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CHILDREN, MEDIA, & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Beyond home and school: community-based media and youth voice on pandemic life in the United States

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"I got a glitch for y'all"

"Back with another video. I got a glitch for y'all. Imaboutta bless, Imaboutta bless." On the second day of a city-wide early work program for low-income youth in one of America's largest municipalities, a teen experiencing yet another remote learning set-up took to YouTube to share a "glitch" that offered a shortcut to meeting mandated use requirements of a program-wide learning app.

A basketball game played on a TV in the background, sneakers squeaking on floorboards as the narrator trained his phone's camera on an iPad and explained the workaround he'd discovered. He ranged from sharing irritation at what he saw as a cookie-cutter learning experience ("it's so dumb bro, this is so annoying") to feigning deference to an off-screen authority figure ("yessir, yessir") as he tapped through the interface, to excitement as he shared his discovery with his teen audience. A telling comment under the video expressed deep gratitude: "You deadass saved my life, this shit had me stressed fr [for real]."

Two tropes of youth media engagement during COVID

In this short video, two competing tropes of youth media engagement during COVID-19 were on display: institutions issuing one-size-fits-all digital prescriptions, and youth creating peer-to-peer media about what's important to them (including subverting the institutions they participate in).

Across the United States, educational institutions struggled to respond to the pandemic. Presented with the need to rapidly pivot to remote learning on the order of weeks while also facing an austerity environment of immediate budget cuts, many struggled and reached for scalable solutions that were "plug and play". This was certainly the policy context at play in our example. And while the choice to look to such solutions is understandable, so are the reactions of young people to the resultant learning experiences: frustration, lack of agency, and efforts to game the system.

At the same time, teen media engagement under COVID had a counterpoint to institutional experiences like "Zoom school". During lockdowns, social and interest-driven media engagement became more central to their lives than ever. But, in line

with pre-pandemic trends (Day et al., 2020), most were engaging with media in order to "hang out" and "mess around", with media practices that involve teens "geeking out" independently (Ito et al., 2010) likely remaining in the minority.

However, it's important that we don't allow these dominant tropes of youth media practice to cloud our view of what's possible during this crisis, and how youth might engage in creative media making that supports them to give voice to their experiences of the pandemic in line with approaches, ones that far predate the COVID crisis, that blend informal educational environments with youth voice and expression (Jocson, 2018).

Youth voice via community-based media making

As part of a rapid response research effort focused on youth and organizations participating in remote, community-based summer programming that was part of the same municipal initiative referenced earlier, the authors were privileged to see modes of youth media engagement that might provide more expansive possibilities for how youth can give voice around their experiences of the pandemic than the dominant narratives outlined above. We see such practices and opportunities as having heightened value in a precarious historical moment with attendant development turbulence, one in which youths' relationships to media, identity, voice, and political context are intertwined (Sloam, 2014). The examples we share provide an alternative frame that might inspire possibilities for youth voice through creative media engagement supported by caring adults.

Day in the teen-COVID life: TikTok, vulnerability, and making space

In one program, black female teens gathered each week with their mentors, a group of five black female entrepreneurs, to design a product that responded to a local problem in their communities. In front of a public virtual audience, youth opened their final product presentation with a series of short original TikToks that portrayed a day in their life during remote learning. In looping videos overlaid with voice-overs, pictures and emojis, they play-acted scenes of their everyday struggles – charging devices that ran out of battery, oversleeping for a Zoom meeting, being too distracted to learn – conveying anxiety, frustration, and, in some cases, depression.

These youth-initiated videos drew on an established routine in the program – entrepreneur mentors checking in on youth daily, asking them how they are doing and what was going on for them in their lives. As one entrepreneur mentor reflected, the TikTok presentation,

> . . . speaks to the power of creating space, because we didn't ask them to share that. That's just something that they all wanted to express. It's a testament to the practice of being human with them, and then letting them know that we're gonna hold the space for it . . . I think that them being vulnerable and transparent about what was going on for them was . . . It's a practice. It's a social skill that they can continue to use as they're dealing with the rest of the school year and beyond.

The practice of being vulnerable and transparent extended into their TikToks. By openly discussing and creating media to portray the impacts of the Coronavirus on their lives, one youth reflected that she was able to:

> … understand more about the situation and you accept the situation, what you can do to change it. It felt good talking to people who understood what's going on, what's happening and it relieved some of my stress.

The daily encouragement to share openly was especially supportive for one teen, who reflected that when she first began the program, "I didn't wanna open up to nobody. I didn't want to talk," But her TikTok about how COVID impacted her day-to-day life allowed her to express qualities of her personality that were not always present during discussions about the pandemic:

> when I do TikToks I feel more goofy. I just feel like I can just show my whole self. So me doing that … it made me bring out my true self. … People probably thought that I was just quiet or I'm just chill, but I'm actually really goofy and quirky.

It's worth considering this reflection in the context of remote learning where young people are experiencing constant streams of Zoom meetings, and the ways that a particular emergent genre of media production and expression – TikTok – felt like it afforded possibilities for honestly, vulnerability, and playfulness. While there are tensions associated with adults entering youth media spaces, in this case youth brought a genre they felt comfortable with into a context largely shaped by adults, authoring and inserting their voice in ways relevant to their lives and identities.

"Turning the camera on ourselves": youth documentary production about the "dual crisis"

In a second case, a youth documentary production program (Goodman, 2003) acted as a space for researching, reflecting, and representing experiences of the "dual crisis" of the COVID pandemic and racial injustice. As one young person put it, they got to "turn the camera on ourselves" to examine what life was like for them and their loved ones during a tumultuous time.

One of the facilitators, a documentary filmmaker, described how in the first weeks of the five week program the group "spent a lot of time building community, having more kinda deep conversations", which were a jumping off point for developing pitches. Abdul, one of the teens, shared about the brainstorming process:

> It was interesting because we had complete freedom to choose whatever we wanted, which was hard … […] everyone is gonna have crazy ideas, right? But then after brainstorming a bit, we chose to make something a lot more relatable to times now.

In two documentaries – one focused on racism, the other on student experiences of home, school, and mental health during COVID – we see what was alive for them on display. One opened with youth arranged in that all-too familiar configuration of Zoom tiles, sharing one by one about their experience of remote schooling over the Spring:

> I was a hands on learner, and I really depended on my teachers to help me a lot.

> I became such a slow worker and lost motivation to work harder.

> I was very much not motivated, I was not trying to do that work, I was like, I don't think I can do this. I'm sorry.

Later in the video, a teen interviewed her mother about what she saw as positive things that came out of being in quarantine. Her parent reflected on the ways they got to spend time together that they otherwise wouldn't and the deep conversations they had.

Speaking about their collective experience, youth shared about bonds they formed, and the importance of being able to have something in their lives that contrasted with what "everyday" had become. As Abdul shared, it was something:

> … other than sitting at home all day doing nothing, or being depressed. […] Like online schooling right now is just ridiculous. So just having something that you can just put all your heart into. Such an experience was really, really amazing for me.

In this reflection, we see the importance and value that youth in the program placed on the opportunity to, as Abdul put it, "put all their heart" into something that felt both personally meaningful, while also being timely and relevant.

Media-making as a locus of power for youth during COVID

After months of "Zoom school" and mandated learning apps, it's notable that when given the opportunity to make media, youth in both of these examples opted to focus on making their voices heard when it came to their experiences of the pandemic – something especially important as youths' locus of power and agency have been heavily disrupted by it (Day et al., 2020; Gabriel, Brown, León, & Outley, 2020). Occupying spaces where they felt cared for, and where they felt that their voices mattered, they used them to show others their experiences during this tumultuous time. In some ways, none of this is too surprising, but it shows something important – that teen media engagement can transcend reductive tropes associated with home and school and can instead be an avenue for them to speak about their experience during a moment where their lives have been upended.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Rafi Santo (PhD), principal researcher at Telos Learning, is a learning scientist focused on the intersection of digital culture, institutional change, and educational justice. His scholarship spans multiple levels of activity—from understanding youths' cross-setting learning pathways to investigating policy implementation and organizational network design—in order to develop practical insights that come from a holistic perspective. Rafi holds affiliations with Sesame Workshop, CSforALL, and the Hive NYC Learning Network.

David Phelps (PhD) is a researcher committed to serving youth and educators by designing, facilitating and studying innovative learning environments. He's designed and facilitated a wide range of learning environments that engage youth in collective interest-driven inquiry, highlighting the incredible inquiry competencies of young learners. Additionally, he studies how educators navigate issues of power and equity within systems change as they attempt to implement innovative learning environments at scale.

Colin Angevine is an independent researcher, facilitator, and designer. His perspective draws from previous experiences: as an educator (in middle and high schools), a technologist (in edtech and legal tech startups), and as a researcher (in graduate studies of Learning Sciences and Technologies). Most recently, Colin bridged these roles at a Digital Promise, where he facilitated collaborative research and development projects with educators, researchers, and technologists in education.

Alexandra Lotero is the Director of Research-Practice Partnerships at Student Success Network, where her mission is to co-create research knowledge with practitioners and youth so that it is relevant, accessible, and applied to improve practice in youth programs and classrooms. She is focused on measuring and improving youth social-emotional learning and conducts research with youth workers to document how they foster young people's social and emotional development.

Lucy Herz is the co-founder of Student Success Network. She has led the design, development and implementation of SSN's program, including building systems to help organizations collect and use data to drive improvement and creating and facilitating spaces for organizations to develop solutions to shared challenges around supporting youths' socio-emotional health and development. She holds a Master of Public Administration from New York University.

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