Online Youth Networks: Researching the Experiences of 'Peripheral' Young People in Using New Media Tools for Creative Participation and Representation

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Abstract

Online networks can support broad communicative participation and interaction and new media technologies have the potential to allow individuals and groups to reflect, create, maintain, establish, challenge and subvert the media and political representations that affect them. For 'peripheral' youth - those living outside of national and global cultural and economic core centres - new media technologies can enable access to multiple and diverse audiences, that may otherwise have not been reachable. This paper will explore the meaning of 'peripheral youth' and will consider how, using the Internet as a medium for distribution and communication, these young people can represent their local lives and explore different issues, identities and representations through participation in an online youth network.

The experiences of 'peripheral youth' with using new media will be explored in the context of the Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) Project, currently being implemented by Queensland University of Technology. YIRN is designed as an 'open architecture' platform for experimentation, dissemination and exploration of the potential of streaming technologies to promote the production and distribution of creative content by young people. This paper will investigate the implications of this network for the young people in Queensland who are participating and whose access to new media technologies and diverse audiences is limited due to geographical, social and cultural contexts. By engaging with young people active in the network, this research examines how online participation relates to, and is affected by, their local offline lives.

Introduction: The Youth Internet Radio Network

In January 2004, the Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre (CIRAC) at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) established a Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) Project. Its aims include:

- Establishing a network of young content providers across Queensland
- Identifying opportunities for youth enterprise development
- Providing and facilitating training to young people in new media content development
- Considering policy-level implications for the establishment of online youth networks and for enabling young people in different contexts to participate

A streaming website (www.*sticky.net.au)* is being developed and will be launched to the public in 2005. Groups of young people across Queensland are being trained in how to produce original creative content for the site. Through the network and the website, young people will be provided with a distribution platform for their locally produced creative content. An online audio stream (potentially multiple streams) will also allow young people to have weekly, monthly or one-off audio programs. In addition, the network will allow young people to interact with each other on topics and issues that are relevant to them - through chat, blogging, forums, message boards, and emails.

Specifically, YIRN provides us with the opportunity to investigate how information and communications technologies (ICTs) can be used for interaction, creativity, and innovation. The YIRN research methodology combines two research approaches: ethnography, a research approach that has traditionally been used to understand different cultures and; action research, a research method used to bring about new activities based upon new understandings of situations. In the Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) methodology, ethnography is used to guide the research process while action research links the research back into the projects development.

This methodology was developed over the past two and a half years in collaboration with UNESCO and is designed specifically for research on community-based media (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn 2003; Tacchi, 2004). It has been used to help a network of ICT projects develop in South Asia (Slater and Tacchi 2004).

YIRN provides an interesting contrast to the South Asian research. One key aspect of the ethnographic research is an exploration of the ways in which YIRN works as a communication space: How will young people in Napranum talk to other young people in nearby Weipa or far-away Mount Isa or Brisbane? How will young people represent their very local lives and their notions of local and national identity? Does YIRN foster, grow or enable creative content production by young people? If so, what are the impacts of this for the young people participating?

Being young and living on the 'Periphery'
Studies of 'peripheral' youth became popularised in the 1990s in the context of globalisation and culture debates. 'Peripheral' youth refers to young people living outside of national and global cultural and economic core centres and studies of peripheral youth seek an active engagement with these young people by examining the way in which meanings are constructed by them in relation to their local/global positioning. The term 'peripheral' as defined by Pilkington and Johnson, is used to express something more than 'local': it also refers to 'spatially organised power relations'. (Pilkington & Johnson, 2003: 261).

In the context of globalisation, peripheral youth studies consider that the acceleration of global flows as a result of the development of communications technologies has meant that cultural forms are now available for mass-scale global consumption. A 'peripheral framework' is interested in how global culture is reworked and reinterpreted to form 'highly complex translocal youthful identities' (Pilkington & Johnson, 2003: 261). This framework avoids the associated meanings imposed by particular cultural commodities and instead examines the variety of responses in specific localities in relation to broader ethnic, social, class and gender contexts (ibid).

By undertaking YIRN research in the physical locations of young people living outside of urban economic centers, this study seeks to explore alternative accounts of young people's experiences with 'global cores' whilst investigating the significance, if any, of young people's global/local positioning in their interaction with the YIRN online youth network.

In the YIRN project we are considering 'peripherality', albeit a contentious categorisation, in terms of *how young people see themselves*. Do they identify themselves as being on the margins, isolated and removed from mainstream cultural production? If so,

why? And if not, we need to consider how this may challenge the center/periphery model in the context of shifting media power relations in global and local contexts.

New Media Applications for Creativity and Cultural Development
Cultural transformation can be considered a 'dialectical process between globalisation and localisation' that relates to the production of identity both collectively and individually (Stald and Tufte, 2002:2). This is a process that relates to ongoing 'encounters with the mediated representations of the world' (ibid). The mass media, it can be argued, have maintained what Jonathon Friedman (2002) calls a 'practical monopoly' on these 'mediated representations' (ibid:25).

This view raises some interesting questions regarding firstly, the role of the mass media in facilitating new global encounters and secondly, the role of new media in shaping those ongoing encounters. If we accept that the 'mass media' are central to our understanding of ourselves and of others in the world, then what is the significance of new interactions enabled through the Internet, particularly those facilitated through creative content production, as is a central feature of the YIRN project? Do new media technologies allow for the development of a 'global commons' (Silverstone, 2002) where displaced and marginalised groups and cultures are able to participate in media culture in their own terms?

Marie Gillespie (2002) says, 'new directions in flows of images and narratives, ideologies and virtual vocabularies are likely to have political and social consequences that are unforeseeable, perhaps unimaginable' (ibid:173). How then, for example, might the creative content produced by a young person from a remote Aboriginal community in the far north or far west of Queensland affect the perceptions of a young person in Brisbane, or regional Tiaro? Do creative interactions on the network challenge, reflect or subvert mass media representations of young Australians and/or personal perceptions?

Mitra and Watts (2002) cite a central theme for communication scholars in the 21st century as the 'resuscitation of voice'. In redefining the Internet, they envision 'a discursive space produced by the creative work of people whose spatial locations are ambiguous and provisional'. They consider that new constructs of 'voice, agency, discourse and space' in 'cyberspace' may have 'liberating and empowering characteristics' (ibid:486). Power structures, they believe, have inherently shifted in Internet based communication. They argue that in traditional mass media we can identify a central voice, a 'core' and from this point we are able to identify the marginal or 'peripheral' 'other'. The centre, in mass media, has the main stage. But on the Internet, they suggest, it is difficult, if not impossible to locate the centre and a centre cannot be so easily set by national political and organisational power structures. A voice on the internet becomes more powerful if it is popularised and this is most likely through the process of being 'hyperlinked' from other websites. In this context, it becomes difficult to find the 'margins' because 'it is impossible to locate the centre' (ibid:487).

Online community networks and internet radio - and YIRN can be described as both - are surrounded by a degree of hyperbole. The technologies themselves are seen to hold the potential to encourage community building, empowerment, unregulated and egalitarian levels of media access allowing everyone to have a voice, to be enabled to communicate with others and form connections not reliant on physical proximity or mobility. Through the YIRN project we are interested in interrogating popular ideologies regarding the emancipatory and democratising potential of new media technologies.

Whilst it appears reasonable to revel in the beneficial effects of increasing access to media production and distribution tools, in many ways, these claims echo the rhetoric that generally surrounds the introduction of new technologies, as was the case with radio (see Spinelli, 2000; Mielke, 2002).

Online Youth Networks: Creating spaces for Creativity and Innovation?
In the early development of YIRN, the danger of the network becoming too Brisbane focused, or a resource used primarily (if not exclusively) by young people already engaged in media and creative content production was recognised. This is one of the reasons that relationships were sought with ten local project partners distributed across the state in various geographical, cultural and social settings. Through these project partners, YIRN is able to engage with a diverse mix of young people including those who have not had prior experience of participating in online networks or producing creative digital content. How will these young people participate in YIRN? Will their engagement run longer than the duration of the content creation training workshops the project provides? Investigating these questions will help us to learn about engaging the disengaged in online networks and the reasons and ways young people may or may not be appropriating new technology to 'read' and 'write' their own meaning through creative content production and online interaction and communication.

Similarly, the project did not want to be proscriptive and limited to a narrow identified group of users. The design methodology for the YIRN website takes an 'open architecture' approach. This approach is informed by the notion of the 'internet commons' or the 'innovation commons' as articulated by Lawrence Lessig (2001). Lessig believes that innovation on the net prospered because of the very nature of the Internet: its basic and open-ended architecture ensured that creativity and ideas could emerge and flow freely. Lessig fears that the current structural shift in this architecture, intricately linked to commercial forces, will destroy the very creativity and innovation that it originally set out to enable. In resisting this trend, Lessig believes we need to ensure sufficient control to give artists enough incentive to produce, whilst leaving free as much as we can for others to build upon and create.

In terms of Internet architecture, Lessig describes it as three layers, and these layers have an affect on creativity and innovation – the physical, code and content layers. The physical layer relates to access to physical components that are required to produce creative content. In the case of YIRN, this refers to the hardware required to enable content distribution such as multi-platform streaming servers. The code layer refers to the software that this hardware applies as well as what gets published, where and how. YIRN's use of open source software will mean that other groups will be able to take the software applications that the network uses and creates and apply and adapt it to other places in other contexts. In the case of YIRN, this also refers to access to a website with the necessary server space and capabilities as well as appropriate copyright licenses that both protect and enable producers. The content layer, in the YIRN context, refers to the ability of young people to upload and manage their own content and the provision of necessary training and resources that will respond to, and enable them to fulfil creative aspirations.

One of the defining features of the internet is its interactive potential, yet the idea of interactivity is not quite as straightforward as it is sometimes presented. Meikle (2002) distinguishes between different types of interactivity- from the limited juke box style choices offered by many websites to the notion of intercreativity where users can not

only interact but can also 'create' collaboratively. With YIRN we are aiming for intercreativity with a network that is responsive to its users and is designed to allow for new collaborative innovations. Lessig's (2001) description of an 'open network' refers to a network that is simple and allows innovation to come from the ends, from it's users. With YIRN, we aim to build a network that begins as something quite simple and 'open' but also has a complex backend including a content management system that is ready to respond to innovations that emerge from the networks users.

In the YIRN project we have tried to avoid more traditional classifications of types of content, and are approaching the analysis of content created through YIRN as:

> i. *Found* – already existing content such as music tracks. What happens to this content, how is it used, how is it altered, represented, contextualised etc?
> ii. *Self-forming* – content formed through interactions such as email, blogs and chat.
> iii. *Creative* – original content created by participants (which may also utilise found or self-forming content).

Because we are designing a network that allows users to create and innovate through their participation, every activity they take part in can be viewed as a creative act that defines what the network will become. Therefore, we want to view all activity on the website as type of creativity and investigate how one participants' creativity may relate to others.

YIRN will endeavour to explore intercreativity through online and offline interactions with participants alongside a 'trackback' functionality on the website that allows participants to hyperlink to sources on the network that influenced or were used in producing their creative content. A message will then be sent back to the original author whose content has been used and an ongoing log will be kept of all the links that relate to each piece of content. For example, one piece of writing on a message board (self-forming content) may, over time, have ten links connected back to it through the trackback functionality. This will be visible to the network and will essentially form a 'trail' of intercreativity or related content.

In regards to creative original content, young people will be able to determine what sort of copyright license they want attached to their content when they upload it to the network. The Creative Commons copyright licensing system, yet to be recognised by Australian law, allows young people to decide how they want their content to be used and under what circumstances and it allows for the possibility of creative collaborations where content can be shared, added to and altered (see: www.creativecommons.org).

Online Streaming Capabilities: Exploring the Potential
It will be interesting to observe how young people use the online audio and video stream/s available to them through YIRN and what becoming a member of the YIRN network means to them. Will they draw from traditional radio formats in designing audio programs, will they be affected by other interactive capabilities the website offers (e.g messaging, chat, access to others content)? Will they treat the audio stream as a radio station? Will they collaborate to produce programs and other content with young people living in other parts of the state?

The YIRN project is also interested in forging links with radio stations, particularly community radio stations. During our initial visits to meet with project partners, wherever possible we also visited the local community radio station to explore potential links. Out of the nine project sites we have conducted training with, six of the locations had a community radio station nearby. However, very few of the participants had ever visited these stations despite the majority expressing interest in participating in the YIRN online network. We hope that these community radio stations may consider picking up some of the audio stream content produced for YIRN by young people for local broadcast and visa versa. And by encouraging this we are interested in investigating how 'old' and 'new' media innovations might be enabled.

Despite YIRN's inherently participatory nature, to have a streaming audio program, or to participate more generally on the YIRN website, users face one major obstacle: access to a computer and an Internet connection of sufficient quality. According to the Australian 2001 census, 42 percent of the population had used a computer at home and 37 percent had used the Internet the week preceding the national survey. School age students have the highest rate of computer and Internet use- close to 70 percent of 10-19 year olds used a computer at home the week before the census and almost 60 percent accessed the Internet. But there are disparities in access. Only 18 percent of Indigenous people had used a computer at home the week before the census and only 16 percent used the Internet. This is less than half of the national average. Home computer and Internet access is also higher in major urban centres (ABS, 2004). An earlier Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey shows us that households earning over $50,000 are twice as likely to have a computer as those earning under this amount and three times as likely to have an Internet connection (ABS, 2001). Internet access speed also plays a role in affecting levels of participation on the Internet and is an important concern in the context of regional communities lack of access to broadband facilities and the Australian Government's desire to fully privatise the national telecommunications company, Telstra (ABS, 2004).

The YIRN project is interested to investigate how disparities in computer and Internet access at home and elsewhere are affecting young people's participation in the network and this research will play a role in advocating policies that address inequalities impacting upon participation.

Analysis of YIRN Creative Content: Understanding how young people see themselves and the world around them
Delivering training in content creation is providing a means for researchers to interact and get to know young people in their localities. A series of three workshops over two years are being carried out with young people at each of the ten project partner locations. At the time of writing, nine workshops have been carried out in a format called 'Digital Storytelling' (see http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/ digitalstorytelling). This involves a four day workshop where young people create two minute personal multimedia stories about their lives. These Digital Stories will be included with other content young people produce on the streaming website.

One of the YIRN research methods being employed is an ethnographic approach to the analysis of the creative content produced by young people. At this early stage, this involves a broad textual analysis of content 'themes' and identifying the ways narrative styles, meanings and symbols are constructed in the 51 Digital Stories produced in the workshops. This analysis is then contextualised through our interactions with young

people in the workshops and the information they shared with us, research regarding the local area where they live as well as a workshop evaluation and media use survey. Later we will look at the multiple 'interpretive accounts' of these stories by looking at how others respond to them on the network (Titon, 2003).

Our experience with the YIRN project thus far suggests that young people do appear to place significance on their geographical positioning in relation to core city centres, in this case, usually Brisbane (although sometimes Townsville for young people in the far north of Queensland). Our textual analysis of Digital Stories, created by 'peripheral' young people participating in the YIRN Digital Storytelling workshops, is producing a number of recurrent 'themes' that relate to feelings of 'boredom', 'lack of opportunities' and 'isolation' alongside other stories where we can identify 'aspirational' ambitions to seek out career and other opportunities elsewhere as well as a strong sense of place-based local 'cultural identity'. We are also learning about the different ways that young people construct meaning through cultural, geographical and social affiliations.

For example, of the 11 Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island participants, all of their Digital Stories name family members and draw connections to their relationships with one another. Sometimes, this information may seem 'irrelevant' to a 'Western' reading of the film. For example, one film by a 12 year old Aboriginal girl starts out as a film about her Grandmother. As the film progresses a cousin, her brother, all of her aunts and uncles from this side of the family and their children are mentioned. At the end of the film she tells us that her father is close to her grandmother (which is 'very cool', 'solid') and the film concludes with 'and my mother still lives with my father'. Detailed kinship relationships are a prominent theme in the stories of the young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island workshop participants. This was also noted in anthropologist Eric Michaels' (1994) work with a Warlpiri (Indigenous Australian) community. He found that kinship relationships were significant in Warlpiri video productions as well as in their own readings of film and television programs (the below example discusses local understandings of the Hollywood film, Rocky).

> Narrative [in Warlpiri stories] will provide detailed kinship relationships between all characters, as well as establishing a kinship domain for each. When Hollywood videos fail to say where Rocky's grandmother is, or who's taking care of his sister-in-law, Warlipiri viewers discuss the matter and fill in the missing content. (ibid:91)

In another Digital Story, the participant (a cultural youth worker) tells us that her mother is Waima from Papua New Guinea and her father is from rural Queensland. Marcia, who produced the story, tells us that it is a story about 'the blood of two cultures' that runs through her veins. Particularly, the story is about Waima culture and her grandmother. Some time into the story Marcia tells us that, 'I would like to acknowledge my ancestors' and she then reads out the individual names of her matrilineal and patrilineal ancestors going back four generations. From this point, Marcia no longer addresses us, the broad audience, but tells the rest of the story to her ancestors.

Some viewers have read this film as, 'two or three stories in one' and suggested that it should have focused on her Grandmother rather than listing the names of her ancestors. Yet it is clear that to Marcia the two themes of her ancestral lineage and her Grandmother, are inseparable. They are part of the same story and they tell us about the significance of understanding and retaining knowledge of family lineage in Waima

culture. The viewers who see it as 'two or three stories in one' are interpreting it from a different cultural understanding of storytelling narratives. In both of these films and viewers reactions, we can start to understand how differently we form and sustain a 'world view' and how this may challenge norms of Australian media narrative formats.

Other common 'themes' that are emerging from the stories of peripheral young people are 'aspirational', 'sense of agency', 'overcoming challenge/recovery' 'adventure', and 'social message'. One of the films discusses the problem of 'sniffers' (paint sniffing) in an outer Brisbane suburb. The film led to discussions at the local Community Centre and a meeting to discuss with young people how paint sniffing is affecting them and what they thought needed to happen to improve the situation. Another Digital Story from rural regional Queensland can be viewed as an iconic piece about the dominant construction of Australian masculinity – the producer takes an expert journalistic position and uses double and subliminal messages alongside humour and parody to communicate his message that Ford motorcars are better than Holden. This, he tells us, is one of 'three fundamental topics for discussion in Australia' (the other two being 'footy' and 'drinking'). This young producer told us of his ambition to present programs for the local community radio station, and in this context we can see how he places himself as a 'presenter' in his story consciously employing a number of media devices to assert his position and parodying the highly masculine presenter style of motorcar and motor racing programmes.

Conclusion

In some ways this project allows the globalisation core/periphery paradigm to be questioned and challenged. Our research thus far suggests that young people do see themselves in terms of their geographic positioning and recognise that they are often perceived in those terms. At the same time producing creative content appears to allow peripheral young people the opportunity to subvert and challenge the way they are perceived and represented. How will other young people participating in the network respond to their stories? Will peripheral/core positioning be relevant to the personal relationships and interactions formed on the network? Are social relations on this network related to place? Additionally, this project is allowing us to consider creativity, intercreativity and innovation on the Internet and how a space to encourage and foster these qualities might be established and maintained as well as how being on the 'periphery' might impact upon participation in such a space. These are some of the issues we will continue to investigate as the online network is formed and as it grows.

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