ABSTRACT

This paper is drawn from my postdoctoral research project *Youth, Literacies, and the Changing Media Environment*, funded by the Academy of Finland. This research is in the field of media literacy education and applies school and online ethnography to study the media experiences and media literacy practices of 13–16 year-old children. The study focuses on the 2009–2010 school year at a secondary basic education school in Tampere, in the western part of Finland. The ethnography is preceded by a quantitative survey on media use and internet activities among the participants.

In this paper I concentrate on young people’s creative online practices such as video making, fashion blogs and online role-playing game. These activities are related to the school community and peer-to-peer based learning and communication. Although my study showed that the majority of young people are not especially keen to share their creative productions on the internet, some of the teens studied had strong interest in creative media production and online activities. My case study shows that young people’s creative online activities vary from public and individual fashion blogs via school-community based communication and video blogs to peer-to-peer online storytelling. The internet offers different possibilities for young people to publish, share and participate online.

The different networked publics of young people include different online activities. I classify these activities as individual, communal and collaborative. Each conduct-based online activity requires different media literacy and skills.

Individual activities are part of “photo publicity” and identity performance on the internet. Individual activities require skills of personal identity and information protection.

Communal activities involve peer-to-peer relations off- and online at the same time. Schools and other local communities play an important role in these activities. Communal online practices include media making with friends while socializing in school and in the community. Communal videos are shared on the internet but are not for an indiscriminate audience. Communal activities encourage social skills and enhance the strength of the local community while
requiring young people to take notice of copyrights and acceptance of community members.

Collaborative activities are interest-driven activities where people join together online to create something. They are based on affinity spaces (Gee, 2007), which are structured horizontally and without local or offline social boundaries. Collaborative activities require new social skills and cultural competencies (Jenkins et al., 2006).

In my paper I explore these different types of online activities and their relation to publicity on the internet and the role of school and schooling in creative media practices.

**KEYWORDS:** creativity, online activities, school, publicity, privacy.

**Introduction**

The objective of my study was to understand the way young people make meanings when they use different media technology, especially when they make and publish media texts such as web logs and videos on the internet. I was interested in young people’s engagement with creative media production, including their goals, aims and purposes, and how everyday media production is related to their school and learning experiences. In this paper, I explore how young people’s online practices are changing the relationship between private and public. I also examine schools as learning communities and determine what characteristics different online activities have relative to education.

Digital devices and the internet create possibilities for young people to share their thoughts and media productions without having advanced technological skills. Publishing and sharing on the internet is easy. There are, of course, some dangers on the internet. Openness and personal information sharing may lead to problems. At the same time, however, the act of “sharing” has a positive connotation. Sharing may, for example, enhance democracy, equality and freedom (Leadbeater, 2008). Technology gives more people a voice and the power to affect to different kinds of things. For example, the recent political uprising in Egypt has been called the “Twitter revolution” because of the role Twitter played in organizing protesters. It is possible to overestimate the meaning of the internet in our lives, but there is no doubt that the internet creates possibilities for more people to be heard.

The internet also makes it possible for individuals to get recognition for the work they do. Networking with other people on the internet via so-called social networks enhances participation, collaboration and creative thinking. David Gauntlett (2011) has argued that an important part of this creative activity is...
simple joy; joy to do things and to share with others. He defines creativity in following way:

Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something. The activity has not been done in this way by this person (or these people) before. The process may arouse various emotions, such as excitement and frustration, but most especially a feeling of joy. When witnessing and appreciating the output, people may sense the presence of the maker, and recognize those feelings.

Everyday creativity is possible on the internet, and is more than simply a joyful activity. It requires a strong sense of knowledge of one’s own activities, media literacies and social competencies. The internet is a special place to act. It is a mediated mode of communication with many differences from unmediated communication and activities. Therefore young people have to be aware of different risks and dangers on the net.

Method

The ethnography was preceded by a quantitative survey on media use among the participants conducted in August 2009. In this paper I refer to my observations from that period, interviews with students and teachers, and my survey (n=305).

The ethnographical fieldwork was conducted between August 2009 and June 2010. The data was collected using field notes and interviews, both formal and informal. The basis of my data includes handwritten field notes written during observations and at the end of each day.

I observed students in a school setting from three to ten hours a week, mainly in Visual Arts and Finnish Language classes. Most regularly I observed a group of Year 8 students, who had chosen an optional video production course and whose media education was more integrated in their learning that in years 7 and 9.

During my ethnographic fieldwork I conducted 34 formal semi-structured interviews, 26 with students and 8 with teachers. All interviews and some of the school lessons were recorded by digital video recorder. All interviews have been transcribed. During my observation I occasionally used a photo and film camera. For example, I filmed Year 7 students when they presented their own soap opera improvisations in a Finnish language class. I also filmed students making a film in the video course. I used a photo camera mainly in corridors outside of classrooms. I also photographed some works students created in
different classes. Additionally, I gathered students’ media analyses, essays and video films.

My ethnographical fieldwork was not limited to the school. I observed some students in their homes when they played video games or tried to create a new Facebook profile. An important part of my ethnography was so-called netnography (Kozinets 2010), or virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), a form of ethnographic research using the Internet and social networking sites. I followed some students’ web logs, YouTube channels, and social networking profiles on the IRC-gallery¹ and DeviantArt.

Creative Online Practices

In the EU Kids Online study, research regarding children’s activities online has been divided in three genres: content-based activities, contact-based activities and conduct-based activities. Content-based activities occur when children consume different online content. This includes seeking information for school work, watching video clips and playing internet games. These activities are the most common type of internet use among European children. Contact-based activities involve communication with friends and other people using, for example, instant messaging and visiting social networking profiles. These are friendship-driven activities and are also very common. Conduct-based activities, where children participate and create content by writing web logs or sharing files are less widespread. (Sonck, Livingstone, Kuiper & de Haan, 2011.)

My survey (n=305) confirms that young people are not especially inclined to produce media content and share it on the internet. Figure 1 shows that they prefer using the internet for entertainment and being with others.

¹ IRC-gallery is one of the most popular Finnish social networking sites among youth. In the past two years it has lost its popularity to Facebook.
I asked how important it is for students to publish and share different types of media contents on the internet. For 37 percent of the students it is important to publish and share their own material, and half of the students felt it was important to have some kind of influence on the net. Compare that to the responses to the question “how important it is to enjoy the internet (listening the music/watching movies/surfing)” where 81 percent answered that enjoyment is important. According to Mimi Ito (2009: 37) and her colleagues, the vast majority of young people in the United States desire to “hang around, meet friends, just be” on the internet. Even in China, young people’s internet usage seems to be “overwhelmingly apolitical, with focus on entertainment, lifestyles and private issues.” (Liu, 2010: 177). Arguments about a new participatory culture where young people use the internet for their self expression and creative practices seem to be without support in a large scale.

‘Participatory culture’ is a term coined by Henry Jenkins that means new media ecology where creators can develop their voices and identities through interaction with engaged peers and audiences (Jenkins et al, 2006). What is new with participation culture is the possibility for people not only to be media consumers but to be active media producers or proams (pro-amateurs). For Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams (2006: 18), participatory culture implies a promise of collaboration through which peer production “will harness human skill, ingenuity and intelligence more efficiently and effectively than anything we have witnessed before.”

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Figure 1. Importance of activities on the internet (n=305)
The internet creates possibilities for young people to create and share their productions easily. We know that nearly every new kind of online content has created a new kind of media ecology. Nevertheless, the majority of young people prefer media consumption and content-based activities.

There is, however, a minority of young people who want to participate and share their own media productions. My study shows that young people who are engaged with creative media production use the internet for different purposes. In a sense, their internet use is individualized. Manuel Castells (1996) wrote that in the digital world of networks, individuals constantly redefine their lifestyles and consumption patterns. Media experiences and the subjects of interest are diverse. Sue Bennett, Karl Maton and Lisa Kervin argue that there may be as much variation within the digital native generation as there is between generations (Bennett, Maton & Kervin 2008: 779). We also have to keep in mind that the frequency and nature of young people’s Internet use differs between age groups, socio-economic backgrounds and other demographic variables (Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2005; Bennett, Maton & Kervin 2008).

**Individual Identity Performance**

Fashion and lifestyle blogs seem be highly popular among young girls. Fashion blogs are an arena to enhance media skills and practice a new kind of networked publics. The term ‘networked publics’ refers to the ‘public culture’ of the internet and social networking sites. As Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenbridge (1995) suggest, it is an alternative to ‘popular culture’ with more public spheres and active participation in the production of culture. Networked publics facilitate the development of public identities and peer-to-peer communication on the internet.

Blogging can be a large part of a teenagers’ life. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported in 2007 that only 8 percent of adult internet users in the US have created a blog, but 28 percent of teenagers are blogging and most of them are girls (Lenhart, Maden & Smith 2007). An EU Kids Online study shows that in Europe 11 percent of 9–12 year olds, and 18 percent of the 13–16 year old girls, write a blog or online diary. Twelve percent of 13–16 year olds have a blog. According to EU Kids Online data, Finnish children represent the mean of European children.

According my research, blogging activity is higher. Publishing and sharing photos is the most common activity among the students: 52 percent of students published photos once or more than once a month. 16 percent blogged once or more than once a month, 8 percent wrote fan fiction and 11 percent uploaded video content (see Figure 2).
The most popular genre of blog for girls was fashion or lifestyle blogs. As networked publics, fashion blogs are part of one’s online identity performance. Identity performance is accomplished by writing oneself into being (Boyd, 2008: 129; Sundén, 2003), but also by using photographs of oneself on blogs. The body is an important part of identity performance in everyday interactions (Boyd, 2008: 128). Interestingly, though the body has been traditionally a private domain, it has been moving more and more into the public realm (Koskela, 2009). Hille Koskela (ibid.) has pointed out that identity performance may also take on political and empowering dimensions when people play an active role in the array of visual representations.

Angela Thomas (2007: 6) writes that online communities show a cultural production of a new type of body. In these communities the body is self-produced through words and images. It is a question of “the semiotics of identity” where an identity is a performance of fantasy and desire – “a pursuit of being and becoming the image of this desire.” (Ibid. 5.) Online communities and one’s own blog give a person an opportunity to experiment with identities and modify body images. Blogs in particular are good platforms to experiment because they generally contain less storytelling than presentation of moments via an image, reaction, feeling, or event (Dean, 2010: 47).

In interviews I asked some teenage bloggers why they blogged. Fourteen year old Kaisa told me that she hoped other people will be interested in things she is...
doing and that the blog will serve as a virtual business card to possible employers:

When we were in the flea market selling bags that I made, I wrote my blog address to the bags. There was somebody who bought my bag and she has a company that renovates old clothes. My parents advertised my blog address and that woman promised to go and have a look at my blog. (Interview, Kaisa, 14, female)

The audience for a blog is not an imaginary community, nor is it one-to-one communication to friends. Jodi Dean (2010: 46) suggests that a blog is a medium that enables content production to be potentially accessible to anyone who happens to find it: “Blogging opens possible encounters with different and unexpected, whether in the form of the blogger’s own reflection on what she posts or in the reflection of others.” Perhaps that helps explain the popularity of blogging among young girls: blogging opens a new and exciting world where one can create unexpected connections to other people such as possible employers, and create an identity and body.

Kaisa used her blog to share photos of herself, her journeys, parties and everyday life. She presents her clothes and writes short posts of her life in Finnish and in English. She describes her blog as her “very own corner” where she save elements from her life. She is an active blogger; in 2010 she had 92 blog entries.

Kaisa’s description of a blog as a “very own corner” indicates that a blog is individual and made by one person. I call this kind of media production “individual activity.” The focus is a person, a self and her or his feelings and life. The unique thing about blogging is that the life has been shared in the public sphere. It can be empowering when a person is reflexive and makes blog posts and representations of her/his own life.

At school some teachers are aware of fashion blogs, and girls in the school community help each other to design and redesign their blogs. Blogging seems to be linked to the Visual Arts and photographing at school. Fashion bloggers are interested in photographing and try to enhance their skills.

**Communal Video Blogging**

Communal activities on the internet focus creative production more toward local communities such as schools. An example of a school community-based practice in my case study is a video blog (vlog), which was produced and published by fourteen-year-old Gomi. Gomi was interested in movies and filmmaking and had future plans in the movie business. In spring 2010 she launched a vlog about her everyday life in which school and school friends
played a large role. In her video clips she was spending time with her friends at home, in the city and at school. Gomi and her friends had fun in the video clips; they played guitar, sang, danced, made food, watched movies, ate snacks, had birthdays and were shopping. The shots from school showed students’ art work in art class, drawing on the blackboard, eating in schools canteen, socializing and running in the corridors.

An important aspect of Gomi’s video production is that it was made with school friends and then shared with school friends on the Internet. The target audience for her vlog is not unlimited and she does not present herself on her videos. The vlog is for a special group; her friends and schoolmates. Her friends comment on her “silly” videos and encourage her to continue. They made comments such as “You have to continue. Upload fun and different videos so we can enjoy watching them.” Thus, the school community is an extremely important for Gomi and her online practices.

Sometimes social networking, such as Facebook or IRC-gallery, is a part of school community-based practice. This is the case when students share photos taken at school, start a chat about school issues or have school related groups. I observed groups on social networking sites under the name of a schoolteacher, or groups for a particular class. For example, a group of students on IRC-gallery created a group bearing the name of their Swedish book. Although the group is very small and not very active, it shows that the school community is important for students and that they have some common interest with some other people outside of the school community as well.

On social networking sites, local and global boundaries are permeable. Young people act with their closest friends, local communities and global audience at the same time. As Sonia Livingstone (2009: 108) writes, however, “distinct aspects of identity are variously performed for particular rather than indiscriminate anticipated audiences.” In communal activities on the internet the audience is not intended to be global. Rather, communal activities are a continuum of existing networks in school and everyday life. Like social networking, communal activities articulate, strengthen and make visible these networks (cf. Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Accordingly, Gomi the video blogger does not look for new friends, she is primarily communicating with friends and people who are already part of her existing social network. The purpose of Gomi's vlog is thus different than Kaisa’s blog. Kaisa was proud that she had 400 visitors in two weeks in her blog. Gomi, on the other hand, is communicating directly to her existing friends. She asks specifically what kind of videos her friends want her to make. Though only few friends made any comments online, that does not mean that they have not made any conversation “in real life” at school and friend community.
Collaborative Forum Playing

Some students tried to find “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2007), where they are able to share practices with people with the same affinity, interest and endeavour. Affinity spaces are participants’ own online spaces involving special peer-to-peer relationships and learning settings without previously established social bonds. Members of an affinity space relate to each other through a common interest, such as a video game or different fan fiction communities. I call these collaborative activities.

In many cases affinity space participants know each other only through virtual spaces and do not have any existing relationship outside of these spaces. Audiences of collaborative activities are thus different from audiences of individual and communal activities.

Santeri, a 14-year-old boy, shares a passion for fantasy books with other gamers in a role-playing game forum on the Internet. Santeri was a participant in a small community of 30 peers. The community is a virtual world that participants inhabit via avatars or other characters. Participants do not make representations in the sense that large audiences are supposed to see them. They are playing together, and for an outsider it is difficult to understand what is happening without knowing the rules, history and regime of the world.

As a collaborative activity, play is limited to insiders of the game. Of course, collaborative activity can be much wider. Charles Leadbeater (2009) writes about the principal of “we-think.” On the web, we usually see that people either argue or agree with each other. “We-think” means they actually think together. According to Leadbeater, we-think has three ingredients: participation, recognition, and collaboration (ibid, 21). People participate and join collaborative communities of practices when these “communities provide participants with what they most value: recognition for the worth of their contribution, the value of their ideas, the skills of their trade.” (Ibid). This means diversity of independent individuals. Leadbeater emphasize that this is not the same as group-think, which is submersion in a homogeneous and unthinking masses.

According to Leadbeater, in order to achieve “full we-think,” an activity (Ibid, 87) has to be both participatory and collaborative. This is not the case in blogging or other individual activities that allow people to contribute without collaboration. Communal and collaborative activities are more open to collaboration. For Leadbeater, Wikipedia presents an example of “full we-think;” people are able to contribute and collaborate in a public sphere. Online role playing is akin to we-think because it is more collaborative than only participatory. But it is also an example of how creative online practices are manifold and how young people have different interests online.
Digital Skills Online

Individual, communal and collaborative activities online demonstrate that the dichotomy of privacy and publicity is difficult to maintain. In principle, all communication on the internet is public unless a user specifically denies access to content or to a profile for example on a social networking site. Danah Boyd (2008) has noted that one defining character of networked publics and mediated communication is that they do not have structural borders in the same way that unmediated communication have. In offline unmediated environments the boundaries and audiences can be structurally defined. Children and young people are usually explicit with their privacy and express it in various ways. In offline life, for example, they shut the door of their bedroom if they do not want adults or other family members to disturb their practices (Livingstone 2009: 108). But online the situation is more complex. Communal activities on the internet are not global and public in a sense that they are intended for a global audience. Communal activities mean peer-to-peer relations within some existing communal context. However, on the internet people do not necessarily close virtual communities, and sometimes communication that is intended for a smaller audience is left open to the world.

Understanding the differences between unmediated and mediated communication and the characteristics of different online activities is crucial for adults and children. Identity performance and so-called photo publicity, for example, do require digital skills for personal identity and information protection. Some young people seem to be strongly aware of problems that they may have in networked publics. Some girls, for example, make jokes with strangers who try to contact them. One student posted the following conversation on her wall:

Stranger: how u look like?
Answer: I don’t know
Answer: we don’t have mirrors in finland
(14 year old girl in her SNS wall)

Conversations such as this demonstrate how girls can protect themselves by making jokes. Though not everyone is as savvy as this girl was, and younger children are particularly at risk.

Parents can also worry about their children’s online activities. Kaisa’s parents were concerned and considered whether they should restrict what Kaisa presents in her blog. They chose not to, in part because they had a trusting relationship with Kaisa. Trust is an extremely important thing in an online life. Parents should know what their children are doing online, even as teenagers
have a right to their own privacy in relation to their parents. Danah Boyd (2008: 133) writes that there are two groups who have a great deal of interest in children: “those who hold power over them – parents, teachers, local government officials, etc – and those who wish to prey on them – marketers and predators.” These groups act in different ways and children have to know how to protect themselves. The most common dilemma children face is how to remain “cool” to their peers and acceptable to their parents? A trusting relationship between parents and children helps solve this dilemma.

Communal activities have a more direct relationship to schools and local communities. These activities change the way we should think about school and schooling. The internet changes the way students interact at school and impacts their learning styles as well. It has been argued (Meyrowitz, 1985; Morley, 2000; Nikunen, 2010) that new media technologies are making physical boundaries more permeable and transgressing the boundaries between private and public. But new media technology also modifies the space and ways of acting in the space as well. The internet is an inseparable part of school, both in formal learning and in students’ free time between classes. Students use mobile phones to access the internet and social networking sites during the school day. Some use other media devices such as still and video cameras at school and publish photos and videos on social networking sites and blogs. These activities open a school space to the public sphere, and reveal the school to the wider internet audience. Moreover, when students share video clips and photos on the internet the school itself becomes a public space. Teachers should be aware of this, and media literacy should be part of school curriculum. Additionally, schools should evaluate issues of privacy and publicity on the internet.

When students such as Gomi share photos taken in school on their social networking sites they usually do not have their peers’ permission. Sometimes this leads to conflicts. For example, the head teacher in my research reported that teachers often have to solve conflicts that photo sharing on Facebook has caused. Stronger communal ties can help to solve these kinds of problems. When a media production activity is visible and accepted in peer-relations, the problems do not emerge on the same scale. At the same time, however, students have to know what is accepted in online life and what is morally, ethically and legally problematic and forbidden.

Collaborative activities need the same kind of knowledge between the problems of privacy and publicity as two other types of activity, though other skills are also necessary.
Conclusions

Creative media production is not the most important online activity for young people; they prefer entertainment and peer-to-peer communication. But some young people are interested in different kinds of media production. There are, however, differences among the types of creative activities available. Individual activities are identity performances intended for large audiences. Communal activities have bordered peer-to-peer relationships within an existing community of friends or classmates. Collaborative activities are an example of we-think where people in virtual affinity spaces gather together to play or create new material. In my case study, each of these activities had a relationship to school and learning. Students wanted to enhance both their technical and expressional skills.

There is also need for a better understanding of mediated communication and networked publics online. Private and public boundaries are blurred on the internet, which has some consequences at school as well. Different types of creative online activities can open schools to larger audiences when students share photos and videos of the school to the internet. Teachers can enhance different creative activities by teaching how the internet is changing things, talking about netiquette and problems of personal information sharing.

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