

Chapter 8

A Voice of Their Own: Youth Media

by Kathryn Hunt

The mass media rarely makes room for the voices and viewpoints of young people, despite its profound influence on their lives. By the time an American student turns 18, he or she will have watched an average of 25,000 hours of television—more time than was spent in the classroom—and seen nearly a million advertisements. When movies, video games, and the Internet are tossed into the mix, the time that a child devotes each day to the consumption of media is matched only by the time he or she spends sleeping. Children and young adults are groomed to be submissive consumers of media, responsive to its lucrative markets, and not creative, thoughtful makers of their own images. But that’s changing.

Youth media organizations like the Global Action Project, Inc. (G.A.P.) in New York City are offering young people the chance to turn that equation on its head by giving them the tools to produce their own media and reach audiences with messages of their own devising. Youth media (video, radio, Web sites, and television) puts young people between the ages of 12 and 21 at the center of public discourse; it insists that their voices and perspectives are essential to the vitality of American democracy, and it gives them the means to reach audiences with whatever they have to say.

“We began working in youth media by simply asking young people to talk about what their daily lives are like,” says G.A.P. cofounder and codirector Diana Coryat, a filmmaker and media educator. She launched the project in 1991 with Susan Siegel, an educator and youth development consultant, when they accepted an invitation to conduct a video production project in rural Ghana. They worked with a group of young Ghanians

who decided to tell the story of a friend who had died of malaria because he didn't have access to medical care to treat the disease. "We brought the video home and showed it to American kids, and the response was unbelievable. Here were other young people telling the story, and the American kids were touched and moved by what they heard and saw," says Coryat. The video made the lives of young Africans real to the Americans in a way that no television documentary made by grown-up professionals could do. "The American students decided to make a video letter and a handmade book on home-care remedies to send back to the young people we'd worked with in Africa," Coryat reports.

The founders knew they had discovered a powerful tool for creating a dialogue among youth who knew little or nothing about each other's lives. Young people could become educators for each other, opening up the world in a way that the mass media failed to do for them. Youth-produced media, the women realized, also had the potential of building social awareness and leadership skills and encouraging civic involvement. They decided to seek funding for a youth media project that would be based in New York.

It was slow going at first, but gradually philanthropists began to take notice. Community foundations in New York initially funded G.A.P., in part because they recognized the potential of youth media to bring students from disparate ethnic backgrounds together to work toward common goals and build trust. Urban Voices TV, which brought together kids from all over Manhattan to produce documentaries, was one of their first projects. Eventually other funders began to see the promise of youth media, and The John D. and Catherine T. McArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Open Society Institute, the Surdna Foundation, and AOL Time Warner, among others, all made sizable grants to G.A.P., which today has an annual operating budget of \$375,000.

G.A.P. offers a range of workshops in New York and abroad, including Urban Voices Pre-Professional Training; Voices and Visions of Refugee/Immigrant Youth; and international projects in Northern Ireland, Croatia, Guatemala, and the Middle East, for Palestinian and Israeli teenagers. Project costs run between \$25,000 and \$75,000,

depending on the duration of the workshop and its location. But foundations don't have to come up with big dollars to get into the field of youth media. Relatively small contributions of \$1,000 to \$10,000 can support a piece of a project, such as outreach, equipment purchases, artists' stipends, and project evaluation efforts.

Whatever the size of the grant, youth media offers funders the chance to see their dollars making a difference on a number of fronts. Michele Sacconaghi, executive director of the AOL Time Warner Foundation, says that the foundation began funding youth media because it encompasses several of the foundation's program interests. "We feel that media tools like video and the Internet are essential for young people to learn to use, and we want to support them to communicate with competence and confidence with these tools and to develop their own voices." The foundation recently made a grant to G.A.P. "The Global Action Project is right on target in the way they bring together many strands: arts, media literacy, civics, and skill-building. They work really hard to empower young people to have a voice and make a difference in their communities," she adds.

Young men and women involved in youth media projects learn production "how-to" skills, but the heart of the endeavor often lies elsewhere. Participants come together in workshops for six weeks to a year to work with others of diverse backgrounds; to talk about issues vital to their lives and their communities; to work with media artists to develop their own artistic expression; to hone critical-thinking skills; and to discover and exercise their own capacities for leadership and civic activism. Some young people stay involved in G.A.P. projects for three or four years, acquiring skills and maturing as artists. Youth media projects are likely to reach out to poor and working-class youngsters, kids of color, lesbian and gay youth, refugees, and young women—young people who are often subject to offensive or facile images of themselves in the mass media—and who are unlikely to have a voice and have little access to high-tech training. Youth media gives them the tools and the support to begin to speak up.

“The young people are not only producing media, they are also using what they learn and what comes out of the experience of working together to influence adults and to engage others in dialogue about issues that really matter to them,” observes Erlin Ibreck, the director of the Youth Initiatives Program for the Open Society Institute, which funds G.A.P. and other youth media projects. OSI is the only foundation in the country with youth media as a program area.

“Young people’s perspectives are fresh and interesting,” she says. “They are producing images we’ve never seen before and stories we haven’t heard until now. And they are deconstructing the mass media and its effect on them, really taking hold of something that has a powerful—and often negative—impact on their lives. It’s been really exciting to learn about this field and to get involved in it.”

Ibreck has talked with other adults who have listened to radio programs produced by teenagers and who express surprise at the sophistication of the reporting. “I think people begin to realize when they hear young people tell their own stories how complex and challenging their lives are. I find that adults want to hear more of that,” says Ibreck.

She recalls the impact of a project Youth Communications, a New York–based organization that worked with teenagers to help them tell their stories about being in the foster care system to public officials. “They were able to get the attention of policymakers because what they said was new and came right out of their own experience,” she says. “In this case, they influenced the direction of public policy in a significant way.” Foster Care Youth United grew out of these early efforts, and the group of young journalists now publishes a bimonthly magazine with a circulation of 10,000 that bills itself as “the voice of youth in care.”

A desire to affect social change is central to many youth media projects and their funders. Students are encouraged to explore issues that impact their lives, families, and communities as subject matter for their video and radio projects. Often what they learn

about themselves and their communities inspires them to become more active citizens, capable of asking tough questions about what they see in the world around them. G.A.P. videomakers, for instance, have exchanged video-letters with young people in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, in the wake of the September 11 attacks; and another group of G.A.P. producers—this one made up of young refugees in NYC—met with Hispanic youth to show their video “Two Homes” and to conduct a “refugee simulation” workshop. The workshop was designed to give the American kids a sense of what it might be like to arrive bereft of home and belongings and to make your way in a strange land. The workshop gave young people a perspective on immigration issues missing from reporting by the mass media and helped them better understand the experiences of recent immigrants.

“The absence of the voices of young people is a glaring hole in the democratic dialogue,” argues Robert Sherman, program officer for the Surdna Foundation in its Effective Citizenry program. The Surdna Foundation has a strong commitment to promoting youth development and leadership, and it began to take a serious look at youth media about five years ago. “The board and staff wanted to see young people have the chance to express their own points of view forcefully. We saw youth media as a way to promote skill development and youth development at the same time. But it’s not about teaching skills or making media for their own sake. It’s about the changes that come about through these projects, and their social impact.”

With the emphasis on group process and social activism, some worry that the quality of the productions suffers. Its effectiveness is limited if the lack of artistic quality and production values means that the only people who can bear to sit through a film screening are the students’ families. The Surdna Foundation funds youth media projects out of its Effective Citizenry *and* its Arts programs—choosing to support the quality of both the process *and* the product.

Ellen Rudolph, program officer in the arts for the Surdna Foundation, notes that some media projects fail to help students express and develop their artistic voice, turning out poor productions that have little reach. She points to G.A.P.—which is funded by the Surdna Foundation—as an example of an organization that has managed to wed sophisticated arts education and social ideas. “Their arts training is strong, and they want the kids to make work that can stand up in public exhibitions, work that is a genuine expression of themselves that they can take pride in,” she says. “We look at the camera as just another medium for artistic expression.”

When Coryat and G.A.P. codirector Siegel entered the nascent field of youth media a little more than a decade ago, only a handful of organizations in the United States were tilling the same soil. Today there are 80 organizations working with young people to produce videos, radio programs, and Web sites, and to write for newspapers and magazines. With experience under their belts and allies in the funding world, some organizations are beginning to create national and international networks for distribution, discourse, and the sharing of best practices. Not surprisingly, the Internet plays a crucial role in this trend. “It all converges on the Web,” says the Open Society Institute’s Erlin Ibreck. “The ability to distribute is there; it is accessible to people anywhere in the world. The expansion of technology has had a huge impact on this field. Kids grew up with television, video, the Web. It’s amazing to watch them think up fresh news ways to use the medium.”

Coryat concurs, adding that G.A.P. is currently developing the Youth Media Network, an interactive, nationally produced, youth-run Web portal. Youth mediamakers from all over the world, working with artists, will coproduce the site using video, audio, photographs, graphic arts, poetry, and music. “That’s where it all started for us—with an international exchange of stories that kids were telling about their own lives,” she recalls. “We’ve started to network with other youth organizations in this country. The next leap will be when we begin to go global and connect kids around the world with each other through

Web-based projects. That's where this is all headed, and it's wonderful to be along for the ride."

Kathryn Hunt is a writer and filmmaker from Port Townsend, Washington. She directed *Take This Heart*, a film about children in foster care.

Chapter 8 Sidebar

The trend in youth media today is to unite young producers and their mentors with others in the United States and elsewhere engaged in the same groundbreaking work. On-line networks, product distribution sites, film festivals, and conferences help to strengthen ties and create forums for information sharing. Some promising projects to check out:

Gen-Y Studios: A project of Robert Redford's Sundance Institute that immerses young mediamakers in the world of independent film for a week long workshop with a diverse group of their peers during the film festival each year. www.sundance.org

ListenUp!: A national media Web site that links young media producers and organizations and encourages kids to produce public service messages for a national campaign. www.pbs.org

Video Machete: A Chicago-based collective of community activists, video producers, and youth working together for positive social change. Participants learn to use art as a means of exploring their lives and the world around them. They are in the process of developing a national distribution network for youth videos. www.videomachete.org

Wiretap: An on-line independent information source by and for socially conscious youth that showcases investigative news articles, personal essays, art, and activist resources. The San Francisco-based project seeks to challenge stereotypes, inspire creativity, foster dialogue, and give young people a voice in the media. www.alternet.org/wiretapmag/

Youth Communication: A project that helps teenagers to develop writing and critical thinking skills by training them in journalism and other communication fields. Sponsors of a project that has provided a strong national voice for children in foster care. www.youthcomm.org

Youth Media Network: An interactive, nationally produced, youth-run Web portal initiated by the Global Action Network. Mediamakers will produce and webcast their own stories using video, audio, photography, poetry, graphics, and music.

www.global-action.org

Youthnoise: An on-line resource designed to connect, inform and empower youth. Young producers and adults work together to provide info and resources that encourage young people to get involved in civic life and speak up. www.youthnoise.com