HYPE is the subject of a larger research study in progress by Taub-Pervizpour.

8 Jenna Azar, interview with Disbrow, September 2009; italics added.

9 Shaniqua, interview with Disbrow, September 2009.


11 Azar, interview with Disbrow.

12 Sylvia, email message to Disbrow, April 2010.

A youth media educator in Lynne, Massachusetts, described her responsibilities in “monitoring youth produced content,” reflecting on one student’s desire to create a documentary about her experiences with cutting and self-mutilation. “As her instructor and mentor, I have the responsibility to make sure that the story that she wants to tell is both appropriate for telling, and that her exploration of the topic can be done in a safe, healthy manner that isn’t exploitative or puts her in harms way.” Chris Gaines and Paulina Villarroel, “Art Therapy: A Critical Youth Media Approach,” Youth Media Reporter, April 14, 2010, http://www.youthmediareporter.org/2010/04/art_therapy_a_critical_youth_m.html.

Goodman, Teaching Youth Media, 57.

Shaniqua, interview with Disbrow.

Azar, interview with Disbrow.


This contrast is not unlike stark divisions documented by Ellen Seiter in her ethnographic study of technology practices in two public elementary schools in southern California, one urban and one suburban. See Seiter, The Internet Playground: Children’s Access, Entertainment, and Mis-Education (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

Findings from the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project surveys from 2004–2009 show this pattern among teens nationally, and across demographic groups. Although the Pew surveys found no differences by race or ethnicity in phone ownership by teens, ownership rates do vary by socioeconomic, and teens from lower-income families ($30,000 or below) are less likely to own a cell phone. Amanda Lenhart, Teens and Mobile Phones (Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010), http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Teens-and-Mobile-Phones.aspx.


Ibid., 261.

Seiter, The Internet Playground, 17.

Henry Jenkins et al., Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), xi.

Lange and Ito, “Creative Production,” 244.

Seiter, The Internet Playground, 104. Seiter’s study concludes with a compelling list of recommendations that media educators, teachers, and parents can leverage in activities that aim to educate children to be critical thinkers about the Internet. See 103–6.


Goodman, Teaching Youth Media, 23–4.

For example, the recent trend report Inner City Truth: An Urban Youth Lifestyle Study II offers marketers a snapshot of the new connected urban teen. “The overwhelming majority of low-income urban
teens are accessing the Internet, buying the latest cell phones and engaging in online social networking. A
national survey of more than 1,500 African American and Hispanic teens and young adults, revealed that
this group is highly-connected, tech savvy and brand loyal.” Inner City Truth: An Urban Youth Lifestyle
Study II (Motivational Educational Entertainment Productions, Inc., 2009),

xxxii Jessie, interview with Disbrow, September 2009.

xxxiii Ibid.

xxxiv This theoretical model informs the structure of informal learning around media and communication
technology in programs designed and researched by Michael Cole (1996) and the UC Links network,
Steven Goodman, Glynda Hull, and others. See Cole, Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline
(Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998); Goodman, Teaching Youth Media; and Hull and Mira-Lisa
Katz, “Crafting an Agentive Self: Case Studies in Digital Storytelling,” Research in the Teaching of
Challenges to the Sustainability of Service-Learning in Higher Education,” Journal of Language and

xxxv The same, of course, can be said of the then-undergraduate mentor, Disbrow--this chapter’s co-author.
Her ability to effectively communicate the techniques of this complex software to a younger student is
meaningful evidence of her own learning in media and communication.

xxxvi Goodman, Teaching Youth Media, 104.

xxxvii Azar, interview with Disbrow, September 2009.

xxxviii Roots of Change.

xxxix Goodman, Teaching Youth Media, 112.