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Youth Media and Its Global Digital Afterlife

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As a researcher working at the intersection of youth, learning and media culture, I probably should have anticipated the extent to which digital developments have redefined our fields of study, research relationships, conceptual frameworks and strategies of analysis. Yet evidence of these changes took me by surprise when I was working on a book about youth media and learning (Soep and Chávez, 2010). My ethnographic site was Youth Radio, an organization where I play a dual role, as both participant – Senior Producer in the youth-driven newsroom – and researcher. I’d been associated with Youth Radio for eight years or so. At the time, I was reworking a chapter called ‘Converged Literacy’, about the new learning demands and opportunities created when young people produce media reaching massive audiences. In the chapter, I discussed a radio story a teenaged Youth Radio reporter, Finnegan Hamill, had produced called *Emails from Kosovo*, which excerpted his correspondence with a girl living in Kosovo just as war was breaking out in that region. The story turned out to be huge. It ran as an eight-part series on National Public Radio, was quoted verbatim by the then president Bill Clinton and subsequently won the prestigious Alfred I. DuPont award for journalistic excellence. All this attention and impact turned Finnegan into a public figure. He’d been reporting the news, and then he became the news – making appearances on CNN, The Today Show, even People Magazine.

Using this as a shining example, I was applauding the sophisticated literacy practices collaborative media projects can foster in young producers. And then, double-checking the spelling of his name, I came across a blog post Finnegan himself had written years after the series ran. Called *My Year as Kosovo Boy*, it included some harsh reflections on his experience. Describing how the Today Show host Katie Couric
Elisabeth Soep asked him what he had learned from working on the series, Finnegan confessed to his blog readers, ‘I couldn’t think of a damn thing.’

It was a humbling moment, to say the least. I’d been developing an argument about all that young people can learn by producing high-impact media content; and then, through an Internet search, I accidentally discovered some crucial data I hadn’t known existed that collided with my own analysis. Who was the observer here, and who the observed, I had to ask as I read Finnegan’s blog, since as a researcher and producer at Youth Radio, I was both analysing and implicated in his critique.

I don’t want to overstate the case. Youth media research has a tendency to assign a kind of automatic ‘authenticity’ to expressions of youth voice (Fleetwood, 2005) – as if hearing directly from young people is all we need to do to understand the complex and sometimes fraught meanings attached to youth-produced texts. Finnegan was already in his twenties when he wrote the post, looking back on a teen production. And although he raised some important questions about the relationship between media production and learning, these contributed to but did not trump the varied interpretations others, including his editors and peers at the time, the story’s audiences and I, could legitimately put forth. But his account, and the fact that it, like my own, would be permanently available anywhere and at anytime, to anyone who had access to an online search engine, profoundly unsettled the conventional research dynamic. No longer can researchers who study youth media production single-handedly demarcate the beginnings, middles and ends of the processes we examine. The making and remaking continue long after we leave our field sites, beyond the superimposed and arbitrary boundaries we erect to wall off our units of analysis. Nor can researchers assume that it will be our academic peers, for the most part, who hold us accountable – in documented, public, retrievable ways – for our arguments and conclusions. Youth media producers themselves, as research ‘subjects’, have always formed their own interpretations and accounts of the experiences we analyse. What’s different now is that they’re publishing their assessments alongside our own.

In this chapter, I examine the digital afterlife of youth-produced content: what happens in the comments sections and link-rich online conversations that transpire past the ‘completion’ of a given media project. This phase of participation reflects the ease with which content circulates now, as a result of new technological and economic structures that enable users to share media across platforms, via ‘social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes’ (Jenkins,