

Young People, New Media, and Visual Design: An Exploratory Study

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This article¹ will follow contemporary critical approaches to media education, youth, learning, and literacy by considering these as conceptual constellations that remain alert to the existing social realities and life-worlds of young people and their communities. The proposed paper shall identify two initiatives as case studies to explore how the praxis of media education is being carried out, especially among young adults from India. Praxis may be understood “as a social or pedagogical process which enlists human efforts to understand the world more accurately in conjunction with a political will to transform social practices and relations.”² To this end, the article will outline some major arguments about connecting theory and practice. It shall begin with a brief historical review of literature on studies and writings pertaining to youth participation in the media and media literacy models. Further, it develops and builds literature on recent work in cultural and media theory, as well as scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and philosophy to demonstrate the emergence of new models that seek to blend theory with praxis.

Through an examination of two initiatives from India, this article demonstrates how theory and praxis are indeed integrated in the media education practices pursued by young people. In creating and producing a variety of media content, the youth provide interesting perspectives on the local-global relationships which goes beyond the dominant understanding of the dialectic relations between the local and global contexts. For instance, young people raise crucial questions about power modalities around gender, poverty, and other generational and socio-economic inequities. In a preliminary manner, this article will explore some of the issues identified above, and suggest some possible connections with youth media education practices in the United States, and the role of media educators in fostering a globalist approach.

¹ The article is adapted from my UNESCO book, *Innovative Practices of Youth Participation in Media*.

² Sholle and Denski, 1993.

Media Education: Youth, Learning, and Literacy

The paradigm of media education, as it is generally understood and applied in several contexts,³ will be critiqued from a variety of theoretical and praxis-oriented angles. A considerable amount of scholarship has opened-up fresh perspectives on youth, learning, and literacy. This emerging work is more than a revision of the earlier paradigm. For instance, as a social category, ‘youth’ has been trapped in a single universal definition drawn from western-based epistemology, disregarding the multiple ways in which youth actually live in different regions of the world (Besley and Peters, 2005; Soto and Swadener 2002; UN World Youth Report, 2005). According to this definition, youth has been characterized as “persons-in-the-making,” always in the state of “deficit,” plotted along a linear and strategist model. The critiques point out that this understanding of youth has been produced in social sciences research and numerous governmental and policy-related legislations that view ‘youth as a problem’ with an increased emphasis on “control within education and training.” Further complicating this problem has been the persistent use of terms like “teenagers,” “adolescent,” “youth,” that have been used interchangeably.

Contemporary discussions in critical media literacy⁴ grapple with what UNESCO had very aptly outlined over two decades ago through this following statement: “We must prepare young people for living in a world of powerful images, words, and sounds.”⁵ With the emergence of new paradigms and models, media literacy among young adults has become a focus of several institutions and organizations. Recent scholarship on young adults have begun to question the developmental models that view young people as “persons in the making,” thereby denying agency. The emerging new paradigms consider youth as protagonists who are capable of making decisions, exercising choices, and more importantly, as individuals who are active agents in promoting democratic processes and civic engagement. This is an innovative approach toward inculcating a critical stance among young people about the media world—a world where powerful images, words and sounds create reality. Here young people are provided opportunities to learn through their experience of visual images and words.

³ The acquisition of technical, analytical and creative skills usually applied in classroom situations, curriculum development, and policy related legislations.

⁴ Buckingham, 2003; Feilitzen and Carlsson, 2002; Hobbs, 2006; Sefton-Green, 1998; Lankshear and McLaren, 1993.

⁵ UNESCO, 1982.

Interestingly, most of these contemporary perspectives have looked back to earlier contributions of John Dewey and Paulo Freire—two original thinkers of education, democracy, and human development—to sketch models of learning and literacy. Dewey’s theory of education, with its emphasis on interaction, reflection, and experience, and Freire’s insights on dialogical education⁶ and developing consciousness has shaped contemporary discussions of media education, learning and literacy. Consequently, it becomes important to pursue this field as a broad rubric where principles and practices are interlinked in terms of a “constellation,” that is dynamic and open-ended. A major influence that is driving these discussions is the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) that play a significant role in enhancing youth participation and involvement in media. Recent scholarship in new media⁷ points to the relevance of ICTs in education and youth development. Indeed, the role of ICTs and the notion of “media mixes” have been crucial in elaborating youth participation and involvement in the media that enable learning and education through fun and pleasure.

Methodology

Technological convergence and innovations are reshaping the media in content creation and distribution. Print, electronic and digital forms overlap and become simultaneously available, thereby providing an interesting *mélange* of older information and communication technologies (ICTs) with newer forms. The emergence of computers, the Internet, the World Wide Web, and various mobile communication devices has raised optimism among developmental agencies and media education practitioners. There are two responses: one celebratory and euphoric and the other cautious, but optimistic. Several agencies and organizations are engaged in developing policies and programs that are cautious and optimistic. Consequently, questions are asked and discussions carried-out on the transformative potential of these emergent ICTs for children and young people. In this context, it is appropriate to ask how these technologies could enable enhanced participation and help overcome barriers to education. In what ways, if at all, do children and young people interact with these technologies? In the following sections, I look at two initiatives from India where children and young people are exploring new media technologies for informal learning, personal and social development.

⁶ Frymer, 2005.

⁷ Buckingham, 2003; Greene, 2003; Hobbs, 2006.

The wide-ranging examples of youth participation in the media and the dialogical and experiential process of learning goes beyond the instrumental acquisition of skills and techniques. The case studies, limited to developing, least developed, and under developed regions of the world, cover various media—newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the new media—particularly the multiple uses of the Internet. A sample of forty media and youth programs, drawn after an exhaustive survey of a range of materials,⁸ were carefully studied to determine the best examples of innovative use and youth participation in the media. The rationale for selecting the two programs as case studies was based on the criteria that youth were viewed as active agents rather than “persons in the making.”

Youth-led initiatives offer good examples of how young people can be involved in the media. In such initiatives, youth involvement is not a singular act: rather an active and collective process of learning. Within these social settings, young people create and develop their own perspectives and knowledge. Participation provides young people a context and community to explore imaginations and ideas. This process of learning, situating educational activity in the lived experience of young people, is dialogical and open-ended. The various media become more than facilitators and instruments; they enable and mediate learning and literacy. They become “social networks” of learning where the focus is not in creating media content; rather, sketching narratives and stories in the manner of Dewey’s idea of “learning by doing” and Freire’s notion of “conscientization.”

Two Initiatives

The *Cybermohalla* initiative began in 2001 through an experimental collaborative project between Sarai project of the Centre for the study of Developing Societies and Ankur; an NGO from Delhi involving young people living in slum settlements and working class neighbourhoods in Delhi. The main aim is to give a forum where young people not only explore their creativity, but also comment on the social and moral topics that impact their lives. This is an interesting innovative use and participation of youth in the new media. Young people take their experimental works into their “mohallas”—alleys and neighbourhoods—for ongoing

⁸ These include journals, books, and web resources. For instance, *What works in Youth Media* by Sheila Kinkade (2003), published by the International Youth Foundation, *A Closer Look: Case Studies in Youth Media Production* edited by Kathleen Tyner (2004), numerous media education-literacy websites like NORDICOM, MAGIC-UNICEF, Center for Media Literacy, and others.

conversations and dialogues. *Mapping the Neighbourhood*, introduced in 2002 and funded by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India—an initiative of the NGO, Centre for Science Development and Media Studies (CSDMS). The main purpose of the project is to provide school children opportunities to learn about their regional geography and landscape and share this with other members of the community. The school children learn about global information system through workshops organised at their respective schools. The students work with personal digital assistants (PDAs) and global positioning systems (GPS) technologies to map their neighbourhoods. The project is spread over several schools in Northern India.

I discuss the two initiatives through a series of sketches and vignettes to demonstrate how young people learn and develop innovative uses of media. In the Cybermohalla project, youth work with a range of digital media and produce experimental digital works, computer animation, write texts using graphics, publish wall magazines, edit books, amongst others. The main aim is to give a forum where young people not only explore creativity, but comment on social and moral topics that impact their lives. *Mapping the Neighbourhood* is conceptualized as an alternative learning experience through the use of ICT and community maps. The learning process is based on participatory learning and collection of relevant information of the locality. Although the larger idea is social change, this project's main focus is in how new media technology may create a space for students to interact with their communities. Throughout this exploration, a fine balance between theory and practice as young people's voices—dialogue and deliberations—are articulated. Young people gain access to tools of media production in a variety of ways; from training and imparting basic to advanced technical skills, using production facilities and equipment to learning about script writing, story boarding, lighting, set design, page design, layout, digital graphics, and computers. The acquisition of media-making, knowledge and skills, embedded in the lived experience of young people, offers unique perspectives and a vision and a voice that need to be examined to understand youth participation in media. These instances of media production are collaborative experiments between young people and media educators. The role of educators here is quite varied as they come from a broad and diverse backgrounds and locations: school teachers and governmental advisers as in *Mapping the Neighbourhood*, older fellow youth participants, and local and international non-governmental media educators in Cybermohalla.

ICTs and the Pedagogies of Engagement

Cybermohalla (Cyber-Neighborhood) is an experimental project designed to enable democratic access to information and communication technologies among poor young women and men in Delhi, India. These young participants (ages of 15 and 23)—mostly school dropouts—visit the Compughar (translated from Hindi as an *abode of computers*), a media lab with several low-cost desktop computers and free software, to express their ideas and imaginations from the mundane to the serious. Working at the media lab, these participants write, draw and sketch a range of interesting verbal and visual narratives and texts published as books, diaries, magazines, and wallpaper that become available in print as well as digitized formats. The following account describes the philosophy of the project:

One can approach the Cybermohalla project from many directions. One can begin with a critique of the technological imagination and the excessive universe of the dominant mediascape, and then go on to map a counter strategy which grounds itself on access, sharing and democratic extensibility. One can see it as an experiment to engage with media technologies and software ‘tactically’, and create multiple local media contexts emerging within the larger media network that the Internet seems to engender. Still one can see it as an engagement with local history, experiences, modes of expressions and creativity.⁹

From this description, it is clear that Cybermohalla is about adopting alternative strategies to explore and engage the ICTs so as to provide young people opportunities for learning and education. The Hindi-Urdu words that are combined with English to produce terms like “Cybermohalla” and “Compughar,” capture the evocative and open-ended features of new media technologies. These technologies are not rooted in a singular space and place, but as de-territorialized forms that offer unique possibilities for informal learning actualized in non-linear ways. For instance, reflections of young participants on the everyday life in the city are sprinkled with personal experiences, creative self-expressions, and commentaries that offer concrete suggestions on social and political issues. The ICTs also open up “spaces of dialogue” for the young participants: conversations and discussions lead to collective participation in a variety of multimedia experimental works. “What binds them together is their experimentation and play with diverse media forms (photography, animation, sound recording, and text) to improvise and

⁹ Cybermohalla, <http://www.sarai.net/community/saraicomm.htm>.

create cross-media works—texts, collages, posters, print publications, videos, installations.”¹⁰

In Mapping the Neighbourhood project, the second initiative, ICTs are incorporated into formal school learning settings. The project involves school children from rural and urban regions of Almora and Nainital of Uttarakhand province of North India. The basic approach to community mapping has been to visually construct a “map” of the places and spaces in the community, a widely used tool for planning and development of various projects. The main purpose of the project is to provide school children opportunities to learn about their regional geography and landscape and share this with other members of the community. The school children learn about global information system through workshops organized at their respective schools. Another goal is to bring students in dialogue with local and rural communities about the integrating mapping technologies for local development. An important aspect of learning here, one that goes beyond the formal schooling, is in active participation of school children in community development. The notion of participation takes on a new meaning in the activities of the school children since it emerges as a collaboration between students and educators. Here, ICTs provide a context for social networking and ongoing conversations among children, educators, and adult members of rural communities.

Commenting on this innovative work, researchers Rumi Mallick and Himanshu Kalra point out “that young people learn about participation and democracy while in school where they not only spend considerable proportion of their lives and undertake a formal education, it is also a place where many of their views and perspectives on life are developed and shaped.”¹¹ Although the idea behind the project is referred to as “an alternative learning experience,” the primary intent is to integrate ICTs into formal education. Mallick and Kalra explain that “with an aim to create an enabling context for the youth to live, grow, learn, participate, decide, analyze, and change, the programme empowered the youth of the mountain areas by exposing them to technology tools in this case Geo-ICT tools.” These are innovative ideas, extending the traditional community mapping through technologies and bringing school children as stakeholders in the development process. The role of teachers and media educators is that of collaborators and co-creators; rather than imparting training to the students. More important, it is aimed at transforming the idea of education from classroom settings to the field. These strategies

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mallick and Kalra, 2004.

enable learning, and as Mallick and Kalra rightly point out, provide knowledge as well as raise the consciousness of the students.

Working Class Neighborhoods and Community Mapping

The three media labs of Cybermohalla are located in different parts of Delhi—an illegal working class settlement in central part of the city and a poor colony in south Delhi—and provide opportunities to young people to work individually and collectively. The idea of a “mohalla,” as a neighbourhood, exceeds the semantic connotations implied by the English term. As a social space, *mohalla*, with “its sense of alleys and corners,” can be conceived as “dense nodes” where young people from economically deprived and marginalized communities carry out their everyday activities.

Formal schooling is out of reach or unaffordable for many youth. The young people in this demographic visit the lab out of curiosity, but soon get absorbed in the creative possibilities offered by computers and other media. Gradually, the young members, mostly women, begin to express themselves via the computer screens. A bi-monthly magazine “Ibarat” explores various meanings of work in women’s lives. The magazine in Hindi and English is made available in digital and printed forms. A series of creative writings in the form of diaries have been published into a book called, “Galiyon Se” (By Lanes). These reflections and thoughts on the everyday life in the city such as,

For the last year now, I have been in regular conversation with the group of young people in Compughar. Amongst other things streets and lanes were discussed many times. Streets make for great conversations. Streets would lead us to think about the harsh and aggressive behaviour of men towards each other and towards women in particular, the total lack of pedestrian pathways or respect towards them, the absence of street lighting, noisy traffic and its uncaring behaviour, or the near-total inaccessibility for disabled people or elder people. Also being amidst strangers, in crowds and moving with crowds.

This young women’s narrative account of the streets of Delhi offer some unique insights into what has become of the public places and spaces. Although this reads as a political critique, there are many more writings that offer interesting solutions to civic life and public infrastructure in the city of Delhi. Some participants write about streets, some draw and sketch using graphics software presenting multiple perspectives on the topic. The materials produced become available to all participants, distributed in the neighbourhoods for further commentary and reflections. What emerges here is more than content creation; rather, creative engagement with particular

issues and topics that touch the lives of young people. These can be considered important interventions that seek to broaden the terms of political and cultural discourses in some surprisingly innovative ways. For example, the questions of gender insensitivity and discrimination is taken up by various youth members of Cybermohalla in a variety of media forms—texts, collages, graphics, photographs, and video.

Shveta Sarada, coordinator at the Cybermohalla project, suggests that linking the broader environments of our digital worlds with the conversational worlds that we live with in our localities is central in understanding “publicness,”

The world of the digital surrounds us. In our lanes and by-lanes we live through a dense palimpsest of images, texts and sounds, increasingly accessed and accelerated through the digital—VCDs, CDs, Cable, PCOs, DTP operations (pamphlets, stickers, sign boards), etc. Through our own practice, we are trying to work out an interface between this density and our concerns. We use the digital to create for us a networked platform in our own explorations with texts, images and sounds.¹²

Sixty young participants from three different labs—20 from each—have been involved in sketching ideas around “publicness.” Working with a range of multimedia forms like animations, booklets, broadsheets, HTML, typed and formatted texts, sound scape, photo stories, written word, audio and visual juxtapositions or narratives, and storyboards. Members develop innovative perspectives on alleys, corners, mohallas, and locality—important metaphors for “publicness.” Visiting the city alleys and corners, meeting disadvantaged children and other dwellers in the poor and working class neighbourhoods, young participants begin conversations with a young girl working in a factory, an old woman sweeping the streets of Delhi, to a middle aged man who runs a photo studio, a shop keeper, a tea stall owner, and others. Several young members have produced a collage called “Hamari Dilli” (Our Delhi) texts. Here, young people accomplish an important aspect of media engagement that pushes the boundaries of media pedagogy toward eclectic theory-praxis dialectic. Perhaps, an apt term would be to call these instances as “pedagogies of engagement.”

Another project called “Walls” draws upon ideas of publicness and locality to talk about how walls interact with and shape human experience. The experimental multimedia work being

¹² Cybermohalla, <http://www.sarai.net/community/saraicomm.htm>.

carried-out by young participants connect ideas of dwelling and experience. “Dwellings are made of walls. Our lived experience shows these walls are testimonies of fractured, fragile, contested stories of the everyday struggle to make life in the city. Walls are demolished. Walls get hardened. Fragile lives build themselves and reside along walls. Women gather around walls to share experience, youngsters lean against them to recount the day's stories from other parts of the city, infants rest in their shade.”¹³ The Cybermohalla project provides opportunities of self-expression and exploration for the young under privileged people from Delhi. The new and old ICTs not only enable an enhanced participation in media, but also allow young participants a creative range of possibilities for commentary, critique, and dialogue. The approach to cyberspace and the new media as open-ended and globalized forms of communication with the ability to connect with localized forms of communication as embodied in the “mohalla” is an innovative feature. This overlapping of the local and global contexts offers media educators theoretical and practical resources in creating flexible models of media pedagogy.

The main goal of Mapping the Neighbourhood is to make computer-based education attractive to young learners. Although ICTs are understood to enhance learning and participation, the project integrated the uses of several technologies like personal digital assistants and global positioning systems to local developmental needs. This itself is an innovative approach. The involvement of school students makes it a unique exercise. First, it seeks to transform the traditional education process with learning that now takes place in the community, outside the classroom. It is through “doing” that students acquire knowledge. Second, the idea of development itself is transformed. Community participation provides the student learners opportunities and training in citizenship.

The convergence of ICTs, development and education can be glimpsed in the work being carried out by students in Almora and Nainital area in Hawalbag. Here community mapping goes beyond territories and landscape; rather, the visual representations of their regions gives the people knowledge and understanding of how communities live in the social and material world. Mullick, Dhar, and Satyaprakash conclude that the use of ICT as an alternative form of education in rural and urban areas has demonstrated that this form of education can have a positive affect on the community at large, particularly in the villages and towns in which the schools are

¹³ Ibid.

located.¹⁴ This involvement of the students in community mapping, the ongoing conversations with rural citizens, the engagement with their environment, the coming together of local forms of knowledge and modern information and communication technologies, points to an innovative exercise in social development that can be adapted and replicated in other underdeveloped and developing regions of the world. This form of the local-global engagement is more productive than the one that is visible in commercial and popular media around the world, and is an interesting social communication and development model articulated by young people. The conversations between student teams and local community members are an exercise in decentralized planning and rural development. As a form of “direct education” it emulates what Paulo Freire had outlined through his philosophy of education: dialogical education through interaction with a focus on practice (or praxis). The ICTs also open up “spaces of dialogue” for the young participants: conversations and discussions lead to collective participation in a variety of multimedia experimental work.

Concluding Remarks

Although the conclusions offered here are provisional, observations in Delhi, India prove that transformative possibilities of media are in the hands of young people. This exploratory article explored how innovative uses, role of technology, and the old and new ICTs provided a baseline of how young people engage with new media forms. Developing basic media materials in the form of graphics, text, page design and layout, design aesthetics, and digital constructions offer interesting opportunities for young participants to become media makers. The idea of learning through content creation also includes designing the messages in creative and expressive ways. The combinations of media forms enabled young people to creatively build media materials on a range of personal and social topics. The conversations between young participants revealed that they are not only capable of understanding complex issues, but can act on these as well. The conversations between the young people and their peers, media educators within the initiatives, and larger community, pointed to aspects of participation and involvement that otherwise would not have been possible in other media and educational settings. An important aspect of the Cybermohalla initiative is the critique of the notion of “participation” that can be discerned in the

¹⁴ Mullick, Dhar, and Satyaprakash, 2004, p.35.

creative and critical work of the youth participants. Through a series of personal and social narratives, young people pointed both to the problems and prospects in theorizing participation.

Media educators continue to play an important role in inculcating and facilitating learning and education among young people through the process of collaboration. However, with the emergence of new media, these roles become more complex and multi-faceted. At the hands of the young people, new media forms have complicated our understanding of education and pedagogy. This offers both a challenge and an opportunity for media educators to draw insights from global approaches to media pedagogy, while remaining attentive to local and national contexts. An exchange of cross-cultural ideas and research among media educators and practitioners between United States and those around the globe will continue to offer important perspectives that build, shape, and expand theory-praxis of youth media.

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