Introduction: problematizing voice and representation in youth media production

Inés Dussel & Negin Dahya

Published online: 11 Jul 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 47

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Introduction: problematizing voice and representation in youth media production

Inés Dussel[a] and Negin Dahya[b]

[a]Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas del CINVESTAV, Mexico City, Mexico; [b]Information School, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

ABSTRACT
This introduction to the special issue *Voice and representation in youth media production in educational settings: transnational dialogues* presents a discussion of the notions of voice and representation and an overview of the contributions to this issue, and reflects on the possibilities and limits for a transnational dialogue within current academic traditions and publishing practices.

> Young people are encouraged to speak up, speak out, have their voices heard, make a noise, and so on. Indeed this kind of so-called active citizenship is the cornerstone of policies and programs throughout the West. (Harris 2012, 147)

One of the promises brought forth by digital media is that of giving voice to the underrepresented or marginalized populations. The notion of participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2006) has been coined to make room for a new type of citizenship, one engaged with young people telling their stories or making their mark. As Anita Harris says, speaking up and speaking out are the new callings of the times (see also Isin and Ruppert 2015).

In this context, youth media production has been a privileged strategy for making these voices audible and visible, particularly in educational settings that have previously been considered the epitome of adult-centered institutions. In recent years, many educational programs took media production as a central axis of their cultural and pedagogical work, on the assumption that it has lower requirements for social participation *vis à vis* the articulation of speech or bodily dispositions demanded in the Habermasian public sphere. These programs hold to the belief that through digital media more connections significant to young people's lives can be made compared to traditional discursive practices in the public domain, including academic knowledge – especially so considering the growth of digital media tools that have made production relatively easier, more accessible, and more economic (Soep 2006; Buckingham 2009; Poyntz 2009; Poyntz and Kennelly 2015).[1]

Yet, this special issue stems out of a certain discomfort with these arguments. McWilliam has said how, in her research with refugee and immigrant African parents in Australia, there was much that muddied the 'project designed to "let authentic voices speak"' (McWilliam et al. 2009, 70). In a similar line, our studies and educational work in media production in educational spaces (be it schools or informal settings) complicate the somewhat unidimensional narratives of emancipation and empowerment (Rancière 2009) that are often heralded as the outcome of digital media production. In this introduction, we would like to present some of these discomforts and make the case for a more

complex approach to youth media production, also taking into account the national and transnational dimensions implicated in this work.

The problems with voice

The first source of uneasiness with the rhetoric on 'giving young people voice' through the production of media is that these discourses of empowerment do not always problematize the very notions of voice and representation and how they are (or are not) constitutive of their promises. Voices are much more than utterances or speeches, and involve more complex issues than opening up the mic or holding a camera. This is further complicated in the context of young people producing digital media, learning new technical skills to do so, embedded within social and political educational settings and surrounding popular cultural pressures and norms. Our approach is informed by poststructuralist feminism and non-representational theories (Thrift 2006; Lather 2009, among many others) that argue that voices are not univocal vehicles of meaning and of essential identities, nor is voice the shortest road to truth and authenticity (Lather 2009). Just as the subjects who utter them, they are always made of babblings, stutterings, silences, and inconsistencies (MacLure 2009). Non-representational theories have also implied a questioning of logocentrism and an embrace of movement, fluidity, and the materiality of practices as the site of the social (Thrift 2006). Where representational theories were preoccupied with biographies or signifiers that froze identities, non-representational approaches look for affects, gestures, and mobilizations. These theories have implied a profound reconceptualization of voice, bringing to the fore the ambiguities, complexities, and historicity of voice that was hitherto erased or marginalized. They have warned us against 'the tyranny of insisting' on a certain type of participation and a certain articulation of voice (McWilliam et al. 2009, 68).

In terms of youth media production, this theoretical movement implies taking some options and risks. On the one hand, it involves going a step beyond the claims that we have to look at the complex, hybrid, and active ways in which young people negotiate different circumstances in their everyday lives (Nilan and Feixa 2006; Kennelly, Poyntz, and Ugor 2009), as if young people and media or society were two separate entities that connect and mingle only in defined intersections. Instead, we think there is much to be gained in considering voices as always already plural, incomplete, inconsistent, broken, and woven through and with different strands. On the other hand, voices are not to be taken literally, as only utterances or written graphics; indeed, sometimes words are 'frozen, numb, without life', and subjects become voiceless even if they speak (Das 2007, 8). A voice emerges when it 'animate[s] words, give[s] them life' (6). Voices can appear, as in many of the articles presented in this issue, in non-verbal form, with images, bodily gestures, sights; but self-produced videos also share the risk of becoming 'numb words' and voiceless texts. The issue of who speaks, in what context, with which languages, becomes as important as the utterances themselves. Real and perceived audience(s) and the situated context of production also matter in the construction of narratives and re-telling (or omission) of personal and political experiences and events (Dahya and Jenson 2015; Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher 2014).

In this problematization, we invite educators and researchers to be wary of how their own questions and concepts are shaped by 'the circulating sociological and conceptual discourses that frame and animate the very terms with which we imagine and speak of "youth"' (McLeod 2009, 276). The 'voice' that needs to be interrogated is not only that of the researched ('the youth' or 'media'); it is also the one that states the problem and brings an expert language, and a particular frame, to the encounter with the other's texts and speeches. Such authority is imparted by researchers and educators, at times embedded in the norms of institutionalized and partisan school cultures (see Dahya and Jenson 2015). The articles included in this special issue share this discomfort with how voice has been framed in youth media production practice and research, and point to what is silenced or underplayed by this framing: the role of media genres and technologies, the constraints of educational settings and authorities, the explicit or implicit dialogue with political and economic changes and public agendas, among other issues.

Second, as much as a discomfort with this appeal to voice and representation, there is another source of uneasiness with the state of research and policy on youth media production: the uncritical consideration of digital media, still considered as a promised land for self-expression, as it was seen in the early 2000s. However, in the last decade there has been an important shift in these media, which have gone from a potentially decentralized and horizontal peer-to-peer network to a concentrated ring of transnational corporations – even if these can be seen less as a well-oiled machine and more as the type of 'dysfunctional families' (Jenkins 2013, 279). Digital media is arguably more concerned today with 'spread' and virality than with what was conceived as significant participation (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). These days, 'youth media production' might more likely take the form not of an esthetically challenging experimental movement but of a streamlined text that is shaped by these creative industries that provide it with icons, languages, and genres.

Also, it is noteworthy that, in dialogue with these new extended possibilities for creating cultural content and with larger social and political movements that have seen the rise of citizenship mobilization and awareness (Papacharissi 2010; Isin and Ruppert 2015), several transnational corporations have also embraced empowerment as a selling tactic (Banet-Weiser 2007). This commodification of empowerment raises important questions about the ambivalent and contradictory relationships between democratic politics and consumer culture that have digital media as one of its privileged scenarios (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). As Foucault said, every freedom comes with new subjections; thus, it might be important to ask how media production is engaged in the new governing strategies of the enterprising self (Bragg 2007; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Ratto and Boler 2014). To make 'empowerment' an educational goal without acknowledging the ambivalences and tensions it carries might be shortsighted.

These tensions can be seen in youth media production. If, more generally, home videos work today simultaneously as personal or familiar memories and as potential audition tapes for unknown producers or brokers (Berliner 2014), in the case of young people's involvement with media production this is even more pronounced. Sarah Banet-Weiser, a scholar who is studying the intersections between media and corporate cultures, claims that in a context of corporate media and popularity-based algorithms, 'adolescents' question of 'Who am I?' become more about 'How do I sell myself?', (…) precisely as a process of figuring out personal identity (Banet-Weiser 2012, 66; see also boyd 2014). Certainly, in these productions there is 'gleeful appropriation as well as critical resistance' (van Dijck 2013, 155); but the constraints and limitations of the current media scenario should not be overlooked, as they are too many times in educational programs and research.

As much as a less celebratory and more critical approach is to be brought to this conversation, it is also important to ask how these strategies are or might be resisted. How does the imperative to express the self and produce an original, full-bodied voice, work in marginalized populations? How are we to read the resistance or reluctance of some youth who would rather not engage with creative, 'speak-up' pedagogies, and remain silent? In that line, the work done by anthropologist Das (2015) shows that for children of marginalized communities, keeping silent and feigning ignorance might be the expected behavior to sustain complex community bonds and relations against an outside world perceived as threatening. Religious, ethnic, and gender minorities know this too well. Silence, then, can have many different, even perturbing dimensions in different contexts, dimensions that the calling to speak out does not always recognize.

Exploring other approaches to youth media production: the contributions of this special issue

This issue presents research done by scholars studying young people's involvement with new media in different localities. The articles provide numerous examples of how, when, and where nuanced interactions between participants, educators, researchers, the tools available to them, and the systems they work within, construct and constrict young people's voice in media production. They

acknowledge, in their own and distinct ways, Yates' warning that 'neither the politics nor the meaning-making of "the visual story" are singular' (Yates 2010, 281).

The articles in this issue present research on Muslim girls' involvement with media production in a Toronto school, of *Mapuche* youth in southern Chile, of young people in rural areas in the Appalachian mountains or in urban London, of the interactions between online identity and love in North America, and of youth engagement with educational projects such as videogames workshops in Canada as well as higher education media programs in Ireland. The articles highlight the multiple negotiations and compromises that young people make in their media production, mediated by curricular requirements, adult authority and discursive frameworks, media esthetics and narratives, and the local and global visual cultures that shape students' visual and textual repertoires. 'Voice' did not pre-exist these encounters with institutional constraints or media genres but was importantly shaped by them.

Drawing from a range of qualitative methodologies and theoretical backgrounds, these articles come together in making it clear that voices are produced through and within particular institutional and cultural constraints and within particular contexts. The researchers used visual and media studies, action-research methodologies, feminist ethnographic approaches, narrative and semiotic analysis, and inscribed the process of doing media texts within a mesh of agents and strategies that go well beyond teacher–student relationships or consumer–production cycles.

The distinct focus of their work is on the *process* of digital media creation and the sociocultural and relational forces that configure the texts made by young people in diverse transnational settings. The authors address how sociocultural norms, discursive frameworks, technological tools, and other forms of power and privilege influence the process of digital media production for young people, and play a central role in configuring how young people produce media, and what young people produce media about.

In other words, the medium is not irrelevant to which and how particular narratives about the self are articulated. The contributions of Damiana Gibbons Pyles (this issue) on the 'pitch' – seen as a selling-line for the media project – and of John Richardson (this issue) on the spectacularization of the invitation to the prom (the 'promposal') in North America add other instances about these relationships between voice, self-expression, and consumer culture in digital media. For Pyles, the role of power and influence of 'school-like' discursive frameworks interacted with the formation of voice from the time the idea was pitched by young people working in non-school media production spaces. Similarly, Blum-Ross (this issue) considers the tensions of producing *for* donors in ways that are more complicated than merely creating digital media *with* young people. In the case of the promposal analyzed by John Richardson in this issue, the fact that it is a text that is staged in schools and made for a school audience (if not limited to it) poses interesting questions about the links between media, performance, and schooling. If initially the author saw these performances as 'a calculated disruption of schooling' and felt sympathetic to it, soon these disruptions seemed less democratic in terms of their reinforcement of gender binaries and a structured neoliberal marketability for young people who record and share their high school prom proposals on *YouTube*.

One of the common threads of the articles in this special issue is that these productions take place in educational settings. We were interested in pursuing the idea that these texts are produced 'in particular circumstances to particular ends' and that their visual stories are never straightforward (Yates 2010, 281). To produce media as part of an engagement in an educational context means subjecting oneself to certain rules and codes that organize the interchanges and defines what is to be shown and to whom (Bernstein 1990). Even if the settings considered in the articles are different, some being part of out-of-school programs and others curricular activities, they nonetheless enter particular power–knowledge relations and discursive framings that play a significant role in the process and in their outcomes. Both Negin Dahya's and Andrea Valdivia's contributions reflect silence and resistance in their research and highlight the complexities of the answer of marginalized groups to critical pedagogy's invitation to speak up. They emphasize the constraints that the racial and religious configuration of public schooling pose to the callings to speak out and produce alternative

representations for gender, religious, or ethnic minorities. This is particularly challenging for critical educators who want to question these uneven relationships through media production but might end stuck in the same kind of predicaments that were faced with traditional academic curriculum in relation to whose knowledge and whose language is privileged in these media texts.

But the articles also show the possibilities that educational initiatives might offer for other experiences. In their article, Fisher and Jenson examine the discursive positioning of girls as subordinate to boys within the field of digital games and technology culture at large, and demonstrate how girls construct their own subjectivities and leverage a range of qualities related to their identities within educational spaces. Judge and Tuite (this issue) make a strong argument about the relevance of university-level production programs and final project work with larger local and global media trends that guide and frame young people's audiovisual texts. The gender make-up of project teams and topics covered are intertwined with public texts and national engagements with political and economic problems.

Thus, education settings may not only be the constraining and repressive environments that have been portrayed in critical accounts of schooling, but also a different framework for action as public institutions that want to 'open up an experience of a new beginning' (Masschelein and Simons 2010, 544), provided that they do not renounce to make available words, movements, objects, and thoughts that might nurture the creation of this new beginning. In the experiences discussed in these articles, educational projects are still intending to act as public spaces where other languages and disciplines of knowledge are valued. And this is particularly important today, in which, as Siegfried Zielinski says, 'not all conversations must inevitable be markets' (Zielinski 2013, 252). Education can remain a setting where logics other than selling yourself can have some room, and young people can play and experience identities and knowledge to other aims and goals than becoming popular and appealing in the terms already defined by social media.

The search for a transnational dialogue

Finally, there is the question of the transnational dialogue. We were interested, when conceiving of this project, in illuminating the extent to which online and audiovisual media is not a transparent, universal experience, but it is deeply and profoundly mediated by their inscription in particular localities. We wanted to confront the idea that global and local are binaries (McLeod 2009), in which digital media is supposedly on the side of the global and schools, educational workshops or people represent the local. This conceptualization is limited in several ways. On the one hand, digital media are also local: despite their appearance as neutral, universal spaces, they have emerged in peculiar conditions and have assumptions that relate to historically produced, locally bounded selves, such as the metropolitan entrepreneurial and autonomous self (Burrell 2012). How these media operate in different contexts, with unanticipated users and contexts, is something that needs much more research. On the other hand, 'locals' are also global, as they relate and mobilize global icons, languages, and genres that affect their lives and identities. This complex relationship between local and global is clearly shown in Valdivia's work in Chile, as much as it is apparent in the promposals in Canada (Richardson), the rise of ecologic awareness and humanitarianism in media productions in Ireland (Judge and Tuite), or the role that political and media icons such as Michelle Obama play for Muslim girls in Toronto (Dahya). 'Youth media production' operates in contexts where the mobilization of knowledge flows in several directions, and is simultaneously global and local, in peculiar ways in each setting (Rizvi 2012). We believe the articles provide good examples of these peculiarities.

Another intent was to enlarge the conversation to academics from other latitudes. Our initial call got more responses from Anglo-speaking researchers (Canada, the USA, the UK, and Ireland) than from other regions, which is far from surprising given the current geopolitics of knowledge in academic publishing (Dussel 2015). This speaks about the distribution of economic and symbolic resources in different regions (Kennelly, Poyntz, and Ugor 2009), but it might also talk about the

framing of 'voice' within a particular discourse on participation, which might not be immediately legible for academics that work in divergent cultural and linguistic settings.

These questions remain open in these articles, and are still in need of further debates and problematizations. How does 'voice' translate to different policy agendas and pedagogical practices? How does 'youth media production' inscribe itself in educational traditions that have not and wish not a close relationship to popular media? It is interesting to draw a parallel line with what Andrea Valdivia and Negin Dahya went through in their research when they invited students to speak out, and were startled that the voices that emerged, when they emerged, were nothing similar to what they expected, and they had to learn to listen to silences and gestures in new ways. In the same way, those of us interested in a transnational dialogue will have to learn that there are empty spaces in this conversation, and that they contain 'things that we could not access' (McWilliam et al. 2009, 71) through these calls to produce articles and papers that enter a transnational dialogue. As McWilliam says, researchers might have to become much more practiced at producing other callings and invitations, in different languages, to produce wider conversations on how digital media is changing young people's lives and educational relationships in different regions. We are confident that the articles in this issue are already great contributions to a renewed understanding of the intersections between knowledge, media, youth identities, and education, and hope that they will ignite other ideas and research projects in the future that pick up some of their questions and engage with their silences.

Note

1. It should be noted that there is a long and noteworthy tradition of media production in schools, in which Freinet's newspapers and movie-making in the 1930s stand out as democratic and rich initiatives to enlarge the school curriculum and children's experience and participation in culture. See, among many others, Desbarrats (2001).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Dr Inés Dussel is Full Researcher at the Department of Educational Research, CINVESTAV, Mexico City. Her research interests focus on the relationships among knowledge, school, and politics, in a historical and sociological approach. She is currently studying the intersections between schools and digital visual culture.

Dr Negin Dahya is an Assistant Professor in the area of Digital Youth at the University of Washington Information School, Seattle, WA. Her research is grounded in anti-oppressive education, postcolonial and feminist theory, with a focus on girls and women of colour using and creating digital media.

ORCiD

Inés Dussel 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3983-3985

References

Banet-Weiser, S. 2007. *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Banet-Weiser, S. 2012. *Authentic^{TM}. The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
Berliner, L. 2014. "Shooting for Profit: The Monetary Logic of the YouTube Home Movie." In *Amateur Filmmaking. The Home Movie, The Archive, The Web*, edited by L. Rascaroli, G. Young, and B. Monaham, 289–300. London: Bloomsbury.
Bernstein, B. 1990. *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse. Vol. IV: Class, Codes and Control*. London: Routledge.
boyd, D. 2014. *It's Complicated. The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bragg, S. 2007. "Student Voice' and Governmentality: The Production of Enterprising Subjects?" *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 28 (3): 343–358.

Buckingham, D. 2009. "'Creative' Visual Methods in Media Research: Possibilities, Problems and Proposals." *Media, Culture and Society* 31 (4): 633–652.

Burrell, J. 2012. *Invisible Users. Youth in the Internet Cafés of Urban Ghana.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Dahya, N., and J. Jenson. 2015. "Mis/representations in School-Based Digital Media Production: An Ethnographic Exploration with Muslim Girls." *Diaspora, Indigenous & Minority Education: Studies of Migration, Integration, Equity & Cultural Survival* 9 (2): 108–123.

Das, V. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Das, V. 2015. *Affliction. Health, Disease, Poverty*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Desbarrats, F. 2001. *Origines, conditions et perspectives idéologiques de l'enseignement du cinéma dans les lycées* [Origins, conditions and ideological perspectives of the teaching of cinema in lycées/secondary schools]. Thèse doctorale, Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail – Ecole Superieure d'Audiovisuel, Toulouse, France.

van Dijck, J. 2013. *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dussel, I. 2015. "Feminists in Search of a Postcolonial Turn: Locating Ourselves in the Geopolitics of Knowledge." *Gender and Education* 27 (2): 95–97.

Harris, A. 2012. "Citizenship Stories." In *Keywords in Youth Studies. Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges*, edited by N. Lesko and S. Talburt, 143–153. London: Routledge.

Isin, E., and E. Ruppert. 2015. *Being Digital Citizens*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield.

Jenkins, H. 2013. "Rethinking 'Rethinking Convergence/Culture.'" *Cultural Studies* 28 (2): 267–297.

Jenkins, H., S. Ford, and J. Green. 2013. *Spreadable Media. Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H., R. Purushotma, M. Weigel, K. Clinton, and A. Robinson. 2006. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning). Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Jenson, J., N. Dahya, and S. Fisher. 2014. "Valuing Production Values: A 'Do It Yourself' Media Production Club." *Learning, Media & Technology* 39 (2): 215–228. doi:10.1080/17439884.2013.79948.

Kennelly, J., S. Poyntz, and P. Ugor. 2009. "Special Issue. Introduction: Youth, Cultural Politics, and New Social Spaces in an Era of Globalization." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 31 (4): 255–269.

Lather, P. 2009. "Against Empathy, Voice and Authenticity." In *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry. Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*, edited by A. Jackson and L. Mazzei, 17–26. London: Routledge.

MacLure, M. 2009. "Broken Voices, Dirty Words: On the Productive Insufficiency of Voice." In *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry. Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*, edited by A. Jackson and L. Mazzei, 97–114. London: Routledge.

Masschelein, J., and M. Simons. 2010. "Schools as Architecture for Newcomers and Strangers: The Perfect School as Public School?" *Teachers' College Record* 112 (2): 533–555.

McLeod, J. 2009. "Youth Studies, Comparative Inquiry, and the Local/Global Problematic." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 31 (4): 270–292.

McWilliam, E., K. Dooley, F. McArdle, and J. Pei-Ling Tan. 2009. "Voicing Objections." In *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry. Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*, edited by A. Jackson and L. Mazzei, 63–75. London: Routledge.

Mukherjee, R., and S. Banet-Weiser. 2012. *Commodity Activism. Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times.* New York: New York University Press.

Nilan, P., and C. Feixa, eds. 2006. *Global Youth? Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds*. London: Routledge.

Papacharissi, Z. 2010. *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Poyntz, S. R. 2009. "'On Behalf of a Shared World': Arendtian Politics in a Culture of Youth Media Participation." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 31 (4): 365–386.

Poyntz, S., and J. Kennelly, eds. 2015. *Phenomenology of Youth Cultures and Globalization. Lifeworlds and Surplus Meaning in Changing Times.* London: Routledge.

Rancière, J. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso.

Ratto, M., and M. Boler, eds. 2014. *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Rizvi, F. 2012. "Mobilities and the Transnationalization of Youth Cultures." In *Keywords in Youth Studies. Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges*, edited by N. Lesko and S. Talburt, 191–203. London: Routledge.

Soep, E. 2006. "Beyond Literacy and Voice in Youth Media Production." *McGill Journal of Education* 41 (3): 197–214.

Thrift, N. 2006. "Space." *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2–3): 139–155.

Yates, L. 2010. "The Story They Want to Tell, and the Visual Story as Evidence: Young People, Research Authority and Research Purposes in the Education and Health Domains." *Visual Studies* 25 (3): 280–291.

Zielinski, S. 2013. *[... After the Media]*. Translated by G. Custance. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.