

Participatory youth cultures and online news: Evolving tools, practices and literacies in high school journalism

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Abstract

Developments in interactive media, driven largely by bottom-up demand of young people, are reorganizing what it means to participate in social and political life. As more people turn to blogs, mobile updates, photo/video sharing and social network sites as sources of “news,” the boundaries that traditionally separated the “journalist” from the “citizen” are blurring. This shift in the tools and practices of news production raises fundamental epistemic questions related to the field of journalism, including basic ideas of democracy, authority, and expertise that have historically underlaid the field. This project tries to better understand youth journalists’ perceptions of news and journalism in the context of participatory media technologies. Through engaging youth journalists in participatory media design, it also seeks to understand the new forms of literacy demanded by new media practices and uncover effective ways to support learning with new media.

Educational challenge:

Theorists note a new “participatory culture” emerging within online media that fosters:

- civic engagement
- artistic expression
- creativity
- sharing
- mentorship
- social connections



Participation, however, requires multiple literacies in the medium of interaction.

What are the skills and understandings that enable youth to use participatory media to convene and engage communities effectively? How can we best support learning for technological and social fluency in increasingly complex online environments?

“The real gap between tomorrow’s digital haves and have-nots will be a lag in competence and confidence in the fast-paced variegated digital universe building and breeding outside schoolhouse walls.... Today’s digital youth are in the process of creating a new kind of literacy; this evolving skill extends beyond the traditions of reading and writing into a community of expression and problem-solving that not only is changing their world but ours, too.... In this new media age, the ability to negotiate and evaluate information online, to recognize manipulation and propaganda and to assimilate ethical values is becoming as basic to education as reading and writing.”

-Jonathon Fanton, President, MacArthur Foundation.

Project goals

- **To develop an enduring partnership** between Stanford’s schools of Education, Communication and Palo Alto High School’s Online journalism program.
- **To research & design** useful participatory media tools and practices for high school online journalism programs in general.
- **To understand challenges and effective** practices in teaching and learning the literacies associated with participatory media
- **To understand how young people produce and consume online news in their school communities.** How do young people create and consume news? How do they understand the role of journalists in today’s world? How do they think about news, participation, community, as it relates to journalism?
- **To chart youth’s experience** creating with new technologies at home, at school, and online.

Summer Workshop: Values based design

During the month of July, eight students from the journalism program participated in a summer design workshop. The goal of the workshop was to explore and design three participatory “widgets” for the school journalism web site. Students revisited fundamental assumptions and goals related to the role of broadcast and online news in their school community and beyond. Designs for participatory technologies were developed and evaluated in light of these values and goals.

The workshop included:

- Two three-hour design sessions per week for the month of July;
- Guest speaker from the d.school on design thinking
- The implementation of a “values-based design” process:
 - **Crit sessions** to develop an analysis of the social values underlying participatory technology applications (ex: twitter, iReport);
 - **Design sessions** with a focus on embedding youth-selected social values within youth-designed widgets;
 - **Weekly critical review** sessions with editors, former student journalists, educators and leaders in the field of new media and learning;
 - **The building and maintenance of a wiki** for the development and communication of ideas.
- The development of a “pitch” and a supporting design document to present to the editorial board of the school’s online journalism site.

Project design

This partnership work takes place within the frame of participatory design and design research. It involved three phases, during which participants participated in interviews, focus groups, case study and survey research.

- **Background and planning:** Stanford researchers spend significant time on site getting to know the goals, values, participation frameworks of the journalism program - Spring, 2008
- **Summer design workshop:** Stanford researchers lead a select group of students through a month-long intensive workshop to design participatory media applications for the online journalism program’s web site. Summer, 2008.
- **Development and Implementation:** Students develop and implement their designs within the site. Winter, spring 2009.
- **Evaluation, follow-up data collection, writing** Winter and spring, 2009



Exploring Values in design



Twitter values people getting to know each other ... Like, when you get to know someone, you don’t get to know them all at once. You get to know them over time, through all the little things. I think the message of twitter is really that the small things add up.” - Summer Workshop Participant.

Values we want to reflect in our widgets

Community
Democracy
Quality
Expertise
Popularity
Modern
Aesthetics



Results and Next Steps

Research: Analysis is underway on video data collected during the summer workshop, notes from focus groups and recordings of participant interviews. This work has offered a complex view of the tensions youth perceive between participatory technologies and journalistic notions of expertise, quality and editorial authority. We are continuing to collect student techno-biographical data to capture how these youth have learned with technology over the course of their lives.

Design: In September participants “pitched” their designs and supporting design documents to the larger editorial board of the site. Designs were well received and Paly youth programmers are currently building versions of these applications to be integrated within the site redesign. The newly redesigned website is up at <http://voice.paly.net>. Interactive “widgets” intended to enable specific types of community participation will be integrated in February.

Collaboration: Follow up sessions to evaluate work so far and to explore future work together are planned for winter and spring quarters. Students will present their implementations to the school community and Stanford researchers this spring. Four experienced journalists from Stanford Communication Department Knight Fellows program have arranged to speak to speak at Paly this winter and spring.