

# Youth Mediate Democracy

BY ELISABETH SOEP

The relationship between young people and citizenship in our society is full of contradictions. Teenagers in the United States can join the military before they are allowed to vote or consume alcohol. On certain issues, young people are seen as immature, at best junior citizens, incapable of acting effectively on their own behalf. Other issues trigger fears that young people enjoy excessive power to effect change and disrupt the wider society. The globalization of youth culture further complicates young people's relationship to citizenship and democracy. More and more young people define themselves as cosmopolitan citizens, connected through popular culture, digital technologies, and migration histories to social geography outside their own local and national context. Yet despite these new forms of citizenship within youth culture, a familiar image of young people remains. They are still largely seen as disengaged from organized efforts to lead and represent their communities.

Those of us who work with young people, particularly within community-based youth organizations, know this image of apathy is deeply flawed. These groups are fueled by the opposite of apathy: young people's agency, as expressed through their active participation in policy making and community organizing and their exercise of free speech and civil rights.

In all matters linking youth to democracy, the media figure centrally. From mainstream network and cable broadcasts to online blogs, a proliferating array of news sources shape young people's understanding of the political process. The burgeoning interest in broadcasting the perspectives of "citizen journalists" might create new opportunities for young voices to enter public dialogue. But this new development in journalism undeniably raises thorny

questions about how credibility and rigor can be assigned to amateur reporters and documentarians.

At the same time, many in the mainstream media are committed to reaching young audiences. Even so, their efforts often amount, in the words of producer and media scholar Robert Calo, to "dressing their anchors in leather and shooting them at night on an urban rooftop. They're caught in the trap of their own making, fearful to lose the audience they have for one they don't know how to reach."

Young people are not only consuming stories produced by adults but are actually creating stories through participation in the growing youth media movement. *Youth media* is typically defined as being conceived, developed, and produced by young people. The movement's primary goals are youth learning, community and workforce development, civic engagement, creative expression, and social justice. Leaders in many individual youth media programs espouse several if not all of these goals at the same time. Hence practitioners, as well as scholars curious about the field's inner workings, ceaselessly debate which priorities merit primary focus and what combination is most likely to have a positive impact on society.

My primary focus in this essay is the youth media movement centered on hands-on production outside of school, typically in after-school programs where young people generate original stories for significant audiences. Youth media programs such as these often deal with matters of democracy in the content of stories and in the context of teaching and learning. That is, young people in these sites take on some of democracy's most pressing themes and issues as they work in an environment designed to promote active participation, involvement in deci-

sion making, and constant vigilance around matters of equity. These programs, then, have the potential to do more than simply foster “youth voices,” as they are often described in literature touting their virtue. They are also places containing some of the same tensions and contradictions that emerge within any environment aiming to model democratic practices.

My research on community-based after-school programs that engage democracy in this double sense reveals four key shared features: peer teaching, collegial pedagogy, multiple outlets, and applied agency. In this essay, I describe and analyze these four features as they emerge through ethnographic details within a single program, Youth Radio.

#### **Youth Radio: Context and Methods**

A pioneer in the youth media field now in its fifteenth year of operation, Youth Radio is an after-school nonprofit organization in which young people produce stories for local and national broadcasts on radio, television, and online outlets. The program is located in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it has bureaus in Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; and Atlanta. Youth Radio students, primarily working-class youth and youth of color, are recruited from schools in poor urban districts and from public schools that feature striking differences in educational opportunity and outcomes for students in accelerated versus remedial courses.

Young people in the onsite programs complete an application and are then interviewed for inclusion within introductory classes lasting twelve weeks, offered four times per year. Within this initial class session, students come to Youth Radio twice a week in the after-school hours to learn basic media skills in Web, video, music production, and radio, while producing and hosting a weekly live show airing every Friday night, from 7:00–9:00 P.M., called “Youth in Control.” The majority of students graduating from introductory classes return for a second, more advanced level of training, which takes place

two afternoons per week, from 4:00 to 6:00 P.M., for an additional twelve weeks. In this phase, each student specializes in a particular area of expertise; for example, engineering, music or video production, news and commentary writing, or Web design and programming.

Youth Radio also runs a series of outreach programs at local public schools, community-based organizations, group homes, and juvenile detention facilities, offering key elements of the onsite classes, including on-air and online broadcast opportunities. Throughout all learning experiences at Youth Radio, there is a dual focus on professional media standards and youth development opportunities, the latter supported through a comprehensive program carving out pathways into higher education and meaningful work, as well as promoting continued emphasis on building critical media literacy.

After completing introductory and advanced courses, students are then eligible to become interns at Youth Radio, voluntarily at first and after three months in paid positions. When students become interns, they take on new civic responsibilities within Youth Radio itself, essentially running various programs and covering stories for major outlets, notably National Public Radio, which has an audience of more than twenty million listeners. This transition from student to intern status is an important precursor and training ground for the kind of expectation young people face when they build on their involvement within Youth Radio to do work in the outside world, at their school, community, workplace, and the broader public sphere.

Internships place students in every Youth Radio department: from youth development and training to fund-raising and administration, to the organization’s professional newsroom. For students who take an internship in the newsroom, every step in this media production process is highly collaborative. Adult producers, as well as peer teachers, work with young people to prepare interview questions,

outlines, and eventually scripts and audio mixes. In some cases adult producers accompany the young reporters in the field; students might interview a school superintendent, record the scene outside a juvenile courtroom, or tape a frank conversation with a young soldier moving back in with his mom after serving in Iraq.

Youth Radio students hold themselves to journalistic standards of accuracy, rigor, and truth. Like their adult counterparts, they engage in heated debate about what “balanced coverage” means and how truthfulness can be applied to unorthodox storytelling techniques and narratives about democracy in difficult times.

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I have used participant observation, interviews, and focus groups to study the work of Youth Radio since 1999. This fieldwork builds on research I have carried out nationally over fourteen years, independently and through participation in collaborative sponsored studies, on youth learning environments beyond the classroom. My present approach distinguishes itself from earlier phases in my own work by virtue of the sustained, engaged role I play within Youth Radio itself. I am a senior producer in Youth Radio’s newsroom as well as the organization’s education director, working with young people daily to produce stories, joining staff to develop and assess programs, and carrying out research on our collaborative work.

### Youth Media Movement

The origins of the youth media movement stretch back to the 1950s. According to B. Goldfarb, at that time countries including the United States and France

initiated dubious media education programs in an effort to establish themselves as “benevolent” leaders by introducing new technologies to classrooms and other settings in American Samoa and West Africa. Researchers often cite the 1960s and 1970s in the United States as bringing about a key shift from teaching *about* media to teaching *through* media, as an attempt to promote active and critical citizenship. Soon, video tools and other forms of technology made production both cheaper and more portable. At the same time, the civil rights, student, and anti-war movements supported a view of community-based media as an “empowerment” project mobilizing the tools of production and access. The 1980s saw a shift away from community empowerment and critique to a focus on fostering media literacy, as well as “marketable skills” and industry jobs through vocational training. The youth media movement today is drawing increased research attention, in light of growing interest in the creative and political lives of youth outside classrooms.

It is notable that the youth media movement is creating a space for youth expression and critique at the same time that actual spaces for young people, especially those living in poor, urban communities, are diminishing. Public media outlets are among the few remaining resources for young people whose city parks, school facilities, and streets have been transformed by the forces of economic abandonment, racism, and police repression. “The street” remains a potent symbol for youth political activism, as well as a term young people themselves use in reference to a whole constellation of styles, circumstances, and modes of behavior that are also often related to questions of class and race. Yet the physical street itself—the paved one young people in U.S. cities walk along and across everyday en route to school, home, and other places—is increasingly a site of surveillance and regulation.

Suggesting that media channels can function in any straightforward way as actual public spaces or pathways for recreation, creativity, and community

organizing would be highly misleading, not least because of the significant barriers that block (especially) poor and working-class youth from access to media production. Nevertheless, the fact that opportunities for public engagement without fear are as limited as they are puts a special onus on youth media programs to sustain a dynamic environment for youth expression and communication.

### **Beyond Youth Voice**

There is another reason we shouldn't frame youth media production simply as a "free" public space for youth. In programs such as Youth Radio, young people do not produce alone; they collaborate with adults within the organization and through an editorial process involving outside broadcast outlets in the media industry. The editorial process in particular reveals the complexities and tensions built into an environment in which young people produce original work. Youth Radio is a youth development agency and a professional production company. In many cases, this dual mission sets clear guidelines for producing narratives that support young people's learning and well-being, while at the same time informing a public through provocative broadcast products. There are times, however, when these two identities for the organization raise tension. In these situations, Youth Radio has a strong policy that youth development principles trump broadcast pressures. In the end, young people have the final editorial say over the content and distribution of their work.

Negotiating that policy day to day, however, is not always easy. Recently, we worked with a young soldier who had just returned from serving in Iraq. He kept a journal throughout the months he spent on the front lines, which we edited into a five-minute radio piece. Within his writing were criticisms of daily military practices on the ground, and he described interactions with Iraqi citizens in troubling terms. It was provocative material; this young man was a vivid writer, and the immediacy of his stories seemed an important antidote to sanitized war coverage.

The challenge, in this case, was to figure out this young soldier's relationship to Youth Radio's youth development mission. Had we been a "regular" newsroom, we perhaps would not have given much thought to the potential consequences and even dangers this young man might face for sharing his story. He was not a Youth Radio student who had gone through the program, but he was a young person sharing a story through Youth Radio. Broadcasting the story without naming the soldier was not an option in this case, given the outlet's own guidelines prohibiting the use of unnamed sources under these conditions. Early in the process, we talked with the young man about the probable risks inherent in what he was doing: "outing" himself as a soldier who was also serving as witness and storyteller. In a sense, initiating this conversation about risk jeopardized the story; he could have decided to pull out. But he did not. That said, in the end an officer in his division killed the story upon receiving word of the soldier's intent to broadcast the diary.

This editorial process raised issues that go far beyond word choice and story structure; at stake were fundamental rights surrounding freedom of expression and the role of the press, as well as government and military policy. Despite no longer having access to this particular young man's journal, Youth Radio set out to explore the limits—both external and self-imposed—placed on young soldiers' free speech and to examine the impact of those limits on public information about the war.

Related issues arose through the editorial process in a different story that was part of Youth Radio's war coverage. In the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, Youth Radio visited some young Marines who had returned to college in California after taking part in the U.S. invasion. While we were recording, one of these young men opened up a Website he had created, in which he added captions to digital photographs he took in Iraq. He described one snapshot of a burned Iraqi man he called "Mr. Crispy," and another showing Americans in camouflage giving

candy to Iraqi children; the caption read “Hey kids, here’s some candy. Now make sure you don’t sneak up on me tonight or I’ll have to shoot you.” The other young Marine began talking on tape about one particular corporal who had invited him to abuse an Iraqi prisoner. We included these moments in the story, but not the name of the corporal.

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This was another instance of tension between investigative journalism and youth development. Youth media producers typically take some measure of responsibility for the impact of a given story on all young people involved in making it, whether as subject, character, reporter, or commentator. That said, as with all of our coverage we are deeply committed to offering a counternarrative to the tightly controlled messages put forth in the mainstream press, and messages about the war are no exception. Perhaps when the content of the story itself raises questions *about* democracy, the process of creating the story also seems to challenge easy formulas that romanticize the idea of “youth voice” as always and automatically a site of freedom.

These last two examples are not the kind of incidents that occur every day at a given youth organization. Certainly challenges like these are, to an extent, specific to a youth development program aiming to broadcast high-impact stories on volatile topics in difficult times. But every community-based organization in which young people experience and consider issues fundamental to a democratic society faces its own challenges when it comes to reconciling youth development goals with social justice. In the case of Youth Radio, journalistic integrity and rigor are added to this mix, built into the mission.

### **Democratic Practice: Features and Tensions**

Looking across ethnographic moments such as the ones I have presented here, against the backdrop of comparative analysis I have conducted within ten additional youth media production sites across the United States, I see a series of key features of these learning environments emerging. These features help illuminate the inner workings of sites where youth and adults work to embody and explore the idea of education as democracy in action.

#### **Collegial pedagogy**

The learning environment at Youth Radio is guided by a process I call “collegial pedagogy,” in which young people and adults jointly frame and carry out projects in a relationship marked by interdependence and mutual accountability. In an environment of collegial pedagogy, young people offer a key substantive contribution. They possess something the adults don’t have: a certain kind of access, understanding, experience, or analysis directly relevant to the project at hand. These insights were particularly instrumental in the case of the story described earlier, produced in the wake of the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. The young reporter and the Marines she interviewed shared popular culture references, styles of speech, and other generational markers, all of which seemed to set a tone for the interviews that was quite different from a typical exchange between an adult reporter asking questions of a young respondent. That said, the Youth Radio reporter came to this very challenging task having trained with adult professional journalists and media artists. With collegial pedagogy, mentoring adults offer access to equipment, expertise, in-the-moment advice, creative collaboration, and crucially, a network of relationships with outlets for young people’s work.

#### **Peer teaching**

In every program at Youth Radio, experienced young people—often high school students themselves—teach newcomers to the organization. As Youth Radio students routinely report, a highlight

of their experience that encourages continued commitment is learning from other young people. Youth Radio peer teachers take workshops and attend faculty meetings to consider lesson plan development, pedagogy, and classroom management. Their students see that they too can move into a peer teaching role if they stay involved and build up their own skills as producer and community-based educator.

### **Multiple outlets**

The “Youth in Control” show young people broadcast beginning their first week at Youth Radio has a real audience. But it is quite small, and the show is therefore a relatively protected outlet for young people new to the microphone. As young people accumulate experience, they have opportunities to produce stories for expanding outlets: commercial stations, highly trafficked Websites, and major shows such as “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered” on National Public Radio. Clearly, the standards and production values associated with broadcasts on these shows are specific. Not every story is a viable candidate for these programs. Critical, then, to the capacity for Youth Radio students to express a full range of perspectives and aesthetics and to reach an audience of peers as well as adults is the range of outlets they can target as they develop their stories. These outlets include Youth Radio’s own Website, [www.youthradio.org](http://www.youthradio.org), as well as Webcasts and podcasts through iTunes radio. Each of these outlets offers considerable editorial flexibility and reaches its own sector of the public sphere.

### **Applied agency**

Youth Radio puts youth agency in the foreground without underestimating the power and persistence of inequality imposed within youth communities and surrounding young people’s position within the wider society. This focus on supporting youth agency entails going beyond the goal of getting a young person’s story on the air. Sites such as Youth Radio can make a lasting impact on individual young people and their communities only when pro-

grams support young people’s educational and professional opportunities, their sense of social responsibility, and their participation in efforts to unsettle ideologies and institutions that reproduce uneven distribution of power. Supporting youth agency, then, does not mean “giving youth voice.” Rather, it means working on a systemic level to help open concrete opportunities and expose injustices where they exist.

### **Conclusion**

Youth Radio creates conditions for a dynamic and complex learning environment for young people and adults. First, a collegial approach to pedagogy puts young people within a larger field of practice in which they have meaningful relationships with adults in various positions of expertise, authority, and lived experience. Second, despite the important role of adults, the key to youth programs embracing democratic practices is the structure for peer education, through which young people learn by having to teach. Third, the opportunity to target varied audiences with a given piece of work permits flexibility when it comes to editorial choices, or any kind of decision about how young people present the work they create. Fourth and finally, I have identified applied agency to describe a context in which participants use the methodologies at their disposal—in the case of Youth Radio, the process of making media—to unsettle inequalities and distorted tellings of important truths.

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*Elisabeth Soep focuses on youth learning and cultural production beyond classroom walls. She is coeditor of Youthscapes, a volume on youth culture and globalization.*

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