

YOUTH VOICE? WHOSE VOICE? YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH MEDIA PRACTICE IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT. Thanks to advances in user-friendly, new media technology, many educational organizations around the world are supporting young people who wish to express their views through media production. The term “youth media practice” refers to these media production activities. This paper raises questions about the possibilities and limitations of the idea of “promoting youth voice through media production,” presenting some snapshots of current research contrasting different youth media settings in Hong Kong. Youth voice is not a naïve or transparent process, as in simple notions of self-expression, but I suggest that selves are constructed by and construct themselves through the processes of making video – mainly evident in the subject positions enacted through the performance of fictional identities and “voices.”

« LA VOIX DES JEUNES? LA VOIX DE QUI? » LES JEUNES ET LA PRATIQUE DES MÉDIAS JEUNESSE À HONG KONG

RÉSUMÉ. Grâce à la plus grande convivialité des nouvelles technologies médiatiques, de nombreux établissements éducatifs de partout dans le monde apportent leur appui aux jeunes désireux d'exprimer leurs points de vue par la production médiatique. L'expression « pratique des médias jeunesse » renvoie à ces activités de production médiatique. Cet article soulève des questions sur les possibilités et les limites de l'idée de « promouvoir la voix de la jeunesse par la production médiatique », offrant des images de la recherche actuelle mettant en opposition divers milieux médiatiques des jeunes de Hong Kong. La voix des jeunes n'est pas un processus naïf ou transparent, comme dans les notions simples d'expression de la personnalité, mais je pense que les identités se construisent par et à travers les procédés de production vidéo – ce qui est particulièrement évident dans les positions du sujet établies par le jeu d'identités et de « voix » fictives.

There is no universal approach used by educational organizations to guide youth media practice. Various types of youth media organizations invariably construct different conceptions of youth. I argue that young producers in different settings construct themselves differently in relation to their involvement with the media text, teamwork and the pedagogical discourse. Some of the positions experienced and expressed by the producers may not be reflected in the media text, and some of the positions reflected in a media text may not derive entirely from the producers. Negotiation, ordering, and selection occur before certain positions can be fixed in media texts, raising broader questions about which voices have been legitimized, promoted, and canonized, and which voices have been subtly neglected and devalued.

Introduction

“Youth media practice” describes media production activities that enable young people to express their views. Advances in user-friendly, new media technologies have enabled youth media practices internationally, with many media groups, youth work organizations, arts organizations, and educational organizations now organizing youth media production (SOROS; Shaw & Robertson, 1997; Buckingham & Domaille, 2001; Hodge, 2001; Maria-Ross, 2001; Harvey, Skinner, & Parker, 2002; Goodman, 2003; NAMAC, 2003; Yanofsky, 2003). In Hong Kong, various youth media production activities have been developed by schools, media arts groups, and social service groups. These organizations have created platforms for young people to share their media productions and have organized media workshops for young people. Slogans such as “independent media,” “youth voice,” and “self-expression” are the terms commonly used by these groups (Breakthrough, <http://www.uzone21.com>; HKFYG, <http://www.u21.org.hk>; IFVA, <http://www.ifva.com>).

While this climate seems highly promising, research has argued that the “self” of the young person in a media production is not a singular unit and that media technology is not a neutral tool reflecting an objective reality (see Buckingham *et al.*, 1995; Buckingham, 2003). In addition, there are numerous ways to define and measure creativity in youth media practice (Sefton-Green & Sinker, 2000; Banaji, Burn, & Buckingham, 2006), and to demonstrate that young people are experiencing various positions in the process of media production (Buckingham *et al.*, 1995; Richards, 1998; Buckingham, 2003). In response to the lack of coherence between models, Buckingham has proposed that media education needs to enable students to develop a “meta-language” which can help them critically engage with various positions (Buckingham, 2003, p. 172). Promoting youth voice through media productions is indeed never transparent or neutral. This assertion gives rise to a number of theoretical questions about the nature of youth media practices:

- Do different organizational or institutional settings affect how youth position or express themselves?

- Is youth media practice authentic and natural?

The rest of this article attempts to answer these questions through the use of some snapshots of empirical data from my current research in Hong Kong, highlighting the significance of researching youth media practices.

Method

Many film festivals or screenings of youth media suggest that the content of youth media productions are comprised of the views or opinions of the young people who produce the work (see, for example the continuing series of youth media productions available at feed://rss.groups.yahoo.com/group/themagic_network/rss). Where the young people themselves are the directors, the positions expressed in their media productions supposedly reflect the beliefs and values held by the subject who “speaks” through these media productions.

In order to explore these commonly held assumptions, I analyzed the positions of youth constructed in texts from various perspectives, including the media texts produced by the young people, the retrospective accounts provided by the young people, and the documents of the organizational settings. I interviewed many of the participants in these production contexts (including more “official” representatives’ of the institutions) and performed a form of discourse analysis to extrapolate common themes and to expose underlying assumptions. The three selected settings are Campus TV of Buddhist Wong Wan Tin College (BWWTC), Easy-film.com, and Independent Short Film and Video Awards (IFVA). They were selected because they are well documented, and have a comparatively long history of working as organizations with an established pool of young producers’ media works. These three settings also feature interesting contrasts: Campus TV of BWWTC is a school-based setting that is regarded by some researchers as highly interventionist and controlling (Chu, 2003). Easy-film is a youth-led media group setting without any prominent teaching or interventionist elements. Here, young people have been organizing most of their media activities by themselves. Finally, IFVA, the independent media competition, is a setting which presents itself as very liberal, where young people are encouraged to express their independent voices. Each of these settings play a role in how young people represent themselves.

“Young people” in pedagogical discourse

Campus TV of Buddhist Wong Wan Tin College (BWWTC) is a typical example of the most common school-based media activity in Hong Kong. Sponsored by the Quality Education Fund (QEF) run by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) of the Hong Kong Government, many video studios have been established in various secondary and primary schools since 1998 (http://qef.org.hk/eng/main.htm?proj_sum/proj_sum02.htm). There are about 400 secondary schools in Hong Kong, and it is estimated that more than

one-fourth of them have school-based video or radio studios. The Campus TV project of BWWTC, established in 2002, produces a 25 minute broadcast program twice a week. This on-campus TV program, simultaneously transmitted to all classrooms, provides clubs, teachers and students with a platform to promote their latest news or share interesting information. Helping students become self-confident is a major goal of the Campus TV project. Many of the students are sophisticated and knowledgeable about shooting video and using editing software. However, many media practitioners in Hong Kong feel that this school-based media setting is a highly regulated and controlled setting (Chu, 2003). Participating students are expected to develop team spirit and adopt a collective identity as BWWTC students.

Easy-film.com is media group run by young people; it is a setting without any prominent teaching or adult intervention. The young people of Easy-film.com have plainly positioned themselves as a group of media parodists, producing many playful media works that have attracted attention of the broadcast media and the press. The website of Easy-film.com (<http://www.easy-film.com>), founded in 2002, is one of the most popular youth media websites in Hong Kong. The operation of Easy-film is mainly online, and members can share their productions through the site. They also have occasional workshops, screenings, prize presentation ceremonies, video shooting activities as well as leisure activities, such as BBQs, swimming, etc.

The Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards (IFVA) is an independent media competition which presents itself as being liberal, encouraging young people to express their “independent” voices. IFVA (<http://www.ifva.com>) is a competition scheme that encourages Hong Kong people to produce creative and independent short films and videos. Besides the competition, IFVA also includes workshops, seminars, screenings, and other activities throughout the year to help promote the competition. The IFVA pamphlet briefly states that “independent work” means work initiated and produced by the director’s own initiative and “short” means works not exceeding 60 minutes in length. The founders of IFVA imagine participants as citizens pursuing freedom of expression and resisting mass media culture.

Young people in the media texts

As might be expected, each of the three media production settings has a corresponding impact on the way youth voice is positioned in the media text, and on the forms and styles used by the youth producers. *Kung Ping Road* is an animation with a straightforward dramatic storyline, clear characters, actions, and speeches. *Changing head* is a digital video production with a clear dramatic storyline which is driven by action rather than speech. It has the stated intention of using a “surreal” approach. *980001* is a digital video production with a non-narrative montage sequence. It is driven by images and music; the message is strong and passionate. These three productions

show us very different images of young people. In *Kung Ping Road*, we see that a morally upright young person is eventually rewarded. In *Changing head*, we see a young person who can absurdly change her head. In 980001, we see a lonely, disaffected schoolgirl who is complaining about examination pressure.

1. *Kung Ping Road* (Justice Road) is a three minute Flash animation. In a job interview setting, a morally good young person is cheated by a bad person competing for the same job. The good young person loses the job, but is eventually rewarded. How this comes about is not clearly explained. It is just stated in a subtitle, "ONE MONTH LATER," that the good young person has been promoted. It is not made clear why the cheating cannot happen again on another job-seeking occasion, or why the good person will not



suffer again. The production is didactic and lacks a persuasive plot. Yet the short animation hammers home the central message in the ending subtitle: "Cheating is not a virtue. Hard work will eventually be rewarded."

Kung Ping Road is from the carefully regulated Campus TV setting of BW-WTC. It was produced in the academic year 2003-2004, and entered in the

Animation competition on anti-corruption organized by Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

2. *Changing head* is a digital video production that has a clear dramatic storyline with an interesting climax intended to surprise the audience. It is drama totally driven by the action of the actress rather than her speech. It has the stated intention of using a "surreal" approach. We see an ordinary girl at home on an ordinary morning; she is annoyed by her comb and her



hair, but she can take off her head to solve the problem. Then she is annoyed by the choices of heads available in her wardrobe, so she decides to buy a new head from a supermarket, throwing away her old one.

Changing head is from the non-teaching youth-led setting, Easy-film.com. It has been on the Easy-film.com website since 2000, and is one of the most popular videos on the site. The young

person who can absurdly change her head is exemplary of the playful media works of this "youth-led" media group.

3. 980001 is a digital video production with a non-narrative montage sequence, mainly driven by images and music. It has a coherent theme which is progressively developed through some sub-themes. We see a lonely girl in school uniform. She is in a dilemma; she does not want to be disturbed but at the same time she wants to be cared for. She blames the people who are watching her and complains about the pressure of examinations. After she angrily scolds the people who are watching her and calls for a halt, she comes back to normal school life, but she wants someone to care about her. 980001 is the real student ID of the actress in the video. The ending subtitle shows that this video was produced by two other “numbers” – 980133 and 980230 – that is, the authors’ student ID numbers.



980001 is from the liberal media arts setting, IFVA. This video, produced in 2002, entered the 8th IFVA Youth Category and received a Distinguished Award. The disaffected schoolgirl who is complaining about examination pressure is typical of IFVA, because we know that pursuing freedom of expression and resisting the dominant culture are major characteristics of this independent media arts setting.

Does this kind of matching, this ideological relationship between institution and film aesthetic mean there are different types of youth, and these different youth media practices cater to different types of young people? Or does it mean that actually all these settings have been structuring young people toward different positions? I do not wish to suggest there is a simple or direct ideological correspondence between the contents of the media texts produced by the young people and the images of youth promoted by the respective youth media settings. Nonetheless, these questions are fundamental and political, revealing the fragility of romantic ideas of youth voices through youth media productions.

“Young people” in young people’s verbal narrations

It is useful to know what negotiation, ordering, and selection has occurred before certain positions held by young people are fixed in their media texts. This can help illustrate whether there are any “youth voices” that have been legitimized or devalued. Reviewing the young people’s articulation of their subject positions through their retrospective accounts illuminates this question. The young people interviewed include Stanley and his peers from Campus TV of BWWTC, Jessica from Easy-film.com, and Susan from IFVA. The images of youth constructed in the media texts of these young producers do not necessarily represent the positions held by them. Indeed, the next

section reveals quite how contradictory and complex these correspondences are and how they conflict with easy assumptions and preconceptions.

1. Stanley, the chairman of Campus TV in 2003/2004, and Vinsson, one of the authors of Kung Ping Road:

For Stanley, the image of young people constructed in the media production does not reflect his core values. The social part of creating media was much more significant for him than what was produced or for whom. Stanley and his peers were not so serious about the values or messages promoted by the foundations behind the media activities that they participated in. For these students, having fun was the most important value. When asked, Vinsson nearly forgets the name of the organisation that held the competition:

Vinsson: The course was organized by the Hong Kong Women Council.....no...sorry...Social Service Council...It was a competition about...what...was it environmental protection?...Yes... environmental protection. They worked with an environmental protection group to organize this program.

A sense of belonging and of mutual responsibility were influential in shaping this group's motivation to make media. They initially took up a role in a task and then they became more involved and more responsible, gradually developing a sense of group belonging. Stanley commented that he was given no right to edit content even though he sometimes wanted to improve it. Stanley and his peers were willing to assume their Campus TV duties mainly because they positioned themselves as members of the team. Vinsson stated that it was the pleasure of being with his friends during the process of production that kept him progressing. He also commented that this experience facilitated his role in other activities:

Vinsson: The force that keeps me moving is the joy with my friends during the process of production. Seldom can you enjoy a formal lesson like the process of group discussion in media production. You know, there is a lot of fun in the process. When the people appreciate my work, I get the motivation to move on. This is probably a major reason to keep me continuing my work here. Maybe it also applies to other things I do.

Friendship was the most important thing in their group experience. Vinsson mentioned that the environmental protection video competition involved a ten-session training course far from their homes and late into the evening. The students enjoyed being out together and especially the dinner together after the lesson.

2. Jessica from Easy-film.com, director of Changing Head:

Jessica is one of the founders of Easy-Film.Com, beginning her journey as an amateur media maker in 1996, and progressing to a university student in creative media in 2004. She also enjoyed the experience of creating the

media more than the production content or the experience of communicating with an audience. However, for her, the media technology itself was the core element of her media practice. Although Jessica felt that the social process of production was quite enjoyable, she mainly treasured the opportunity to learn about media production and media technology. She thought that this was a kind of useful knowledge that made her life more valuable and she identified with the media technology community, enjoying the status of being a hi-tech person.

Jessica: Indeed the programme here has given me a lot, for example, I enjoy those technical things very much such as lighting, operating the camera, etc... Starting from "I didn't know anything" to "now I know all the things," I feel so satisfied. I have learned a lot here. At least I know a bit about every one of these things. The knowledge of this subject is so broad, it is good for me after I graduate. Not many people have the chance to get in touch with these things. Some people may wish to study media making but they have not got a chance. So I feel media making is something mysterious...mysterious...that I do not know how to describe. So when I have a chance to get in touch with this subject here... somehow... to say it "has made my life valuable" is a bit too big... but I would say... very worthwhile.

Easy-Film can be regarded as a group of playful parodists striving to become serious media critics. It has gradually transformed from a group of young laypersons to a group of seasoned, professional, media practitioners.

3. Susan, from IFVA, the director of 980001

Susan participated in two consecutive Independent Short Film and Video Awards (IFVA) beginning in 2002. She received distinguished awards both years. For Susan, the production idea and communication with an audience were much more important than the experience of creating the media. Among the three cases, Susan is the only one who largely identified with the position constructed in her media text, an image of youth that closely matches the image of resistant youth constructed in the official documents of IFVA. Susan mentioned that her sense of creativity was related to the oppression that she felt:

Susan: If you give someone too much freedom, they will do nothing. If you put them in a box, they will try all their best to jump out...I heard a story ages ago: If you put a frog in a pot of water, heat the pot of water suddenly and strongly, the frog will sense the temperature change and jump out of the pot of water. But if you heat the water gradually, the frog will not notice the rising temperature, will stay and die in the pot without any resistance... Are we those people who are in the hot water and do not know when to jump out or the people who know when to jump out? Will I be the only one who wants to jump out but the other people do not? Then, if so, can I? Or maybe I am now already too tired and too late? Or maybe this hot water has alerted me and my sense of it will let me escape from danger.

Susan thought that a technically oriented approach to media production would downgrade the value of her media arts production. She wanted her voice to be heard in a larger context, perceiving that the genuine message of the media maker is more important than the appetite of the audience – but, nevertheless, she was still eager to have some audience reach:

Susan: To produce a video and to seek recognition is quite similar to a situation where you have said something and then want someone to respond. If there is no audience, it seems you are just talking to a wall. But I cannot always guess what other people around me want to hear before I say something. I can only expect that I will meet someone who is willing to listen after I have said something. I do not require them to judge whether I am right or wrong, good or bad. This is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that someone is willing to listen.

Conclusion: promoting “youth voice”? Which voice? Whose voice?

These observations show that the subject positions constructed in a young person’s media text should not be simply taken as his or her authentic expressions. Moreover, they also suggest that a non-formal setting (e.g., IFVA or Easy-film.com) is by no means freer than a school setting (Campus TV or BWWTC). Various institutional conditions are always teaching even without the presence of an instructor or a teacher. Ultimately, there are diverse positions held by young people and distinct presumptions about young people held by the organizers or teachers of youth media production settings. Studies of the production process clearly reveal the negotiations, ordering, and selection made before certain positions are fixed in the media texts. This raises broader questions about the ways in which some voices have been legitimized and canonized, and some other voices have been subtly neglected and devalued. At a preliminary level, this dynamic of subject positions leads us to question assumptions about the identity work of the young people and in particular how we address the classical discussion of the role of the structure and agency in a youth media setting. It raises questions about how far a young person’s agency (as revealed through an analysis of the resulting media text) can determine subject positioning. And it also raises questions about how far the structural properties of a production setting, like its pedagogical objectives and training activities, can shape this dynamic.

At a deeper level, this dynamic of subject positions in youth media practices has informed other discussion about the role of media in identity formation. As Buckingham (1993) has argued much media research focuses on media reception rather than media expression, presuming a dichotomized relationship between media consumer (usually supposed to be the audience) and media producer (usually supposed to be the mass media corporation) (see Morley, 1992 for an extended discussion of new audience studies). My analysis has shown how youth media practices present mediated self-expressions. That means that young people’s identity work is not merely a process of media

reception, but is a process where some voices are expressed, materialized, institutionalized, reorganized, and then internalized. The different subject positions or “voices” of the same person have been constructed in different occasions. These “voices” can be externalized, mediated, fixed, circulated, valued, devalued, and eventually consumed by the young people themselves. For example, the rewarding experience of winning a competition, in teamwork, and of getting good feedback from a particular audience community may contribute to encouraging particular “voices” of a young person and ignoring some of their other “voices.” Usually all these “voices” have been indiscriminately incorporated by the young person as his or her own expressions. Young people may believe that they are naturally expressing themselves, whereas they may have been merely inserted into a particular system with its own controlling authority and its own propagandistic agenda.

Indeed this analysis prompts more questions. Is it possible to engineer young producers’ identities using their own media expressions? This engineering is not about controlling the person or dictating the media content. It is about selecting the preferred contents from a pool of diverse contents that the young people, usually unreflectively, regard as something from themselves. Is it possible for someone in power to select and encourage something that can fit their agenda, facilitating certain positions and ignoring others? This question, of course, prompts more research and discussion. The discussion here suggests that educators may need to think about helping students to develop the ability to evaluate what it means to express a position and to have “voice.”

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