Child and youth engagement: civic literacies and digital ecologies

Guest Editors: Chelsey Hauge*[a] & Jennifer Rowsell[b]

[a] Independent Scholar; [b] School of Education, University of Bristol, UK

With a rise in participatory media, there has been a hopefulness about how networked media spurs on youth leadership and civic engagement, offering opportunities and power to marginalised voices and communities that are historically under-represented. As more communities began to use these networks, and as organizations and institutions began to harness digital media and creative practices for the explicit purpose of *empowerment,* arguments around the technological determinism and the politics of hopeful futurity began to emerge (Hauge & Bryson, 2014; Lesko & Talburt, 2012; MacIntosh, Poyntz, & Bryson, 2012; Warschauer & Ames, 2010). As a scholarly community, we have noticed the ways that young people traverse global mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996), crafting stories that move through networks that are far flung and as they do so they play important roles in global culture, and they braid together civic and digital literacies. As young people play on the terrain of global mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996), they contribute and shift them, offering us new ways to imagine our lives, creating and transforming what is possible through the contribution of their own narratives, perspectives, and stories. This is especially true in March 2020 when so many young people took to social media to share their COVID-19 anxieties in a time of uncertainty.

These critiques and the frequent challenging and disempowering experiences of some young people urged us towards more critical ways of thinking about the politics of how we make sense of and understand communication across global networks where the politics of difference – including race, sexuality, gender, class, dis/ability – consistently manifest and emerge. Despite the sometimes painful and often subaltern challenges and relationships that occur in media networks, youth organizing, and the creative production of storytelling, this set of articles insists on what Jose Muñoz might call a *critical politics of hope.* In this way, we insist on bringing together the material and lived experiences (Pahl & Rowsell, with Collier et al., 2020) of young people who *continue* to insist on the creation of digital stories and community with a more nuanced understanding of power, agency and what it means to engage in civic literacies as we strive for and imagine something closer to equity.

It is in this spirit that we have the honour to feature this Special Issue of *Discourse.* Each article explores the role of media and technologies to pursue civic literacies and

---

* Corresponding author's email: chelseyhauge@gmail.com

digital equity. With determination and insistence, children, teenagers, and young adults in the special issue disrupt normative, classed, sexist, and racist beliefs and practices to make room for their own stories and to carve out agentic spaces. There is nothing timid about their productions and practices, they are filled with vitality, drive, affect and lived experiences built on open communication and genuine, felt notions of equity and civic participation. There is a tapestry feel to the special issue. An arts-media-digital tapestried tour of: moving image work, Twitter, livestreaming, gaming, makerspaces, memes and hashtags, tablets and finishing off with the arts, the issue moves across contexts, ethnicities, and technologies to push back, insist, and disrupt. It is a journey through digital ecologies with a common goal of social change and determined innovative productions.

There is a distinct character to analytical work borne out in the special issue that involves relationality and a sense of community. This relational property functions on two levels. One level involves communities of individuals within a common space reacting to what they regard as inequities, injustices, and challenges. The other level involves institutional and normed beliefs exerting these same unjust, unfair, and challenging forces (e.g., conventions, law, media-driven, etc.) that people relate to and push against on local, lived levels. Texts produced or used as a result of two relations/interactions represent what we refer to in the special issue as civic literacies. It is not necessarily the particular character or properties of civic literacies as they are expressed in the papers that follow, but instead the fact that what is intrinsic to each one is provocation, disruption, and an enduring desire to *not* accept normative life – they consistently disrupt dynamics of racism, sexism, classism, and hetero-normativity. These provocations materialize within designs and on screens.

The special issue begins with an article by Dahya and King and their film work with black youth in Seattle. The authors speak of 'critical moments of influence' that are located within the youths' worlds – institutional structures, barriers and walls that reinforce social and cultural norms in educational settings. These critical moments of influence circulate in institutional spaces and in the language of official texts and signage that reinforce in subtle and not-so-subtle ways who is in and who is out. Applying Soep's (2014) framework, the young people in Dahya and King's study talk about and problematize these normed discourses and images and design and produce films based on these dialogues. Curating and investigating a range of still images, sources, live footage, youth produce short films as acts of civic literacy. Such participatory work is built through a web of relations, conversations and commiserations and like-minded design practices to assert a particular stance (Rowsell, 2020) on inequities. This dynamic and creative group of black teens and their educational staff alongside Dahya and King uncover oppressive structures and pervasive, racist interpretations in media. They reveal how women of colour are out of place and othered in visual work. Their interpretations of visual culture consider what Dahya and King describe as the dualisms – closed and open, protected and vulnerable, youth-driven and adult controlled – where oppressive structures are embedded in visual cultures that claim to overcome them. As Pyles (2017) says, 'to uncover youth voice, one must uncover the structure behind the context in which the youth are using their voices to see what is being allowed or disallowed' (p. 9). Dahya and King offer readers a space to think about how young people leverage moments of influence to tell their stories and voice their feelings and convictions.

Following black youth's filmmaking, activist work, Hauge telescopes into how Bana Alabed, a child living in conflict in Syria, visualizes and communicates about her world. Focusing in on the Twitter world Bana has created, she shows the power of her tweets to make change happen. Hauge exposes how Twitter and other social media platforms offer a critical politics of hope through the participatory networks and digital community. Harnessing her theorizing to Ahmed's notion of sweaty concepts, she illustrates how Bana yields multiple insights through the words and images that she tweets. Reading through Bana's Twitter feed it appears that her innocent framing of a war-torn country filled with upheaval represents an effort to make sense of the impossible, as Hauge expresses it, 'it is a refusal to put up with a world' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12) that feels harmful and dismissive – in her case, a refusal to put up with living at the center of the war and encountering a feeling of being forgotten. For Ahmed (2017), it is the *refusal* that engenders creative response. In foregrounding Bana's rendering of a city at war, Hauge shows readers how social media makes Bana into an embodied girl on the one hand, and a cultural construction as filtered through and made sticky by her girlhood.

The next article by Ehret and Čiklovan illustrates how speculative design experiments in digital education research help to come to terms with the technocultural changes that have taken place within digital social life. The article specifically examines a speculative design experiment, wherein Ehret and Čiklovan produced a critical remix video as intervention into the spread of toxic technocultural discourse on Twitch.tv (Twitch), an online platform in which content creators stream live content alongside a live chat audience. As a vehicle for social change, speculative design experiments allow youth to engage in digital practices that explore and develop new pedagogic potentials. Ehret and Čiklovan are particularly concerned with how regulating what the authors call toxicity online may be engendered in coming generations of young people who will and do compose such communities, through targeted critical, digital literacy education. This brand of critical literacy education addresses such issues of concern as cyberbullying within online gaming environments. Part of their argument rests on three key concepts: amplification, waving, and network influencing. Each of these terms are enacted within streamed live content coupled with live chat conversations.

The fourth article explores the world of stereotypes and prejudice in videogames. Hawreliak and Lemieux give readers an in-depth and provocative look at gaming, urging scholars to critically reflect on videogame content and characterization. The demographic make-up of most major game studios continues to skew heavily white and male and, according to Hawreliak and Lemieux, videogames continue to serve as a breeding ground for hateful ideologies like white supremacy, toxic masculinity, and homophobia. Through a series of case studies, they argue convincingly that videogames can critique oppressive systems such as wealth inequality, white supremacy, misogyny, and homophobia. Though they acknowledge an abundance of male-dominated gaming narratives, there has been progress in making games more inclusive, open, and equitable. In their article, they conduct a qualitative analysis of in-game representations through the notion of 'close-playing' (Chang, 2010) coupled with multimodal discourse analysis. They conclude the article with caution to game developers on how they use multimodal mediation to disrupt intolerant, unjust gaming cultures.

Following this in-depth look at the gaming world, Hébert and Jenson dive deep into the world of e-textiles and makerspaces. They advance a perspective on making that is

participatory, reflective and firmly situated in materials. Calling attention to gaps in knowledge within the field on the intricacies of sewing and coding, the research study strongly illustrates the potential for maker pedagogies for future curricula. Giving students the opportunity to work on a project that they could then take home and wear allowed them to take ownership of the learning process and it liberated teachers involved in the research. It is an article that focuses more on the stuff of digital work from smart watches to e-textiles to circuitry, Hébert and Jenson show how a group of young people navigate their own learning through a series of questions and challenges that they work through because they are interested and invested in the process.

Moving into the realm of hashtags and memes, Mihailidis shares the results of an investigation in how young people understand and employ popular social communication modalities – memes and hashtags – for civic purposes. With an awareness of the ubiquitous cultures, Mihailidis considers how young people navigate online ecosystems as a part of their everyday to share, create and express their beliefs, interests, and motivations. While there exist an abundance of readily available platforms and technologies for young people, the young people in this study take full advantage of online material to reuse, recycle, and civically participate. The study uses *Emerging Citizens*: a suite of digital multiplayer games and digital literacy learning content that teach people of all ages how to critique and create civic media. Mihailidis conducted one of the larger studies in the special issue with 93 young people from ages 13–17 in four public schools in greater Boston, Massachusetts. Through a participatory action research design, the research probed the impact of the *Emerging Citizens* digital games on how young people understand the role of memes and hashtags for civic voice and agency in daily life. Circling back to a recurrent special issue theme of civic literacies, Mihailidis underscores the potential of civic media literacy interventions to create powerful creation-centered, maker-based learning experiences.

Moving into public schooling, McKee and Heydon profile a research study that examines curriculum-making as a form of civic engagement. The research conceptualized professional learning within a community of practice model (Wenger, 1998) that positions learning as active processes of negotiating situated 'new meanings' that are nurtured through supportive relationships. Although digital cultures are clearly present, what runs to the heart of the article and its message about civic literacies is inquiry. In exploring professional learning that provokes learners keenly interested in digital cultures, they identify how children have tremendous capacity for meaning making that spurs on social change.

The special issue concludes with an article by Burgess on adult language learners who apply multimodal practices to resist stereotypes and prejudice. The article provides a glimpse of an English-as-an-Additional adult language environment that is almost entirely taught through multimodal pedagogies and with a goal of resisting prejudice and power imbalances. Through autoethnographic inquiry, a writing of the self, this article argues that affectively charged moments in literacy and language settings should be recognized as Deleuzian sense-events that are resistant to interpretation. There is tremendous promise and possibility to taking a sensory lens on language teaching and learning and by moving outside of more rigid linguistic paradigms.

As a collective, the papers insist on disrupting normative relationships and constitute 'a refusal to put up with a world' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12). There is a hopefulness and

optimism through social media worlds that is borne out in contemporary times as we witness youth responses to a global pandemic. This sense of hopefulness that young people can and do continuously engage in material practices of making, carving out spaces for storytelling, and disrupting the ways of knowing and being that feel hopelessly shaped by neoliberal politics. These practices nurture hopefulness and we see this hope as a response to inequity and impossibility, a response to noticing and making visible what is typically understood to be the subaltern, the impossible. These papers showcase moments of provocation as they manifest on screens and in digital networks, and insist on valuing and focusing on and even enabling discord, critique, creative response that cause *friction* as possibility.

Anna Tsing (2005) writes about global networks and connectivity, arguing that moments of friction are bound to occur and that it is in fact, these moments that produce change and even, possibility. Tsing offers the concept of friction from her transnational ethnographic work to describe the relationship between the local and the global. Thought through this set of papers of global civic literacies, friction is a useful concept for describing the cultural production youth do when they make creative media representations, allowing us to consider their situatedness in the global landscape as well as their particular engagement at the local level. Friction gives us a way to think about how the stories, digital communities, and civic literacies that happen in global digital networks are organized. As young people move through these networks and participate in them, how and what they know comes to life through their stories, and those textual representations produce a sense of friction that carves space for youth voice and possibility. The papers in this Special Issue notice and nurture this possibility.

Acknowledgements

References

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization* (1st ed.). Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.

Chang, E. (2010). *Close-playing, a meditation on teaching (with) video games.* 11 November. http://www.edmondchang.com/2010/11/11/close-playing-a-meditation/

Hauge, C., & Bryson, M. K. (2014). Gender and development in youth media. *Feminist Media Studies, 15*(2), 287–305. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.919333

Lesko, N., & Talburt, S. (2012). Enchantment. In N. Lesko, & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 279–289). New York: Routledge.

MacIntosh, L., Poyntz, S. R., & Bryson, M. K. (2012). Internet. In N. Lesko, & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies: Tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 213–218). New York: Routledge.

Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J., with D. Collier, S. Pool, Z. Rasool, & T. Trzecak. (2020). *Living literacies*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Pyles, D. G. (2017). A social semiotic mapping of voice in youth media: The pitch in youth video production †. *Learning, Media and Technology*, *42(*1), 8–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2016.1095209

Rowsell, J. (2020). 'How emotional do I make it?' Making a stance in multimodal compositions. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy.* Published online January 10 https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1034

Soep, E. (2014). *Participatory politics: Next-generation tactics to remake public spheres*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Tsing, A. L. (2005). *Friction: An ethnography of global connection.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Warschauer, M., & Ames, M. (2010). Can one laptop per child save the world's poor? *Journal of International Affairs*, *64*(1), 33–53.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.