

## **Building Voices: Teens Connect to Their Communities Through Youth Journalism Websites**

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This study uses a grounded theory approach to understand how online youth journalism programs can promote youth voice for building stronger communities. Specifically, this study draws on 24 in-depth interviews with youth and adults working at scholastic and nonscholastic youth journalism websites to derive themes connecting the importance of youth voice to community-building efforts. The results support and extend existing research to suggest that youth voice in these journalism programs can promote community building through informing and empowering local youth, promoting peer support among both participating and nonparticipating teens, and fostering constructive youth–adult partnerships.

*Keywords: youth media, scholastic journalism, community building, youth development*

### **Introduction**

In her foreword for a report published by the International Youth Foundation, journalist Christiane Amanpour puts forth that the skills young people acquire through participating in youth journalism programs serve them positively in their relationships with others, in their school lives, and in their future work environments (Kinkade & Macy, 2003). Moreover, Amanpour says, “For many, the experience they gain in analyzing and presenting the news will make them more informed consumers of the news they receive, and more active citizens in their communities and nations” (p. 4). Howard Rheingold (2008), in his chapter contributing to *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth and Learning*, proposes that helping youth harness their enthusiasm to use digital media “to be active creators as well as consumers of culture” (p. 97) so that they may give public voice to issues they care about will foster “active citizenship” among members of this younger generation.

However, the benefits of youth journalism to facilitate greater youth voice in community involvement point to these exact deficits among young people today. Studies have consistently shown that youth across the country feel as if they have no voice in their communities, or at least not one that is heard and respected by adults (Evans, 2007; Fredericks, Kaplan, & Zeisler, 2001; Thompson, 2013). Beyond not having a voice, many youth doubt even their *ability* to make a difference in their communities.

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A 2006 report from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement assessing youth attitudes and involvement regarding civic affairs in their local communities found that “only 10% are confident that they personally can make a great deal of difference in solving community problems, although another 45% believe they can make *some* difference” (Lopez et al., 2006, p. 14).

Otis (2006) suggests that youth who want to be involved in their communities may feel they lack guidance and encouragement from adults and may feel powerless to effect real change. The solution to this problem of disengagement is not trying to “fix” young people, but rather to foster “passionate involvement” in them by persuading them that they are valuable community assets and are seen that way by adults (Calhoun, 2002).

Embedded in these charges to empower youth voice is an understanding that doing so is important not only for young people but for the community as a whole. When youth and adults partner for the good of their communities, both groups come to recognize and reinterpret their previously existing stereotypes (Barnett & Brennan, 2008). From there, all members of a community—younger and older—can move forward together with more accurate perceptions of each other and “a more representative voice . . . that reflects the diverse needs and wants of the community and the organizations within it” (p. 41).

The study presented here is interested specifically in how youth content creators at online youth journalism outlets describe their experiences in working with these programs, and what potential their involvement offers toward empowering youth voice for building stronger local communities. This study draws on 24 in-depth interviews with high-school-aged teens and the adults who work with them to understand how youth in and outside of school perimeters talk about their experiences producing online content. Driven by literature regarding youth voice and community building, this study uses a grounded theory methodology to derive consistent themes from the described experiences of youth journalism participants and examines how these themes connect to the existing body of scholarship. The results suggest that youth journalists find tremendous empowerment in the ability to have a voice in their communities, to represent their generation in telling their own stories, and to partner with adults in this process.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Explication of Community***

Friedland (2001) points out that in much of the postindustrialization scholarship on community from a communications perspective, a sense of place has been substituted by communication networking. In this sense, social structure is defined not so much by geographic boundaries, but by the structural ties of communication networks. We can see this concept applied in the digital age through terms and concepts such as “virtual communities,” “online communities,” and “communities of interest.”

The study presented here adopts Friedland’s position that if a sense of place with geographic boundaries is abandoned in the understanding of community, then it becomes unclear what community

actually means in this new sense. Given the rich history of sociological scholarship in this area (e.g., Bender, 1978; Tönnies, 1887/2001; Wirth, 1938), removing community from its association with geographical space runs a risk of appealing to relationships that people may desire but that may no longer exist. It is not that concepts such as virtual communities, communities of interest (e.g., fandom), or diasporic communities do not overlap with understandings of place-based geographic community, but simply that for a clear differentiation of what is and what is not meant by the term *community* in this study, they are not included as part of the consideration of youth involvement in community building.

Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg (1996) refer to community as a collection of interlocking subcommunities (i.e., families, schools, businesses, churches, special interests, and various other associations) in which people understand that they “share certain common conditions and fates” (p. 10). Taylor (2005) argues that community building draws upon three primary types of resources available in a community: economic resources, such as businesses and jobs; human resources, which comprise the skills and contributions of the people in the community; and physical, natural, and cultural resources, which may be manmade or come from the natural environment.

This study relies on Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecological systems theory to grapple with the myriad dynamics and intersecting influences as well as the nebulous boundaries that arise in discussing definitions of community and social life. Although Bronfenbrenner’s theory focuses on individual human development, it points out that this process occurs in a networked social environment comprising various levels of interaction and influence. Moreover, these levels of influence are in large part defined by the linkages of communication between people and institutions within a given network. The individual is circumscribed by social influences at the direct, face-to-face microsystem level (e.g., immediate family, peers, school, church), at the mesosystem level (linkages and processes among settings at the micro level, such as parent–teacher communication), at the exosystem level (extended family, school board, mass media, neighborhoods), and at the macrosystem level (e.g., cultural traditions, similar belief systems, hazards, physical and social resources, and opportunities for social exchange). Thus, the construct of community in this study focuses on individuals’ experience extending out to the exosystem level, and it recognizes that those experiences are influenced by events and experiences at the macrosystem level.

### ***Youth Voice in Community Building***

In this theoretical context, this study takes its definition of community building from Feister’s (2007) work examining the National Community Building Network, which operated from 1993 to 2005. Feister defines community building as “an approach to improving conditions, expanding opportunities, and sustaining positive change within communities by developing, enhancing, and sustaining the capacities and relationships of those who make up the community” (p. 3). Community building is not a format, but a framework that emphasizes community-driven efforts put into action by residents who are the “dreamers, planners, and implementers of a collective vision for their neighborhood” (p. 3). It focuses on building relationships among residents as much as it does services, programs, and institutions to combat local ills such as poor schooling, crime, bad health, unemployment and underemployment, and family instability. Furthermore, community building serves to increase the civic capacity of individuals, small groups, and

organizations to act and engage in community concerns in ways that access public- and private-sector resources and influence a local agenda regarding matters of the economy, the state, and the physical and social environment (Saegert, 2004).

Unfortunately, youth perspectives about issues important to them are often left out of such community conversations, and research suggests a concerning disconnect between youth and their communities (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009). When young people are invited to participate in community discussions or community-building efforts, too often these well-intentioned attempts to get youth involved become tokenistic by providing young people with the techniques for engagement but not with the knowledge and experience of leadership (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Young people want consequential involvement, not superficial busy work, in the issues that are important in their lives—such as education, jails and detention facilities, crumbling communities, social inequality, and a lack of dignity for youth (Kim & Sherman, 2006).

To mobilize any group or individual toward community-building efforts, people must be persuaded of both the legitimacy of any particular community-building effort and of a sense of collective support, and this requires access to one or more media outlets (Klandermans, 1984). Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) argue that regardless of the form or technology involved, media that are to be considered integral to building local communities must be producing messages specifically *about* the local community.

When strong links exist between members of a community, local media, and community organizations, and when residents are encouraged to engage in local storytelling, people are most likely to feel a sense of belonging to their community and work to strengthen it (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001). Putnam (2000) points out that the terms *community* and *communication* are conceptually as well as etymologically related.

Looking at youth community involvement specifically, Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002) suggest that young people are most effectively motivated to participate in community-building activities to the extent that their participation promotes personal feelings of efficacy derived from having a voice in the community conversation—the sense of empowerment that comes from being able to speak and act in one's own interests. In turn, through contributing to a sense of shared values, youth develop an attachment to their communities that perpetuates further involvement as youth grow into adulthood. Engaging youth in their communities during their formative years can develop "lifelong identities as active, responsible, ethical participants" (Levine, 2007, p. 70) and is the most effective way to enhance a civil society.

Youth voice is not merely constructive for community building; it is essential for it. Dewey (1916/2005) argues that it is through communication that we find agreement in our shared standards, beliefs, and values. And it is through communication that we pass these on from one generation to another. Social life, Dewey argues, is identical with communication, and communication—not merely living in spacial proximity—is what serves as the experiential foundation for developing common mores and transmitting them to future generations. Helping youth to invest today in community-building efforts

provides a valuable perspective in conversations about what a community's shared values should be. It also promotes a generational bridge to effective community building in the future.

### ***Youth Journalism In and Outside Schools***

Engaging young people in journalism and their local storytelling networks alongside supportive adults can serve as a strong catalyst for promoting in them the very sense of voice, efficacy, and community belonging that will spur continued community involvement (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Clark and Monserrate (2011) suggest that scholastic journalism programs accomplish this by helping youth gain a sense of concern for how the rights and experiences of other students are respectfully addressed. Scholastic journalism offers students an opportunity to discuss and debate issues important to them, and these students in turn are more likely to be civically engaged once they leave school (Scholastic Journalism Institute, 2010). "Schools where authentic student voices are heard are places where critical thinking and civic responsibility is encouraged" (para. II.3). However, Marchi (2012) notes that the benefits of scholastic journalism do not always extend to low-income and minority youth, who are underrepresented in high school journalism programs across the country. In some cases, community-based youth journalism programs outside of schools are helping to fill this void.

Outside of formal school settings, youth are taking the helm in creating news content through nonscholastic youth journalism outlets (commonly called "youth media") sponsored by professional media groups as well as nonprofit organizations. The primary goals of these media programs are "youth learning, community and workforce development, civic engagement, creative expression, and social justice" (Soep, 2006, p. 34). Nonscholastic youth journalism programs offer young people an opportunity to document and encourage various kinds of youth community service (Goodman, 2003). Thus, they serve as both a direct channel for young people to get involved in their communities as well as an opportunity to cover and promote other community-service activities that these youth and their peers are involved in.

These nonscholastic youth journalism outlets are characterized by what Soep (2006) calls "collegial pedagogy" (p. 38). Through creating original media content, youth help build their local community through their access, understanding, experience, and analysis relevant to youth-related issues. Adults involved in these programs mentor these youth and provide access to equipment, expertise, advice, creative collaboration, and outlets for the work young people create. In turn, youth who are more experienced in media production then teach peers who are less experienced.

The process of collegial pedagogy also provides collective accountability among those involved in the production of youth journalism. As youth and adults work together to provide a platform for youth to participate in the public dialogue of community development, they come to hold each other to high standards of media production, constantly weighing decisions based on established standards, including accuracy, originality, aesthetics, rigor, and matters of social impact (Chavez & Soep, 2005).

In a 2008 survey of 82 nonscholastic youth media organizations, Tyner (2011) found that the primary mission—the number one reason for their existence—provided most often by these organizations was to give youth a voice. The second most common answer was to encourage youths' creative self-

expression, and the third was to build and strengthen the community. A strong advocate for the power of youth voice, Soep (2010) offers the term “point of voice”—a combination of “point of view” and “youth voice”—to suggest a shift in the way we think about youth voice. She argues that asserting a distinct but diverse youth point of view is not enough; it is too passive. “Making media means translating a vision into a statement . . . from taking in the world to speaking out the word” (p. 83). Second, youth voice is often put forth by researchers and practitioners as categorically positive. Rather than naively present youth voice as a panacea for negative stereotypes and myriad social ills, we should see voice as a starting point that raises a number of difficult but important questions. One such question is: How do youth journalism organizations move from voice to actual social action and then justice?

In a study of more than 300 websites created by and for young people, Montgomery (2008) found that youth were participating in what could be loosely referred to as “youth civic culture” (p. 28). Although most sites were little more than “brochureware,” Montgomery states that many displayed “innovative uses of interactive digital technologies for a variety of civic and political purposes” (p. 27).

Coleman (2008) refers to the application of digital media technologies to engage youth in civic discourse as “youth e-citizenship” (p. 189). Because the virtual public sphere is cheaper and less burdensome to participate in compared to the traditional, physical public sphere, it is particularly attractive to young people who may otherwise be excluded from civic participation. However, Rheingold (2008) argues that digital media skills and interest do not necessarily translate directly into engagement; youth need guidance from supportive adults to find ways to apply these skills so that they facilitate genuine community involvement. This is not always easily accomplished, because many adults working in youth journalism programs may be unfamiliar with and uncomfortable in this new role. Dezuanni (2011) points out that, in the past, such media educators focused on empowering youth to “become critically reflective users and consumers of media” (p. 121). Now these adults must adjust to guiding these young people in becoming “responsible and ethical media producers.” Digital media offer youth new opportunities for agency and raise the bar for adults to steer these young content creators to apply their agency for constructive, community-building purposes. Bennett (2008) suggests the key to capitalizing on the potential of digital media to engage youth is to figure out which *kinds* of digital environments build the sort of social bonds and capital that help translate cohesion into civic (and community) involvement. The question at hand, then, is whether online youth journalism outlets represent examples of such an environment.

### **Research Question**

With the preceding literature review in mind, this study was guided by a single research question:

*RQ: How do participants in scholastic and nonscholastic youth journalism programs describe their experiences producing online youth journalism as they relate to empowering youth voice for building local communities?*

### Method

The interviewees selected for this study all worked at youth journalism websites in the United States. The specific websites—which generally came out of high school newspaper programs or nonscholastic youth journalism publications affiliated with nonprofit groups or professional newspapers—were selected from a list of teen journalism websites provided by the American Society of News Editors High School Journalism Initiative. At the time of selection, the High School Journalism Initiative’s list included more than 2,700 high school and teen journalism websites, making it the most extensive single list found of youth journalism websites.

The specific websites from which the participants were drawn were selected to ensure broad representation across the United States, as well as equal representation for scholastic and nonscholastic youth journalism sites. However, these sites were restricted to metropolitan areas because much of the heart of community research—the reason why it has become important in our historical context—is focused on what many have perceived to be increasing fragmentation in urban areas (Bender, 1978; Janowitz, 1952; Park, 1929; Putnam, 2000; Tönnies, 1887/2001; Wirth, 1938). This selection process yielded seven scholastic and seven nonscholastic websites in 11 states: California, New York, Florida, Ohio, Arizona, Illinois, Georgia, Massachusetts, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas.

The seven scholastic sites examined, their respective schools, and the metropolitan areas in which they are located are as follows: *The Argus* (Bel Air High School, El Paso, TX); *The Messenger* (Calvary Christian Academy, Fort Lauderdale, FL); *The Pointer* (Sparrows Point High School, Baltimore, MD); *The Grantonian* (Grant High School, Portland, OR); *the broadview: online* (Convent of the Sacred Heart, San Francisco, CA); *AHSnews.com* (Arcadia High School, Phoenix, AZ); and *The Word* (Grandview Heights High School, Columbus, OH). Of these sites, all except two are affiliated with public school systems. One of these, *The Messenger*, is an online and print publication produced by the scholastic journalism program at a private school affiliated with the Calvary Chapel association of evangelical, nondenominational Christian churches. The other site, *the broadview: online*, is the online student news site for a private, all-girls, Catholic school affiliated with the Network of Sacred Heart Schools.

The seven nonscholastic sites examined and the metropolitan areas in which they are located are as follows: *L.A. Youth* (Los Angeles, CA); *VOX Teen Newspaper* (Atlanta, GA); *The Mash* (Chicago, IL); *Teens in Print* (Boston, MA); *Teenlink* (Fort Lauderdale, FL); *HarlemLIVE* (New York, NY); and *New Youth Connections* (New York, NY). At the time of sample selection, these seven sites constituted all the nonscholastic youth journalism sites on the American Society of News Editors list that also met a host of selection criteria applied by the researcher (e.g., most content on the site must have been created by youth between the ages of 13 and 19). Of these seven sites, the following had direct affiliations with a local professional news organization: *The Mash* (*Chicago Tribune*), *Teens in Print* (*The Boston Globe*); and *Teenlink* (*South Florida Sun-Sentinel*). The other four sites were part of nonprofit media organizations, often encompassing other programs such as foster care writing projects (*L.A. Youth* and *New Youth Connections*), a local support group for girls (*VOX*), and a college mentor program (*HarlemLIVE*). All these sites drew teens from a variety of schools in the local community and were open to all interested participants.

From these sites, a total of 24 semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone between February and June 2010 until saturation was reached. Sixteen of the interviews were conducted with youth, and eight were conducted with the adult advisers who work with them. Although the primary interest of this study involved examining the accounts of youth themselves, the interviews with adults provided a useful context for the teens' perspectives. The interviews ranged in length from 17 minutes to 76 minutes. The mean length for a single interview was 49 minutes. Youth interviewees were referred by their adult advisers with the understanding that the advisers would best know which youth were most involved in their particular program and would thus be able to answer questions most effectively. Adult interviewees were selected solely on their availability and willingness to participate.

The interview guide approved by the institutional review board at the researcher's university was structured such that the interviewer began by asking participants broad, open-ended questions intended to leave wide latitude for generative responses. For example, the first question on the interview guide was simply, "Can you tell me about a typical day for you?" As participants voluntarily mentioned ideas or topics related to the connection of their youth journalism involvement and community building, the researcher probed these responses for greater detail and specificity through follow-up questions. Questions on the interview guide became progressively more specific, including, "What does it mean to you to be a journalist?" and "How do you think your website affects your local community?" Again, responses were probed through follow-up questions for more detail regarding community building.

Upon completion, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to derive emergent themes in the real experiences of the research participants. The researcher chose a qualitative approach to allow for a more open opportunity to learn about the participants' interior experiences as well how they perceive and interpret them (Weiss, 1994). This study is focused on youth voice in scholastic and nonscholastic teen journalism, and thus it seemed a natural course that the best way to hear and understand youth voice was to hear it directly from young journalists themselves. Although this approach is limited in terms of generalizability, it provides rich, detailed results that are often not attainable through strictly quantitative methods.

The researcher carefully examined transcripts for emergent thematic properties, revisiting texts from the interviews as necessary to reexamine them in light of later emerging properties, collapsing themes into broader categories when appropriate, writing extensive memos and notes, and eventually writing out a higher-level, abstract theoretical explanation of how the emergent themes connected across the interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The entire data collection process, including the interview guide and consent forms for all participants and their parents (in the case of minors), was approved by the institutional review board at the researcher's university. Names of participants, many of whom were under age 18 at the time of the interviews, have been changed for their protection.



## Results

### ***Youth Voice to Empower, Equip, and Inform***

Supporting the work of Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002), teen participants consistently indicated that the opportunity to provide a youth voice about issues affecting teens was one of the things they valued most about working with their journalism program. Shanarra Lancing, an 18-year-old editor and staff writer at Boston's *Teens in Print*, said:

I love the fact that I just have the opportunity to actually write at this age because I'm in high school. You know, teens don't always get opportunities to actually have an article published at such a young age unless they're in college and writing for a college newspaper. So I love to deliver the news and to give teens a voice that they may not have or they may not have the courage to speak up for. (personal interview, May 25, 2010)

Responses such as Lancing's point to the value of these sites as a platform for the youth journalists to gain agency in producing news from their perspective as members of their generation. Many youth said they enjoyed the opportunity to express themselves, explicitly through a first-person perspective many times. In such responses there was a distinct reinforcement of Soep's (2010) concept of "point of voice." The participants see youth journalism programs as an opportunity to *actively* share ideas that are positive and constructive for building their local communities, but which often go unheard in mainstream media channels.

Along these lines, scholastic and nonscholastic sites offer a contrast to the perspectives and ideas of professional media organizations, which are dominated by adult content producers and cater to mostly adult audiences. Connecting to the work of Zeldin, Camino, and Mook (2005), interviewees consistently mentioned that a youth perspective is absent in these adult-centric channels and that youth journalism programs help to fill this gap in their communities. "I think that teens are often ignored or overlooked or dismissed," said Stephanie Jones, the adult editor at *Teenlink*. "They are dealing with a world that many of us grow out of and then immediately forget" (personal interview, March 12, 2010).

Responses from participants also indicated that these youth journalism programs are contributing to the "converged literacy" that Soep (2010) describes as necessary "for young people to claim a right to participate as citizens of the world and agents in their own lives" (p. 21). Specifically, participants indicated that, through their involvement in youth journalism, they had engaged in interactive, hands-on learning experiences that allowed them to bring together texts, technologies, issues, and ideas to negotiate and contribute to broader social and community discussions relevant to their lives. We can also see in these results that youth journalism programs are fulfilling the need that scholars such as Rheingold (2008), Bennett (2008), and Dezuanni (2011) have pointed to: that youth need to be guided in their use of digital media to transform aptitude into active civic media engagement.

Yolanda Miller, 16, of *HarlemLIVE* described how her program had equipped her with digital media skills that then empowered youth voice.

We work with a lot of people who actually teach us how to write broadcast scripts, how to edit video with programs that people in college have to pay for. . . . We learn a lot of things that people pay for in colleges and we learn it on a hands-on, one-on-one basis with just a person. (personal interview, April 26, 2010)

Miller went on to say that these tools help prepare youth for success in the future, but they also give them an opportunity to provide a different voice in community issues now. Miller said in most adult-centered news outlets:

You get that standard view. . . . You only hear about what they would consider the most important things. . . . You probably won't hear about, like, get a full coverage on, a big church in Harlem that I guess is doing a seminar for Martin Luther King (Day). (personal interview, April 26, 2010)

Miller said at *HarlemLIVE* they cover everything from community cultural activities to local leaders and controversial, not widely discussed issues in the local schools.

Looking at an example from a scholastic context, Marybeth Tarbell, a junior at Arcadia High School in Phoenix and editor of *AHSNews.com*, expressed how student concerns are a part of broader local community concerns. "We're going to be running schools one day," Tarbell said. "We're going to be members of the community. We already are, and I feel that our voices should be heard in decisions that will affect us as students" (personal interview, April 13, 2010).

Tarbell also provided comments that showed a clear connection between youth voice and the overlapping ecological levels of Bronfenbrenner's networked systems theory. Specifically, Tarbell indicated that her online high school newspaper provided a point of communication in reaching students' parents and family members so that they knew more about what was happening at the school (e.g., fund-raising events and special programs)—mesosystem-level linkages—as well as a student perspective on issues at the district level of the local school system—exosystem level. Moreover, Tarbell suggested that the work of her scholastic journalism program could help other students realize that there was a channel for their voices to be heard on these myriad topics.

I think they take it as something, "Oh, a student my age, a student like me could go and talk to the governor or can go out and do these reviews and actually have fun and get a credit for a class for it." It's just something that they can see that people, students just like them can do. (personal interview, April 13, 2010)

### ***Peer Support and Collegial Pedagogy***

With these youth journalism programs being run primarily by young people and for young people, the work tends to rely strongly on teens' peers as sources for quotes and information. The content on these sites thus provides a platform for youth in the community *who do not directly participate* in the youth journalism programs to also have a voice in issues of specific concern to local teens. In many cases, these stories reinforce Goodman's (2003) point that such journalism programs—both scholastic and nonscholastic in the case of this study—can document and encourage the positive community-building activities of other local youth. It can also bring attention to the hardships and challenges of other youth in the community. Furthermore, these examples point to the relational dynamic central to Feister's (2007) definition of community building.

Sharice Blackwell, 17, of *New Youth Connections* in New York expressed this idea when she described a story she had written about a friend who had been evicted from her home right before the beginning of her senior year in high school.

She went through a lot, and I think it's a story that it's not really out there. But I feel teenagers do go through it, and it's good for them to read it and know they're not alone because it does happen. You do get evicted, and then right in senior year it affects your life, and my friend went through a lot when everything happened. (personal interview, April 12, 2010)

Several interviewees said they felt their participation in a youth journalism program empowered other teens (mesosystem linkages) to believe they could accomplish similar successes. Maria Garcia, 18, of *The Mash* in Chicago said she was inspired to start writing for the publication when she saw another teen's name in the print version of the newspaper.

The first thing that made me want to write was because I saw the byline. It was by a high school student—this person's name and then their high school. It was like, "Wow. She can do this. Why can't I?" So it really, it kind of motivates students to actually, like, "Wow I can actually do this, too." (personal interview, March 22, 2010)

In other cases, youth interviewees indicated that they enjoyed the fact that their work at a youth journalism site might inform and inspire other teens to get involved in (mesosystem- and exosystem-level) community activities not directly related to their publication. Alexandra French of *The Messenger* said that teens are best able to relate to teens and promote involvement among their peers.

We want them to get involved with the things we're talking about a lot of times. When it comes to community outreaches and ministry opportunities, we want them to read it, look on, and see, "What can I do to change this?" or "How can I get involved?" (personal interview, March 2, 2010)

In connecting with peers, many participants said they enjoy focusing their work on pop culture—a common interest for most teens. However, this pop culture content occasionally ties to more serious issues in very concrete ways. For example, during the time that pop music celebrities Chris Brown and Rhianna were in the mainstream news for domestic violence, Shanarra Lancing used the incident as a hook for a story in *Teens in Print* about domestic violence and how it relates to teens. The story drew the attention of another community organization that worked with teens to address domestic violence locally as well as the *Boston Globe*, and the three organizations together put on a community forum for adults and youth to discuss the topic together. When the work of youth journalism extends into concrete community-building activities such as this, we can see a strengthening of links between community members, local media, and community organizations that promotes a sense of belonging among residents that encourages further community-building efforts (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Or to use the terminology of Bronfenbrenner (2005), we see a strengthening of the various mesosystem-level linkages among the people and institutions of a community network.

Responses from participants in this study supported Soep's (2006) conceptualization of collegial pedagogy, in that they strongly called to the foreground the access and expertise that youth bring when creating content about issues relevant to teens. Additionally, youth who are more experienced in these journalism programs regularly mentor those who are less experienced to guide them in learning and applying the skills necessary to produce their own work.

Jennifer Powers, a student journalist for her high school news website, *The Pointer*, in Baltimore described how older students often took leadership in the organization through formal editorial positions. However, she also noted that the students frequently helped one another in various informal ways.

We all value each other's work and learn from each other. . . . When we do different things on the website, if we have to change it to publish instead of pending, someone might forget how to change that. Or just different little tricks on the website, we all teach each other and stuff like that. (personal interview, June 2, 2010)

Hadiya Al-Mohammed, an alumnus of *HarlemLIVE*, returned to the program as a part-time assistant after finishing a graduate degree in journalism so that she could continue working with the youth there.

Throughout the years I have always went back, even though I was in college, I went back. I still participated. I taught kids in the program. Or, whenever I wasn't able to be there, I helped getting goodie bags or whatever for the awards ceremony, or getting them a place to do the ceremony, or just going in and acting as a judge or an adviser or speaking to the kids. (personal interview, April 22, 2010)

### ***Youth-Adult Partnerships and Collegial Pedagogy***

Reinforcing the concept of collegial pedagogy further still, participants in this study consistently noted that youth and adults work together in youth journalism programs to hold one another accountable

for producing quality work that has legitimate influence on community issues (Chavez & Soep, 2005). Looking specifically at the scholastic context of youth voice, Chloe Smith, a student writer at *the broadview: online* in San Francisco, said adults in authority positions are not always aware of how their decisions are affecting students. "When students are involved [in the conversation], they're able to work with administrators and teachers to create an atmosphere that is best for growing and learning," Smith said (personal interview, May 17, 2010). In her interview, Smith's comments related the work of Barnett and Brennan (2008) to the work of youth journalism. Specifically, Smith suggested that, through the work of her online high school newspaper, students and adults were able to understand one another better, and thus together create a better overall learning environment.

Youth and adult participants at both scholastic and nonscholastic sites indicated a strong sense of mentoring and adult support in their programs. However, there was a significant amount of nuance with respect to how these positive youth-adult partnerships were achieved at scholastic versus nonscholastic sites. Nonscholastic sites seemed to be slightly more conducive to more personal mentoring relationships, but this only applied to youth who came to the office more frequently and were highly involved in the program.

Nonscholastic sites face a unique barrier to this type of one-on-one mentoring relationship in that youth participants are geographically spread across their respective metropolitan areas. For many, coming to the office is either not possible or terribly inconvenient. In contrast, participants from scholastic sites were more likely to indicate that the youth-adult relationships were more similar to a conventional, less personal student-teacher relationship than a close mentoring relationship; however, because the journalism program was part of the teens' regular school activities, students were more frequently physically present and had more one-on-one interaction with the adult adviser.

Sharice Blackwell at *New Youth Connections* said that her adult editor had not only helped her improve her writing but had offered personal guidance through the process of choosing a college.

The editors here aren't, the adults here aren't judging and they're more sort of like your friend. They listen to you, and you don't get in trouble here. They're just more supportive. They're fully supportive of you. It's more like of a closer relationship than with teachers. (personal interview, April 12, 2010)

George Castalano, an adult editor at *L.A. Youth*, mentioned that the level of mentoring varies for each individual teen based on a number of factors, including their level of involvement, their personalities, and the nature of the stories they write. However, Castalano and many other participants in the study noted that youth respond positively when they are treated as adults. "I don't feel like I need to condescend to them," Castalano said. "They can detect that, and the second you do that, you're done. You've lost all credibility" (personal interview, April 14, 2010).

### Discussion

The results of this study suggest that online youth journalism programs in both scholastic and nonscholastic settings provide an opportunity to engage youth voice for community-building purposes. These programs serve as platforms to empower youth journalists to actively share their personal perspectives on local issues they care about. They inform those in their audiences, be they young or old, of what things teens care about and how others can get involved in specific ways to strengthen their communities. Likewise, through the use of youth as sources in the stories they write, these participants also open a channel for young people who do not regularly participate in the programs to have a say in community issues. Thus, scholastic and nonscholastic journalism sites provide an opportunity for both individual and collective youth “point of voice” (Soep, 2010).

Sometimes these issues are significant concerns in the community that need the input and insight of a teen perspective—residential stability, for example. Sometimes youth journalists use their voices to promote opportunities for community-building involvement. Other times, these young journalists just offer an online space for other local teens to realize they are not alone, and this may happen through content as seemingly superficial as celebrity gossip or other forms of pop culture. However, these points of common interest among youth, as removed from immediate community concerns as they may seem at first glance, can serve as a catalyst for peer conversation and cross-generational discussion about more serious community issues—domestic violence being one example highlighted in the results.

The results also support Soep’s (2006) discussion of collegial pedagogy and extend the principles of this construct from nonscholastic youth media to scholastic journalism as well. The dynamics of both peer collaboration and youth–adult partnerships differ in scholastic versus nonscholastic contexts, but the principles of collective accountability, peer learning, and mentoring from adults who provide access to a channel for youth voice are consistent in both scholastic and nonscholastic youth journalism programs. Peer learning may be more formalized in scholastic settings—upper-grade high school students serve in established editorial leadership roles—but responses in this study also suggest that a great deal of informal peer learning occurs as well. Youth–adult partnerships may fall into a more traditional, familiar student–teacher dynamic, but schools also offer a stability and consistency in attendance that nonscholastic programs do not always enjoy.

Promoting peer support among local teens, and demonstrating that there are supportive adults to help them in this process, is important for sustaining ongoing motivation for youth involvement in community-building activities (Klandermans, 1984). Through their direct work with these journalism programs, youth participants challenge the stereotypes that youth are “objects of concern” and unmotivated to work on community-building issues (Zeldin et al., 2005). In the process, they develop a sense of efficacy and empowerment that will promote their consistent, continued involvement in community-building efforts not only in the near future but in their lives as adults (Levine, 2007; Sherrod et al., 2002). They also serve as positive examples to their peers of the opportunities for youth to be meaningfully involved in the local community. At the same time, while even more lighthearted stories, or those not explicitly referring to community concerns, may strengthen positive generational cohesion and support among local teens, the most effective content for direct community-building outcomes will be that

which translates digital opportunity into genuine involvement and explicitly addresses local issues, resources, and challenges in which the entire community has a stake (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Rheingold, 2008). Advisers and other youth journalism organizers would do well to intentionally guide youth to explicitly address community concerns on a regular, structured basis.

The results here also suggest that online youth journalism programs are equipping teens with skills in digital media production and “converged literacy” (Soep, 2010) that are directly applied toward community-building goals. Moreover, responses from interviewees suggested that this opportunity to acquire such skills is very attractive to youth participants. However, as a point of context, youth and adult participants also indicated a certain technological pushback against digital media. Commenting on the continued value of print media in the digital age, George Castalano of *L.A. Youth* said:

That’s a question we get. “Well, do kids want to keep reading?” Our experience has been yes, absolutely. If you give them good stuff to read, they will read it. I think quality is so underrated or underconsidered when it comes to trying to reach youth. (personal interview, April 14, 2010)

Other interviewees pointed to the convenience of having a print product in their schools and around the community that is readily available for teens to pick up and read. Moreover, the learning curve involved in some digital media applications seems to still be a hurdle for youth and adults alike, even among those assumed to be “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). In both scholastic and nonscholastic settings, participants’ responses reinforced Dezuanni’s (2011) argument that media mentors are not always comfortable in their emerging responsibilities to guide young people in not only critical media consumption but effective media creation. Many adults suggested that using digital technology to its fullest can sometimes be a challenge in the face of scarce time and funding. “I know that the future of journalism is on the Web. And yet to me it feels like one more thing that I don’t have the time or resources to focus on,” said Jason Freeman, adviser of the student newspaper *The Grantonian* (personal interview, May 20, 2010).

Yet in the midst of these challenges, youth journalism programs facilitate constructive community-building activities through the collaborative work of youth and adults. They provide an environment for youth to overcome assumptions that adults are out of touch or do not care, and adults can see direct evidence of young people employed as meaningful assets in the process of building the local community (Camino, 2000). However, this study suggests that participation in youth journalism programs alone will not accomplish these kinds of youth–adult partnerships. Rather, all who participate in these programs—teens and adults—must work deliberately to foster rich, meaningful mentoring relationships. Adults who guide these youth must value the opportunity they are given to invest in their lives and seize every opportunity to do so. At the same time, youth participants cannot expect adult editors or advisers to strong-arm them into these relationships. Teens must also grab hold of the opportunities before them to receive the support of caring adults and mine these relationships for all that they can.

### Limitations and Conclusion

One limitation of this study is that it seeks to connect community building with the self-reported experiences of individual youth journalists. This study has sought to highlight responses from participants that correspond to and support the research of others regarding the importance of personal and meaningful involvement, the networked ecology of communities, and youth-adult partnerships when it comes to effective community building. However, future studies examining operationalized *results* of youth journalism on community-building efforts, not just the reported experiences of youth themselves, are needed in order to make a generalizable argument about a causal relationship.

Similarly, given its qualitative approach, this study is limited in that it is based on the responses of a handful of participants. Future quantitative studies, such as surveys, are needed for truly generalizable results. This study does not attempt to extrapolate from its findings the status of youth engagement writ large in any local community, but rather proposes simply that youth journalism can be *one* effective way of promoting youth involvement in the process of community building.

This study is also limited by the fact that most of the participants interviewed were female. Specifically, 15 of the 16 youth interviewees were female, and five of the eight adult interviewees were female. It could well be that the sense of empowerment and voice obtained through involvement in these youth journalism programs is particularly salient for girls and women, while other themes unidentified in this study might emerge in a study that includes more boys and men. Future research would do well to seek more representation of a male perspective to accommodate for these and other possible gender differences in experiences.

Similarly, this study did not probe participants' experiences in ways that might illuminate differences or nuances across characteristics such as race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, language, or ability. Future studies delving into the influence of these characteristics of youth voice for community building would provide more context for the findings presented in this article.

Nonetheless, the themes identified in this study suggest that online youth journalism programs offer a wealth of opportunities to empower youth voice for community-building efforts and to benefit teen participants and their peers. The evolution of digital technology proves that new media formats will continue to expand the ways in which people send and receive information. By and large, youth have demonstrated that they are comfortable in this ever-changing environment of digital media—both consuming it and creating it. It is critical that these young people have knowledgeable and supportive adults to guide them in using their technological aptitude to constructively give voice to community issues teens care about. Online youth journalism programs—both in and outside of schools—offer a rich mine of opportunity for this aim.



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