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The Digital Afterlife of Youth-Made Media: Implications for Media Literacy Education

Generación y recreación de contenidos digitales por los jóvenes: implicaciones para la alfabetización mediática

ABSTRACT

The digital age has fundamentally re-configured the relationship between makers and users. Every networked action by a user has the potential to be reinterpreted by other users. The original intentions of media makers emerge from this process in recontextualized form that I call the «digital afterlife». The phenomenon of digital afterlife has striking implications for youth-made media, which I explore in this article through an ethnographic analysis of behind-the-scenes activities among a group of young people working with Youth Radio, a California youth organization, where they create high-impact media. The case study examined here centers on a major investigative reporting initiative within Youth Radio – a transmedia series on child sex trafficking produced by a 21-year-old reporter in collaboration with veteran editors. The analysis reveals the ways in which youth media ceases to be «youth media», once it moves into its digital afterlife, given the extent to which the content gets re-produced, again and again, by adult institutions with their own histories, agendas, and political economies. The article concludes by identifying key dimensions of literacy that young people invent and deploy through their experiments with social and mobile media, including: discovery, analytics, network mobilization, and platform programming.

ABSTRACT (Spanish)

La era digital ha reconfigurado las relaciones entre productores y usuarios. Las acciones en red son potencialmente reinterpretadas por otros usuarios. La intención de los productores mediáticos adquiere su sentido en este contexto que denominamos «el más allá digital». En este artículo analizamos cómo ha influido este fenómeno en las implicaciones de los medios y los jóvenes. El estudio se realiza a través del análisis etnográfico de las actividades llevadas a cabo por un grupo de jóvenes que trabajan creando productos mediáticos de gran impacto en una radio en California (Youth Radio). El estudio de caso que se incluye en este artículo se centra en una iniciativa de periodismo de investigación dentro de Youth Radio: una serie transmediática sobre el tráfico sexual infantil producida por un joven de 21 años con la ayuda de editores más veteranos. El análisis desvela la forma en que los medios «juveniles» dejan de serlo una vez que se convierten en un producto digital en sí, cuyo contenido se reproduce una y otra vez en manos de adultos e instituciones con su propia historia, organización y economía política. El artículo concluye identificando dimensiones clave de alfabetización que los jóvenes crean y emplean a través de su experimentación con los medios móviles y sociales, entre otros: el descubrimiento, el análisis, la movilización en red y la programación de plataformas.

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1. Introduction

In a speech to a crowd at the 2010 South by Southwest Interactive Festival in Austin (TX) media theorist Douglas Rushkoff declared, «If you are not a programmer, you are one of the programmed... If we don't create a society that at least knows there's a thing called programming, then you will end up being not the programmers but the users, or worse, the used» (March 12, 2010). Technology platforms increasingly organize our lives. In Rushkoff's view, individuals who fail to understand the inner workings of those platforms, and who can't deploy them effectively, will be marginalized from decision-making power and self-determination. If you can't access technology's source codes, you will be outsmarted by thinking machines (Rushkoff, 2010).

That idea echoes media literacy's aim for young people to be active producers, rather than mere consumers, of high quality, original media. And yet, Rushkoff shifts media literacy's standard assumptions and terminology in a provocative way. He replaces the concept of audience with that of the user, implying that in new media, every networked action by a user has the potential for a reaction and recontextualization by other users. In this context of user-driven content, the original intentions of media producers are reinterpreted, remixed and sometimes distorted by users and emerge into a recontextualized form that I call the «digital afterlife».

The digital afterlife has particular implications for youth-made media that originates in schools and community-based organizations. Social media environments are governed by a different set of players, agendas, stakes, consequences, and rules of engagement than those associated with youth-serving institutions. Youth media organizations typically aim to promote youth development, literacy and social justice. Users who join the production process in the afterlife –bloggers, commenters, etc.– do not necessarily share those orientations or pro-social goals.

In this article, I explore the digital afterlife through an ethnographic, participatory analysis of behind-the-scenes activities among a group of young people working with Youth Radio, a California youth organization, where they both create high-impact media and program new technology platforms. In the process, I examine the implications for media producers who attempt to target and tailor their content toward users, rather than audiences, and I raise questions that shift media literacy assumptions and practices.

My research with youth and digital media production challenges Rushkoff's framework of the user as a pitiable soul who is «used». Instead, the user shows up in young people's learning and language, again and again, as the imagined force that drives production. Working as a producer, in other words, requires an ability to embody, enact, and animate the position of the user. What's overlooked, in the denigration of the user, is the extent to which the user directs production. Far from being a pathetic, marginalized character, the user surfaces as the arbiter of any given production's value and likelihood of achieving success. Establishing one's proximity to the user, and being able to anticipate and articulate the user's point of view, are among the smartest moves a producer can make.

In this article, I explore the production process before and after a major investigative reporting initiative within Youth Radio. This ethnographic case study examines the digital afterlife of a multi-part, transmedia series on child sex trafficking in Oakland, California, produced in 2010 by a 21-year-old reporter in Youth Radio's newsroom who collaborated with a team of peers and veteran editors at Youth Radio and National Public Radio. By focusing on this story's digital afterlife –in other words its period of use– I will identify key dimensions of literacy and codes of conduct that young people invent and deploy through their in-depth experiments with social and mobile media.

2. Research site, materials and methods

Founded in 1992 by reporter Ellin O'Leary with San Francisco Bay Area high school students Deverol Ross, Chano Soccarras, Ayoka Medlock, Noah Nelson, and Jacinda Abcarian, Youth Radio is a youth-driven production company and community-based journalism program where young people aged 14 to 24 make and distribute original media and develop emerging technologies across platforms. Young people come to Youth Radio primarily from the nation's economically abandoned public school districts, in which students are often organized into separate academic tracks (remedial, «regular», honors, and advanced placement), and where black and brown youth are disproportionately disciplined and relegated to the poorest schools. At Youth Radio, beginning with students' very first class, they work together to carry out a single, demanding, shared task – producing a weekly live radio show, «Youth in Control», plus all the digital media products (e.g., photos, video, blog posts) that give radio an online presence. In addition to the Oakland headquarters, Youth Radio has bureaus in Los Angeles California, Washington DC, and Atlanta Georgia, as well as editorial collaborations with other youth groups around the US: in a coal-mining

community in rural Eastern Kentucky, a gentrifying Chicago neighborhood, a Native American reservation in Arizona, a juvenile detention facility in the San Francisco Bay Area. Youth Radio's coverage is transnational, with stories in recent years developed by young people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Palestine, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Ghana, and other locations throughout the world.

Recruited by program graduates, students working at Youth Radio's Oakland program begin with introductory transmedia classes and advance through specialized courses and eventually paid positions as media-makers, engineers, and peer educators. Between 35 and 50 are on staff at any given time. Applicants fill out applications and participate in interviews. Recruitment decisions are guided by efforts to fill multiple classes that run four times per year, balancing the student body in terms of gender, geography, and race, and serving primarily low-income youths and young people of color. All programs are free. Students receive individualized education and career counseling, and, in 2007, the organization began offering high school and community college credit and brought on board a licensed social worker who offers one-on-one therapy and leads agency-wide health initiatives.

Youth Radio reporters, commentators, and producers deliver content on deadline to commercial, public, and community-supported radio stations as well as the «San Francisco Chronicle», the «Huffington Post», iTunes, and the Internet's varied social media sites. Through a combination of intensive training, deadline-driven production, and one-time workshops and presentations, the organization reaches more than 1,200 people per year. The newsroom files regularly to public broadcasting shows including NPR's «All Things Considered» and «Morning Edition» and «American Public Media's Marketplace». Youth Radio has been honored with George Foster Peabody, Alfred I. DuPont, Edward R. Murrow, Robert F. Kennedy, Investigative Reporters and Editors, and Gracie Allen Awards. These are honors normally bestowed to newsrooms staffed by journalism veterans at the nation's top public and commercial media outlets. Youth Radio is undoubtedly unusual in the recognition it has received from professional journalists and in its collaboration with mass media outlets. And yet the organization's core values and strategy of leveraging media production to promote youth development and justice are not at all uncom-

> Young people are developing new codes of conduct as they create models for sustaining production beyond publication. Digital media literacy in this context requires tracking and shaping the way your content is recontextualized by others, who have the power to take it in new directions, and apply it to different communities and uses. That doesn't mean jumping into comment streams and protesting every time you read something from a user with which you disagree. But it does require having a network of collaborators who can help guide your decision about when, in fact, it does make sense to intervene when the afterlife of a story takes an unexpected turn, and how to do so effectively. Literacy, in this sense, means knowing your users, trusting your users, and also pushing back against your users when that move is called for.

mon, as evident not least through the other essays in this journal issue. In this sense, Youth Radio products and processes are hyper-visible examples of the kinds of activities young people are developing through cross-generational, interest-driven engagement in neighborhood-based organizations and online communities around the world (Ito & al., 2010). Lessons from Youth Radio, then, hold relevance for any place where young people find, frame, articulate, and spread narratives they feel a pressing need to tell. Implications help in our efforts to understand any site

where adults and young people participate in high-sta-kes creative projects, with the goal of generating some kind of public awareness, impact, or influence.

«Participation» is a key term in media literacy rese-arch, especially since Jenkins (2006) powerfully refra-med what had until then been dubbed the «digital divi-de». Jenkins argued that the source of inequality wasn't necessarily differential access to the technology itself, but to the means of participating, fully and deeply, in the kinds of networked environments that support learning, opportunity, and advancement in, through, and beyond digital activities. Participation is

led participant and data-driven observer, is not always comfortable. There are periods of heavy data collec-tion and analysis, and other periods when pressing production demands push those activities to the mar-gin. Certainly there are things I can't (or don't want to) see because I am «in» the work and not standing out-side. But there are also special affordances that come with this unorthodox research position. Perhaps most relevant here is a capacity to watch what happens to individual media projects long after an outside resear-cher would likely have moved on to other questions or sites, and to participate with young people in naviga-ting how that afterlife unfolds.

A final note about met-hods: One way to frame the research reported here would be as an ethnographic case study located inside a single organization extended over ten years. But that framing would miss the extent to which the work is fundamentally multi-sited (Marcus, 1998). The analysis tracks the formation and dissemination of selected media projects as they shape and are re-shaped by a someti-mes stunning range of con-texts, institutions, and ideolo-

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also a central concept in ethnographic research, which defines my methodology here. In particular, this work relies on methods related to community-based partici-patory research, or participant action research. These approaches unapologetically privilege participation as a source of insight and means to connect scholarly work with struggles for social justice (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Morrell, 2004; Torre & Fine, 2006).

I participate in my research site in a very concrete way. I work there, as Research Director and Senior Producer. My involvement at Youth Radio started in late 1999, when I began volunteering at the organiza-tion while finishing my PhD dissertation. Now I colla-borate with youth reporters and technology develo-pers in a model for teaching and learning Vivian Chávez and I have characterized elsewhere as «colle-gial pedagogy» (citation omitted to preserve blind review). I also research our work by keeping field notes and carrying out interviews with youth and adult staff; recording and analyzing interactions, scripts, and other texts; and tracking products once they enter cir-culation, always with a focus on implications for lear-ning and literacy. This double perspective, as embroi-

gies that animate their afterlives. Key methodological questions, then, are: Out of what conditions did the media project originate? How did it travel? Who pic-ked it up? How did it change? What difference did it make? To address these kinds of questions, one needs «a mode of study that cares about, and pays attention to, the interlocking of multiple social-political sites and locations» (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 37). While «we learn a great deal» about people from single-sited ethnographic studies, argue Dimitriadis & Weis, «what we do not know is what happens to them after they leave these specific locations» (2006: 478). I apply this logic not only to people, but also to media processes and products, and therefore my attention migrates with the media, following the story as it gets embedded and re-produced across time and space.

3. «Trafficked»: A Case Study

In 2010, Youth Radio's newsroom began work on an investigative reporting project that would extend over six months and spread across every department within the organization. It centered on a story that directly touched Youth Radio students' lives and pro-

foundly affected Oakland residents: child commercial sex exploitation. While «trafficking» is typically used in the US to describe transnational sex trade, Oakland is a hub for selling sex with underage American girls living inside US cities, and Youth Radio's editorial staff wanted to draw attention to this phenomenon as a local and domestic issue. At the time of Youth Radio's coverage, child sex trafficking in Oakland was starting to attract mainstream media attention, including features on local news sites and the national cable network, CNN. But across news coverage, too often girls who'd been recruited or, more often, coerced into the sex trade as children—sometimes by boyfriends, sometimes after being kidnapped and then forced to work the streets—were talked about rather than given an opportunity to share their stories. «To solve a problem, you have to understand it», is how one girl who'd been forced into trafficking at age 15 put it, «so to solve this prostitution problem, you have to understand the girls». That was Youth Radio's starting-point for the story—partnering with girls who'd been trafficked as co-producers of the story.

«I'd wake up at 5, I'd be outside by 5:30», said a girl with the pseudonym Brittney, who was interviewed for the story by Youth Radio's lead reporter, Denise Tejada. «I would just wait to see what happened», Brittney went on, «Whether it'd be in the streets or whether I'd be on the Internet. And then I won't be able to come back inside until like 2 o'clock in the morning, so I'd get only, like, three hours of rest». Many girls who were being sold on Oakland streets were still in high school.

For one part of the story, reporter Denise Tejada and a Youth Radio producer went to International Boulevard in Oakland to capture the scene there, an area widely known as «The Track». Here's the except as it ran on NPR.

Denise: «It's around 6:10 and we're driving down International. And these are girls that look so much younger than I am, and I'm only 21. In a 50 block span, I count 20 girls. Some are posted on street corners. Others are hanging by bus stops, or just walking the same blocks over and over.

I park at one of the many taco trucks on International Boulevard. The guys who work the truck say that everyday, pimps use their parking lot to drop off their girls and hang out. They say it's common to see a girl being beaten by her pimp. Basically pimps run their businesses from this spot.

Just in a matter of seconds, there's a girl getting picked up by a guy, or a john. From my car, I spot two women. One seems to be the leader, or what people in the game call a «bottom girl». She approaches the car, speaks to the driver, and instructs the younger girl to walk over… It's a Toyota Prius, and they're waiting for a girl to get into the car. She has tight leggings, gray shirt, just carrying her heels. She looks like she could be 17 or something and they just left right now.

While most Oakland residents drive by and don't think twice about what's going on here, the people in this neighborhood do. People like 20-year-old Frank Pardo, whose mother owns Yogi's Bridal Shop. Pardo grew up here».

Pardo: «They're always there, you always see them, and some of them are quite beautiful too. Looking like straight models. They've been here for all these years. What makes you think they're going anywhere? Police see em. I mean, everyone sees them. Nobody does anything».

In telling this story, Youth Radio aimed to «do something» by revealing the realities of child sex trafficking as they relate to flawed laws and commercial infrastructures (websites, photo studios, marketing consultancies) that have sprung up to promote underage girls' online profiles. In gathering interviews for the story, Youth Radio producers and researchers took great care in approaching community-based advocacy organizations that work with girls who'd been trafficked. As a youth-serving institution, the newsroom sought to differentiate itself from other media organizations that were known to dig for the most sensationalized personal narratives and not always protect girls' identities. This level of care translated into the details of the scripting itself, especially how girls, and Oakland itself, were described in passages like the one excerpted above. Though the word prostitute does appear a couple of places in the story, Denise and her colleagues heeded a point made by a local advocate who'd been trafficked as a child and went on to help girls move out of that life. «Every act of what's called quote unquote 'prostitution' with these children is actually a form of child sexual abuse», said Nola Brantley in the story, «and to take it further, child rape. So no, I don't think children who are raped should be criminalized».

And yet, a key finding in Youth Radio's reporting was that that's precisely what law enforcement policies do, when officers arrest girls and send them into juvenile detention, while lacking the necessary resources to carry out the much more costly and demanding police work required to prosecute traffickers and johns.

3.1. Investigating the Digital Afterlife

In addition to broadcasting «Trafficked» in two parts on National Public Radio on December 6th and

7th, 2010, Youth Radio published interviews, documents, and links to relevant resources on its own website (Youth Radio, 2010a), on NPR's website (Youth Radio, 2010b; 2010c), and on the massively popular «Huffington Post» (Youth Radio, 2010d; 2010e). It was through those venues that a digital afterlife for the story began to take shape. Comments accumulated: more than 300 were posted on «The Huffington Post». The story was shared through Facebook more than 4000 times, and Twitter streams filled with tiny urls linking users to the coverage, including Tweets from journalists and advocates working on issues related to child welfare. The story showed up on college class syllabi almost right away, in departments of sociology and education.

Striking in the afterlife was the extent to which the very same issues that manifested in the pre-production phase of developing the story surfaced again and again, refracted through the voices of varied users with interests of their own. Never far from the surface on some sites were debates about the legalization of prostitution, and then came reminders of the story's focus on children, for whom legalization would not apply. Here's one excerpt from one site's comment stream:

«A friend in college helped pay her bills by being a high class call girl. Another friend of a friend moved to New York and did it til she got married to a German. I don't recommend it, but it does happen».

«What's that got to do with child sex trafficking? This article is not about «prostitution» it's about slavery and rape of minors».

«Those who are (predictably) calling for legalization of prostitution need to pause their fingers above the keyboard before hitting «send» long enough to realize that this article is about underaged girls… being forced into the sex trade. Legalizing prostitution for adult women will do nothing to address this issue…».

Also striking in the story's afterlife was the way in which the content traveled. On its website and «The Huffington Post», Youth Radio editors published materials that were not part of the radio story, including interviews with three high school girls who were still actively working Oakland's track, and a document procured from the local district attorney's office called «pimp business plan». In that document, one trafficker outlined in hand-written notes precisely how he planned to move from «the concrete streets to the executive suites» by expanding his commercial sexual exploitation of girls.

The Youth Radio editorial team was well aware that the pimp business plan was just the kind of document that can sometimes «go viral». And it did. First, it was published by the website Boing Boing (5 million monthy readers), an editor of which has been a longstanding Youth Radio partner. Beyond that contextualized post, the plan moved to a very different kind of website: one known to analyze business models and other news emanating from start-up companies in Silicon Valley, hot bed to US dot-com entrepreneurship. On that site, running under the headline, «Pimp Proves Rhyming Doesn't and Won't Ever Help Your Business Plan», a typed-out version of the plan appeared, accompanied by an unattributed photo of an African American man talking on a cell phone wearing an oversized crown with huge gems, sparkling sunglasses, and a humongous silver pinky ring. «The 15-odd step plan is funny», wrote the post's author, «and we don't want to take away from the enjoyment of reading a rhyming business plan, but there is a serious undertone here. The business plan was designed to re-model the way the pimp markets underage girls for sex». She went on to briefly enumerate the elements of the plan and then conclude, «as far as business plans go, we probably don't need to tell any of you that it's terrible. Had the pimp only typed 'business plan' into wikipedia, he could have written a better one using their basic outline… Assuming that the fact his plan is now all over the internet means he's no longer a pimp, the plan is proof that rhyming might help you remember your business plan - but it won't help you if you leave off the most important plan for the future which, in the case of illegal activity, is of course, don't get caught» (Comstock, 2010).

As the pimp business plan migrated, it drew the story into online conversations whose tone, content, and community were quite a distance from the Youth Radio newsroom's intent for the reporting. Part of navigating a story's digital afterlife involves complex risk calculations, about how to release provocative content that has the potential to deliver a substantive message to wider and wider audiences, knowing that content can move and re-circulate as a decontextualized unit, and that there's always the possibility it will re-appear in problematic forms.

How can media literacy prepare young people for cases like this one, where they program content for users beyond publication? If it were ever appropriate to refer to a story like «Trafficked youth media», it becomes highly questionable to affix that label to the story once it takes on a digital afterlife of its own. I mean to take nothing away from the role of young people leading the research and reporting. Rather, I want to highlight the extent to which the story gets re-produced, again and again, by adult institutions with

their own histories, agendas, active users, and political economies.

3.2. Managing Digital Content

Rushkoff calls for a codification of the changes we're undergoing, «their social, cognitive, and intellectual implications», in this still-emerging digital era (2010b: 19). Young people are developing new codes of conduct as they create models for sustaining production beyond publication. Digital media literacy in this context requires tracking and shaping the way your content is recontextualized by others, who have the power to take it in new directions, and apply it to different communities and uses. That doesn't mean jumping into comment streams and protesting every time you read something from a user with which you disagree. But it does require having a network of collaborators who can help guide your decision about when, in fact, it does make sense to intervene when the afterlife of a story takes an unexpected turn, and how to do so effectively. Literacy, in this sense, means knowing your users, trusting your users, and also pushing back against your users when that move is called for. Skills and habits that take on especial urgency include:

• Discovery: While the capacity to produce high-quality original content remains a prime media literacy goal, equally important for emerging media makers is knowing how to find, filter, arrange, and display existing content that will help tell your story in a full and nuanced way. In this sense the author is always already a user of other people's media first, and an aggregator and assembler of materials that can support and amplify the story you want to tell.

Analytics: To track how a story like «Trafficked» is being actively consumed and used, young people need to know how to access, understand, and act on analytics – meaning compilations of data that reveal how content is being consumed. It is no longer enough simply to deliver a story to an outlet and then report out audience «cumes» (which is the metric distributors have traditionally used to calculate their total number of unique listeners). To know their users, authors need to understand what parts of a story users click on, how long they stayed, what users' points of entry were into the piece, where they went when they left, and what platforms they used to share the story with friends. These are data available through free, back-end systems that visualize displays using pie-charts and graphs and statistical presentations. Without knowledge of these systems, young people can only guess at how their content is being consumed and used.

• Network Mobilization: It is one thing, as an individual author, to respond to a reader's problematic or erroneous comment on one's own. It's another thing entirely when an author can deploy a network of connected users to get a story back on track, if that action is called for in its digital afterlife. At Youth Radio, we've seen examples of young people posting Facebook status updates to their thousands of friends inviting them to write into comment streams on sites where the authors are being personally attacked. In other cases Youth Radio's own social media networks can be mobilized to sustain interest and focus on a given story's key themes or discoveries. In this sense building an engaged community of friends or followers is not simply a matter of «playing the social media game». It is a crucial step in developing a powerful position in the digital afterlife (Ito & al., 2010).

• Platforms: Finally, in this article, I have focused on young people producing content. We can see in a story like «Trafficked», and in recent political uprisings around the globe, full-blown digital media literacy entails not only knowing how to tell stories, but also how to program platforms. That is precisely the

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newest body of work Youth Radio is undertaking through its Mobile Action Lab, where young people partner with professional developers to design and build mobile apps that serve community needs. They program to users in both a literal and metaphorical sense, learning to create new technology tools, which increasingly determine who knows what, how information flows, and what makes change possible.

4. Conclusion

Lest this work of programming feel like a huge leap from what media literacy knows best –original, high-quality narrative production– I will end on an observation from an 18-year-old participant in Youth Radio's Mobile Action Lab. He has contributed to reporting projects not unlike «Trafficked», and is now part of a team programming apps. He describes how the team has used open-source software to design and test apps and get acquainted with the development process. «First you envision what you want a specific part of the app to do, then you attempt to add the functionality, and then you make any adjustments you find necessary after testing it out. Coming from a background in journalism, I have had ample practice with this process of creating and editing… Reading through the coding blocks was like meticulously scanning a paragraph for errors and incompatibilities».

As this young man says, whether they are creating content, or programming platforms, young people who undertake this kind of meticulous production work are constantly envisioning not simply what a story will look or sound or read like, but what it will do. These young producers are developing digital materials that travel and transform, and in the process, they are forming new codes of conduct and modes of literacy for the digital age. They need supportive peers, professional colleagues, nimble institutions, and expansive learning theories to do that work well. And then we, collectively, will be able to use their efforts to tell a new story about what media education can do.

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