Book Review
The Digital Youth Network: Cultivating Digital Media Citizenship in Urban Communities

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The Digital Youth Network: Cultivating Digital Media Citizenship in Urban Communities by Brigid Barron, Kimberley Gomez, Nichole Pinkard and Caitlin K. Martin (2014). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Much of the activism around the recent murders of Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Eric Garner, Oscar Grant, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown and Walter Scott has been mediated through digital technology (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Boylorn 2014; Garza 2014). The Internet has served as a space where young people have offered counter-narratives to the dominant portrayals of black people in media while holding institutions accountable for their devaluing of black lives. As was the case with the infamous Trayvoning meme, the tools used to protest systemic injustices have also aided in perpetuating them (Noble 2014). Thus, as media literacy educators we recognize that encouraging our students to participate in a democratic society requires helping them develop the critical consciousness and technical expertise necessary to engage discourses across multiple modalities. As the authors contend, "The opportunity to give voice to hopes and dreams and to critique the governmental and entertainment hegemony is an important, empowering, and, we would argue, necessary experience for all students" (p. 4). Thus within the current political and social context, *The Digital Youth Network's* concern with helping underserved youth develop into digital media citizens is particularly timely. For media literacy scholars, K-12 educators, and youth media program designers, this work reminds us that mitigating the digital divide requires not only making technology more accessible to marginalized youth but also interrogating the quality of that access. The authors view this reframing as necessary when considering how we create environments for students to engage technology in ways that are meaningful to them.

The Digital Youth Network is a book based on a three-year longitudinal study of the Digital Youth Network, a program out of Renaissance Academy, a technology-focused K-8 public charter school on the South Side of Chicago. The research was a collaborative effort between two teams, one based in Chicago with researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Chicago and the other based out of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. In total, three faculty members, a research associate and eight graduate students conducted the study, which follows 54 African-American students throughout their time in middle school. Nichole Pinkard, who left a tenure-track position to become the lead designer of the research team working with Renaissance Academy, founded the Digital Youth Network. She began the Digital Youth Network "on the premise that the limited engagement of minority and low-income youth in digital media affinity spaces was not the result of disinterest or fleeting curiosity" (p. 249) but rather a lack of access to opportunities to develop digital media literacies. While working with Renaissance Academy, Pinkard observed that although students regularly used computers at school, they needed sustained engagement with technology

to develop identities as media producers. This was a challenge considering that there were limited opportunities for students to create media within the constraints of the classroom.

With funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Pinkard developed the Digital Youth Network as a hybrid in-school and after-school program. Students also received personal laptops that they kept for the duration of their time at Renaissance Academy. By having a laptop at home, students' engagement with technology expanded across multiple settings. As part of the voluntary after-school program, students participated in weekly two-hour sessions (called "pods") focused on digital video production, digital music production, robotics, video game design, graphic design and spoken word. Young women also took part in Digital Queendom, a pod designed to encourage them to perform gender critiques through different forms of media production.

The book is organized in three sections comprised of eleven chapters. In the first section, the authors lay out their research agenda describing the project's learning model and the research methods used to assess the program's impact. In the second section, the authors report the study's findings detailing the success and challenges of program staff blending the roles of artist, mentor, and teacher. They also look at how the mentors worked to sustain student identities as media creators. Finally, the third section points to the implications for designing programs aimed at increasing underserved youth's engagement with technology, and looks at the opportunities and challenges associated with expanding the program.

The researchers' ability to describe students' individual experiences with media and technology is one of the book's strengths. The study focuses on nine case learners and provides detailed case narratives on four learners: Calvin, Maurice, Ruby and Michael. Narratives were comprised from student, parent and mentor interviews and observing students while they participated in the pods. Each narrative also includes examples of student work and is accompanied by a chart illustrating the student's engagement with various forms of technology from Pre-K through graduating Renaissance Academy. The narratives effectively complement the findings chapters and are particularly insightful for those designing media production curriculum for middle school students. For example, Chapter 6 describes how learning became "a self-sustaining process" (p. 168) where students created personal projects outside of program time, sought support from adults, and employed what they learned in the program through teaching and consulting with others. Ruby's case narrative, which follows the chapter, details how she experienced this process. From this, we learn about the importance of program designers creating space for youth to explore the personal utility of the skills they learn.

It is refreshing that the researchers also acknowledge that effectively teaching media literacy requires a unique skill set. Chapter 3 chronicles some of the early challenges associated with program staff attempting to blend the roles of artist, mentor and teacher. After some initial failures, the DYN adjusted its professional development model to adequately support mentors. This required recognizing that the mentors possessed varying degrees of youth development, teaching, and technical knowledge and needed support accordingly. The authors also highlight how each mentor's cultural capital contributed to their interactions with students.

The program staff's cultural capital is sometimes the hidden resource that goes unaccounted for when considering whether a program can be replicated. Mentors were instrumental in the DYN's aim to push students "beyond the capacity to simply create digital media" but rather help them "become critical consumers, constructive producers, and social advocates for better futures" (p. 132). Mentors achieved this by positioning students to take on various roles, stances and identities through media. Specifically, mentors encouraged students to become social analysts through remixing and reworking existing media artifacts and messages. They also developed what the researchers refer to as a critical disposition through various sites including in-person forums, online discussions and through media production. For example, Maurice's case narrative illustrates the program's success in developing students who combine technical expertise with social justice orientation. As a student interested in enacting social change, Maurice created a social networking website aimed at impacting young people's views on social issues.

In examining the conditions that encourage students to become creative producers, the authors highlight the value students placed on having opportunities to present their work and thus the importance of young people knowing that their voices were heard. The program design included multiple spaces for sharing student work including opportunities to present to the entire school, parents, siblings and people outside of the immediate school setting. Students showcased their work as part of weekly forums, competed in school-wide contests, posted on a student-driven website, and participated in citywide media and technology competitions.

One major theme that emerged from the work is the role gender played in youth participation in the program and their engagement with technology. The researchers modified the program in response to some of the trends they observed. Pinkard created the Digital Queendom pod after noticing that there was a lack of young women participating in the video game design and robotics pods. They also highlight how the program's perceived value among those in the community was sometimes determined along gender lines. One mentor stated that they believed that parents were more likely to view the program as a distraction for young women and more likely to pull them from the program than young men. The book also details how gender critique fueled student's media production. In Chapter 4, the authors describe how journal responses to the PBS documentary, *Merchants of Cool* and a class discussion about respecting young women served as the impetus for a group of young women recording a rap song about female empowerment. The examples point to how unfettered access to digital technology allowed the young women to follow their creative impulses.

Researchers also compare data generated at Renaissance Academy with that acquired at Palm Middle School, a predominantly white and Asian middle school in the Silicon Valley. In looking at the two sites, researchers contrast the experiences of students growing up in an area where few people have jobs in the tech sector with those in a region renowned for technological innovation. While the researchers found that students at Renaissance had a higher engagement with technology than their peers at Palm Middle School, the study also reveals the work necessary to achieve this outcome. Providing underserved youth with experiences with technology that are comparable to those in more affluent areas requires considerable intellectual and financial resources.

In the book's final section, the authors outline both the challenges and opportunities associated with replicating the DYN and offer insights and best practices for designing effective youth media programs for underserved youth. They also detail how the program "scaled up" and extended its work beyond Renaissance Academy throughout Chicago. In recognizing the difficulty in replicating such an ambitious project, the authors offer generative ideas that may inform media literacy practices in programs with fewer resources.

While making the important contributions detailed above, this research raises several issues that are outside the scope of the study. Considering that all of the mentors and students were African American, the study offers opportunities to think about the kinds of youth identity work that is potentially unique to all-black educational spaces and how technology supports and complicates this work. Specifically, I wonder: how does race factor in students identifying as tech-savvy? The book stops short of explicitly discussing the types of media literacy decisions and practices that educators and learners make that may be specific to racially homogenous environments.

Overall, the *Digital Youth Network* succeeds in its aim to appeal to a broad audience including researchers, educators, policy-makers and parents. This work prompts educators to complicate the discourses about the digital divide that center on the need for under-resourced young people to develop technical skills to be competitive in the 21st Century marketplace. Beyond economics, such conversations must continue considering how young people use digital technology to advance their social and political interests. *The Digital Youth Network* troubles the idea that all youth are digital natives, possessing technical proficiency by virtue of growing up in an age where technology is seemingly plentiful. In challenging this conception, which some scholars treat as axiomatic, *The Digital Youth Network* reveals that technical expertise is a product of cultivation and not merely a form of inheritance. Ultimately, this work embraces the participatory pedagogies

that new media affords while recognizing the importance of teaching young people how to deconstruct the technical and ideological aspects of media. What results from this fusion is promising, as researchers found that DYN participants were twice as likely as their peers at Palm Middle School to use the Internet to access and share material about politics. This speaks to the need for funders to support more large-scale projects that blend critical media literacy and participatory new media literacies practices. Such an approach lays the groundwork for students to use technology to overcome their lack of access to formal political channels and respond to the complex social justice issues that matter to them and their communities.

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