

When does the digital make a difference? Digital media practices and identity negotiations at a New York City middle school

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One afternoon in the fall of 2009, I attended an after-school workshop on “remixing” videos. The workshop was being sponsored by The Downtown School for Design and Technology, an innovative public middle school that had just opened in Manhattan. I was following the lives of 75 11- and 12-year-olds that made up the school’s first class. The Downtown School publicized itself as tailored to fit the interests and needs of a generation of “21st century learners,” who, the school’s founders argued, were being uniquely shaped by fundamental changes to media and technology. One of the ways the school hoped to meet the needs of this new generation was by weaving the latest digital media technologies, and especially tools for media production, throughout the curriculum.

As a lead into his workshop, the instructor showed the students a section of a [talk Lawrence Lessig gave on “remix culture”](#) at the 2007 TED conference. For those who don’t know of him, Lessig is a professor at Harvard Law School and an eloquent public champion of digital media’s potential to democratize cultural production. The instructor was showing a portion of Lessig’s talk that included the following quote:

“It is now anybody with access to a \$1,500 computer, who can take sounds and images from the culture around us and use it to say things differently. These tools of creativity have become tools of speech. It is a literacy for this generation. This is how our kids speak. It is how our kids think. It is what your kids are as they increasingly understand digital technologies and their relationship to themselves.”

The section of the TED talk quoted above was shown as a video during an after-school workshop on remixing videos. In the moment after Lessig said, “This is how our kids speak,” the visiting instructor briefly paused the video to tell the class, “That’s you,” before resuming the clip. After the video ended he told the students it was their civic duty to remix media. Schooling is filled with such didactic moments. What surprised me about this moment was that the instructor’s assertion that the students already had the sensibility he was calling on them to develop. I read that paradox as indicative of some of the limiting assumptions that Lessig, and many others (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998), have made in their portrayal of young people’s relationship to digital media, and in particular their relationship to what Jenkins (1992; 2006) has called “participatory culture.” These accounts tend to portray today’s generation of youth as monolithically interested in digital media, glossing almost all other forms of social difference. In this post I want to complicate these accounts by looking at how young people’s uses of digital media, what I’m calling their “media practices,” are often bound up in peer negotiations over school-based identities.

“Media Practices” and Identities

For most young people in the U.S., much of their identity work remains strongly conditioned by compulsory schooling. This remains true even in our digitally-saturated age. Schools remain the primary places where young people routinely assemble and establish social relations with other youth. In keeping with the work of Paul Willis (1981), Penny Eckert (1989), and William Corsaro (1992), I see participation in informal peer groups as the main social process by which these school-based identities get negotiated. These informal groups tend to originate at school but the work that sustains and shapes them carries over into out-of-school spheres, including those that materialize in networked media.

While individual membership in these social groups always remained in-flux, a rather stable social order emerged at The Downtown School over the course of the first year. In sociological terms, the social formation articulated divisions in gender and, more complexly, racialized ethnicities that were intertwined with differences in social class. The graphic below illustrates this social formation in sociological terms. This social organization consisted of two main groups of boys – the “Geeky, Nerdy, Gamer Boys” (The “Geeky Boys” for short), and the “Cool Boys”– and two main groups of girls – the “Goody Two Shoes,” and the “Cool Girls.” The labels I’m using for each clique are the most frequent terms that non-members used when describing the cliques during interviews. The racial-ethnic and class divisions were somewhat more porous although each group tended to skew significantly towards either privilege or poverty and the highly correlated Department of Education racial and ethnic categories of White and Asian American, on the privileged side of the division, and Black or African American and Latino or Hispanic on the less privileged side.

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Sociological description of the main cliques at The Downtown School.

The “Goody Two Shoes” were primarily recognized for their studious and obedient orientation towards school. When asked why she called them “Goody Two Shoes,” Star, who rarely hung out with this group, explained to me, “You know like the coupons,” which were a reward for good behavior handed out by one of the teachers, “they’re always in a rush to get them. And they’re always the same people who win them.”

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Display in the main hallway of The Downtown School. A teacher awarded coupons for good behavior and whichever student had the most coupons at the end of the week was named student of the week. The winners were mostly Goody Two Shoes, several of whom won numerous times.

In terms of media practices, most of the girls in the Goody Two Shoes clique defied gender stereotypes and got deeply engaged in the media production projects that the school assigned. These included building two- and three-dimensional video games, making podcasts, short videos, and various other forms of media production with and without digital media. This is an encouraging finding. However, media production in and for itself was not central to the identity of the group. None of the girls pursued deeper engagements with media production outside of school assignments. Instead they participated in private classes for dance, music, foreign language, swimming, ice-skating, tennis, and horseback riding. When asked to name their hobbies and interests, many noted a similar list of activities. Importantly, nobody referred to this group in media-specific terms despite their substantial engagement with media production for school.

In terms of media practices beyond school, this group engaged in a collection of activities but none especially fanatically. Like many girls in the school, they participated in simulation games such as Farmville and The Sims much more than their boy counterparts. However, the most distinctive characteristic about their media practices was that their communications-based practices were more regulated by parents than for any other group. Many weren't allowed to have Facebook accounts and several weren't allowed to have AIM accounts. Similarly, many didn't have phones, despite their generally affluent status.

The Geeky Boys clique was primarily recognized for their distinctive interest in media and technology, and especially video games. This group was the largest group at the school and the only group whose distinct interests corresponded with the school's unique approach. The main media practice that the boys shared was gaming, especially hyper-masculine first-person-shooter games like Modern Warfare II. The most committed of these players self-identified as, "hardcore gamers," and had nuanced tastes for gaming consoles and specific games. These media-centric identifications were also used in online self-presentations on social network sites, such as by using images of characters from a game as their profile photos, or by uploading an image from a game's promotional website and tagging friends in it.

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Facebook photo uploaded by one of the Geeky Boys. He has tagged the various game characters with the names of his friends. The album title mentions "the brotherhood," which is both the subtitle for the game and a reference to the friends he has tagged. Their comments are below. Like the Goody Two Shoes, most of this group was also deeply engaged in the school's media production projects, especially game-design. Unlike the Goody Two Shoes, though, many of these Geeky Boys also pursued digital media production projects outside of school assignments. They were the only group at the school to do so in a routine way. The Downtown School offered a collection of after-school programs based on media production and almost all of those who attended were from this clique. A smaller collection of these boys also pursued media-production in less adult-managed settings, including a duo that filmed and edited a series of digital videos that were widely circulated and celebrated amongst the students and staff.

The main alternatives to these two groups were two groups of youth that were often referred to as the "cool" or "popular" kids. While being cool and popular was widely recognized as an exclusive status, most Geeky Boys and Goodie Two Shoe girls didn't covet membership. If anything, non-cool kids referred to the desire for popularity as a shortcoming.

The Cool Kids were best known for their precocious practices, and especially playing with, and at times antagonistically challenging, the rules, norms, and directives of the school's adult authorities. While this precociousness initially won them cred from some of their peers, as the year wore on the Cool Kids gradually came to be seen as "troublemakers," "bad kids," "bullies," or, at the very least, "disruptive" and "annoying." These labels were often intermixed with racial readings of difference, often expressed in terms that referenced racialized geographies, such as "the hood," "the ghetto kids," or "the kids from Brooklyn and the Bronx." In keeping with these precocious and racialized stereotypes, the Cool Boys were distinguished from all the other groups on the basis of physical accomplishments, especially in relation to sports and heterosexuality, whereas the Cool Girls were often characterized as caring about appearances and gossip.

In terms of media practices, the Cool Boys were similar to the Geeky Boys in that their main media interest was video games. Yet while some played first-person shooter games, their collective favorites tended to be sports games like 2K10 and Madden. Interestingly, the Cool Boys had their communications practices regulated by their families more than any other clique except the Goody Two Shoes. Several weren't allowed to have Facebook profiles or email accounts and some weren't yet allowed to have a phone. Importantly, none of these boys pursued media-production for its own sake outside of school. When I asked one of the boys, Jamal, about this he replied, "I don't really do stuff like that outside of school, because, really, my family, like on my mom's side and on my dad's side, our talent is in sports. So usually I'm playing sports, or I'm playing sports games." Many of the boys were deeply involved in basketball and football programs outside of school. When not attending sports practice, the Cool Boys either spent their afternoons at community-based organizations, such as the Boys Club, or at a relative's house.

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Facebook photo uploaded by one of the Cool Boys. He played basketball on teams outside of school and his brother, a scholarship student at a private NYC high school, was a star player for his high school basketball team.

Finally, the Cool Girls were the earliest adopters and heaviest users of communications media. They tended to use a combination of Facebook, AIM, MySpace, email, and a program called ooVoo for group video chat. They would connect with friends from The Downtown School, friends from their neighborhood-based elementary schools, and family members, both immediate and extended. Like the Goody Two Shoes, they played simulation games, often through Facebook, such as Happy Habitat and Petville. Some also used virtual worlds such as Meez and Zwinky. Only one pursued media production outside of school, and most were apathetic to the school's assigned media-production projects.

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Facebook photo uploaded by one of the Cool Girls. The photo is a screenshot of an ooVoo session between two of the Cool Girls. ooVoo is a free software program for group video chats. I've blurred the image to protect the identity of the students.

Conclusion

This quick sketch of the students' digital media practices raises doubts about the generational claims that Lessig and others have made in their celebration of digital media production. In my case, media production mostly appealed to boys from more privileged backgrounds who tended to organize socially as the Geeky Boys clique. The most encouraging feature of the Geeky Boys clique was that it had more social class and ethnic diversity than any of the other main cliques. While dominated by wealthier White boys, several less well off boys who identified as Puerto Rican, African-American, and Caribbean-American, also participated in this group. Each earned cred within the group for his excellence at gaming. This suggests that gaming may offer less privileged boys a way to participate in social formations from which they'd otherwise likely be excluded. It also suggests that some gaming practices may offer an alternative form of masculine group life for adolescents who don't want to or can't participate in masculine groups that are more stereotypically concerned with playing sports and getting girls. That said, a shared interest in gaming only offered less privileged boys partial access to the practices of the Geeky Boys clique.

When it came to distinguishing themselves academically and participating in more resource-dependent practices, such as media-production, the less privileged members of the Geeky Boys remained at a significant disadvantage to their friends.

These findings also suggest that while most youth routinely produced media, few were recognized for, or identified with, media production in and of itself. For most young people, media production was more incidental, subsumed under activities whose valued purpose was something other than the production of media or technology. The Goody Two Shoes' engagement with media production for school, and the Cool Girls' sophisticated uses of communications media with friends and family are two such examples. Such findings suggest that educators and other adults who want to tailor their services to be "relevant" to young people's lives need to look beyond digital media as the guarantor of pertinence.

Finally, digital media practices were often aspects of, rather than alternatives to, participation in the peer groups that assembled at school. Participation in these peer groups, in turn, inflected different classed and racialized ways of doing, learning, and assembling gendered identities. Ethnographers of schooling have repeatedly shown that middle school students are often deeply concerned with finding and making a gendered place for themselves in the social organization of their peers. By and large, digital media practices at The Downtown School didn't escape those concerns.

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