



## From Voice to Influence: An Introduction

by **Sangita Shrestova & Henry Jenkins** on [June 27, 2016](#) in **Article**

I had thoughtful teachers and adults who encouraged me to pursue my interests. I think finding a good mentor who will guide you not only in terms of your civic interests, but also in terms of the big picture of one's life is incredibly important. And speaking of big picture—I felt that the younger me always pursued my civic interests on the side, in addition to school, work, and my other obligations. I think it would be great if we could open up a space of freedom within schools, or within paid occupations, that allow for young people to pursue their civic interests and receive academic and monetary recognition for their work.

—Carol Zou

Carol Zou is a yarn-bomber: that is, she has participated in, and sometimes led, grassroots arts projects where everyday people make their voices heard and presence felt in urban environments through the expressive use of knitting. We sometimes think of voice as referring to written or spoken words or perhaps youth-made media. Zou's group demonstrates that voice can be expressed by any media necessary, by whatever tools, resources, and practices people have at their disposal. Not unlike graffiti artists, yarn bombers "occupy" the urban landscape, creating works that catch the eye and hopefully generate discussion. Yarnbombers use these works to call attention to public eyesores, to offer alternative conceptions of how spaces might be used, and to call attention to local history and culture. As they pursue this work, yarnbombers also tap online networks, where they make plans, share results, and debate tactics with other participants.

If we, as educators, want to encourage students to become political agents, then we need to appreciate and support a broad range of civic practices. Some of them will look more or less like civic engagement has for generations—letters to the editor, petitions, street protests, and of course, voting. Others may take new shapes as youth tap digital tools and networks or involve new expressive practices such as yarnbombing.

What's interesting to us here is the way Zou describes the kinds of support she and other young people needed as they begin to act upon their emerging civic interests. Zou shared these perspectives during a webinar series on "Storytelling and Digital-Age Civics" we organized for Connected Learning TV.<sup>1</sup> Carol and twenty-two other young (and youngish) media makers, artists, and activists shared their own stories and talked about the ways that storytelling helps them to bridge between cultural and civic/political engagement. Streamed live in January 2014, the four-part series was organized by the University of Southern California's Media, Activism and Participatory Politics (MAPP) Project in partnership with Youth Radio, the Media Arts + Practice Division of USC's School of Cinematic Arts, the Black Youth Project, and the MacArthur Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP).

Zou's observations echoed those we heard from many young civically active people over seven years of research, a process that has included interviews with more than 200 young activists. Again and again, we heard that young

people often felt constrained by in-school environments and found it more productive to pursue their interests through peer-based participatory networks. Like Zou, their civic paths required them to connect with like-minded peers, identify a mentor, and acquire the skills they needed before they could fully define and actively pursue their collective political interests.

Zou's experiences, her search for mentorship, shaped [Yarnbombing Los Angeles](#), the group she helped organize, and inspired her commitment to mentor other young activists. At a youth mural workshop she helped organize, she told us, many young people were initially intimidated when they were asked to interview community members "for their stories." Zou and her colleagues provided the youth with a safe space to "practice and experiment with interview techniques (or any aspect of storytelling)." Such practices helped her students feel more confident about engaging with "the larger community around them." As such, she is not radically different from other educators working in more formal settings to tap their students' interests. Our own recent research in this space has brought us into partnership with such groups as the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), the National Writing Project (NWP), and Facing History and Ourselves, each of which has made a serious commitment to promoting digital citizenship. Given how many obstacles young people face in trying to develop and share their own political insights, we value these kinds of educational interventions and respect the commitments that educators at all levels have made to helping young people address issues of concern within their communities.

Every week brings us new signs that American young people are on the front lines of many emerging movements that are seeking to bring about a more just and inclusive society, call attention to long standing problems, or otherwise change the world. In a new book from New York University Press, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*,<sup>2</sup> our research team has documented the ways young people are seeking to make a difference by any media necessary. We take this term from the writings of Malcolm X who spoke about changing the world "by any means necessary." If you go back to his speeches, you will see his model for social change relied heavily on grassroots media platforms and practices and on getting youth more involved in the political process. Young people today have been among the first to recognize ways that digital tools and practices might deploy new media platforms and practices for constructing and sharing stories, for mobilizing groups of people, and for publicizing the outcomes of their activism. Yet, they have not done so on their own: often, they have needed strong support from educators and other adult mentors.

There is much we do not yet know about these new and emerging forms of activism. Where do youth engage with civic issues outside schools? When and how do they feel invited to participate? What are their learning needs? How are educators (in and outside schools) able to respond to these needs or provide the resources youth require to take meaningful action in these new contexts? And ultimately, what kinds of learning environments encourage youth to express their perspectives on issues that they care about in ways that will make a difference in the world?

### Participatory Culture, Politics, and Learning

In recent years, a wave of new research focused upon the interplay between participatory culture, learning, and politics has emerged from the MacArthur Foundation's [Digital Media and Learning Initiative](#) and, in particular, from two related research networks, the [Connected Learning Research Network](#) and the [Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network](#). We have drawn heavily from both networks in identifying participants for this issue, and in many ways, its themes and content represent the point of intersection between the two.

In a collective statement, the Connected Learning Research Network advocated for approaches to education that are "socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented towards educational, economic, or political opportunity."<sup>3</sup> The report summed up its perspective: "Connected learning is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, connected learning takes seriously young people's interests and passions. Connected learning values their experiences online and out of school, and seeks to reshape educational institutions and practices so they can more fully value these alternative sites of learning. The goal is to create a more integrated learning eco-structure, one that helps young people build on what they learned outside of school as they prepare themselves for a fuller life. The Connected Learning Research Network recognizes that such supports are not already in place for many young people, that there are many barriers that prevent young people from being able to deploy the skills they have acquired from informal learning contexts, and that there are many inequalities in terms of who has access to such opportunities. And the network defines success through many axes, including not only economic opportunity or classroom accomplishments but also new models of civic engagement and political participation.

In a statement summing up the work of the Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Danielle Allen define participatory politics as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern."<sup>5</sup> Kahne et al. stress that their "notion of political extends beyond the electoral focus" to include a "broad array of efforts" that range from "electoral" and civic activities to "life style politics." They also propose the following activity types as characteristic of participatory politics:

**Circulation.** In participatory politics, the flow of information is shaped by many in the broader community rather than by a small group of elites....

**Dialogue and feedback.** There is a high degree of dialogue among community members, as well as a practice of weighing in on issues of public concern and on the decisions of civic and political leaders....

**Production.** Members not only circulate information but also create original content (such as a blog or video that has political intent or impact) that allows them to advance their perspectives....

**Mobilization.** Members of a community rally others to help accomplish civic or political goals....

**Investigation.** Members of a community actively pursue information about issues of public concern....<sup>6</sup>

Largely peer-to-peer focused, participatory politics has a complex relationship with more institutionalized forms of politics. YPP Network member Cathy Cohen explains: Participatory politics is never meant to displace a focus on institutional politics. We might think of it as a supplemental domain where young people can take part in a dialogue about the issues that matter, think about strategies of mobilization, and do some of that mobilizing collectively online.<sup>7</sup>

Another network member, Lissa Soep, Research Director and Senior Producer for Oakland's Youth Radio, made the case for a new kind of civic education in her 2014 white paper: "Participatory politics don't come automatically, even for young people raised on mobile devices and digital media. Nor do individuals act alone when they deliberate and pursue justice, and in this sense it's best to frame literacies as activities that communities can organize themselves around through interconnected efforts, rather than as skills possessed by or lacking in this or that young person or segment of the youth population."<sup>8</sup> Educational institutions need to ensure that they provide equitable access to the skills and knowledge necessary for meaningful participation and that they provide an infrastructure where those skills can be rehearsed and applied in contexts of everyday decision making. In particular, they need to prepare young people to identify shared agendas and draw on each other's skills to take collective action.

This particular model of participatory politics can be traced back to an earlier white paper for the MacArthur Foundation, *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture*. There, participatory culture was defined as having "relatively low barriers" to entry, strong support to create and share content, and informal mentorship structures. In a

participatory culture, members “believe their contributions matter” and feel a “social connection” with each other as those with more experience mentor others.<sup>9</sup> As Henry Jenkins suggests in his dialogue with Nico Carpentier, this definition of participatory culture may, in fact, “be a utopian goal, meaningful in the ways that it motivates our struggles to achieve it and provides yardsticks to measure what we’ve achieved.”<sup>10</sup> Today, we live in a more participatory culture, one where more, but not all, people have access to the means to produce and circulate media towards their own personal and collective interests.

This issue’s two co-editors have worked together for the past seven-plus years to run Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP), a research project at the University of Southern California. MAPP has sought to identify these “yardsticks” as they relate to participatory politics. In particular, we are interested in how organizations and networks encourage youth to more meaningfully participate in civic and political life. As Peter Dahlgren aptly observes, “One has to feel invited, committed, and/or empowered to enter into a participatory process.”<sup>11</sup> Schools have historically been one of the institutions that have invited young people into the political realm and helped them to acquire the core social skills and cultural literacies needed to be effective at promoting social change.

Our project has drawn on concepts from cultural studies and political philosophy to identify the mechanisms by which young people get recruited, trained, and mobilized as civic agents. Our work is particularly interested in what we call the civic imagination. Before you can change the world, you have to be able to imagine what a better society might look like, you have to be able to envision what the process would be to transform current conditions, you have to see yourself as someone capable of making change, and you have to have some degree of empathy for people whose experiences are different from your own. The mechanisms by which the civic imagination operates, the stories and images it draws upon, change from one historical moment to another. Our research has found that young people do not necessarily respond to classic models of citizenship, often finding the languages through which politics are conducted to be exclusive (in that they do not provide points of entry for new citizens) and repulsive (in that heated and divisive rhetoric overrides any attempt to find common ground between competing parties). We have observed young people tapping into the rich reservoir of popular culture (superheroes, Harry Potter, *The Hunger Games*, and zombies, among other tropes) in search of new terms through which they can speak about their hopes and fears for the future of their society. For us, this focus on the civic imagination focuses attention onto the cultural context within which political change occurs. And this emphasis on civic culture has led us to focus on “mechanisms of translation,” which help young people who are culturally active to become more civically and politically engaged.<sup>12</sup>

Our 2016 book, *By Any Media Necessary*, shares case studies of innovative networks and organizations that have helped to recruit, train, and mobilize young activists: among them are [Invisible Children](#), [the Harry Potter Alliance](#), [Imagine Better](#), Nerdfighters, the DREAMer movement, Students for Liberty, and a range of projects supporting the American Muslim community. This research highlights multiple, and at times fraught, trajectories, as young people harness expressive practices (voice) to affect social change (influence). On one hand, we discovered young activists who have overcome enormous difficulties in gaining access to the means of cultural production and circulation: bloggers who did not own their own computers, filmmakers who did not own their own cameras and who rely on community centers and public libraries for digital access. We have seen them succeed in making their voice heard through their innovative use of social media. We have also seen youth who get frustrated after they attempt to use available tools and fail to have their voice heard. Some groups have access to the skills, knowledge, resources, and social connections that enable them to exert their voice. Others—especially many of those economically deprived, socially marginalized, historically disempowered—do not. Our book is cautiously optimistic about the new civic cultures that are emerging as young people deploy media-sharing and social-networking sites as springboards for civic action: we identify examples of successful social movements but also some of the paradoxes these groups face as they seek to create a context for participatory politics.

Coming out of this field research, we've sought to apply what we've learned to promote civic learning: helping the groups we studied to identify and share their own best practices, assembling resources educators can use in working with young people, and offering some professional development training to help educators identify effective strategy for incorporating those materials into their own teaching. You can learn more about these efforts at our website, [byanymedia.org](http://byanymedia.org). In this issue, Diana Lee, a MAPP team member, shares one example of the ways that educators have already started to deploy these resources. She explores how one campus-based group, "I, Too, Am Harvard," sought to call attention to the "microaggressions" minority students confront in their day-to-day experiences at this elite institution. Lee recounts how our documentation of this project helped inspire a high school teacher from one of our workshops to develop a lesson plan to help her students understand the subtle ways that racism might enter their lives.<sup>13</sup> These resources are already inspiring educators around the country to bring materials produced by young activists into their own teaching of a range of subjects—not only social studies but also literature, arts, and humanities classes. We hope readers will take a moment to explore what we assembled (including videos from many different organizations, some sample lesson plans and activities, and discussion starter videos produced by Joseph Gordon-Levitt's HitRecord) and think about how they might use them with their own students.

Our efforts, in partnership with the [National Writing Project](#) and the [National Association for Media Literacy Education](#), represent simply one of a number of pilot programs that have emerged from the two MacArthur Networks and are intended to provide more opportunities for young people to acquire and rehearse the skills at the heart of today's participatory politics. As one recent article summing up these efforts concluded, "Educating for core civic capacities, such as investigation, dialogue, circulation, production, and mobilization is vitally important given the significance of these skills to widespread and effective participation in democratic life."<sup>14</sup>

### Bridging Between Voice and Influence

The work coming out of both the YPP and Connected Learning networks grapples with "voice" or "civic agency." Nick Couldry defines voice as the capacity of people to "give an account of themselves and of their place in the world" in terms that are not only personally meaningful but can also be heard and acted upon by others.<sup>15</sup> Couldry makes clear that serious work on the politics of "voice" requires us to go beyond "a celebration of people speaking or telling stories." Rather, the politics of voice must be placed in a larger political context, identifying the forces that enable or block certain voices from being taken seriously as part of ongoing struggles over power.<sup>16</sup> Building on Couldry's analysis, Peter Dahlgren stresses the social and collective dimensions of voice, stories shared within a community, and not simply "a collection of atomised personal stories."<sup>17</sup> Too often, schools reduce voice to an issue of personal expression and do not consider the civic contexts within which stories are generated, circulated, heard, and acted upon. Where we once stressed that the personal is political, we now increasingly are thinking about the politics of networks.

In the recently published *From Voice to Influence*, editors Danielle Allen and Jennifer S. Light brought together leading political philosophers, media scholars, and researchers on social movements and the public sphere to think through how classic understandings of civic agency have shifted in an era of networked activism.<sup>18</sup> In an interview about the book, Allen explained what she sees as the relationship between the two core concepts:

The rise of digital media and social media have brought an explosion of 'voice' in the public sphere—communications from ordinary people about whatever it is they feel like communicating about that are easily accessible to all of us. There has been a lazy assumption in a lot of commentary about the impact of new media on politics that more voice in itself changes political life and is a good thing. We thought that assessing that view required more clarity about when expressions of voice are 'influential' and when they are not, that is, more clarity about when they make a difference beyond the existential experience of the speaker... We came to distinguish between forms of influence that operate mainly on specific communities of discourse (a neighborhood, a social

media network, etc.) and those forms of influence that operate on the level of a whole polity. To achieve an understanding of influence, we had to look at how speech acts can pull levers within political institutions, in relationship to the many organizations of civil society and the corporate world, through the work of social movements, and by effecting cultural change.<sup>19</sup>

Allen and her contributors have drilled down on the concept of civic agency, understood as the capacity to translate voice into influence, and have sought to identify a range of different mechanisms at play in contemporary politics, where collective, grassroots expression has been able to be shaped and directed in ways that have been consequential for the groups involved.

This core distinction between voice and influence has been central to many recent discussions of the power of hashtag-based activism, for example. There is a tendency to dismiss those forms of political activism that place a strong emphasis on voice as “slacktivism,” suggesting that it constitutes the lowest form of political participation. As Ithica College student Charlotte Robertson explained in a 2014 *Huffington Post* op-ed, “Social media can be used as a forum to promote ideology and begin conversation. However, it is unacceptable to not move past the point of conversation, into action.... Activism should not be an isolating experience. Activism should be rallying, speeches, emotion. So let’s step away from the computer, put down the cell phone, and reconnect with the real world in order to take on and help solve its problems.”<sup>20</sup> In short, her definition of slacktivism stresses moments where there is strong emphasis on voice but limited focus on influence.

A core debate here centers on the issue of how we help ensure that young people’s voices are not simply heard but acted upon. In a world when everyone can speak at once, who takes the time to listen to the voices of others, especially those who come from different backgrounds or perspectives than our own? Couldry’s focus on “voice” also leads him to an emphasis on the mechanisms and ethics of active listening: what efforts should we be taking in the networked era to insure that as diverse a set of voices possible is being heard by those in power to act upon their concerns? Technological advances have lowered the barriers to producing and circulating media, but they have not yet confronted the systemic and structural obstacles that block certain voices from being heard. Accusing young people of engaging in slacktivism blames them for a problem not of their creation: if the full potentials of a more participatory culture are to be realized, we need to identify those problems which block young people from being able to translate voice into influence. The first step in this process requires educators to think more deeply about how they are fostering voice and ensuring influence in the core decisions shaping the lives of their students.

Historically, fostering voice has been a valued part of how schools have helped to prepare young people for civic engagement and political participation. For example, here’s how that need gets described by the Campaign for the Civic Missions of Schools: “Student participation in school governance provides students with civic skills that will serve them well beyond their time in school. Students who know how to make their voice heard at school will be best equipped to be active and effective in their communities at large.”<sup>21</sup> Here’s a core paradox: organizations like the Student Press Law Center report on the growing constraints placed on what students and teachers can say within the classroom, yet those students who have access to digital networks outside of school have relatively unfettered ability to create and circulate media within their peer networks. There, they often lack the kinds of adult mentorships that might help them to deploy these communication capacities responsibly and ethically. So, which of the two represents the best learning environment to help young people understand the links between voice and influence, between great power and great responsibility?

Why do we have such trouble fostering meaningful student governments in the era of Kony 2012, #blacklivesmatter, the DREAMer movement, and Occupy Wall Street, to cite just a few examples of campaigns where youth voices have played vital roles? Why do young people have so many more meaningful opportunities for civic learning, engagement, and participation outside school than within? What might educators learn from looking at the kinds of instruction and learning that are emerging within these grassroots organizations, movements, and networks that

have been effective at getting youth involved in the political process? What are the implications of these efforts for those who are teaching civics, composition, and media literacy skills? What has happened as brave educators have sought to incorporate what they've learned about participatory culture and politics into how they teach? What are successful models for new forms of civic education that are fostering an ideal of community readiness?

### About this Issue

For this special issue, we invited theoretical and applied submissions that explore how and when the practices we associate with participatory culture might be politically meaningful: both for those who participate (for whom benefits might include developing their voices and skills as citizens) and for those who receive such messages (for whom benefits might include gaining access to alternative perspectives to those represented through more mainstream media channels). We also sought to further understand the risks and limits of these particular tactics and the models of change that inform them. Finally, we were interested in how in- and out-of-school experiences can help young people learn to use their voices to influence social change. We see these concerns as central to what it means to foster digital citizenship and media literacy in the twenty-first century.

All of the articles included in this collection unpack the implications of these core concepts—voice and influence—for educators, with a particular emphasis on civics and participatory politics. Some of the articles examine what youth and activists are currently doing to support youth voice. They identify specific skills youth need as they bridge between voice and influence. Others explore the opportunities and challenges faced by educators who aim to scaffold digital media making and participatory politics in learning contexts. Taking a case study approach, they grapple with the question of what constitutes success under such circumstances.

#### *Participatory Learning Outside Schools: There Are No Digital Natives*

Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Sasha Constanza-Chock et al. both focus on digital media practices outside school contexts. These are the kinds of practices we would need to take seriously within a connected learning framework, since these are experiences that should be more fully appreciated and valued within the classroom.

Constanza-Chock et al. share findings of a collaborative research project conducted by the Global Action Project (G.A.P), DataCenter, and Research Action Design. The research project strove to understand storytelling and media making practices as defined by youth organizers around the country and found that youth “are increasingly involved in all aspects of media making—from training peers to implementing media strategy.”<sup>22</sup> Through her ethnographic study of the Nerdfighters, an informal fan community that formed around the vlogs of John and Hank Green, Kligler-Vilenchik similarly argues that “out-of-school youth-driven participatory spaces” are crucial spaces of connection and learning for the young people who get involved.<sup>23</sup>

While focused on different communities, Kligler-Vilenchik and Constanza-Chock et al. both highlight the skill development and supports young people require as they learn how to affect social change. Contrary to the myth of the digital native, which assumes such skills are widely held by anyone who came of age within the networked era, young people are not “magically imbued with multimedia production skills at birth.”<sup>24</sup> Rather, “media” making is “a critical arena of intentional struggle”<sup>25</sup> and skill development.

Kligler-Vilenchik and Constanza-Chock et al. draw on their studies to propose specific levers that can help support young people in these out-of-school contexts. Kligler-Vilenchik identifies “mechanisms of translation,” a term she uses to refer to “the ways that groups can leverage the same spaces, practices, and language that are honed in the context of online participatory cultures and are employed by participants for sociability and enjoyment, to extend participatory politics.”<sup>26</sup> Constanza-Chock et al. emphasize that media making is itself an transformative experience; they argue that the most effective media organizations

invite their members to participate in cross-platform media production that is linked directly to action, is accountable to the group whose stories are being told, and strengthens critical consciousness. This approach builds the knowledge, skills, and self-determination of participants.<sup>27</sup>

Read together, the “mechanisms of translation” and “transformative media making” emphasize on-the-ground practices that young people engage with outside of school settings, practices that can have real consequences for how they see themselves as political agents and how they are able to act upon issues that have a direct impact on their lives.

Three “Voices from the Field” contributions illustrate how different kinds of organizations are applying such values and practices through their work with young people. Janae Phillips highlights the work of the Harry Potter Alliance, an organization that fosters the civic imagination via forging connections between the Harry Potter narratives and real world social issues.<sup>28</sup> Phillips recounts her own civic journey and describes how the group’s campaigns harness the power of story to engage youth who might otherwise not be motivated to join a more conventional organization. Yomna Elsayed interviews Rawan Damen, the maker behind Palestine Remix, a online interactive project created by Al Jazeera, which allows participants to use existing documentary footage to “retell” the stories from this much-contested region.<sup>29</sup> With three million visitors, the project started out as a “fun” way to learn about Palestine but has become a tool “for educational purposes as well (both universities and schools).” Tani Ikeda (interviewed by Alexandra Margolin) recounts how ImMEDIAtE Justice, a organization that teaches “filmmaking with a feminist lens,” sees media production as an empowering process. She articulates how she and her colleagues use story as an “agent of change” that has the “capacity to shift cultural conversations.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Learning to Dialogue*

Erica Hodgkin and Carrie James et al. highlight “dialogue” as a practice “essential to maintaining a healthy democracy.”<sup>31</sup> As Hodgkin observes, digital media in particular allows opportunities for “online dialogue” to “take place anytime, anywhere,” thanks to the affordances of online forums, comment sections, and social networking sites.<sup>32</sup> But anyone who has spent time in such contexts knows that the comments posted there are not always civic, civil, or constructive, and that more work needs to be done to encourage an ethics of listening and responding in such spaces.

James et al. draw on qualitative research to explore “how digitally savvy civic youth” use such connectivity to encourage discussions of civic and political topics. Though they note that the youth in their study do deploy “moves and tactics”—like intentionally educating and strategic tone use and use of humor—“to achieve their goals,” they also observe many “uncertainties and struggles” that youth face around online political conversations.<sup>33</sup> Youth were often not sure about when and how to share politically inflected content through their social networks. They worried about “flooding people’s feeds” and unintentional audiences. Many youth wanted guidance (in the form of a peer, educator, or other adult adviser). They also found that many youth resorted to “self directed learning strategies” when it came to figuring out the best way to dialogue effectively.<sup>34</sup>

Hodgkin documents an educator response to these needs in the form of Youth Voices, “a school-based social network platform developed by NWP [National Writing Project] teachers to bring students together online to share and engage in conversation.” Designed for in-school contexts, Youth Voices stresses safety and accountability. When interviewed by Hodgkin, the students who participated in Youth Voices felt it was a “safe space focused on learning where they could be taken seriously and express themselves academically and politically.”<sup>35</sup> Hodgkin outlines specific guidelines that helped develop a dialogue etiquette:

1. Speak directly to the student or teacher whose post you are responding to.

2. Quote from the post or describe specific details.
3. Relate the work to your own experiences or to another text, image, video, or audio that this one reminds you of.
4. Be encouraging and generous with your remarks. End on a positive note.<sup>36</sup>

She recounts how some students and teachers were able to use other social media like Twitter and Facebook to garner additional visibility for stories initially circulated through Youth Voices, resulting in an online petition (on change.org) “compelling the state to provide more academic and mental health counselors for schools in high need areas.”<sup>37</sup>

#### *Goals: What Defines Success?*

Several articles in this special issue grapple with what constitutes success in digital media learning contexts. Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone, in particular, interrogate two key discourses that guide digital media programs in school and after-school programs. On one hand, they name the “voice” discourse, which posits that “equal opportunities can generate iniquitous results” and focuses on “disadvantaged groups to support their agency, creative expression, and civic engagement.”<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, they identify a rival (what they call) “entrepreneurial” discourse, which “focuses on teaching young people to use digital media technologies effectively” with the goal of providing “tangible skills” needed to “get ahead” in a “technologically advanced and increasingly competitive and precarious world.”<sup>39</sup> Fueled by what the authors identify as the “rise of neoliberalism,” the entrepreneurial discourse prioritizes “self-interest” over the more communal and civic goals stressed in the voice discourse.<sup>40</sup> Through a review of the ebbs and flows between these discourses over time, they point to a possible “linear shift from a more communal vision to an increasingly individualized one.”<sup>41</sup>

Andres Lombana-Bermudez’s study of the Cinematic Arts Project (CAP), an afterschool program at Freeway Highschool in Austin, Texas, demonstrates the challenges and complications that arise from conflicting definitions of success. Pressured to live up to the success standards defined by an earlier iteration of the program when participants and mentors succeeded in creating a feature length documentary that was accepted to a prestigious European film festival, the CAP organizers and students pushed themselves hard to create a transmedia documentary film—*Paul’s Memories*, a story told from the perspective of a man with Alzheimer’s. As Lombana’ Bermudez recounts:

The demands wore out many of the participants, especially those who assumed major responsibilities such as editing and managing. The amount of work during the last month of postproduction required some Freeway High students like Antonio to spend long hours at night working at the computer lab, unable to attend regular school classes or complete their college applications. After finishing the program, several CAP members expressed their feelings of tiredness and stress due to the amount of work required to deliver all the media texts on time. Those feelings were magnified by frustration upon learning that the film festival’s jury did not select *Paul’s Memories* and that the money they raised was not enough to sustain the large-scale program for another year.<sup>42</sup>

Here, arbitrary conceptions of what constituted success overrode both the desire to provide opportunities for youth voice and to provide training necessary for future economic success.

#### *Civic Centered Design, Usability, and Connected Learning*

How can we begin to move beyond what Livingstone and Blum-Ross describe as the “doublespeak”<sup>43</sup> created by competing discourses, funding pressures, and shifting goals? In their articles, Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis, Craig

Watkins, and Kiley Larson et al. work through specific case studies to propose possible ways forward.

Gordon and Mihailidis observe, “Institutions continue to struggle with how to provide ‘useful knowledge’ to a sufficiently wide range of students.”<sup>44</sup> They “argue that there needs to be a refocusing of the liberal arts away from usefulness and towards... usability.” They define “usability” as “knowledge characterized by its potentiality, in addition to its instrumentality,” knowledge that is “open-ended, capable of accommodating a range of user experiences, and appropriately cultivated within the social experience of learning.”<sup>45</sup>

The authors respond to their own articulation of usability through the forming of the Boston Civic Media (BCM) Consortium, which they launched to “create partnerships and synergies between higher education and community groups in order to normalize more applied, flexible, and usable models for learning.”<sup>46</sup> The authors see BCM as a “forum for university faculty and their partners in community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and government who are interested in new forms of civic agency and how they intersect with the classroom.”<sup>47</sup>

Watkins focuses on two “Advanced Game Design” courses taught at the Freeway Highschool (same location as Lombana-Bermudez’s case study). Taught through a partnership with his research team, the courses aimed to use game design as a tool for “real-world” thinking and community engagement around a specific issue (in this case childhood obesity).<sup>48</sup> The courses were taught through “civic-centered design,” which Watkins describes as generating solutions to community-based problems through an act of making, which is driven by the needs, desires, and context of the intended beneficiaries.<sup>49</sup> Watkins argues civic-centered design learning differs from more traditional learning models in significant ways:

In the traditional classroom, learning is vertical and memory-driven. More specifically, knowledge and information are dispensed in a top-down fashion insofar as teachers are positioned as the exclusive source of expertise in the classroom. By contrast, learning in the civic-centered design classroom is horizontal and inquiry-driven. That is, knowledge and information flow in multiple directions from teacher-to-student, student-to-student, and even student-to-teacher. In the traditional classroom learning is memory-driven. As a result, assessment is typically based on how well students can memorize classroom facts. In the civic-centered design classroom learning is inquiry-driven. Assessment is based on how well a student can probe a community-based challenge and develop innovative solutions. Whereas the traditional classroom situates learning as a linear path to mastering already established facts, the civic-centered design classroom situates learning as a messy journey to discovering knowledge and the capacity for change.<sup>50</sup>

The horizontal structure of civic centered designed classroom also necessarily supports and encourages student voice. In fact, it cannot function without it.

Watkins admits the project faced practical challenges stemming from connectivity issues, lack of familiarity with software, and home situations that did not support “out-of-school engagement with school assignments.”<sup>51</sup> A member of the Connected Learning Network, Watkins observes that “the effort to link the students’ learning and game-creation practices to activities outside of the classroom via more informal modes of information gathering and knowledge production is, in theory, a good idea. However, for many of the students that we worked with, engagement with academic learning was primarily a school-based activity.”<sup>52</sup>

Focused on the Regenerate Chicago Neighborhoods (RCN) project that took place at Journey (a charter school), Kiley Larson et al. recount “how a collaboration between formal and informal educators, working with under-resourced and non-dominant youth, created civic learning opportunities for students that bridged their in- and out-of-school lives by allowing them to explore issues relevant to their neighborhoods.”<sup>53</sup> The project asked students to identify problems impacting their local communities and to propose practical solutions that might improve their lives. Rooted in the connected learning framework, the project urged students to put Dewey’s “democracy as a way of

life” into action in their local contexts. Through the first person student reflections included in Larson’s study, we learn how the project impacted the youth involved. As one student, Neel, explained,

I’ve been living in my neighborhood for, like, four years now, and before this project, I’ve never even considered anything about my neighborhood. It was kind of like, I just go home, and then I leave to go to school or whatever. I don’t look around and see what could be improved. Now, every time I leave my neighborhood, I look back and I’m like, “Hmm, this could be improved, or this could be cleaned up.” That kind of opens your mind to your neighborhood and how you can improve it.<sup>54</sup>

Though the RCN project also faced its own set of challenges (neighborhood violence that constrained exploration, challenges of translating between interests and civic action), it still succeeded in shifting participants’ interest and confidence levels as they started to voice their concerns as citizens: “Linking students’ neighborhood experiences to their in-school learning and scaffolding ways to meaningfully engage with community members and stakeholders also provided students with roadmaps for continued civic engagement.”<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion—Moving Forward

We began this essay with the story of Carol Zou, the young yarnbomber who has become a mentor to help other youth harness their voices to influence issues confronting their communities. We will end with another story we found through our research on young activists. We had encountered Lauren Bird some seven years ago when we did our first interviews with young people affiliated with the Harry Potter Alliance, an organization that taps into the shared references and infrastructure of fandom in support of various human rights struggles around the world.

At the time, Bird was first finding a voice as an activist, attracted to the group because of the opportunity it offered Bird to deploy creative and expressive skills already acquired through participation within Harry Potter fandom. In those early interviews, Bird described some disappointment at the ways that formal schooling had failed to offer compelling models of civic engagement:

I wasn’t terribly civically engaged when I was younger. I had some teachers who told us of the importance of watching the news and being responsible citizens, and I followed that advice as best I could, but the contents of the news or just what being a “responsible citizen” meant, were rarely discussed... I wish I had had more grown up examples of diverse and critical thinking. I wish there had been more teachers who were talking about current events or about how to get involved in our communities.

For many young people, their path into civic engagement and political participation includes dinner table conversations with their parents, civic teachers who bring political leaders and current events into their classrooms, volunteering in community organizations, and participation in after-school activities around student government or journalism. For Bird, the entry was primarily through the informal mentorship fandom offered: fandom taught Bird ways to write fiction, to edit videos, and to share perspectives about stories that mattered.

Through its mechanisms of translation, the Harry Potter Alliance was able to spark Bird’s civic imagination, motivating participation in a range of social justice campaigns. (Read Janae Phillips’s contribution to this issue for another account of this organization and the impact it had on yet another young woman on her path from fan to activist.) Bird became a key player behind the scenes on the group’s Not in Harry’s Name efforts, which sought to challenge Warner Brothers for contracting with companies not certified as fair trade-compliant in the production of the chocolate frogs and other confections sold at their Harry Potter-themed attractions. Bird also became the central figure in another video that used images and events from *Hunger Games* to talk about economic inequalities. Month by month, Bird shared thoughts about life, fiction, and current events through podcasts and video blogs circulated amongst HPA members. In many of these cases, these campaigns did exert influence—including getting Warner

Brothers to shift its contracts and to acknowledge the young activists for having helped to inform their decision.

Last spring, during one of the regular HPA podcasts, Bird came out as transgender, publically adopting the name, Jackson: “As a spokesperson and video creator, you are confronted with how you look and how people perceive you on a daily basis. I am still being treated and labeled in ways that don’t conform to how I actually feel inside... I just want to be me, all the time, without having to think about everything.” As she puts it, once she’s said it on the Internet, the world will know. So “break out the gummy bears.”<sup>56</sup>

But for Jackson, the task has just begun, and Bird uses the rest of the video to share his own sense of what it means to be transgender, why transgender politics matter, and how his own gender identity was formed and deformed through various media representations. As Bird continues, “I have been reminding myself of how important it is to share their stories and experiences. And it is important for me to be honest because I have to acknowledge that I weirdly kinda have a slight platform right now and to not use that is selfish.” Being part of the Harry Potter Alliance had helped Bird to find his voice, to begin to feel like there was an audience that listened to what he had to say, to have some early collective victories in terms of influencing key decisions that impacted his life, and to experience some sense of responsibility to the larger society around him. Bird’s coming out video was widely circulated across the HPA network and beyond, providing a platform for Bird to give an account of himself to the world and through this process, perhaps to influence how many young people thought about gender and sexual identities. For us, Jackson Bird’s trajectory represents the power of participatory politics at play.

Like many of the other young activists we interviewed, Bird found his civic path not inside the classroom but pursuing his outside interests. The HPA has been held up as a model for ways that organizations can scaffold young people as they acquire core media and civic literacies required to change the world. Yet, we are hoping that the educators reading this issue will consider how they might incorporate some lessons from these grassroots organizations into their interactions with their students. As the Connected Learning Research Network has shown us, bringing such practices into the classroom can be empowering because they provide recognition for what young people have found meaningful and rewarding outside school. Only a small subset of young people will find these kinds of experiences on their own, and schools have an important role to play in making such skills and knowledge more widely available.

We asked Bird to share his own thoughts about what young people could do to create a more supportive environment for young citizens:

“Meet the kids where they’re at. I mean that in terms of interest, in terms of technology, even in terms of messaging. Do your students spend all their time on Facebook? Make them join a Facebook group for the class or about issues related to the project so that when they’re aimlessly scrolling their feed, they can’t help but see things related to class. It might not get them to take action, but it’ll get them thinking. Incorporate the pop culture interests they’re talking about. Be genuine and authentic with all of this. The best way to do that is by giving young people a voice. Act as a facilitator, not lecturer.”

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## About Sangita Shresthova & Henry Jenkins

Henry Jenkins was the founder and co-director of the MIT Program in Comparative Media Studies and now serves as the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California. He has published seventeen books on various aspects of new media, popular culture, and public life, starting with *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* in 1992. His most recent books have included *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick in the Literature Classroom*; *Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture*; and the forthcoming *By Any Media Necessary: Mapping Youth and Participatory Politics*. In addition to his academic publishing, Henry blogs regularly at [henryjenkins.org](http://henryjenkins.org). He serves on the Jury of the Peabody Awards, as chief advisor to the Annenberg Innovation Lab, as a member of the MacArthur Foundation's Youth and Participatory Politics Network, and on the advisory board for Disney Jr.

Sangita Shresthova is the Director of the MacArthur funded Henry Jenkins' Media, Activism & Participatory Politics (MAPP) project based at the University of Southern California. MAPP focuses on civic participation in the digital age and includes research, educator outreach, and partnerships with community groups and media organizations, and companies. Sangita's own scholarly work focuses on the intersections among popular culture, performance, new media, politics, and globalization. She holds a Ph.D. from UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures and MSc. degrees from MIT and LSE. Her book on Bollywood dance and globalization (*Is It All About Hips?*) was published by SAGE Publications in 2011. Drawing on her background in Indian dance and new media, she is also the founder of Bollynatyam's Global Bollywood Dance Project. Her more

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