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NAVIGATING DIGITAL PUBLICS FOR PLAYFUL PRODUCTION: A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS OF TWO INTEREST-DRIVEN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Ksenia A. Korobkova & Matthew Rafaflo

Abstract: *This article argues that the set of skills and strategies associated with managing digital publics online represent an emergent literacy practice of importance to literacy researchers and educators. Drawing on two case studies of online communities popular with contemporary youth to learn, play, and socialize, we articulate how youth participants strategically negotiate multiple audiences online with varying levels of publicity in order to achieve learning outcomes. In one case, players of a popular production-centered video game share their content in ways that garner the specific kind of audience and feedback they need for their projects. In another, members of an online fan fiction community analyze and negotiate expectations of their audience in order to craft media that garners attention and sustains readership. Both examples identify how skills centered on navigating and managing publics – that is, multiple audiences that are permeable across a wider public online – constitute a recognizable and important “new literacy” in digitally mediated learning environments. We situate our empirical studies in sociocultural theories of learning and historicize the work in contemporary digital cultures and the general move from the writer-reader relationship to writer-audience relationships to more complex relationships within digital publics. The article ends with considerations for literacy researchers, policymakers, and practitioners interested in technology-mediated practices of today’s youth.*

Keywords: new media, literacies, interest-driven communities, publics, online production, youth studies

Introduction

Researchers and practitioners alike have interrogated the role of technology in living, working, and learning in the 21st century. Increasingly, scholars call attention to the kinds of skills and artifacts technologically-mediated environments offer to participants. With the aid of digital technologies, learners pursue new pathways of participation, writing, and collaboration (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Researchers document how youth develop valuable literacies as they create and remix multimedia texts in blogs, wikis, and social networks in online communities (Black, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In turn, those working on reimagining schooling in the 21st century have thought about ways that learning environments might harness the potential of digital technologies in helping youth access new opportunities for learning. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills explicitly calls for educators to think about new aptitudes linked to digital communication, on-demand access to information, and collaboration across networks (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006). Questions arise about what it means to effectively communicate and collaborate in an increasingly networked world.

Studies show that youth in online communities or affinity spaces are highly aware of their audiences, real or imagined (Berkenkotter, 1981; boyd, 2006), and pay close attention to how they represent themselves and their work. Less is known about how youth themselves narrate and navigate their position across multiple audiences in participatory online settings. In the context of an ethnographic multi-sited study of youth-driven production practices in online communities, we documented the multiple ways that youth manage, negotiate, and interact with audiences. Drawing from this work, this paper

provides a detailed portrait of how young people situate their work in complex digital environments. We ask: what does it mean for young content producers to work with not one, but *many* digital publics as part and parcel of content production? How do they talk about audiences in relation to their identity, status, and group membership? What effects does dealing with multiple real, cognitively constructed, and networked audiences have on their sense of self as composers and their production practices? And, relatedly, how might this work inform our thinking about adeptness, literacy, and sociality in new media? In sum, we find that learners develop key skills pertinent to learning in the 21st century: the ability to strategically navigate audiences across digital publics in order to construct a meaningful socialization and learning experience.

Study Context

This research took place in the context of a larger study on the socializing and learning dynamics of interest-driven online groups that support academically relevant knowledge seeking and expertise development (Ito et al., 2010).

As part of this bigger project, we looked into two different online communities. They were similar in that both were youth-led, digitally-mediated, and interest-fueled that enabled self-initiated production of new media. They differed in the kinds of media they produced and in the kinds of passions that fueled their projects. The first case study focused on an online story-sharing community centered on sharing Fan Fiction stories about a popular boyband named *One Direction*. Another case study examined a video game online community in which members designed and critiqued new levels for a game called *LittleBigPlanet 2* (Media Molecule, 2011). Both studies highlight how informal, technology-mediated learning environments, as compared with most school contexts, often encourage self-sponsored learning activities. The cases focus on young people participating in new media composition practices and dealing with various online publics, albeit in very different contexts.

LittleBigPlanet 2 (Media Molecule, 2011), also known as *LBP2*, is a puzzle-platformer video game that was released in January 2011 for the Playstation 3, and Sackboy Planet is a companion community of *LBP2* players where they interact and share the levels they produce within the game (Sony Interactive Entertainment, LLC, 2016). After its release the game was purchased widely, particularly within the United States and the United Kingdom. A key facet of the game is its digital tools that enable players to produce their own levels, art, soundtracks, and animations. Players use these tools and develop skills in creativity and problem solving, and are provided opportunities to create levels with others and share them to the community at large. The game gives players a side-scrolling video game experience that is productively coupled with activities designed to teach players to create their own levels. Sackboy Planet is a popular online community centered on an interest in *LBP2*, and it was the focus for this project.

Wattpad (WP Technologies, 2016), as both an app and a web site, is a popular place for young writers and readers to congregate. In addition to being a writing platform, Wattpad invites graphics, book covers, and forum discussions of all things related to writing. The site includes a writing platform as well as a way to publish, share, discuss, and improve one's writing. Although Wattpad attracts users from all parts of the world, stories in the English language are the most prominent, and Young Adult and Fan Fiction genres are most popular, since the robust majority of the site is of adolescent age.

The comparison between the production practices and the way members discussed their participation and production seemed fruitful because members of both online communities were engaged in making and sharing new kinds of media artifacts -- game levels on the one hand, and Fan Fiction books on the other. Composition practice was directly linked to participating and being recognized as a part of the particular community.

Production in both cases was driven by the fan community and enabled by new technology. The products in both cases were *multimodal* (made up of print texts, videos, and audio) and *intertextual* (involved references to other texts, narratives, and objects related to the fandom). Moreover, internal mechanisms of reputation management, recognition, and boundary work between the experts and the novices were tightly bound up with the practices of composition and circulation of products. Members of both communities talked about what it takes to talk the talk and walk the walk in order to be seen as adept in their craft, authentic in their fandom, and valuable to the community. In the interviews, “making” stories and levels was narrated as “making for” different groups and purposes. Members talked about producing content for different groups, adapting their language and tool use to effectively speak to the particular group. For example, in the course of a day, a *One Direction* fan was able to share a moving image she made on Wattpad and Tumblr (a microblogging site), because those are networks for fans, and think about but ultimately reject the decision to share the same product on Facebook, because her parents might be able to see it. The longer version of the gif was shared on Wattpad with a caption to index her amassing video editing skills and the shorter version of the .gif file was circulated on Tumblr with a caption that made the product seem like an inside joke. For the members, producing and circulating content was also about managing diverse audiences -- groups the producer was also part of and thus more aptly called “publics.”

Conceptual Framework and Related Literature

This study draws from several connected literatures: the sociocultural study of literacy, with a focus on research on new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), and multimedia (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Researchers and theories of “new literacies” posit that digital technologies enable the production of new kinds of texts and, in turn, new possibilities of interaction and meaning-making. This way of looking at literacies draws from sociocultural approaches to learning and literacies that see engagement with texts as more than coding and encoding words on the page, but also involving values, identities, group membership, and power dynamics (Gee, 2007). In recent decades, scholars working in the way of recognizing literacies as plural, context-embedded and fundamentally social practices have turned their attention to practices and texts made possible by new media technologies, such as social networking, modern gaming practices, and participation in online communities (Black, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Work in this vein sees social participation with new media, such as gaming, as involving new kinds of reading, writing, and relating practices: as a *literacy* in itself.

Researchers of new literacies consider playing digital games and participating in related online spaces, such as message boards, to be consequential literacy practices. Researchers such as Gee (2003), Jenkins, Clinton, Purushatma, Robison, and Weigel (2006), Lankshear and Knobel (2006) bring attention to ways in which online and media-rich activities function in specific semiotic domains, calling on detailed knowledge and developed know-how. New technologies usher in new affordances, of which new skillsets and literacies are but few.

The Internet raises the visibility of fan production. Private activities can be transferred into a public arena – online fan communities where massive audiences provide motive and encouragement for creative work. Moreover, the interactive affordance of fan web sites mean that a fan could go beyond her individual ability and benefit from others’ reactions, critiques and knowledge (Black, 2008). Research on digital writing, socializing, and production has recently moved away from thinking about authors composing *for* audiences and toward thinking about authors composing as part of participating in groups, social forms, and digital publics. Coined by boyd (2010), “networked publics”

describe participation in public culture that is supported by technologies. The term refers to both the “space” created through networked technologies and the “collective” born out of the connection of the people, technologies, and practices within that space (boyd, 2010). Because of proliferating new ways to connect to each other online, we have an abundance of networked publics to address and engage with daily. But we still know little about how learners navigate networked publics as part of their informal literacy enterprise. Moreover, although some literacy research have focused on meaning-making and collective-forming practices in online spaces, especially in studies interested in fandoms and affinity spaces, they hone in on one particular website and public. In this article, we propose that to fully understand the rich literacy practices of young people afforded by digital technology, it is necessary to conceptualize socialization and learning across various sites, spaces, and spaces.

Working within the traditions of conceptualizing literacy as a social practice, and in a polemic with studies of new media as enabling new types of literacies, our comparative project focuses on how youth negotiate different online publics as an integral part of production and participation in interest-driven online communities.

Research Questions

- How do young people navigate digital publics and associated varied audiences to effectively engage in socially-supported creative production?
- What features of digital publics enable young people to engage in navigation practices as a means of supporting creative production?

Methods

The two case studies utilized mixed methods to delve into a particular community, members of which were connected to each other in two ways: (1) with an online forum and other media and (2) through a common interest. Using content analysis, ethnographic observations, surveys, and interviews, we explored the dynamics related to learning, literacy, production, reputation, and audience management.

The *LittleBigPlanet2* case research design focused on observation and interviews with members of *Sackboy Planet*, one of the largest online player communities (Media Molecule, 2011). We obtained data through two means: observation in *Sackboy Planet* forums, and interviews with *Sackboy Planet* community members. Observation in *Sackboy Planet's* online forums was conducted during a nine-month period in which we visited the websites several times a week and observed interaction in the forums and the forum chatrooms. Observations, including quotes or excerpts from dialogue on the website, were recorded in field notes compiled the same day of observation. We began by interviewing the creator of *Sackboy Planet*, as well as the publicly identified moderators of the community. With the permission of the site's creator, we posted an open call for interviewees, noting that we sought to speak with players both new and more experienced with the community and with *LBP2* (Media Molecule, 2011). We ultimately draw from interviews with 24 community members who vary by age, race-ethnicity, gender, and geographic location. Interview questions were informed by observations in the forum. The questions were used to conduct semi-structured interviews, allowing us to probe for emergent themes, as members clarified questions that had emerged from our observations.

We also investigated the *One Direction* fan community on Wattpad (WP Technologies, 2016), a mobile-based story sharing community, over a nine-month period. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants, the protocols for which were semi-structured and designed to elicit discussion regarding the participants' experiences with Fan Fiction production, critique and comment structures on the website,

involvement in fan communities, school experiences, home and family environments, and the relationships between those contexts. From those interviews, we followed up on topics, organizations, and websites mentioned by the participants, such as social networking groups, school clubs, videos, and jokes that were important to them and circulated in their respective fan communities. These follow-ups are meant to give a more holistic picture of fan writing and media production practices, literate histories, and involvement in Fan Fiction communities.

Artifacts created by study participants are also analyzed, focusing on media objects such as the stories posted by participants, forum postings, book covers, trailers, gif files, and participants' profiles. Background surveys, interviews, and objects created by participants were studied across and alongside each other in order to look for differences and similarities in the experiences of study participants.

Although interactions on both field sites are available to the public, we took steps to ensure the anonymity of those we interviewed and observed to minimize any potential risks for study participants. Our recruitment and observation strategy were not perfect means by which to reach all participants of a community, as it would be incredibly difficult to individually gain consent for passive observation on platforms where thousands of people interact. However, our research design maximized community awareness of the study through the aid of community leaders to develop and share public notices of research activity that allowed community members to both the researchers and the institutional review board any questions about the project. Identifiers from all excerpts are anonymized, and no names (including usernames) were used. Additionally, we obscured any excerpts from observed activity online (while maintaining the meaning of the quotes) in order to reduce searchability and minimize the risk of participants being identified.

We use content and discourse analysis techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Gee, 2007) to analyze a variety of interviews, forums, and media artifacts we collected. Thematic, iterative coding (Saldaña, 2009) was used to code the multimodal dataset. We took several passes at the data – to see the kinds of recurring topics that emerge and to identify the themes in the data and how they related to each other. We used analytical software Dedoose to derive overarching thematic categories that emerge with regularity across the data sources. Using the software helped us generate codes to represent given characteristics of studied contexts such as available technologies, symbolic and material resources, supports and barriers to participation, and recognition management systems within those communities. Moments of code switching or lengthy explanations of how one would produce something differently for one space or another became coded as “navigating.”

Case and Cross-case Data

Imagining Digital Publics for Playful Production

Through the advent of computer-mediated technologies, much of what has previously been labeled as “private” becomes “public.” Although hardly resembling a townhall meeting of a small town, social media technology such as Facebook and Twitter are often analyzed under the heuristic term “publics” as both a group of people and a communicative space. However, what happens in affinity spaces inspired by specific passions or interests? Moreover, what happens when the interested individual or learner becomes invested in more than one digital public? These questions animated selection of data from the larger project in order to understand strategic maneuvering users undertook when navigating different publics. To contrast different types of interest, levels of

involvement, and affinity space architectures, we interviewed members of two very different interest-different communities, albeit the shared passion for playful production.

Navigating Publics for Feedback on Sackboy Planet

A central means of participating in each of these online communities is sharing created products and circulating them among members of the platform. Participants on *Sackboy Planet* share their levels in development on the community forums for feedback from other participants to improve their design skills, to promote their work, and to join level creation contests that have awards. *Sackboy Planet* is a digital public where these learning artifacts are shared. But like in other online contexts, attention is a scarce commodity. Due to the very high volume of content and ways to interact with others in the community, *Sackboy Planet* participants have to sift through many posts, blogs, and chat logs to suss out which game levels are worthwhile to review. While some scholars tend to argue that attention scarcity is necessarily “bad” because of its effect of obscuring people (see DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2004), on *Sackboy Planet* such a phenomenon creates opportunities for learning. Attention scarcity denies some youth the ability to share their work for advice, but designers can also be strategic as they navigate the *Sackboy Planet* public to draw out the type of attention they need to grow as budding game designers.

One example of this phenomenon can be observed in a post by a community member named Sacklad. His post, which was in a very visible area of the forum allocated for feedback on level design, was among a few of the most popular posts in that section. His post, however, was not fully in accordance with the rules of this section of the forum. Forum administrators leave notes, or sticky posts, where they set these rules and decree them to others in the forum. Forum discussions would be unwieldy and make it difficult for participants to find the types of content they are looking for if it were not for these rules. A full one-third of the one hundred and fifty pages of responses to Sacklad’s post was about topic-appropriate discussion of level ideas and recruitment for other level designers, but then Sacklad stopped requesting new ideas and teammates. Instead, he used the remaining one hundred pages to share updates about his game and encourage readers to follow his project until it debuted. Some forum participants became annoyed that the thread drifted from the original topic and broke some of the forum rules, and they asked that the discussion be moved into a private group away from this public post. However, Sacklad believed that keeping it in public was valuable:

EVERYBODY JOIN THE PRIVATE GROUP!! NEVERMIND BECAUSE THIS THREAD IS STAYING! LOL!!

I said that because I want the rest of Sackboy Planet to know that this project is still in development...and by the way, this is the most visited thread on the site...I want everyone to know



In order to promote his own work, Sacklad navigated not only the existing rules of the community that restrict off-topic dialogue but also the digital publics of the *Sackboy Planet*. In doing, he created an approach that operated much like the use of a megaphone in a crowded room: he accrued a considerable level of attention towards his work despite the fact that the forums were saturated with others’ posts about levels they created.

Sometimes community participants shared their levels in development in less public settings, and they used different communication mediums and privacy settings to achieve the audiences they desired. For example, Luchadoro created a blog post announcing his project and called for feedback:

I need a group of testers to play my level, identify bugs or problems with the game, and submit these errors to me. If you are interested I will send you a private message containing a highly secret code needed to access and play the level. Then you can find some friends (three, for the most fun!), play the level a lot and share any problems with me!

Blog posts are in a less public area of the website, and while viewable to the public they are much less visible than the forums. Additionally, Luchadoro used privacy settings within the level design to require a code or password to be able to view his designs. I asked why he used blogging and passwords rather than a post in the forums:

I wanted to make sure [the level] was bug-proof and that everything worked smoothly. And I also wanted to award players with a preview of the level. I wanted feedback. That was my main goal.

By using blogs and passwords, Luchadoro was able to reach out for feedback while also not sharing a level creation that had a lot of problems in its design. I asked him if he would have garnered the same kind of feedback if he asked for help in the much more public areas of the forums. For Luchadoro, using blog posts and privacy settings allowed him to obtain his desired audience:

I would have gotten feedback I think. But for one thing the level could have had a lot of bugs. And for another it's much easier to get feedback if you actually ask people for feedback. It's way more likely to get detailed, very informative feedback. Actually I got a message for two full pages of feedback, so it was worth it. After about six testers I turned everyone down.

By using blogs, a quasi-public space on *Sackboy Planet*, to share his levels in development, and privacy settings to restrict project visibility, Luchadoro navigated the community's online publics to reach the type of audience he needed. Implicit is Luchadoro's preconception that there are *multiple* ways of imagining audiences on *Sackboy Planet*. Moreover, he reached for this particular audience because he was not at a stage where he wanted the project to be fully public – it had design problems and needed more work. While the website does have specific areas for level sharing and feedback, those areas are highly visible to the broad public. Luchadoro used blogs and passwords to innovatively tackle online publics and obtain an environment for level creation and learning best suited for his own needs.

But in addition to these opportunities, learners also face challenges to get constructive feedback as a consequence of how others wrestle with attention scarce nature of the *Sackboy Planet* public. As part of the design of the game and the online community, players can “heart” or “like” a level or artifact that they think is well produced. These hearts are used cumulatively as metrics of success that elevate certain artifacts to the top of well-publicized lists. During interviews, participants report that others will try to “game the system” in ways that unfairly provide attention to some levels over others. One way participants achieve this is by asking for “hearts for hearts.” Jimbob explains:

Someone was asking for hearts for hearts and that's not allowed on the site...Sackboy Planet looks down on that because you're not really giving feedback to the creator, it's like you are just promoting your level without really playing it...sometimes they don't play so it's not really fair, that's why the forum doesn't like it. (Jimbob, 2013)

Community participants look poorly on participants who bypass the slow process of level reviewing through instead asking for hearts from others for hearts in exchange. “Hearts for hearts” is one way that users game the metrics system and evade attention scarcity on the forums by boosting project visibility. Attention scarcity can therefore create barriers to

participation by making it more difficult for participants, especially new participants, to engage with others in the community around their work.

While attention scarcity can create barriers by minimizing opportunities for participation, it also generates new avenues for participants to generate the kind of publicity they need for their own learning and development. During our fieldwork in *Sackboy Planet*, we observed how participants shared their level designs with others for different purposes. Usually, levels in development are posted on the *Sackboy Planet* forums for feedback to improve their skills and designs, to promote their projects, and participate in contests. But players would also share their content elsewhere on the website to strategically garner the kind of attention they wanted for their projects.

Content Management for Publics among Wattpad Directioners

Self-described fans of the boyband *One Direction* or Directioners -- although dissimilar to *LBP2* level producers in interests and demographics -- follow similar patterns of thinking about making and sharing in their community. Directioners on a story- and picture-sharing website called Wattpad.com often compose Fan Fiction stories, book covers and animated picture files in connection to the band. They talk about the complicated design-oriented thinking implicated in the making and circulating such objects across various fan networks they are involved with. In relation to composing gifs (looping animation image files with no sound), Directioners speak of inspired by what they see on Tumblr and other social networking sites and once they make the product, sharing it selectively and differentially among those networks. In .gif production, Directioners take clips from the band's interviews, videos, and confessionals and turn them into short loops, often adding words and captions or transposing other images to get the desired effect, whether it be humor or innuendo.

Making a picture of a .gif that is highly successful involves many moving pieces: researching the oeuvre of the boyband and their more niche taped appearances, figuring out the audience's likes and dislikes, familiarizing myself with the web-based gif-making software or Photoshop, the attention and detail-orientation required to getting the time stamps exactly right when clipping video, and so on.

During the data collection period, we noticed that it was not possible to account for the full range of these fans' literate repertoires without staying attuned to different audiences for whom these cultural producers were performing. Participants shifted discourses and channeled different sets of skills when dealing with different publics. For example, when dealing with fellow fans on Tumblr, the author might put on their knowledgeable fan hat, while when writing for fan fiction writers and readers on Wattpad, she might tap into her literary knowhow. Following the thread of their interest, participants cycled through different technologies, environments, and digital publics.

One adolescent participant, 15 year-old Nessa, narrates the challenges she faced in learning the craft of making .GIF files. She has been writing Fan Fiction or fiction based on popular media objects for quite some time on various websites but has lately ventured to the "Multimedia Designs" forum on the website, as she was getting interested in making graphics, covers, and trailers for her stories (mostly about "the boys" as she affectionately calls the band). This forum was targeted for users to help other user improve their design and media collage skills. In the "Designs" forum, she was able to get feedback on the story cover illustrations she was making and help with her Photoshop skills. As time went on, she asked for less hands-on help from her fellow forum posters (e.g., collaborating on the same illustration and having them "shop" a piece of the picture) and asked for more indirect, general feedback.

Once she got the hang of the .gif art formation, Nessa began to post the animated images on her fan Tumblr blog account. After getting help with transposing words onto

the images onto the forum, she began to practice the art of aphoristic writing. She explains, “I wasn’t very funny at first... Not a lot of people followed me.” This has changed, since Nessa’s creation have about a hundred thousand followers on her original Tumblr blog and as many on Twitter. The main mechanism responsible for this increased popularity is audience awareness. Nessa knows what her audiences are into – what jokes are en vogue, what’s going on with the band, which songs are being played on the radio. She crowdsources content from her story-sharing website account to get some of this information. She also beta tests various prototypes of her .gif files on the Wattpad forums in order to gauge whether her new meme will stick. She often keeps more literary jokes for the story-sharing website and more mundane content for her fan blog.

Cross-case analysis

Recent scholarship on new literacies argues that digital technologies, and particularly games, offer avenues for youth to learn important skills by invoking a number of important modalities. Yet, this work does not well consider key features of online learning environments, namely, their relationship to online publics, in developing theoretical platforms for learning with new media. Although educators have long seen learning as situated within a particular audience or set of audiences, online environments like those explored in the present cases are linked to multiple audiences that have permeable boundaries. In other words, youth must learn skills needed to navigate multiple audiences within a broader public online.

Our cases show the challenges and possibilities for literacy development centered on navigating and managing online publics. On *Sackboy Planet*, *LBP2* players wrestle with a phenomenon called attention scarcity -- their level designs are one of thousands shared in the community. In some cases, players find ways to promote their own content by gaining notoriety by bending forum rules to generate lots of comments on their level-in-development. In other examples, players strategically select the specific avenues to share their level designs, such as on harder-to-find blogs rather than very public forums, to get detailed feedback from select players. Both examples show how youth strategically workshop their designs across different levels of public space online in order to improve their craft. *One Direction* fan fiction writers probe the expectations of their community in order to craft media that can be shared while sustaining peer interest. For example, some writers share ideas with select members of intended audiences to “test the waters” before publishing more widely.

Comparison of the two contexts yields several insights about the prowess of internet publics to drive transmedial negotiation and mediation. The features that empowered this kind of participation were the same in both cases. In *LBP2*, attention scarcity, passion, and reputation management lead to the engagement of different publics in publishing new levels. On Wattpad, scaffolding on the site, rules and norms of participation, and the availability of different audiences for different needs allowed the engagement of different publics in publishing artifacts connected to the users’ favorite band. Sociotechnical designs of both interest-driven communities drove *navigator engagement* in both sites, as youth played with multiple publics as part and parcel of their crafting practice. Recruiting and sustaining peer interest in a topic that they care about was an important catalyst to make and publish media, in both cases. The main navigation strategy in the gaming community was delimiting audience to reduce risk and to amplify voice. By contrast, the main navigation strategy on the story-sharing app was experimenting with and shifting content to appeal to multiple different audiences.

Discussion

The cross-case analysis presented here illustrates how participants of two interest-driven online communities navigate multiple publics online for learning. These youth strategically create and share their work across different tiers of publicity to achieve the kinds of feedback and recognition they needed for their own purposes and at their particular stage of work. These empirical cases thus build on our existing notions of literacy practices by showing the value of navigating publics online for learning. These examples also expand our thinking about the relationship between creator and audience to a reality where youth come to see their work as existing within more fluid relationship between collective creation and reception among others online.

On *Sackboy Planet*, youth shared their work in different parts of the forums to garner feedback from different audiences within the community public. In some cases, learners used privacy settings to share their designs-in-progress with select people who they knew would give in-depth feedback. In other examples, participants shared their designs in parts of the forum that cast wide audience nets – like using a megaphone – in order to generate interest and publicity. These strategies reflect conditions of online publics that are critical for understanding twenty-first century literacies. Audiences online are variable in their size and reach and also provide different types of feedback that have implications for how learners and their learning artifacts are received within the broader community. Participants thus must understand these differences and employ strategies for sharing their work that achieve the outcomes they need for their own developmental agenda.

Fan Fiction and related media-producing fans of the popular band 1D youth produced and shared various fan artifacts in different communities with strategic understandings of the underpinning values and purposes of each discourse community. Users understood the ability to post more amateur fan artifacts on Wattpad's forum section, such as drafts of fanfic stories, while showcasing deep fan knowledge and writing skills. At the same time, the same users would call upon fan networks on Twitter and Tumblr, using quick humor and meme juxtaposition, showcasing broad knowledge of pop culture and wit. Although much has been written about value laden uses of discourse in different communities (see Gee, 2007), it is worth exploring in more depth how young people in technology-mediated contexts, enroll themselves into and perform specific kinds of competencies in more than one digital public at one time. This strategic skill of maneuvering, or navigation that is as skillful as it is playful, is highlighted in data exemplars presented here. Just as literacy practices evolve, as tools and texts change, we are calling attention to this type of navigation as a meta-literacy practice.

Observed literacy practices among study participants, across both sites, showed that the bifurcated constructions of writer and audience or coder and consumer did not hold up. Instead, we found actors that occupied multiple roles and negotiated multiple audiences as part of their literate participation in technologically mediated interest driven communities. Moreover, because they often spoke to members of networks that were just as active as they were, our participants were just as often writers as readers of the finished cultural products. Thus, digital publics might have more analytical purchase when studying interest-sparked adolescent literacy experiences online as they move through and among technologies, spaces, and networks. Rather, following theorists of ecologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979/2009), we find that interest-driven communities embedded in digital publics – like any systems consisting of human and nonhuman actors – are complex, evolving, and relational. Taking an ecological perspective means considering a variety of learning contexts, composed of activities, resources, relationships, and interactions (see Barron, 2006). Moreover, each learning context might call upon different configurations of people, as we have demonstrated in this paper.

Both of the cases can be considered “openly-networked” digital ecologies that evoke mercurial engagement with multiple interest-driven publics (Connectedlearning.tv, n.d.). In the connected learning framework, openly-networked learning spaces link together “institutions and groups across various sectors, including popular culture, educational institutions, home, and interest communities” (Connectedlearning.tv, n.d.). We learned that “in the wild,” as part of their online interest-driven pursuits, youth actively create individualized, openly-networked spaces that weave together different digital publics.

Educational institutions and policy makers should heed these findings about the importance of managing digital publics for learning and children’s development as tinkerers. Typically, researchers and practitioners envision the school as a monolithic entity that constructs children as an audience for learning. This assumption is very problematic. First, it limits the social networks where children are allowed to play, learn, and share their ideas with others to connect them to opportunity. Second, it positions children as consumers of educational content from teachers rather than active participants and creators within a given setting. As we find, kids can be rather adept at developing skills needed to create and share across digital publics when given the opportunity. Schools and educational policymakers need to consider what structural supports are needed to enable, rather than dismantle, kids’ capacity to play online and across multiple settings beyond the classroom in order to prepare children for the twenty first century.

Jenkins and colleagues published a list of important skills that enable engagement in today’s “participatory culture” that proves salient here (Jenkins et al., 2009). Specifically, they highlight negotiation and transmedia navigation skills that when used together, interweave with the negotiation skills we are highlighting in this paper. Transmedia navigation, in their framework, means following the flow of stories across multiple modalities. Negotiation has two meanings: “first, as the ability to negotiate between dissenting perspectives, and second, as the ability to negotiate through diverse communities” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 99).

Although current research has shown how young people in transmedial ecologies (Jenkins, 2010) work side-by-side and with each other, using different modes and technologies pursuant to their task, researchers are only beginning to capture ways in which youth produces new texts (games, stories, gifs) not only for different audiences but due to being part of several digital publics. Thus, along with the list of important new skills scholars of new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007) and participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2009) propose, we add a new one: navigation of digital publics. This paper has shown that this is an essential skill in gaining access to new literate, social, civic opportunities in transmedial contexts.

Lastly, although we often hear about youth lacking a *critical* orientation in today’s fast paced technological world, it is important to note that aspects of navigation in and of different publics shares key characteristics with what has been described as critical literacy (Luke & Dooley, 2011). Critical literacy is seen as a disposition toward texts:

...as human technologies for representing and reshaping possible worlds. Texts are not taken as part of a canonical curriculum tradition or received wisdom that is beyond criticism. Rather they are conceived of as malleable human designs and artefacts used in social fields. Texts, then, operate in identifiable social, cultural and political contexts. The aim is to develop learners capable of critiquing and making texts in their cultural and community interests. This involves an understanding of how texts and discourses can be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed to represent, contest and, indeed, transform material, social and semiotic relations. (Luke & Dooley, 2011, p. 856).

Because young people profiled in this paper exhibited markers of deconstructing and constructing multimodal artifacts for different audiences, they exhibit key characteristics

of critical literacy. In particular, learning that different audiences have different aims, strengths, and weaknesses and thus need to be strategically interwoven into one's learning network is an important insight that lends itself to the roots of critical literacy. In turn, youth learn how to make texts to further their own goals. These skills – already honed in the “wild” of fandom's cultural practices – need to be elaborated and explicitly taught in formal learning environments in addition to informal ones. In this way, learning publics can inform one another.

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