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**Feminist perspectives and mobile culture(s):  
Power and participation in girls' digital video making communities**

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## Introduction

Many feminist media-education programs teach young people how to create media with a focus on participating in digital worlds and sharing their stories. These programs are designed to engender self-representation and to teach media literacy in a media landscape fraught with sexism and racism. These efforts to engage young people in the skills of storytelling and self-representation through media are important. Our work adds to this discourse with a focus on two less-often discussed aspects of media education, technical skills training and the hierarchy of value associated with the use of particular filmmaking tools. We posit these are critical elements of media education for practitioners and researchers working with young people to produce media, and especially so using Internet-enabled mobile technologies.

First, we discuss the importance of technical skills training and pathways to sharing media online, which are essential but often overlooked aspects of participation in media education settings. We propose that youth media education interventions require more focus on technical skills to ensure that the stories young people want to tell, whatever they may be, can be made, told, and shared. This includes focused education about sharing work online and the various technical and social factors related to this type of participation. An emphasis on technical skills and digital literacies of this kind are sometimes overlooked as critical to feminist work, and seconded to retelling narratives of oppression, resilience, and redemption.

Next, we identify the critical role of tools used in media education in relation to how media made by young people is valued. We focus on how media technology and media education are imbued with the same hierarchy of values that permeate inequities in the social world. Our work examines how a shift towards using tablets and smartphones as primary media making tools among already marginalized young people might perpetuate the very inequalities they aim to interrupt. Teaching youth to make media with low-cost technologies, like mobile devices and smartphones, often interacts with unstated assumptions about the value of these tools, positioning them as lesser than professional media making equipment.

Our analysis is based on a qualitative study of a series of Seattle based feminist filmmaking workshops, including observations of young people making digital videos using mobile devices like iPods, in-depth interviews with media educators, and surveys with participants. We draw on pilot research to query how the construction of participation using mobile tools is valued by practitioners, exploring the relationship between power and participation in feminist media education.

## Background

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Our work is situated in a landscape where the 21<sup>st</sup> century rhetoric of participation and “girl power” demands girls be active, self-determined, and self-representative digital media makers (Dobson & Harris, 2015). Such participation is necessarily positioned in environments where girls' engagement in feminist media making circles is enabled and/or constrained by social expectations, by the tools that are available, and by educational structures. Jenson, Dahya and Fisher (2014a, 2014b) identify how the potential to produce media in after-school environments is dependent upon the interplay of dynamics between students and video production technology, and between students and teachers. For example, in one study, our work showed how a group of girls pursuing a news-broadcast covering the hypocrisy of teachers chewing gum in the classroom was abandoned because the teacher refused to cooperate *and* because the existing footage was deleted or lost in the editing process. The reality of educational contexts is that they are messy and the role of technology cannot be separated from pedagogy and practice.

Participatory culture has been well-formulated with regard to the many ways in which new media converge in the lives of young people, creating possibilities for young people to represent themselves and their interests, and share their work in multimedia and Internet-enabled platforms (see Jenkins 2006; Ito et al., 2010; Soep, 2014). At the same time, critiques of the youth media making landscape identify how these notions of girls' empowerment are promoted as a commodity. In this critique, there is a focus on how girls' self-expression is constructed to be individual, “unmoored from any notion of social inequality” (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 183) and seemingly protected from the underlying assumptions applied to those representations and images when used and interpreted by viewers (see Dahya & Jenson, 2015). Girls' bodies are continually exploited across digital media platforms, and certain bodies, such as bodies of color, are inscribed with otherness, as strangers, as already and always out of place (Ahmed, 2000; Dahya & Jenson, 2015).

Critical conversations about digital media, voice, and participation problematize the idea that giving a young person access to media making equates to “giving voice” or “empowerment”; they recognize the layered influences that inform and sometimes constrain young people in the process of producing media and the act of self-representation (Berliner, 2018; Dahya 2017; Dussel & Dahya, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2009; Soep, 2006, 2014; Yates, 2010). Kelty (2016) describes participation as not being open to everyone, not synonymous with inclusion. Participation and power are tied together and participation can be restrictive, constrained, and represent or reproduce unequal social and cultural norms. What does it mean to participate, and what does it mean to have power, or be empowered, in digital media and digital media making communities? How do these notions of power and participation change when using mobile, networked devices for producing and sharing media?

Mobile filmmaking, also referred to as *cellphilms*, is on the rise (see Burkholder, 2016; Schlessler, 2014; Watson, Barnabas & Tomaselli, 2016). Girls making digital media with mobile tools in informal educational settings are instructed on how to construct a story, write a script,

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use a mic, hold a camera, and frame a shot (among other basic filmmaking skills), all using a smartphone or tablet. These actions are embedded with expectations from funders and educators that through participation in this kind of production participants create media that represent their lives and interests (Blum-Ross, 2017; Dussel & Dahya, 2017) and that feminist work is attached to the stories they/we tell.

In this chapter, we call attention to the politics of power embedded in and enacted on girls of color making digital media with mobile tools in informal educational settings and we consider the possibilities and challenges to their participation. We explore power and participation in digital media and feminist media making, where feminist media education aims to give girls and women critical and technical skills to create digital videos. Our contribution has clear implications for educational practice and theory, considering the interplay of power and participation in the process of producing digital videos using mobile devices like smartphones and tablets.

## Research

In 2015, our non-profit partner, Reel Grrls, facilitated six workshops (2-3 days each) in July and August. All participants involved identified as female and ranged from 12-15 years old. The pilot study discussed here involved (1) a small sample of 24 girls who completed pre-program and post-program surveys, (2) interviews with five media educators facilitating those programs, and (3) observational field notes. A researcher on the project delivered surveys to participants and documented field notes over the course of these summer workshops. The Principal Investigator and lead author of this chapter conducted the media educator interviews. We designed the survey to gather information about participants' experience with and understanding of digital media production, media literacy, and participatory culture. The survey data offers a snapshot of participant profiles and their interest in digital video production. In our exploratory analysis and collaborative coding of the media educator interviews, we discovered key themes related to structures of power-dominance embedded in the use of film-making tools and pedagogical practices.

The findings presented in this chapter aim to inform practitioners of feminist media education programs about the strengths, limits, and gaps in goals of feminist media education programs and the opportunities for girls to fulfill them. From this work we discuss the location of power structures related to digital media production tools, such as smartphones, and pedagogies employed by media educators in this informal production program. Previous work informing our discussion in this chapter, and more about our critical approach to youth media production in educational contexts has been published elsewhere (see Dahya & Jenson, 2015; Dahya, 2017; Jenson, Dahya & Fisher, 2014a, 2014b).

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## Teaching Barriers to Online Participation

Information from the pre-program surveys suggests that participants had some experience with mobile filmmaking coming into the programs. Many had used video cameras on smartphones, tablets, iPods, or iPod Touches before starting these summer programs. They also indicated that smartphones are indeed an available and accessible technology for them to continue filmmaking. Respondents noted that video sharing happens primarily among local communities, and friends and family in particular. Importantly, these participants also indicated that there is a disparity with regard to consuming media online and posting media online in public video sharing forums such as YouTube. All but one participant indicated that they watch online videos regularly, but only a few indicated past experience in creating their own videos and sharing them.

The post-program survey revealed that all participants wanted to continue making videos after the program was over. Although all participants wanted to keep making videos and sharing them with friends and family, few said they would share them using an online platform, and most were uncertain about if they would or would not create videos and post them to an online and publicly-viewable platform. The surveys did not query why they felt hesitant to share their work publically, and, our survey did not ask explicitly about social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram where short videos can also be posted. However, these online communities do not typically host longer and more formally produced videos of the kind made in educational feminist filmmaking programs, such as the site of this study.

The participants' desire for continued video-making and circulation stands in direct contrast to educator goals for the program. In interviews, one of the media educators explained about the program goals: "This is like a practice round. I'm showing this rough cut in front of a small group of people, so then I'll take the tools that I learned, go home, and then pick up where I left off and make a final product to put on the Internet for billions of people to see, in theory." The framing of the program as a practice setting is important and a necessary educational step. However, the design of the program did not tackle the next step – entry into the publicly-viewable online world. This omission matters in a context of young people who have noted in their survey responses that they do not actually participate in video sharing online using publicly-viewable platforms, and in the context of an imagined media education space that enables girls and young people of color to engage in a broader form of public and "participatory" self-representation.

One media educator explained further: "But we sort of make it as like a trial run for them, maybe... We never say that blatantly, but I think just sort of... It's kind of implicit that we're trying to have you all understand that what you put on the Internet is seen by a lot of people. [chuckle] So if you're nervous about it being seen in front of this many people, you probably are gonna be even more nervous about putting it out for these many. So ultimately it's just about generating confidence, and about letting it be okay for them to mess up but also knowing that they are responsible for the media that they put out." This implicit assumption that the

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confidence needed to create media will translate into the confidence to also share media publicly ignores the distinction between girls' desire for making videos that may be shared in relatively private settings and their desire to have their "voice" expressed publicly.

Online video sharing is certainly not the only (or perhaps even the primary or desired) mechanism of "participation." However, in the context of research examining digital communities as participatory spaces it is pertinent to understand how, where, and if girls of color making digital video in these informal educational settings are a part of broader digital worlds. Our work points to complications in how mobile filmmaking is presented and taught to young people, and in this example, is related specifically to the possibilities and challenges of sharing their work more broadly and publicly online.

### Power Dynamics and Mobile Video Production

Considering the interest participants had in making media and the access they had to smartphones, we present examples of how media educators in this program approached the use of mobile devices, specifically iPods and smartphones, for filmmaking. In these interviews, it is evident that mobile devices as filmmaking tools hold a dual position that both encourages participation and is simultaneously questioned for legitimacy as filmmaking devices. Interview participants recognize the value of using mobile tools for their lesser cost and wider availability, compared to digital video cameras. They also identify positive affordances including the tactile engagement of touch screens and the simplicity of mobile editing applications and their functions, such as an image of scissors to represent cutting a clip. In the following examples, interview participants also articulate nascent power dynamics associated with using mobile tools in place of more traditional filmmaking equipment.

For example, one media educator explained their decision-making process about what technology to use to edit films recorded on mobile devices during the summer workshops: "Well, do we want to be just like 'Here's an iPod, shoot it, film it right there, be done.' And then I think we wanted it to look a little more legit. [chuckle] So, we went with the computer editing." Another shared a similar sentiment regarding the value of mobile filmmaking saying, "So, it's much about the illusion of the electronics I have for feeling, like, driving a big Mercedes is more impressive than driving a small Toyota, but it will get you eventually at the speed of 100 kilometers an hour at the very same time. Maybe you'll hear it louder or something." And a third said of mobile filmmaking, "And it's pretty limited especially for... What's it called? Media editing programs. Because really there's only so much you can do with iMovie. It's a little gimmicky and it's a little kind of... I don't know. It's not particularly advanced. So by default, visually, the vlogs don't turn out as well as I think the kids had hoped, just because there's only so much that you can do with it."

The perspectives of these media educators on mobile devices as filmmaking tools reflect a hierarchy of values suggesting that using traditional, professional grade, difficult-to-access film equipment may be perceived as more "legitimate." Regarding the capacity of mobiles as tools

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that can “only do so much” the jury is out: professional films such as Director Sean Baker’s feature length *Tangerine* (2015) suggest that the potential of mobile filmmaking is indeed vast, and simple tips and tricks of the trade help to ensure good quality filmmaking even using more technically limited devices (Chowles, 2016). In this work, we have identified a relationship between perceptions about how mobile filmmaking is valued, the culture of youth media education programs using mobiles, and the acceptance of mobile filmmakers as part of broader filmmaking culture(s) and communities. Relatedly, we seek to call out this hierarchy of values as it is implicitly taught in the media education curriculum and embedded in practitioners’ views about different types of tools and their role in “professional” media making.

## Conclusion

Technologies do not override already existing cultural assumptions and experiences, but rather must be considered as “built to enact social programs” (Kien, 2009, p. 19) and have power structures embedded in their use. While the stories girls and women tell matter immensely, so too does teaching young people how to use the tools available to them to enable them to participate in the public domain. In this regard, media education and teaching technical filmmaking skills among non-dominant communities – girls and people of color in this case – are in themselves mechanisms for changing structural inequality. Here, we emphasize the powerful interplay between tools, teaching, and participation among girls and underrepresented groups making films on less expensive, more available, mobile devices.

The focus of our discussion has been on the way certain digital media production practices with young people are framed as entryways to greater participation in the digital domain, while simultaneously (re)inscribing power differences and complicating the picture of participation in digital media making communities. From this study, we invite further inquiry into mobile filmmaking programs and the ways in which the value of mobile filmmaking tools are presented and communicated to participants, particularly when they come from underrepresented and under-resourced groups, for whom these might be the only filmmaking tools available. We also point to a nuanced gradation in digital media education and production programming, targeting precise goals for both digital media production (what kind and what tools) and digital media participation (for whom, and shared using what platforms).

Smartphones and tablets as tools for creating media and filmmaking are at the forefront of discussions about more equitable digital participation. Certainly there is great potential for creating digital content and engaging young people in media making using mobile tools. However, our work complicates this landscape by identifying nuanced ways in which participation is constrained and interweaves mobile tools and feminist practices of digital media education.

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