

Lauren S. Berliner, **Producing Queer Youth: The Paradox of Digital Media Empowerment**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2018, 172 pp., \$155.00 (hardcover), \$46.36 (Kindle).

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Identity expression takes various forms in today's diverse media ecosystem. The queer youth demographic, a group that is vulnerable and controversial, is demanding an authentic way to express itself. But what can be done to ensure the media empowerment and free self-expression of queer youth? Lauren S. Berliner's ***Producing Queer Youth: The Paradox of Digital Media Empowerment*** explores this issue through her research at the Hillcrest Youth Center, a San Diego community center for queer youths.

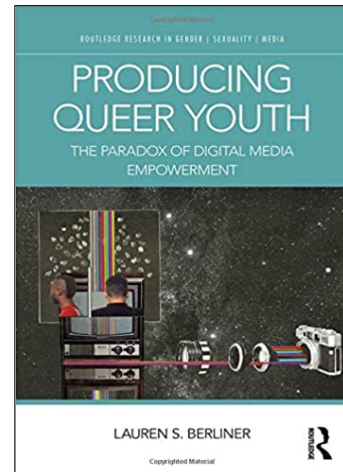
Berliner worked as a production instructor with queer youth groups to produce videos for a public service announcement (PSA) campaign to raise public awareness of school bullying of queer youths. Her research shows deficiencies in the current pedagogical model of queer youth media production and provides solutions.

Berliner's potential audiences include funding organizations, educators, and parents of queer youth. The author explores ways to encourage queer youths' self-expression and help them seek empowerment in the digital age.

*Chapter 1: The Problem with Youth Voices.* The young, digital generation is assumed to be adept at using digital platforms and media to express themselves. So, organizations encourage queer youths' self-expression through social media, especially video media. The author examines whether such campaigns can help queer youth gain their rights.

Queer youth is a private and exclusive demographic. Many of them fear that by posting honest videos online that describe their lives they may draw undesired attention to their group. Queer youth often carefully manage their online identities because they worry about putting themselves in danger. They tend to mask their true identity online, which discourages their self-expression. In addition, most video production campaigns set specific production requirements, including length, theme, and formats. The specific standards make it easier to win for those with experience in video editing who are willing to take guidance from the organizations. These requirements may impede authentic self-expression by queer teens who might seek media empowerment through forms other than videos, such as memes and selfies.

Based on such evidence, Berliner argues that the current approaches of video production campaigns discourage authentic expression by queer youth and set limits on the channels they can use to express their identities. As she suggests, "When we assume the existence of normative subjects and practices in any media production environment, we risk missing opportunities to attend to the heterogeneity of the



expressive modes of the people with whom we work" (p. xx). Instead, Berliner argues that educators should pay more attention to production goals and the video-making process to open broader communication in the queer youth community and not worry so much about the final video product.

*Chapter 2: "Look at Me, I'm Doing Fine!": The Conundrum of Legibility, Visibility, and Identity Management in Queer Viral Videos.* In an attempt to understand how queer identity expression functions, Berliner analyzed the *It Gets Better Project*, a queer video campaign that went viral on YouTube in 2010. The campaign organizers expected to deliver a unified, homogenized voice on anti-gay bullying and rally people to their side. As the campaign gained popularity inside, among queer youth, support increased significantly, breaking the old norm.

Posts about the campaign fell into two categories: pedagogical videos intended to deliver a normative expression of anti-gay-bullying voices and self-made, improvisational performative videos aimed at an already invested audience. These two types of content function differently in a viral campaign. Pedagogical videos tell stories of depression and bullying in a normative, linear way that helps the campaign gain exposure to related groups at an early stage of spreading. By contrast, performative videos challenge delivering messages of love, happiness, and connections in queer youth society, fostering their viral takeoff. Berliner suggests it is wrong to equate the depression-based queer youth image illustrated in pedagogical videos with the actual identities of the queer youth group. Performative videos may deliver more authentic messages for queer youth.

*Chapters 3 and 4: Vernacular Voices: Business Gets Personal in Public Service Announcements, and "I Can't Talk When I'm Supposed to Say Something": Negotiating Expression in a Queer-Youth-Produced Anti-Bullying Video.* Although Berliner's "action research" in the queer youth antibullying PSA project highlighted certain limitations, she suggests that the making process benefitted queer youth production groups by encouraging creative ways of expression. The production of a coherent narrative encouraged engagement and connection and prompted further conversations over depression and low self-esteem. Berliner suggests:

The making of the PSA prompted an opening to a much larger conversation among the youth about the phenomenon of bullying and ideation, and the other effects of humiliation, rejection, and intimidation . . . Ultimately, play, imagination, performance, and communication were the outcomes of the grant's investment, not the particulars that were made visible in the video. (p. 136)

The author suggests that normative rules and regulations in queer youth PSA projects do not effectively address the group's actual need. They do not deliver an authentic, clear message of the group's identity. To address this problem, Berliner offers four suggestions.

First, scholars should expand their theorization of queer media production pedagogy. Current efforts that focus less on video and film production and more on other forms of delivery—like memes, vlogs, and selfies—may promote greater authentic identity recognition from queer youth. Second, funding organizations should focus more on the unique and specific needs of the queer youth community. Normative

understanding may not meet the real needs. For example, providing high-tech digital media production equipment can be counterproductive because students value the chance to learn about the concept and experience of production.

Third, educators should put aside normative rules and rubrics and allow youth to decide the types of content they wish to produce. Fourth, teachers and administrators should shift their attention to the making process and away from the final video product. They should also encourage youth to understand the empowerment ability this content can create once it gains traction.

Lauren Berliner's *Producing Queer Youth: The Paradox of Digital Media Empowerment* provides critical insight into today's queer youth media expression and offers practical suggestions for dealing with parts of the issue. Despite this value, the book is quite narrow in the scope of its discussion on the existing forms of queer youth expression. Although the book demonstrates that tweets, selfies, and vlogs can be preferred tools for queer youth empowerment, it does not address why these specific forms of narrative function better than videos and how they can be integrated into current pedagogical efforts. But Berliner shows, convincingly, that authentic narratives generated by these changes can help queer youth groups get the help they need.