

**STICKING WITH MY DREAMS:  
DEFINING AND REFINING YOUTH MEDIA IN THE  
21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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# **Sticking With My Dreams: Defining and Refining Youth Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

## **Introduction**

As access to diverse sources and formats for the production and distribution of information increases dramatically, the roles Youth Media can and should play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and even what Youth Media is, remain unclear. A web search on Youth Media shows just how much confusion there is. Awards for outstanding materials targeted toward children and teens are called Youth Media Awards, as are awards to recognize journalists and media organizations who have demonstrated excellence in reporting on youth. Definitions of Youth Media also include media targeted toward youth, media about youth, media literacy for youth and even the impact of media on youth. This plethora of meanings for one two-word title does not even include what we are taking, for the purposes of this paper, as the “real” definition of Youth Media: media conceived, developed and produced by youth and disseminated to others.

In an effort to provide some clarity about the state of Youth Media in the United States, including its goals, its current issues and its future, in this paper we examine the development and status of Youth Media, and what is and isn’t known about its impact on participating youth, target audiences and society. Also included is a series of recommendations for possible future directions for Youth Media.

The preparation of the paper has been informed by a variety of sources,<sup>1</sup> including:

- Interviews with the four program officers from the Ford Foundation, Open Society Institute, Surdna Foundation and the Wallace Readers Digest Fund, whose interest was a catalyst to the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for annotated list of programs from which data was collected.

- Interviews with staff members from 21 Youth Media programs in the United States ranging from Appalshop/Appalachian Media Institute (AMI) (KY) to Youth Radio (CA).
- Interviews with youth participants from five Youth Media programs: Children’s Express (DC), PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL), Just Think (CA), Education Video Center (EVC) (NY) and DCTV (NY).
- Site visits to Youth Radio (CA), Pacific News Service (CA), Children’s Express (DC) and EVC (NY), including interviews with staff and participating youth and observations of the programs.
- Attendance at the Do It Your Damn Self! National Youth Video and Film Festival (MA).
- Attendance at Listen Up!’s (NY) convening of more than 40 Youth Media programs.
- Review of Youth Media program materials including, where available, studies of program impact and/or plans for impact studies for a total of over 70 US-based Youth Media programs, including the 21 programs where interviews and/or site visits were conducted.
- A search of related literature and web sites.
- Interviews with experts who view Youth Media from a variety of perspectives including Katherine Montgomery from the Center for Media Education, Bill Tally, author of *The New Media Literacy Handbook*, and Renee Hobbs, director of Babson College’s Media Literacy Project.

## **The Range of Youth Media**

In the year 2000, Youth Media comes in many different shapes and sizes,<sup>2</sup> as does its products. Today, Youth Media may be print, audio, video or all of the above. It may come through the mail, the web or the cable network, or may be broadcast on TV or radio. Youth Media products can include print periodicals such as Youth Communication’s (NY) *New Youth Connections*, with a circulation of 65,000, and *Foster Care Youth United*, with a circulation of 10,000. Products can be TV shows such as Twin Cities’ *Don’t Believe the Hype* (MN) which

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<sup>2</sup> The programs included in this paper are not necessarily representative of the entire range of Youth Media programs. These were selected based on recommendations from those involved in Youth Media as being good or effective Youth Media programs as well as on a literature and web search.

has an annual hour long public TV broadcast. They can be weekly radio shows such as those done by Youth Voice Radio (NC) and Blunt Youth Radio (ME) which feature commentary and music, or public service announcements (PSAs) from around the country which are posted in downloadable formats on Listen Up!'s (NY) web gallery. Increasingly they can also be youth film festivals such as the Do It Your Damn Self! National Youth Video and Film Festival which in its five years has grown from 50 to 184 entries and the 24 year old Maine Alliance of Media Arts, Maine Student Film and Video Festival.

### **Distribution**

Many Youth Media products become part of the mainstream media as well. Youth Radio's (CA) products have been heard on National Public Radio broadcasts. Children's Express' (DC) stories have been included in, among other sources, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and CNN. Material from Foxfire (GA) has been published in a series of Foxfire books and in the *Foxfire Magazine* which has been in existence for over 30 years. Stories written by Youth Communication (NY) youth have been republished in the high school English textbook series, *The Write Source*, while public service announcements (PSAs) developed by New Mexico Youth Media programs are shown weekly on affiliate nightly news programs across the state (The Institute of Public Law, 2000).

This year for the first time, the 2000 Native American Film and Video Festival will feature work of young Native media makers (Listen Up!, 2000). Additionally, Manhattan Neighborhood Network (NY) is establishing a youth initiated channel and Paper Tiger's AccessOrbit (NY) project is producing a five-hour satellite broadcast of youth-produced video in December and January that is expected to reach at least 2 million homes. In an example of multi-level Youth Media in mainstream media, the New York Post carried an article by youth from

Children's Express (DC) that was an interview with Paper Tiger's (NY) youth staff (Daley & Mentor, 2000).

There are many more Youth Media products not yet in the mainstream. Thirty Youth Media programs surveyed by Video Machette (IL) reported having over 1,000 "distributable" titles but not enough funding, knowledge or staff to distribute them.

### **Content**

Whether in the mainstream media or not, the content covered in Youth Media products is not "fashion [or] the latest pop singer." Rather, as a Children's Express staff member (DC) explains, youth are covering "something that has significant cultural influences on them." At Children's Express (DC), this means youth are covering topics involving health, education and technology, community and leadership, religion and values. As the staff member explains, youth have "figured out how clearly their lives are impacted by policy."

These words about Children's Express (DC) youth hold for other youth as well. Across programs, Youth Media content ranges from issues with particular relevance to youth, such as the juvenile justice system (EVC, NY), sexual abuse experienced by foster care children (Youth Communication, NY) and the effects of death, dying and bereavement on teens (DCTV, NY), to national and international stories such as events in Chiapas (Street Level Youth Media, IL) and the Democratic and Republican conventions (Children's Express, DC; Youth Radio, CA).

Youth produce PSAs and work on projects like PBS' "Africans in the Americas" series, where Street Level Youth Media (IL) worked with local youth to "look at issues of race and respond to those issues." Others do stories on community-related cultural issues, including domestic violence in the Appalachians (Appalshop/AMI, KY) or cover local news such as the town mayor's resignation (PACERS, AL).

## **Structure**

The Youth Media programs that produce these products can be part of larger organizations, as is Rise and Shine Productions (NY), a media literacy program based in TRUCE (Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families) or the Teen Video Workshop, which is part of New Orleans Video Access Center (NOVAC, LA). Programs can be directly linked to schools, including programs that operate from schools, as does PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL), in-school media classes, such as South Burlington's (VT) computer animation class (South Burlington High School Image Lab, 2000), or Cimarron's (NM) video production classes (Cimarron High School, 2000) or they can be programs that give teachers the tools to integrate media into their classroom, as do EVC's (NY) Teacher Development workshop and Just Think's (CA) "Developing Minds" curriculum.

Some programs are part of networks, such as the Listen Up! (NY) affiliates and the high schools involved in PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL). Others are independent, like Youth Radio (CA) and PHat Lip! (VA), exist outside of any larger organizational structure. Some are totally youth run, as is Youth Voice Radio (NC).

Some programs have only one component like HarlemLive's (NY) on-line newspaper or Blunt Youth Radio's (ME) weekly radio show. Others have several components, as does Street Level Youth Media (IL) with its three drop-in centers, girls-only program, annual Block Party showcasing youth's videos, artist residencies, school consultations, special projects for developing artistic and employment opportunities for program participants.

## **Youth Participants**

Youth Media programs range greatly in size from larger programs such as Children's Express (DC) with 750 youth in the worldwide active press corps, to individual youth who create

and distribute their own zines and e-zines. Time commitments can vary as well. At one end are programs such as DCTV's Pro-TV (NY), an intensive two-year program where youth work at least eight hours a week during the school year and participate in an international exchange. In other programs such as Pacific News Service's (CA) *The Beat Within*, incarcerated youth in the Bay Area can participate by attending as few as one of the hour-long writing workshops.

While most Youth Media programs focus on youth between the ages of 13 and 19, some, such as PHat Lip! (VA) work with youth from 9 to 26, and others, like *New Moon* (MN) work with an editorial board of 8- to 14- year-old girls. A number of programs target specific groups of youth, including:

- African American youth (HarlemLive, NY)
- Bi-, lesbian, gay and transgendered youth (Elight, VA)
- Girls (Teen Voices, MA and CA)
- Latino youth (Radio Arte, IL)
- Immigrant youth (Global Action Project, NY)<sup>3</sup>
- Native Alaskan youth (KBC Alaska Native Youth Media Institute).
- Rural Appalachian youth (Appalshop/AMI, KY)
- Underserved/disadvantaged youth (DCTV's Pro-TV, NY)
- Urban youth of color (Don't Believe the Hype, MN)
- Youth in foster care (Youth Communication, NY).

Other programs such as Youth Radio (CA), PHat Lip! (VA) and NOVAC's Teen Video Workshop (LA) have groups that are mixed in terms of ethnicity, geography and gender. NOVAC's Teen Video Workshop (LA) feels the mix is key because an ethnically and economically mixed demographic functions to stir up dialogue and new ideas.

### **Networking and Isolation**

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<sup>3</sup> Global Action Project. works with U.S. born African American, Latino, Asian youth, as well as immigrants from around the world. They also we work with youth internationally in Israel, Guatemala, Ghana, Croatia, Northern Ireland.

The very diversity of Youth Media programs has led some to speak of the isolation they feel and the need for networking. For some, like Youth Communication (NY), finding others doing similar work and who can help them with non-media aspects of the work is difficult.

We sit around here wondering who are our colleagues. It's a professionally lonely situation [for those] who do it the way we do it. A lot...ends up being in the youth development end of it rather than the media end of it. We need help with the developmental end of it. No one here is a social worker. [With the youth we work with, we deal with] post-traumatic stress disorder... [and] resilience. How do kids survive and flourish? What in [the youth development] field can inform what we do in that field?

With the realization of isolation has come the perception of a need for networks. As Listen Up! (NY) realized, most Youth Media programs “were mom and pop shops [with] little coordination happening between them. We told them we were trying to create a national project, and the one thing they told us that would help was to have a way to find out about what others were doing...” With 56 organizations currently in their network, Listen Up!’s (NY) focus this first year “has been to make programs aware that they are not working in an isolated situation.” Listen Up! (NY) also believes this networking “has helped [organizations] bring production quality up.” Improving the quality of products and of programs was the focus of their December, 2000 workshop for over 100 youth and leaders.

Other Youth Media networks are in formation as well, including the National Youth Media Distribution Network, coordinated by Video Machete (IL), which is collaborating with groups across the country to develop a “long-term and collective vision for advocacy and distribution of youth media - locally, nationally and globally” (Video Machete, 2000).

Another network, the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), was formed in October, 2000. AMLA, a national non-profit, membership organization, is currently made up of a 13-member Founding Board of leading educators, scholars and advocates in media literacy. Its

mission is to provide national leadership, advocacy, networking and information exchange in media literacy, which under their definition includes Youth Media, among teachers, parents, community leaders, social service agencies, public health leaders and those in media and technology organizations. Their upcoming 2001 National Media Education Conference “Unleashing Creativity,” will focus on the “liberating role of media literacy and media arts education in empowering educators, advocates and youth” (Partnership for Media Education, 2000).

### **Funding**

Youth Media programs are supported by many different funders ranging from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Microsoft Corporation to Suzanne's Muffins and Gertrude Stein's Restaurant. While the list of funders is not complete, of the more than 200 different Youth Media funding sources identified for this paper, the only federal sources are the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Arts. The most frequently mentioned funders, however, are the Open Society Institute, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Microsoft Corporation.

Among other foundation funders are:

Altman Foundation	Anne E. Casey Foundation
Boston Globe Foundation	CBS Foundation
Charles Hayden Foundation	David and Lucille Packard Foundation
Dewitt Wallace/Readers Digest Fund	Edward Moore Foundation
Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund	Knight Foundation
Levi Strauss Foundation	Newhouse Foundation
Surdna Foundation	W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Corporate funders include:

3Com	Adobe Systems
Anchor Brewing Company	Apple Computers
Bank of American	Citicorp

Delta Shuttle  
FAO Schwartz  
Morgan Stanley  
Skyy Vodka

Disney  
IBM  
Pricewaterhouse  
Time Warner.

Public local and state funders include:

California Arts Council  
City of Berkeley  
City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs  
Massachusetts Cultural Council  
New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.

While many groups have funded at least one Youth Media project, funding remains problematic. For some programs, funding issues reflect the relative isolation or unique niche that Youth Media fills. For example, although Youth Media is at the core of Youth Communication (NY), they have little funding “as a media project.” Children’s Express (DC) agrees that Youth Media is “unique enough that it’s difficult to find funding.”

Other programs are concerned that grant guidelines limit what Youth Media programs can do. Sustained funding over time can make it possible to have products of the quality and high circulation of a Foxfire (GA) or a Youth Communication (NY) publication. However Street Level Youth Media (IL), Blunt Youth Radio (ME) and EVC (NY) all report a lack of funding for institutionalization or longer-term projects. Funder focus on products or the “latest trendy things”, which as Blunt Youth Radio (ME) points out, is often at odds with the ability to use funding for capacity building.

While the range of Youth Media programs is incredibly wide, Youth Media is also, as Children’s Express explains, “a concept that’s so simple and clean that the barriers are really only the creativity of the adults at the table.”

## **The Goals and Philosophies Behind Youth Media**

Youth Media program goals tend to fall into the following areas:

- youth voice/social change
- career development
- youth development
- media literacy
- academic enhancement.

### **Youth Voice and Social Change**

For most of the Youth Media programs covered in this paper, including Youth Communication (NY), Youth Voice Radio (NC) and Pacific News Service (CA), “youth voice” means offering youth a chance to make their experiences and concerns heard in “a public forum” or by “the political process.” As part of a commitment to youth voice, programs often focus on instilling a commitment to social action in participants, and/or using their youth-produced media to affect the wider community. Like others, Street Level Youth Media (IL) wants “to create a place...where ideas lead to actions and actions create change...to create opportunities for young people to find solutions to their problems, to strengthen their communities.” Programs like Don’t Believe the Hype (MN), Street Level Youth Media (IL) and Appalshop/AMI (KY) offer youth a chance to address issues in their communities while Youth Voice Radio (NC) trains “young people to use the equipment so they can be heard” and can “articulate what they are angry about [and] concerned about... They can create it and it gets heard.”

Children’s Express (DC) takes youth voice to another level, helping youth gain credibility nationally and internationally as “real journalists.” Behind this is the belief that kids “bring an incredibly powerful pre-political perspective and are able to see a perspective that adult journalists can’t.”

Directly linked to youth voice are issues of who does media. Within Youth Media, there tends to be an important focus on bringing out the voices of those who have been least apt to be heard, typically rural youth, urban youth, at-risk youth, poor youth, youth of color and gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. However, disturbingly, Renee Hobbs points out, “in American schools, media production is often the province of the non-readers, the low-ability kids for whom media production is the 'last chance' before dropping out.” She questions whether Youth Media production can ever recover from its 20-year reputation as an “educational dumping ground” (Hobbs, 1996).

### **Career Development**

Youth Media program concerns about who does media are reflected by the lack of diversity in media professionals. Only about one third of journalists across media are women and about eight percent are minorities (Weaver, 1999). According to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 42 percent of newspapers have no nonwhite reporters at all (Chideya, 1999). Youth Media programs with career development goals seek to change this disparity by exposing youth to media and training them in media careers to increase the numbers of underrepresented people in media careers, as does KBC Alaska Native Youth Media Institute (AK) which seeks to increase the number of Native people in media careers. More practically, as Youth Radio (CA) put it, youth involved in media, specifically technology-based media “...are in the driver’s seat because of the labor shortage...these companies don’t have enough trained professionals. It’s a real opportunity to come out of poverty.”

### **Youth Development**

Not surprisingly, youth development also ties in strongly to Youth Media. Youth development, as defined by the National Youth Development Information Center (1998), is a

process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models which focus solely on youth problems.

Youth development's positive nature, its underlying principle to focus "on young people's strengths rather than their failings" (National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth, 1996), is clearly true for the Youth Media programs included in this paper as well. Similarly, West's (1974) classic four ingredients necessary for the positive development of youth – a sense of competence, a sense of usefulness, a sense of belonging and a sense of power – seem to undergird the goals and activities of Youth Media programs.

Programs focusing on youth development, such as Rise and Shine (NY), Youth Radio (CA) and DCTV (NY), expect Youth Media to improve the lives of their participants by increasing their confidence and self-esteem, helping youth become "better at assessing their own growth and development," "to be empowered, to realize their own creative talent and opportunity," and to "lead thoughtful and productive lives." As a Youth Radio (CA) staffer explained:

...we've [asked] ourselves, are we a media organization or a youth development organization? We've identified as a youth development organization first. [We are] using media to engage young people in a positive activity [that can] impact their lives positively.

### **Media Literacy**

An exploration of Youth Media program goals and content also finds a strong relationship to media literacy. Media literacy has many definitions, including this one from the Center for Media Literacy:

[Media literacy is] just what it sounds like – the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols we take in

every day through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and of course advertising. It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around you and not be passive and therefore, vulnerable (Thoman, ND).

Some Youth Media programs feel that understanding media and its impact is necessary to create effective media, therefore making media literacy an important component of Youth Media. Youth Media programs with media literacy goals, like Street Level Youth Media (IL), guide participants in understanding “how youth have been misrepresented” in mass media, or like Rise and Shine (NY), in examining “both the similarity and disparity between their own views and the views that various media convey.” Just Think (CA) stimulates this “critical thinking about popular media...[and] the content of media [as part of mastering] the technical skills to produce media messages...” and knowing how to impact an audience.

While media literacy is a component of some Youth Media programs, some media literacy experts see Youth Media— or at least “providing students with the ability to create media products”— as one goal of media literacy (Ontario Ministry of Education as cited in Media Literacy Online Project, ND). Whether media literacy programs need to include the development and production of media is one of Renee Hobbs’ “Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement” (1996). When Hobbs encourages people to vote to include the development and production of media in media literacy, she focuses on the value, of the process telling people to:

Vote yes [that media literacy programs should include Youth Media]... if you think that young people cannot become truly critical viewers until they have had experience making photographs, planning and organizing ideas through storyboards, writing scripts and performing in front of a camera, or designing their own web page, or reporting a news story. According to this view, media literacy is incomplete unless students get a lot of experience 'writing' as well as 'reading.'

However, she says to:

Vote no... if you've ever wondered what students are actually learning when they make their own videos, if you are concerned that media production is impossible in the underfunded schools that typify American education, if you've found that production activities require too much time for 45 minute periods and more skills than can be reasonably expected from an overworked, underpaid, middle-aged teacher.

It does appear that Youth Media can be a tool for media literacy programs just as media literacy can be a tool for Youth Media programs.

### **Academic Enhancement**

Whether in or out of school, there is a strong academic component to many Youth Media programs. For some out-of-school programs an academic focus is needed, particularly in reading and writing, to “[make] up for what the schools don’t teach” as Youth Radio (CA) has found. Often, this academic focus is necessary to even make the Youth Media program possible. For example, DCTV (NY) added an academic component when they discovered that students with whom they were working were “functionally illiterate.” For in-school programs, Youth Media can be a tool to motivate students academically. Schools often get involved with the PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL) because they can’t get their students to write and have found that writing for the community newspaper suddenly raises the “relevance of writing” for students when their work is “put in front of not only their family, but their friends, their pastor, the guy who owns the grocery store down the road, everyone they know.”

Foxfire (GA) also focuses on the importance of audience for academic work, explaining “it may be another individual, or a small group, or the community, but it is an audience the learners want to serve or engage. The audience, in turn, affirms the work is important, needed and worth doing.” In its work with students as well as its teacher training effort, Foxfire (GA) emphasizes student involvement and action, thoughtful reflection and rigorous assessment,

imagination and problem solving, using applications beyond the classroom for what is learned, and meaningful connections to the community.

### **Youth Media as Tool or as Field**

In spite of all the diversity within Youth Media programs, the programs themselves and their goals seem to fall into two broad categories. In one, Youth Media is a tool to be used by those involved in youth development, media literacy, career development or other areas to reach program goals. In this instance, youth development programs can, and sometimes do, use Youth Media, organized sports, arts and crafts and/or hands-on science activities as tools to help them meet their goals for youth. Similarly, career development programs can use Youth Media, job shadowing and/or internships as tools to help them meet their goals. Media literacy programs could use Youth Media, textual analysis of ads and/or the study of propaganda to help them reach their goals. In these examples, Youth Media is not an end, but rather one of several means to an end. Here, Youth Media may be used as a recruitment tool, a retention tool or as a tool to reach longer term goals such as increased self esteem, increased academic skills or better skills in working with groups. Youth Media may be a more or less effective in helping these programs reach their goals, but it is one of many possible choices. It would appear that in these cases, programs would not be funded as Youth Media programs, but rather as youth development, media literacy or career development programs.

The second category for Youth Media programs is quite different. It applies to programs and goals where the focus is specifically on Youth Media, on getting youth voice out and on using that voice to impact audiences and the media in general. In these cases, Youth Media is the primary, and in many cases, the only way to reach program goals.

These two categories are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, most Youth Media programs have both a product (end) and a set of experiences (means) for participating youth. There is, often however, what Youth Communication (NY) describes as a “product process tension” where “process is the work with the kids, while the product is what you are producing.”

### **The Balance of Process and Product**

While all the programs want Youth Media to be a good experience for the youth, there are great differences in the emphasis that is placed on the quality of the process versus that which is placed on the quality of the product. The emphasis seems to be related to the primary goals of the Youth Media program. Programs with a greater emphasis on process tend to be those where Youth Media is used as a tool to reach youth development or other goals. For example, at Rise and Shine (NY) the staff perspective is often “it’s okay, this one doesn’t have to be perfect,” while at Blunt Youth Radio (ME) they “want to have quality programs but not at the expense of real decision power making on [youths’] part.” Since “young people run the show..., it’s quite loose, mistakes are made.” At Appalshop/AMI (KY) the “emphasis is not so much on quality.” They “stress a quick turn-around time, trying to get the media out to get people to see it.”

As with many programs, KBC Alaska Native Youth Media Institute has tried to find a balance between process and product between, as they explain, having “such a high expectation that the students don’t get to do anything and having them do the hands-on and learn no matter what it sounds like.” They “have moved more toward letting [students] do the work” but have set some expectations including writing “in proper English.”

Listen Up! (NY) brings another perspective to the balance of process and product, that of the audience:

It's a very empowering experience for the producer to make this product, but it tends to be a painful experience for the audience to sit through a 15 minute experience that feels like 45 minutes.

The impact on audience is key to programs that use Youth Media as a way to get the voice of youth out. Some reflect Youth Communication's (NY) belief that "if you really produce a product, you have an obligation to produce something useful to the world." Producing something of quality is important to Don't Believe the Hype (MN) because the products they generate are broadcast. They feel that even though having quality control can make the process "less fun or exciting or sexy" for the youth involved, there is a need for quality control and that the pieces are stronger because of the quality control. EVC (NY) agrees, feeling that "because there is a final documentary with a screening that will be shown in catalogues and schools, there is an emphasis on quality."

While there is general agreement that "the process shouldn't be sacrificed for the product," EVC (NY) goes a step further, pointing out that skills related to quality control are skills they want youth to have. They "want kids to learn to do their best, to learn how to revise something, to work for something that is a little more polished, for that second or third draft of something..., and that communicating to an audience is important." They also point out that, "if we can clearly see some missed opportunities, like we didn't get enough youth perspectives or background evidence was flimsy – those things are clearly affecting the product and it shows the process was not as rigorous."

### **Youth and Decision-Making**

At the very core of Youth Media are the relative roles that youth and adults play in decision-making. Who decides the topics to be covered, the perspectives to be represented and when, or if, something is good enough to go says much about the program. The degree to which,

and how, youth determine what topics are covered may even be a defining factor as to whether a program can be defined as Youth Media.

There are many things that influence the role of youth in the determination of content, one of which is whether the program is school-based or not. School-based Youth Media projects operate under strictures of the 1988 Supreme Court decision *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260. Under this decision, public school administrators can censor student “speech” in official school publications or activities, including newspapers and other publications, if the officials think students are saying something inappropriate or harmful even if it is not vulgar and is not disruptive of school functions (ACLU, 1997b). To do this, school officials need to show they have a valid educational purpose for their censorship and that the publication is not a “forum for student expression” where students have been given the authority to make content decisions (Student Press Law Center (SPLC)<sup>4</sup>, 1992).

The *Hazelwood* decision has been criticized as granting too much power to school officials and not adequately protecting the First Amendment freedoms of high school students. There is reason for concern; a 1992 survey of student newspapers found that over half the students said that the editor would get in trouble for a controversial story and 40% reported their newspaper had failed to run important stories because of subject matter (Nopes, 1994). Legislation has been introduced in nearly 30 states, and passed in six, to protect high school journalists (SPLC, 2000). This legislation tends to focus on the protection of the “liberty of the [student] press” and the rights of public school students to exercise freedom of speech and mandates, as does the Kansas legislation which states that “material [in student publications]

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<sup>4</sup> The Student Press Law Center (<http://www.splc.org/>), a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing legal help and information to the student media and journalism educators, is an excellent resource on Youth Media and censorship issues.

shall not be suppressed solely because it involves political or controversial subject matter.” (SPLC, 1997a; Clites, 1998).

Youth Media programs working in schools or with in-school programs have had to find ways of dealing with the “muting of youth voices.” To prevent principals or teachers from pulling pieces for “petty” reasons, PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL) set up a project agreement with participating schools. Under this agreement “principals have a right to pull stories, but they better know why and it better be a good reason.”

Other school-related programs take different stands. After students working with Appalshop/AMI (KY) did a piece on gays and lesbians in the Appalachian mountains, the media teacher from a school which sends students to Appalshop/AMI (KY) was upset about the content of the piece and threatened to withdraw from the program. “She said she would participate if teachers had the last say in what the kids did.” Appalshop/AMI (KY) said “no way” and now that school no longer sends students to the program.

When authorities exert control over content, the options are quite limited for school-related programs. However, when a Youth Media effort is out of school or after school and independent of school sponsorship, the situation is quite different. In *Thomas v. Granville Central School District*, 8 607 F.2d 1043, the Supreme Court held that as members of the public, students are subject to the same laws as any other citizen. “[T]he First Amendment forbids public school administrators and teachers from regulating the material to which a child is exposed after he leaves school each afternoon.” Schools may not censor what is covered nor stop in- or out-of-school distribution of Youth Media that is not officially sanctioned or paid for by public schools, as long as the media is not “indecent” and the distribution does not “materially

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and substantially" disrupt school activities. The school may place reasonable limits on the "time, place or manner" of distribution (SPLC, 1997b).

As the American Civil Liberties Union concludes in their briefing paper on freedom of expression in the arts and entertainment:

two fundamental principles come into play whenever a court must decide a case involving freedom of expression. The first is content neutrality – the government cannot limit expression just because any listener, or even the majority of a community, is offended by its content. In the context of art and entertainment, this means tolerating some works that we might find offensive, insulting, outrageous – or just plain bad. The second principle is that expression may be restricted only if it will clearly cause direct and imminent harm to an important societal interest. The classic example is falsely shouting fire in a crowded theater and causing a stampede. Even then, the speech may be silenced or punished only if there is no other way to avert the harm (ACLU, 1997a).

While the legal issues are quite different for out-of-school Youth Media programs, the role that youth play in decision-making varies greatly in these programs. For example, at EVC (NY) adults help “refine, set parameters, structure, focus ideas” because “the notion of youth empowerment and youth voice is important, but not to the exclusion of the voice and guidance of the [adult leader].” EVC (NY) feels that those “legally and morally responsible for the organization” need to use their own judgment. NOVAC (LA) has a similar structure where “ultimately the [adult leader] calls the shots.” However, NOVAC (LA) points out that adults and youth have never had a major dispute about content perhaps because “there’s a strong relationship already, very tough love, kind of empowering them.”

At Don’t Believe the Hype (MN), the process is “as youth controlled as [participating youth] want, but [adult staff] maintain a structure,” while at DCTV (NY) youth “have the primary decision-making though [adult staff] will influence them. They choose the subject. They do all the work. They run everything.”

Some programs also speak of outside influences on content, including parents. As Blunt Youth Radio (ME) sometimes reminds youth, most of them “are minors and their parents won’t let them do some of these things.” At least as strong are the outside influences on Youth Media programs that target their products to the outside media. Youth Radio (CA) operates under regulations established by the FCC and feels that those “who we deliver the material to - they have the last word.” However, at the same time Youth Radio (CA) uses “a wide array of outlets” including the web, so that youth can “say it like it is” and “not get knocked off the air.” Since they do not broadcast, the Community Arts Center (MA) does not have to worry about FCC regulations. They give control of content to youth once the youth are aware of outcomes and “all the repercussions...such as [using] swears in a song”. Others including Children’s Express (DC) focus on teaching the necessity for stories to be balanced and fair, and feel if this is accomplished, there should be no reason to influence the content or pull the story.

In spite of the differences across programs and the difficulties and limitations, what underlies so many of these programs is a need to, as Don’t Believe the Hype (MN) explains, provide a venue for “unheard voices.”

## **The Impact of Youth Media: What We Know and What We Don’t**

### **Best Practice**

Within a number of fields dealing with youth such as youth development (e.g. PEPNet, ND; Brunner & Tally, 1999) and school-to-career (e.g.. Grobe, Nahas & Steinbrueck, 1996), there has been some consensus around best practice. This has not yet been the case for Youth Media for several possible reasons. The first is quite practical. It is often difficult, as Street Level (IL) explains, to find the money and time “to sit down and think about best practices and

what worked, what didn't work." Too, the same diversity of Youth Media programs and the lack of established national networks that has led to some isolation and a difficulty in defining unifying goals can make it hard to come to a consensus about best practice. When programs feel, as does Youth Communication (NY), that the work they do is unique, determining best practice is difficult.

Among the programs included here there are some issues out of which best practices might grow. One such issue is youth recruitment. As EVC (NY) and other programs have discovered, youth are often "reluctant to travel outside of neighborhoods." Programs differ in how they deal with this common problem. EVC (NY), for example, consciously asks their participants "to cross boundaries and borders," while Children's Express (DC) starts by "locating bureaus in places equally accessible for kids from both sides of the tracks." When Just Think (CA) began having similar problems getting youth to come to the center, even "when it was less than a mile away," they started spending their time "driving around" to pick up youth and bring them to the center. Rather than continuing that, they created the Media Mobile to bring their programs to the youth.

Even when programs speak of "word of mouth" as a common recruiting strategy, different things are meant. For example, for Rise and Shine (NY) word of mouth is being "hooked into churches, schools, and tenant associations" while for the Community Art Center (MA) word of mouth comes via older sisters and brothers of the target youth who have already been in the program.

While there appears to be little consensus of best practices, individual programs and those who work with programs do have strong, occasionally conflicting ideas of what it is that makes their programs successful. Examples include:

- NOVAC (LA)
  - Using professional equipment and treating youth as “professional media makers”
  - Having a “highly structured, responsible environment”
  - Charging even a small amount for participation
  - Recruiting youth who either have a “track record of success in something or [who are] really eager”
- Youth Connection (NY)
  - Using many drafts “to get down to what is more real”
  - Having “adult mediation, discussing and reading and writing in a group”
- Youth Radio (CA)
  - Having youth apply to the program, to “make a time commitment”
  - Having “young people involved in every aspect”
  - Having a mix of youth in terms of ethnicity, geography and gender
  - Using a “peer teacher model, so they can see and aspire to that role”
  - When recruiting, sending “other young people of that ethnicity out...people like me”
  - Giving youth a “mold...a structure” and running the program “like a business, [giving youth] a schedule and assignments and [expecting them] to complete them”
- Just Think (CA)
  - Using the inquiry process because “as the wise facilitator that we should be as teachers, to ensure that students think deeply about the decisions they are making,...with content, editing, etc.”
  - Training, retraining and leaving equipment behind in school-based programs
- Renee Hobbs (Babson College’s Media Literacy Project, MA)
  - Reaching a wider number of youth
  - Having an outreach plan to give people the skills and knowledge to do their own programs and outreach
  - Having the ability to reflect the cultural environment in the community.

### **Research and Evaluation**

In spite of the lack of consensus on what best practice is, there has been a great deal of discussion on the potential of Youth Media to impact participating youth, other youth, mainstream media and even society as a whole. Program staff, commentators and experts speak of the potential programs have “to present young people with opportunities for learning and doing, fueling their bodies, brains and spirits with options” (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 1998) and of “the potentially transforming power of interactive communications on young

people” (Morino, 1997). Related to many of the goals of programs involved in Youth Media, discussions of its impact include:

- “Giving children a significant voice in the world” (Children’s Express, 2000)
- Students “gaining credibility and skills on a range of issues via the media” (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 1998)
- Improving the image of youth in the media (Health and Education Communication Consultants, 1997)
- Having educational, citizenship, public relations and vocational benefits as well as an ability to increase youth empowerment (Arnold, 1995).

While there is much discussion of the potential of Youth Media, there is little study of Youth Media’s impact on participating youth, audiences or on society. One exception is Youth Communication (NY), publishers of *New Youth Connections* and *Foster Care Youth United*, which has done surveys of its adult distributors, teen readers and alumni “on and off” for the past 20 years. In a survey done this year, they found 64% of the teen respondents, up from 43% in 1994, said reading a *New Youth Connections* story made them take a specific action, most usually talking about it and changing the way they thought. Eight percent of teens reported taking more direct actions, including stopping drinking and smoking, discouraging friends from taking drugs and signing up for Yoga classes.

Adults were also asked about the impact of their reading Youth Communications (NY) publications. Over 60% of responding adults reported using *New Youth Connections* for writing exercises and discussions, while almost three quarters of the adults surveyed about their use of *Foster Care Youth United* reported using it with young people, primarily for group discussions. Almost 90% of the responding adults said they learned things about teens from reading *Foster Care Youth United*.

More data has been collected on the degree to which Youth Media products are picked up and used by mainstream media. For example, an evaluation of Youth Radio (CA) found that 679 radio pieces by and about youth were placed on public and commercial radio. Children's Express (DC) provides an impressive list of their media outlets, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, BBC and CNN. Smaller programs also collect information on the distribution of their products, such as PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL), which has increased their production and distribution of town newspapers from four in 1993 to 24 currently, and KBC Alaska Native Youth Media Training Institute has had pieces aired locally and then broadcast on the American Indian National Radio and Satellite System.

Programs ranging from Appalshop/AMI (KY) to Youth Radio (CA) keep information on their own growth, including changes in the number of youth served and services offered. A few, such as EVC (NY) and NOVAC (LA), also do assessments of youth work through portfolio assessments or feedback from audiences and professionals.

The lack of solid impact data is a concern for many Youth Media programs. For example, while Appalshop/AMI (KY) is "always up on counts, [on] people that come, [on] how many events we have," they feel impact evaluation is important and want to do more. Several programs, including the Community Art Center's Teen Media Program (MA), Youth Radio (CA) and Rise and Shine (NY), are in the process of developing evaluation plans to help them determine if they are meeting their goals and, in the case of Rise and Shine (NY), to look at the impact of program participation in such areas as school attendance, grades, dealing with others, learning, world outlooks and mental health. In addition, the Media Awareness Network has developed a website and user group to encourage systematic collection of data on the impact of media education and to share assessment techniques (Worsnop, 1999).

Funding for evaluation can be problematic, as Just Think (CA) describes:

With our first major grant, we proposed to do a longitudinal study of the program. We got the funding for implementing the program for the five years but didn't get the funding for the evaluation part, and that's really a tragedy... evaluation should be built in— it's so necessary.

Even with its worldwide reach, Children's Express (DC) has “never been able to secure funding for a significant study” of program impact. And as a Street Level Youth Media (IL) staff member comments “with a small pot of money, it's hard [to do impact evaluation]. We want to look at the impact of programs we do [with] an innovative sort of design for evaluation... How do you capture what a young person learned through video making?” EVC (NY) has a similar concern. They feel they address the development of “skills and competencies” very well because when youth make “a documentary, they have to gather evidence, weigh it, compare evidence, make an argument, learn to take turns in a group, revise their work,” but they are not clear how increases in those skills and competencies can be adequately measured, and they don't feel standardized tests will do it. Listen Up! (NY) also points out that while they ask youth what they have learned and what they have gained, the short duration of some programs makes it difficult to look at pre/post change.

While little work has been done to evaluate Youth Media programs, there has been work in related areas that can be useful in looking for impact. For example, surveys of high school journalism students and college communications majors have found participation in high school journalism was a major influence on decisions to go on to journalism/communications as a career (Dodd, Bellow & Tipton, 1990; Dodd, Tipton & Sumpter, 1989). However, high school journalism students have been found disproportionately to be white (Arnold, 1995, Nopes, 1994) and from predominantly white schools (Callahan, 1996).

Looking at programs that stress active student learning, which is a part of many Youth Media programs, early work by Conrad and Hedin (1980) found such “experiential education” can effectively promote the psychological development of adolescents, and do so at least somewhat more effectively than classroom-based programs. Looking explicitly at community-based programs, McLaughlin (2000) found young people who participate in community-based programs have higher educational aspirations, report feeling better about themselves, are more apt to have received recognition for good grades, and are more apt to see doing volunteer community service as important than those who are not a part of community-based programs.

It may be that the act itself of pulling together of ideas and concerns in written and oral form, as is often done in Youth Media programs, can make a difference. After years of work in the area, Pennebaker concluded that translating upsetting experiences into language changed the way people thought about the experience (as cited in Pennebaker, 2000). Furthermore, he found that organizing the event in a coherent way, using oral or written language, helped individuals deal with life issues more effectively. This has been found to lead to improvements in participants’ physical and mental health.

Finally, summarizing the research in resiliency in youth, Bonnie Benard (1997) concluded that three characteristics are consistently found in environmental systems that support growth and development: caring relationships, the communication of high expectations and opportunities for participation and contribution – characteristics that the stories in the next sections show can be found in many of the Youth Media programs.

### **Youth<sup>5</sup> and Staff Perceptions of Program Impact**

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<sup>4</sup>It is important to note that these youth were not randomly selected and are not necessarily representative of youth in Youth Media programs. Their stories are presented here as examples of youth perceptions of impact and possible areas for further study. The youth quoted here come from five programs:

## **Caring Relationships**

Both youth and staff speak about the caring relationships within their Youth Media programs:

A lot of times, it's hard not to bring your personal life to work with you. Everyone here is like my family. [They] helped me learn to cope more with what's going on. [I'm] more responsible and more mature. [I] still make mistakes, but [they] help me see life in a better point of view. (Youth, DCTV, NY)

They understand you're a kid; they work with you on that, to become a better individual. They aren't just your supervisor but your friend. (Youth, Children's Express, DC)

Some of these kids don't have anywhere else to go after school, so they come here, use the computer, hang out with each other, with us [even when they aren't working on their project]. (Staff, Children's Express, DC)

There's a lot of in loco parentis, helping to resolve family/immigration problems...[We] really get involved in their lives. [We are] support systems for them sometimes... [There is a] social worker component that our staff is involved in. (Staff, DCTV, NY)

These are kids who live all sorts of difficulties...my time is often spent as a counselor as well. (Staff, Rise and Shine, NY)

## **Opportunities for Participation and Contribution**

Youth and staff see the experience of working in Youth Media as an opportunity to have an impact, to make a difference both now and in the future. For some youth it is the product that is developed that makes a difference:

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- PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL) which works within schools to produce town newspapers across Alabama, as part of a larger effort to "improve and change the nature of learning, process of reflection and sharing between teachers, administrators, students and community members that leads to genuine school reform."
  - Children's Express (DC) which has a national and global focus and works to integrate children's voices in mainstream media.
  - Just Think (CA) which is focused on media literacy and giving kids "creativity skills to lead thoughtful and productive lives."
  - DCTV (NY) which seeks to "open opportunities for at-risk minority students" through media arts education while becoming a "bridge to higher education and employment opportunities in the media arts field."
  - EVC (NY) which aims to teach "documentary video production and media analysis to youth, educators and community organizers" by offering video and digital media arts programs to at-risk youth.

We had a county paper and the quality wasn't as good as our [Youth Media] paper and a lot of people in the community told us that and felt our paper cared more about the issues and topics in our community [than did the existing paper]. (Youth, PACERS Community Newspaper Project, AL)

The truancy tape did affect a lot of people. I was on the executive board at my high school at the time we worked on the tape. I showed it to the teachers and principals, and when they watched it, they did a lot of changes, tightened up security...It took that tape to make them want to do something. We just showed them a side of the whole truancy issue that they never thought of before. (Youth, DCTV, NY)

And youth from a number of programs spoke of powerful changes in their own lives:

[I'm] more understanding of people in general and the hardships they go through, and more curious about people's lives – ordinary lives. (Youth, DCTV, NY)

It changed my life, I was doing bad things before I came here...not bad, but kind of hanging out with the wrong people. (Youth, EVC, NY)

Basically, it changed me. I used to be an at-risk youth, 'Scared Straight program'<sup>6</sup> 'been there, done that'. ... It opened my eyes for the world, before it was limited to New York, now I see the big picture – so many different people, all types of people, their struggles, now a lot of angles. ... It opened my eyes to what we have here in the US. [I have a] broader outlook on life. Helped make me a better person in every sense of the word. ... [I'm a] less violent person, more reasonable... [I have] more pride in myself. (Youth, DCTV, NY)

[I learned] how to be more of a leader, to not be afraid to take charge in a situation, how to interact with people, to accept the fact that your ideas aren't the only ones that are right. (Youth, Children's Express, DC)

[Because of being in Youth Media] I strongly believe in 'noblesse oblige', which means the more power you have the more you have to give to your community, the more you're in the more you give out. I want to help out people because I know people have helped me to be how I am, to be a strong individual, I want to give that back to the community... I spoke a lot [at conferences], most of the time I was the only African American student there, or the only student there, most were very old... [There was] no voice of youth or minorities. ...I want to give that opportunity to others less advantaged. (Youth, Just Think, CA)

## **Career Development**

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<sup>6</sup> Scared Straight is a program where youth are brought to correctional facilities to see some of the consequences of breaking the law.

Although the information is rarely collected systematically, programs tend to keep track of alumni who continue into media as a career. Somewhat independent of whether career development is a major goal of a program, going on to a media career is often seen as evidence of program impact. Program staff point with justifiable pride to:

- The “two kids [who]...got into film school – one got a professional contract shooting and editing.” (NOVAC, LA)
- The alumna who is a “writer on the New York Times and 33 years old, and a finalist for a National Book Award.” (Youth Communication, NY)
- The former participant and now mentor who “is graduating and getting a job with the Detroit Free Press as an illustrator.” (PACERS Community Newspaper Project, AL)
- The three youth participants who are now at Columbia continuing on in media arts. (Street Level Youth Media, IL)

Program staff also talk about the many participants who “go straight to running the county seat paper or become reporters” (PACERS Community Newspaper Project, AL) or who “work at their local radio station” or “in video production in their school districts” (KBC Alaska Native Youth Media Institute, AK). The youth who were interviewed spoke more directly to the role their programs played in their career and educational plans:

DCTV helped me to stick with my dreams because I wanted to do stuff like this. There’s other stuff here in NY that I could be doing but they helped me realize what I want to do. [I’m going to do] TV production in college. If I didn’t come here, I may have chosen a different college, different major. (DCTV, NY)

It’s made me think a lot...right now I’m a mathematical economics major, had thought I would do something in the business world – all summer I’ve done a lot of soul searching...at the very least it’s made me think a lot about my major and career. (Just Think, CA)

Up until [the Republican Convention] I wanted to go to the Naval Academy. The convention opened my eyes. Now I want to do political journalism. I’ve been doing it all my life, [working with this organization for six years], so I never considered it before. (Children’s Express, DC)

When we started everyone had their own different goals, a doctor, a pilot, [now] more see themselves doing documentaries and working in TV. [Working here] broadened their horizons. (DCTV, NY)

### **Skills Development**

Two programs stressed building and improving writing skills as a mark of their success and impact on participants. Youth Communication (NY) staff described how a portfolio of participants' work has shown "what the kids have learned, from not knowing the past tense to understanding more complex literary concepts – [they] progress as writers." The director of PACERS Community Newspaper Project (AL) spoke of the impact of "relevant" writing:

[In a participating school, a teacher] couldn't get kids to write - so she started a newspaper and required the kids to put in an article, she even said your submission will go blank if you don't. Test scores on the SAT 9 [Stanford Achievement Test 9<sup>th</sup> Edition] verbal increased, a huge turn around...because you're saying writing means something, to know how to write well. One student told me, she realized she had to get the facts straight, grammar right, punctuation, because she hears about it if she doesn't. That type of reinforcement is powerful.

Other programs point to other areas of skill development including EVC (NY) youth who say they have been developing skills that transfer to other areas such as interviewing and how to be better and more effective participants in a group. Staff at Youth Radio (CA) have reported seeing a difference in the way "young people approach education, writing and reading" and how youth "stay in school, go to college, get a career."

### **Social Change and Advocacy**

From Yugoslavia to New York City, some see participating in Youth Media programs as having an impact on how youth deal with controversial issues and with each other.

In Yugoslavia, they've had a 400-year national war. We are used to working with gang war [in California], but there were a lot of similarities. The first exercise we do is break [participants] into groups of two's and teach them how to run a camera. Then, we ask them, if they had 30 seconds to send a message to the world, what would they say and how? Then, they break up with a stranger to work on it. Usually, they get so engaged in

working with the technology, they are not focused on each other, and that generally works with all populations that might be in conflict. (Staff, Just Think, CA)

We had one case where a group...decided to look at the question on gay and lesbian youth, on gay/straight alliances, a student movement in schools. So the one open lesbian was able to convince the rest. There were some kids that were quieter. In fact, one kid was a devout Catholic immigrant from Poland, who found the topic was against his values and beliefs. But he found a way into it, first into the technology, he was really into the digital editing, and was very skilled at it, but after he learned more about the content, he did become more engaged by it, became less hostile and standoff-ish... (Staff, EVC, NY)

### **An Important Caveat**

While the anecdotes are powerful, as Sally Sharp of the University of Michigan so wisely commented, “the plural of anecdote is not evidence.” There is a great need for data on the impact of Youth Media on participating youth, on audiences and even on the media itself. The lack of research and evaluation data on program impact is worrying in several areas. As Zuckerman (2000) reminds us:

Effective programs use data to track progress, assess the impact of services and measure improvement in the lives of young people... The key to effective programs is doing the right things and doing them well. Information is more than a report that is sent to funders to keep them happy and get the next grant. It is the mirror that youth programs and young people use to answer the question ‘How am I doing?’ The answer must be ‘I know where I want to be and I have a plan to get there.’

### **Future Directions**

If Youth Media is to develop and expand, a number of questions need to be more definitively answered. Key among these questions is whether Youth Media is, or even should be, a field. Based on the work done in this paper, it does appear that Youth Media can be both a field and a tool for other fields to use<sup>7</sup>. One possible unifying factor which could be used to

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<sup>7</sup> This is a model that has been used by others, including Women’s Studies. Women’s Studies is a field with its own programs, field of knowledge, goals and even degrees. At the same time it is also a tool used by other fields to reach such goals ranging from increasing student self concept to making a corpus of information more complete.

define Youth Media as a field is an emphasis on facilitating the voice of youth and providing a venue for that voice to be heard in order to have an impact. This is, however, only a suggestion; one that needs to be debated, discussed and possibly discarded.

### **Building Consensus: Defining Youth Media**

If Youth Media is to be a field, there needs to be work on defining program characteristics that make something “good” Youth Media or even Youth Media at all, including if a Youth Media program can be “good” if its products are not. If there were a great deal of work on the impact of Youth Media, defining best practice would not be a difficult task, but such work is generally not available. Therefore, it may be appropriate for those involved in Youth Media to come together and begin to generate some possible areas of best practice. This activity will be of value only if Youth Media has been defined as something unique, something that, while it may overlap with fields such as youth development or media literacy, is also different. If this is the case, then the model offered by the Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet, 2000) is worth examining.

PEPNet, created and managed by the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC), is a system and an information source, based on practice and research, for identifying and promoting what works in youth related fields, youth employment and development. In 1996, NYEC and a national working group of practitioners, policy makers and researchers identified practices common to effective programs, effective programs being those which have “evidence of success.” The PEPNet model incorporates the results of their work in three areas that are key to field building— improving programming and capacity, informing public policy and increasing support for effective youth programming.

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Key to the definition of Youth Media is who decides the topics covered. Among the Youth Media programs described here, there is a strong tendency for topics to be selected by youth, to be serious and to be approached from a more progressive perspective. While this may be the result of the authors' unintentional selection bias, it does raise some important questions for discussion. Is it appropriate for the content of Youth Media products to reflect the perspectives that, for example, homosexuality is immoral and wrong or that gangs provide a positive social influence in neighborhoods? Is a product considered Youth Media at all if it focuses on topics such as fashion or rock stars? Is it necessary for youth to choose the topics covered for it to be Youth Media?

And to what youth should Youth Media be directed? As indicated earlier, youth participating in high school journalism are disproportionately white and from predominately white schools. However, youth targeted by most of the Youth Media programs described here tend to be underrepresented and/or disenfranchised and as Hobbs maintains, youth in in-school, non-print media production tend to be "the low-ability kids." Implications for the development of Youth Media, based on whether it is targeting all youth, at-risk youth, disenfranchised youth or some other specific subgroup, need to be discussed. These implications may be related to expected quality levels or products, the need for access to youth counseling and other resources or even to the need for stipends or not.

### **Moving Beyond the Pure of Heart Model<sup>8</sup>: Refining Youth Media<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks are due to Tom Kibler for his generation of the "pure of heart" model of social change.

<sup>9</sup> While the issues may be somewhat different where Youth Media is being used as a tool; in this case, it is important to see if youth participation in Youth Media activities provides a different set of outcomes related to youth development goals, media literacy goals or skills development than do other tools or strategies. Work needs to be done to determine the impact of Youth Media compared to other strategies or tools in such areas as the recruitment of targeted youth, the retention of targeted youth, the development or improvement of desired skills or changes in affective areas in the desired directions. Using Youth Media as a tool for programs in other areas may have positive

For Youth Media to develop and expand it must first address its adherence to the “Pure of Heart” model. It is clear from the interviews and site visits conducted for this paper, that the vast majority of adults involved with Youth Media programs are caring, wonderful people with a strong commitment to youth. They are doing what they feel is right. One Youth Media program staffer explained it this way— “we are doing this on faith and if you don’t believe in it, \*\*\*\* you.” Regardless of positive intent, studies from other fields, in this case efforts to increase the diversity of youth going on in math, science and engineering, have found unexpected negative outcomes occurring, such as:

Hands-on science activities done by teachers or by after-school leaders caused students to become *more* stereotyped and limited in their opinions of who could do science (Campbell & Hoey, 2000).

A program to encourage women to continue on toward engineering degrees reinforced rather than overcame stereotypes. Some women in the program felt it existed because women weren’t as good as men in engineering. As one woman explained: “[Engineering] theory is easier for boys. That is why they put us together [in the special program].” (Campbell & Hoey, 2000).

Unintended outcomes are a concern for any Youth Media program but may be of particular concern for programs working with vulnerable youth such as youth in foster care and incarcerated youth. Youth Media program staff need to be able to deal effectively with the legal, ethical and moral issues that may come up, something that is particularly difficult for staff without counseling or other youth experience. Working on faith can be very powerful, but without information on impact, it is not clear whether programs are having the desired effects or even if programs are having negative unintended outcomes.

### **Developing the Next Generation: Supporting Youth Media**

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outcomes in areas of youth voice and social change as described earlier. However, this is a conjecture that must be tested.

Youth Media is about mentoring and that mentoring has been focused on the youth. More needs to be done towards mentoring those staff members who are new to Youth Media, including those in newer programs without the resources of larger, more established programs. Thought needs to be given to the next generation of Youth Media program leaders, from where they will come and how they will be trained. Running a “good” Youth Media program requires a variety of skills, including organizational skills, media development skills, youth development skills and skills in digital/technical areas. Gaining skills in digital/technical areas is particularly important as information and distribution of that information becomes increasingly digitized. Youth Media programs need to be able to explore what these changes can and should mean for them.

### **Building Networks/Building Alliances: Informing Youth Media**

Currently some Youth Media programs, concerned about their isolation, are beginning to come together in different networks to learn about each other, provide support and begin to determine ways to improve program and product quality and explore ways to improve distribution networks, such as those efforts described earlier by Listen Up! and Video Machete. While this work is important, it is in its very early stages and needs support and facilitation. The different networks being established also need to know about each other, and decisions need to be made as to whether networks will include Youth Media programs using different types of media, how many networks there should be or even how Youth Media is defined among different programs within a network.

Networks bringing Youth Media programs together can only go so far; to be a field, Youth Media needs allies. Indeed the lack of allies may be, as PHat Lip! (VA) feels “why Youth Media in America has stayed where it is.” Getting those allies will not be easy, but there are a

number of potential allies out there including youth development programs with an interest in getting the voice of youth out, community media programs with an interest in expanding to include youth and even mainstream media who are interested in helping the next generation of media professionals. However, to be successful, these and other efforts need to be supported not just by funders but by programs themselves.

## **In Closing**

Within Youth Media there is a tremendous amount of passion and excitement. Youth who work with adults know the difficulties but also realize that until they “start speaking out... nothing’s going to happen. The adults won’t listen.” (Youth, Arts High School, MN) It is very clear that youth have much to say, the question is how we can help them to be heard both today and in the future.

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