

State of the Youth Media Field Report

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Foreword

Over the past three years, I have had the pleasure of visiting several young people and youth media educators engaged in youth media projects across the United States. Consistently, these educators share the same energy, awareness, compassion, and commitment to their work with young people.

The friendship and camaraderie of youth media attracts many different types of individuals to the doors of its programs—young people and their adult allies, many who push boundaries and know what it is like to exist on the margins.

I often think about what it would have been like if I had access to a youth media program when I was a teenager. I am confident that such participation would have made a major impact on my life. The dynamic between youth producers and their adult allies provides the necessary backdrop for teenagers to join a community of reflective learners, active in crafting good stories that can reach a large audience through multiple media streams.

As the editor-in-chief of *Youth Media Reporter* and program officer of youth media at AED, I have focused primarily on educators—their concerns, their challenges, and their many successes. Educators in youth media see the direct and long-term impact of their programs on young people, despite how hard it is to measure. They witness powerful moments, such as young men gaining the courage to interview adults about street harassment and sexism, young women who break their silence on radio and through the written word, and, drop out youth who become college students as a result of participating in youth media organizations.

Today, youth media programs exist throughout the United States and more programs are launched every year in new places. The field continues to expand and evolve. It is exciting to imagine what positive impact would result if the field developed the capacity to afford young people everywhere the youth media experience.

In August 2009, with the generous support provided to AED by the McCormick Foundation, I had the pleasure of organizing and facilitating a National Youth Media Summit, working with youth media educators from all across the country on a field-building agenda. As we all worked together, the energy, debates, camaraderie and intersections of youth media were apparent.

The youth media field has a promising future. We have opportunities to move in new directions, listen to new voices, develop young leadership, and take advantage of unexpected opportunities.

Youth media must be scaled and made a priority because it is a successful strategy that positively affects the lives of young people and our collective participation in a just democracy. As long as we document what we do best, what we have learned and the strategies to move the work forward, we can have faith that the roots, history and impact of the field will surpass the challenges we confront.

This report is dedicated to the field and its success in changing lives and presenting new opportunities to the world.



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This report seeks to provide a recent snapshot of the youth media field and underscore the urgency for youth media organizations to work together, especially at a time when there is a growing need for youth media and the changes it can effect.

It is derived from conversations with youth media practitioners in the United States who attended a National Youth Media Summit in Lake Forest, IL in August 2009. In addition, it builds on many other reports and research,¹ especially a 2004 white paper, “Developing the Youth Media Field: Perspectives from Two Practitioners,” and Open Society Institute documents capturing the state of the youth media field.²

INTRODUCTION

The moment is right for youth media. While newspapers and magazines are increasingly giving way to new media, young people are using free or low-cost blogs, cell phones, video cameras, pod casts, v-casts and other tools to distribute their work, largely via the Web. The current distribution platforms are creative and versatile, and they reward high-quality craft and content—qualities that youth media promotes.

At the same time, youth media organizations are helping preserve the traditional ethics and skills of good journalism. Young people who participate in youth media organizations learn to do more than write a good English paper or upload a video on YouTube—they find an opportunity for creative self-expression and a means to tell authentic, challenging, fact-based stories to a targeted audience. Youth media organizations train young people to respond to their environments with a critical eye, provide unique insights, and address issues of social injustice and inequality. They often seek to cultivate young people’s use of their First Amendment rights and engage young people as members of a democratic society.

A youth media sector survey respondent explains, “I’ve learned that it is tremendously powerful for young people who don’t have agency at school, home, or elsewhere to tell their stories. This ultimately leads to more active participation and, particularly in the cases of underrepresented youth of color, women, queer and working class folk, it helps shape the political and social discourses on important issues (education, violence, reproductive justice, etc.)” (AED, 2009).

WHAT MAKES YOUTH MEDIA UNIQUE

Youth media neighbors other fields—including youth development, media arts, and public interest journalism—and has looser ties with civic engagement, youth organizing/activism, and service-learning. But youth media is distinct in that it uses media as a tool and strategy for young people to examine themselves, their communities, and the world at large. One of the greatest qualities of youth media is its potential to reach large audiences while offering young people a thoughtful, mediated process.

As Diana Coryat of Global Action Project and Steven Goodman of Educational Video Center explain:

While it is only in the past five years [1999-2004] that some of us speak of a ‘youth media field,’ young people have been making media for almost forty years... These advances in technology coincided with the emergence of youth political agency as a powerful force, manifested through a multiplicity of progressive social movements. Indeed, the youth media field stands on the shoulders of, and has been supported, influenced and fueled by many artistic, social, political, cultural, and educational movements. In addition to the anti-systemic struggles of the 1960s, other influences include public

¹ See references list, as well as “Mapping the Field” by Kathleen Tyner and AED’s sector-wide YM survey, conducted in spring of this year.

² Coryat, Diana and Steven Goodman (2004). “Developing the Youth Media Field: Perspectives from Two Practitioners.”

access and community television, the media arts field, popular education in the U.S. and Latin America, media education, cultural studies, community organizing and the youth development field.³

In two recent sector surveys conducted in 2008 (Tyner, in press) and 2009 (AED), most youth media educators believe youth media is a way for young people to express themselves, come to voice, and experience transformation—personally, politically, or socially—while developing skills for future career use. Respondents to AED’s sector survey added that youth media:

- Approaches learning and collaboration in a way that creates new opportunities for change and growth—youth media provides spaces for exploration of identity and new ideas/innovative approaches.
- Pushes boundaries, is holistic, has a deep analysis of power and privilege and works towards the self-determination of youth. It is often intergenerational and can be multilingual.
- Provides meaningful edification even for those not necessarily interested in working in film and television. Media skills are increasingly important to any field, so the communication skills that youth develop will be applicable regardless of their future career.
- Helps young people learn how to identify their concerns and translate them into sophisticated and compelling media that reach real audiences.

In order to create a clear picture of the youth media field, one might start with the fundamental questions journalists raise: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How—starting with *What*.

What:

The majority of the 100-plus youth media organizations⁴ in the United States are diverse in their approaches and goals, including social change and social justice, media justice and reform, media literacy, civic engagement, media arts education, critical literacy and career preparation, digital media, and the visual arts.

Such organizations use a range of tools. In response to ever-changing technology, youth media now encompasses film and video, including documentary, narrative, community and cable access broadcast, and public-service announcements; radio and podcasts; the Internet and blogs; journalism and print media, including magazines and newspapers; gaming; and music and other arts, including experimental art, theatre, spoken word, beat poetry, and street art.

Such approaches and tools support the process, products, and impact of authentic youth voice and create opportunities for young people whose power and value is often overlooked. As Keith Hefner of Youth Communications, NY, explains:

We began doing this work because we saw that young people’s ideas were systematically excluded from the marketplace, to their detriment and to the detriment of the institutions that served them and the larger society. Worse, not only did young people not have a voice, they were ignored and/or caricatured in the mainstream media—or treated simply as consumers. Most people who went into youth media also felt youth audiences deserved media that accurately reflected their lives and concerns.⁵

Youth media frequently tackles sensitive and authentic personal and political issues, such as gender-based violence or immigrant and gay rights in minority communities. For example, this summer Reel Grrls, a youth media organization in Seattle, WA, launched its first LGBT camp this summer called “Reel Queer,” which

³ Ibid. In addition, a Google map of youth media organizations will be available on-line along with the launch of an Investment Prospectus in December 2009. Go to: www.youthmediareporter.org/2009/09/documents.html.

⁵ Personal communication.

supported the production of three short films that used humor, fact, and statistics to provoke the audience to consider pop culture, stereotypes, and homosexuality. The same organization has made efforts—with additional funding—to support youth producers in leading distribution efforts, which include screening and discussing films in middle schools, high schools, and colleges.

As part of its emphasis on encouraging the power, engagement and purpose of young people, many youth media organizations aim to be youth-led (where youth lead and shape a program) or youth-driven (where adults support, but do not direct, youth). Youth media educators often refer to inquiry-based education models described by educators like John Dewey, Paulo Freire and bell hooks. In these models, the teacher is often a guide or facilitator, addressing topics that come out of students' experiences and questions.

Youth-produced end products are typically shown to a public audience in a screening, on public access TV, to mass readers of print and online news, and/or in a gallery. Showcasing youth media in any form is an act of amplifying youth voice in the community and to a broader audience. As one survey respondent explains, youth media is “the only youth development activity for which there are (potentially) mass audiences for the products teens develop” (AED, 2009).

Where:

Youth media is most visible on the coasts—New York City and San Francisco's Bay Area. Many organizations are also located in Portland, OR; Whitesburg, KY; Chapel Hill, NC; Atlanta, GA; Philadelphia, PA; Providence, RI; Boston, MA; Salt Lake City, UT; Washington, D.C., San Antonio, TX; New Orleans, LA; Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN; Albuquerque, NM; Chicago, IL; and Indianapolis, IN.

Youth media happens in formal and informal spaces that differ based on each organization or program's local context. Some organizations operate independently from larger organizations, and others are supplementary projects. Though most programs are offered as after-school options, youth media also flourishes in schools.

Since youth media often focuses on marginalized youth, educators are quick to craft opportunities to assist with transportation, even to the extent of creating mobile media learning labs (vans)—like MoLLIE (Grand Rapids, MI) and OLLIE (Portland, OR) services—to ensure that the process and craft of media creation is accessible to *all* young people.

Regardless of where youth media programs operate, they usually afford young people access to mentoring, skill building, and technology not typically offered in school. For many young people—especially those who are dealing with issues more serious than a typical school is able to handle—having an alternative, creative learning environment allows teens to explore real-world issues and change some of the conditions that make school painful and difficult for them. At the same time, youth media also provides a creative outlet for schools that have lost arts and media funding.

Who:

Youth media is typically comprised of adult allies who mentor, guide, and support young people 12-19—although some young media practitioners work on both ends of this spectrum.

Youth media frequently recruits and retains young people from marginalized communities who—as the Stuart Foundation describes—“have been let down by schools and other institutions” (Stuart Foundation, 2003) Program participants typically include incarcerated youth, immigrants, non-native English speakers, racial and ethnic minorities, and/or those with few economic resources.

Youth media explicitly seeks to engage young people who are stereotyped in the media. It also reaches out to young people from populations that are not featured in the media, such as queer minority youth. By focusing on these populations, youth media practitioners seek to stem the advent of “a new cultural underclass,” in

which “citizens who have fewer resources...increasingly rely on the cultural fare offered to them by consolidated media and entertainment conglomerates” (Ivey and Tepper, 2006).

Ultimately, not every young person that a youth media program attracts has a goal to enter the media world. What attracts many youth producers to youth media are the opportunities for self-reflection, meaningful dialogue with peers and empathic adults, and a process to formulate and explore one’s identity and beliefs (although, this motivation may only become apparent in looking back). The opportunity to showcase an end product—whether produced independently or with a crew of peers—frequently convinces participants that innovative approaches to storytelling can make an impact, be healing, be understood and recognized, and be part of a bigger picture and next step in life.

Why:

Youth media provides youth with practical, hands-on experience in media and technology—experience that can translate into professions in journalism, film, radio, music production, new media, and emerging technology.

But youth media organizations provide more than media production training. Youth media organizations are also about extending the reach of a young person. They mentor, guide, and motivate youth to strive for greater academic and professional aspirations—something often missing from the lives of at-risk teens.

For example, Tom Bailey, the program director at Community Television Network says, “Last year, we worked with 15 high school seniors at Community Television Network (Chicago, IL). Out of those, 11 are in college. They finish a project where they can see their work pay off, [which supplies] positive reinforcement and motivation. You can develop meaningful relationships with the students who lack that kind of encouragement at home or in school” (Williams, 2009).

Youth media also has great potential to effect personal, social, and political change, “giving youth a voice, fostering a sense of social responsibility, inspiring a commitment to excellence, helping youth gain confidence and credibility, helping young people relate to adults and peers in more positive ways, improving basic literacy skills of reading, writing and communication that can boost academic achievement, strengthen adult transition skills, teach career-related skills, and address critical issues” (Stuart Foundation, 2003).

Youth media affects not only the young people it serves but also the local community, such as parents like Babylon Williams in Chicago, IL. She explains:

In a time when we are losing our young people to violence, creative solutions are needed to connect parents, teens, and the community out of the digital fog...What will inspire a youngster from Englewood, the Wild Hundreds, or Westside to put down a gun and pick-up a video camera? Youth media [provides] young people safe passage from adolescence to adulthood [and] affords parents insight into the psyche of young people—with the hopes of using what we learn to create safe passage solutions based on what *they* need and feel and not solely on what *we want for them* (Williams, 2009).

The effect youth media has on both young people and their local communities is instrumental in creating a more tolerant, collaborative society. As practitioner Antoine Haywood from People TV in Atlanta, GA explains, “there will *always* be a need for community building...to help the voices of young people resonate...and keep in mind the viewpoints other than one’s own” (Haywood, 2008).

How:

Youth media uses popular culture and technology in which young people are already engaged. Participants are familiar with—even fluent in—gaming, watching movies, or making films on their cell phones. They are playing with media and, as the Internet becomes increasingly accessible, broadcasting it. Kathleen Tyner, a professor at the University of Texas-Austin, found that youth media programs “bridge the gap between students’ use of

advanced technologies at home and in social settings and their dismal integration into the formal school curriculum” (Tyner, 2007).

In an average youth media classroom, an educator or team of educators provides a basic understanding of journalism ethics, media literacy, and critical analysis prior to teaching media-making skills and techniques. The process encourages young people to become strong storytellers, combat media stereotypes, and create a message with an audience in mind. The supportive environment to tackle and analyze taboo issues engages young people—for many, it is the first time that they feel free to be themselves.

Youth media programs provide opportunities for mentoring relationships between youth and adults—or, sometimes, between younger and older students. These relationships are often substantive and meaningful. For many young people, these connections are an important pipeline for a whole variety of help: counseling; academic and professional guidance; access to other communities, families, and resources. Mentoring is particularly important because many youth media producers do not have adults with whom to discuss the difficult or personal issues they may address in a film, photograph, online, or on the FM/AM airwaves.

For example, at Vox Communications in Atlanta, GA, youth media educators stepped in to support and protect a teen writer whose brave cover story of her personal experience of Female Genital Mutilation received a threatening response from her local community. Similarly, educators at BeyondMedia in Chicago, IL—who often support youth to tackle issues such as HIV, abuse, and sexual violence—began Chain of Change, which organizes youth activists to strategize individually and collectively how to end violence by exposing its roots.

In many ways, youth media is one way to address the MacArthur Foundation’s concern that there is a “lack of a public agenda that recognizes the value of youth participation in social communication and popular culture.” For example, Y-press in Indianapolis, IL ensured that their teen reporters would attend and report on the 2008 Democratic and Republican conventions, despite a limited budget and travel issues. Many other youth media organizations also had some role in the organizing power of young people in the 2009 election. Their contributions were documented in articles, videos, podcasts, and photos of youth producers with Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and other candidates.

A DEFINITION OF YOUTH MEDIA

Youth media’s inter-disciplinary nature and multi-skill set approach can make it challenging to articulate a unanimously agreed upon definition of the work. Educators’ emphases fall somewhere on a spectrum between media production and media literacy; process and end product; vocational training and more holistic training; a target audience of youth peers and a target audience of adults; content that is teen-driven and content that is funder-driven; 19th century skills (reading and writing) and 21st century skills (digital/technology); staffing media professionals and staffing credentialed youth media educators; and even between teenage participants and participants up to the age of 30.

Timothy Dorsey, formerly of Youth Media Learning Network observed, “We tend to agree that what we do in youth media is uniquely interdisciplinary and that our practice represents a point of intersection and overlap for many critical concerns related to education, youth development, media arts, and social change” (Dorsey, 2007).

A sector survey respondent further suggests, “Many practitioners share similar values in their practice—for example, youth-centered learning or community-based inquiry—but their educational approaches vary greatly, even if differing approaches claim similar outcomes” (AED, 2009).

In the youth media sector survey (2009), educators identified the field as:

- An opportunity for diverse young people to interact with people (youth and adults) who they wouldn't otherwise meet; to engage in one's community as an activist and creative producer; and to collaborate, transform media as a whole, and create new models of democratic leadership.
- A support system for young people to grow emotionally and professionally.
- Professional training in media skills and tools that enable teens to participate and gain a voice in the larger media and political landscape.
- The use of great tools for freedom of expression where programming is adaptable, fresh and cutting-edge.
- An ability to express oneself that ultimately becomes a path to confidence, leadership, and self-knowledge for young media makers.
- Development of a society that appreciates the ideas and perspectives of youth from all backgrounds.

Steve Goodman of Educational Video Center in NY explains, "Youth media educators are often attracted to youth media because of their deep commitment to youth and a belief that mainstream schools have for too long been ignoring, silencing or even punishing youth for trying to express themselves through stories about their most pressing personal and community related problems."

One practitioner noted, "Those of us who have come to this field have done so because we know at our core that working with young people, identifying issues of relevance for them, and guiding their media productions to be powerful tools of change is unmistakably a radical and essential movement in education" (National Youth Media Summit Evaluation, 2009).

OPPORTUNITIES

Five years ago, the Open Society Institute and Surdna Foundation convened youth media practitioners in New York City to assess and improve youth media practice.⁶ The 2004 convening inspired several tools for collaboration, including a professional journal—the *Youth Media Reporter*—and a professional development resource, the Youth Media Learning Network.

Since then, youth media practitioners are calling for more opportunities to come together as a field to articulate common goals, principles and promising practices. At the Youth Media Summit in 2009, practitioners repeatedly stressed the benefit of having face time with each other. Opportunities for collaboration help make youth media organizations more efficient, and therefore more cost effective. They also help amplify youth media's approach and increase its impact, thereby improving its visibility.

In the meantime, several youth media organizations in the U.S. have found ways to increase visibility through mainstream broadcast outlets—such as NPR, WNYC and *Newsday*—and by creating networks and associations. Groups in Boston, the Twin Cities, New York City, and Chicago have built formal and informal communities of reflective learners and democratic educators. Adobe Systems has funded youth media production and marketing on a national and an international scale.

Those connections are fertile territory. They may begin to answer a question the Open Society Institute posed at the convening in 2004: "How can the youth media field effectively make the case for the kind of intensive programs we provide young people?" By establishing—for example—federations, youth media providers can not only share resources, but help the public understand what makes the work unique and respond effectively to major national and international issues.

⁶ A 40-year youth media timeline of youth media, compiled by the National Youth Media Summit participants, will be available at: www.youthmediareporter.org/2009/09/documents.html. An on-going timeline continues as a Wiki at: <http://youthmediasummit.pbworks.com/FrontPage>.

WHAT IS NEXT?

Since the last Youth Media Summit in 2004, foundations and philanthropies have seen their investments plummet. As a result, veteran funders are making fewer and smaller grants, and new funders are not inclining toward the kind of small, youth development-oriented organizations that populate the youth media field.

Despite this funding landscape, youth media organizations and their funding partners acknowledge that the field has great potential to address large issues like poverty, education, war/conflict resolution, and HIV/AIDS. Funders in these areas tend to make long-term investments with short-term deliverables—a combination that would seem perfect for youth media, which routinely produces short, powerful, convincing, provocative, and extremely innovative pieces that have the potential to change society.

To make the most of this potential, the field will need to have a solid, united base and a strong strategic plan. With this in mind, 45 educators came together at the National Youth Media Summit and set the groundwork to build on six priority issue areas and corresponding investment opportunities, to be laid out in an Investment Prospectus (forthcoming, 2009). The areas are:

- Youth and adult leadership
- Curriculum
- Distribution
- Research and evaluation
- Professional development and networks
- Strategic partnerships

In order to scale up, the field needs a clear local and national platform to convene; a central, visible website/location for its research, resources, curriculum, and best practices; and training to increase staff and capacity. The forthcoming Investment Prospectus will outline specific investment opportunities—derived from strategies in each of the priority, field-wide issue areas above—to a wide net of new investors.

Youth media has the benefit of offering flexible tools to young people, who are responsive to the current culture and its changing, challenging conditions. Because of its fluid nature, youth media must continue to balance excellent, proven practice and diverse, tailored approaches, while actualizing its collective potential as a field.

CONCLUSION

The field still has work to do. Youth media educators must become adept at raising awareness about the impact of their programs and working on a macro scale. This includes engaging with the local community—on a daily basis, if possible—and finding common ground and sharing resources with other like-minded groups. Youth media is distinct in its interdisciplinary approach, but it must ensure that its doors are open and visible to its neighbors, colleagues, and new allies. As a sector survey respondent explains, “Networking with national peer organizations is a huge asset to developing the field” (AED, 2009).

It is clear that youth media work is effective and successful for many diverse and intersecting issues, including health, poverty, education and literacy. Stakeholders must build the net on a more national level, emphasize the opportunities that exist and have grown, increase the visibility of the work young people make, and scale collective work. With a strategic, concerted, and hopeful approach, youth media will act as a conduit for change and an advocate for young people—raising those at the margins to visible and audible platforms.

Appendix:

2009 NATIONAL YOUTH MEDIA SUMMIT

To explore and build consensus for field-building, from August 5-7, 2009, *Youth Media Reporter* (YMR)/Academy for Educational Development (AED) and the McCormick Foundation launched a National Youth Media Summit in Lake Forest, Illinois. The Summit's 12-person Steering Committee used an extensive nomination process to select participants who would reflect a range of experience, approaches, and geography. Forty-five stakeholders attended, including practitioners, young professionals, young producers, academics/researchers, and foundation staff.

In preparation for the Summit, the Steering Committee developed a youth media sector survey and analyzed field-based articles to define the six priority areas the field must address in order to be sustainable for the next three to five years.⁷ They included leadership development; strategic partnerships; research and evaluation; distribution; curriculum; and professional development and networks.

These strategies—listed in full at the end of this report—outline the field's goals in each area. They will signal funders where and how to offer support, as well as start to provide a blueprint for how youth media organizations can continue to sustain the field. As a result of the Summit, some short-term steps that have been taken include a Wiki on YMR at <http://youthmediasummit.pbworks.com>.

Participants identified that more spaces for emerging leaders and youth producers are needed—like any field, youth media must cultivate new leadership and members while maintaining structure. Participants also asked for more opportunities to reflect with colleagues from afar and to see what work youth producers from each organization were making. These comments underscored the fact that although the youth media organizations often work in silos, concentrating on raising enough money to keep their doors open and meet the immediate needs of their staff and students, practitioners are yearning to connect and create something larger than the sum of their parts. For example, a network of youth media organizations, the Chicago Youth Voices Network, was awarded a grant by a first-time youth media investor, the Chicago Community Trust; in addition, five other youth media organizations are currently collaborating on a group ask to the National Science Foundation.

In order for youth media to make good on the enthusiasm for collaboration and an increasing commitment for field-building, practitioners must first take ownership documenting best practices, publishing articles and insights as practitioners and researchers, and work together to establish common core principles of the field.

Practitioners must also take leadership and responsibility to meet many of the goals identified at the Summit. No single youth media organization alone will be able to "lift all boats"; nevertheless, those with the capacity and dedication to advance and sustain this important work must step forward. With leadership and accountability, practitioners have the opportunity to put youth media in the spotlight and show how it affects young people in every issue area.

⁷ The Steering Committee used as a guideline "What Does Field-Building Mean for Service-Learning Advocates," in which Melinda Fine, Ed.D. wrote, "The challenge...is to use a field-building framework to assess what specific strategies are needed to strengthen various field elements, which strategies have priority, how to leverage current efforts of relevant organization, and which organizations (or groups) are best suited for leading new work."

SIX ISSUE PRIORITY AREAS OF FOCUS DEFINED BY THE YOUTH MEDIA SUMMIT AND STEERING COMMITTEE

(Note: to see a list of potential strategies as crafted by the Summit working groups, please refer to the Report Out document at: http://www.youthmediareporter.org/NYMS_ReportOut_FINAL.pdf).

Youth & Adult Leadership: To grow and sustain youth media we need effective and capable leadership. Because youth media is committed to amplifying youth voice, we particularly need to examine best practices that integrate youth leadership alongside adult leadership—to create the space for those served by the field as it evolves. Youth media has a unique contribution to make to leadership models. We seek to bring together best practices that address making decisions about governance; engaging program participants, staff and stakeholders in organizational leadership; and preparing and recognizing effective leaders.

Developing Strategic Partnerships: Practitioners need to clearly identify partners—including organizations, educational institutions, government, and industry—in order to make the best connections for young people. At the same time, practitioners must define opportunities not only to serve their immediate communities, but to contribute to the field more broadly. More work must be done to connect organizations that are not a part of an existing youth media network. It is also crucial to define what strategic partnerships can look like, and to set common goals at both a local and national level, in order to engage not only organizations, but also like minded fields that are community based, as well as government, foundations, institutions of higher education, and media industry leaders.

Research and Evaluation

Research and evaluation, along with other related strategies (such as professionalization, networking, and partnerships) need to be vigorously supported to contribute to the growth and circulation of this knowledge base. Reliable and valid evidence is key for building arguments that can be used to reinforce all of the field elements. Both research and evaluation evidence are most useful for field-building when studies can be replicated and when data can be aggregated over many programs over time. Key leaders in the field of youth media have presented and published consistently about the need for youth media programs and projects to establish rigorous and systematic strategies for research and evaluation. Reliable evidence about the characteristics and outcomes of youth media is the first step in field-building.

Distribution

Distribution has always been a part of youth media, insofar as it seeks to give youth an opportunity not only to tell their stories, but to reach an audience and impact the world. In 2004, the Open Society Institute and the Surdna Foundation released a pioneering study that found one of the biggest challenges facing the field was distribution: strategically advancing youth produced media to audiences outside youth development. Distribution is especially critical to meeting youth media's aims because young people feel a deep sense of purpose when they believe their creation can impact the world (Inouye, et. al, 2004).

Young people are highly motivated to reach an audience, and when they face the challenge of making work that will be seen, they respond with increased creativity and attention to detail. The youth media field has long recognized that the work should not exist in a vacuum, but be promoted and shared in order for young people to have access to technology creation and expression. We can play a critical role in bringing opportunities to both youth and distributors in a way that respects authentic youth voice, the goals of youth development, and the needs and challenges of society at large.

Curriculum

Youth media curricula reflect a range of approaches. They have the opportunity to and frequently do create space for creativity, both aesthetically and with regard to stories that are not seen or heard in mainstream media—including those of youth in rural settings, low-income youth, immigrant youth, LGBTQ youth, young people with disabilities, and young women of color. While many organizations have responded to the need for curricula by creating or adapting their own, as an emerging field we have yet to determine the

characteristics of high quality curricula and how best to deliver and share excellent lessons, programs, materials, and ideas locally and nationally.

The field must collaborate on sharing resources, innovative ideas and lessons learned to ensure the production of high quality curricula. To do that, it is essential that practitioners debate, engage, and push back about their practices and communicate about their methods, outcomes, and challenges. By generating new means to dialogue and assess together, youth media providers will create curricula that reflects current thinking and generates new practices for the field to grow stronger.

Professional Development and Networks

To sustain and grow youth media, educators must document and share practices and perspectives with one another, emerging practitioners, critical friends in academia, and with funders and other stakeholders. Only then will the youth media field effectively replicate the work and bring it to scale. Opportunities for professional development and networking will yield a set of common principles that highlight the unique strengths of the youth media field; influence future research in, of, and by the field; identify new strategic partners; and demonstrate to a broad audience that media making is both a critical component of young people's lives and a critical mechanism for defining culture, identity, and representation in the 21st century.

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