

“This is their story to tell”: Examining youth voice initiatives in news media

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Abstract

This study examines the ways in which journalists at American news organizations have amplified youth voices and concerns by working directly with youth as co-creators of journalism content. Ten journalists and media professionals who had led initiatives at their respective organizations to include youth voices in the production of news were interviewed about their approaches to working with youth; these descriptions included the quality of relationships between youth participants and adult program staff, the allocation of decision-making power within the program, and challenges to achieving authentic youth participation. The results revealed a wide diversity of program models that shared an underlying value system aligned with the core principles of Youth-Adult Partnership. Participants noted that their work with youth required marked shifts away from established professional norms, but they also perceived benefits to their organizations, audiences, and communities in addition to the youth themselves. While this study highlights the interconnectedness among news media, youth voice, and civic development, it also reveals a need for additional research about the effectiveness of youth voice initiatives.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2014, the oldest association of news media professionals in the United States, the Society of Professional Journalists, added a guideline to its code of ethics that stands out as particularly relevant for a media industry rethinking its relationship and responsibility to communities. “Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience,” the new guideline advised journalists, and “seek sources whose voices we seldom hear” (SPJ, 2014, p. 2). In the context of a democracy predicated on collective decision-making informed by public discourse, this guideline is a crucial one. Even as the American media landscape continues to shift rapidly due to constant innovations in communication technology, institutional news media remain a primary vehicle of political information and civic conversation. Bennett echoes the conviction of many working journalists in arguing that journalism plays a vital role in shaping public opinion and holding those in power accountable for their actions. Without an independent press, he cautions, “government is left to police itself while promoting its own activities through public relations, propaganda, or spin” (Bennett, 2016, pg. 5). While the importance of conventional journalism may seem overstated in an increasingly fragmented and user-generated mediaverse, Bennett points out that much of the near-infinite information on the Internet is recycled from conventional journalism outlets.

Problem Statement

In order for news media to live up to its full civic potential, though, it must reflect the diverse perspectives of the communities it serves. However, youth voices and concerns remain noticeably absent from American news media, and this exclusion has consequences not only for young people’s civic identity development, but also, the inclusiveness and health of democracy.

Media play a key role in the development of civic identity, and the exclusion of youth from conversations about public issues means that policymaking and community problem solving will not reflect their perspectives. It may also, as discussed later, have negative implications for their self-concept as citizens, their perception of their opinions and experiences as valuable, their sense of political efficacy, and ultimately, their ability to meaningfully contribute to civic life.

While some news organizations have sought to incorporate youth perspectives by inviting young people to be co-creators of news, to date no explicit attempt has been made to systematically describe how news professionals approach these collaborations – the strategies they employ, the priorities that guide them, and the challenges they have faced in the process. The existence of these “youth voice” initiatives raises a number of substantive questions: what, if anything, can youth gain from co-creating media with journalists? Can direct participation in the creation of news media act as a pathway to other forms of civic engagement? Do communities benefit from exposure to youth voices and perspectives in news media? What is the best way for journalists to collaborate with youth in a given setting? As a first step toward answering these questions, the present study seeks to gain a fundamental understanding of how journalists at American news organizations have amplified youth voices and concerns by working directly with youth. Using the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework described by Lerner (2005), this study will attempt to integrate partnership constructs from two different fields of study: engaged journalism, which emphasizes reciprocal relationships between journalists and the communities they serve, and Youth-Adult Partnership, which proposes a model of community improvement based on intergenerational mutuality and shared decision-making between young people and adults. These two constructs share a through line of reciprocity and an assumption that citizens, in this case youth, are competent decision makers and experts in their

own lived experiences. However, the application of engaged journalism approaches to youth news consumers has not been studied, nor has the application of Youth-Adult Partnerships to news media contexts.

Significance of study

Adolescents coming of age in the twenty-first century have no shortage of political and social problems with which to contend. A worsening environmental crisis, tensions around gender and racial identity, renewed fears of nuclear war, persistent economic inequality, and the erosion of democratic norms represent just a few of the issues that teenagers and young adults are actively engaging with, thinking about, and worrying over on a daily basis. As adolescents navigate these challenging issues, though, they are doing so in a media environment that is oversaturated with content, fraught with misinformation, and controlled by algorithms that prioritize advertising revenue over meaningful discourse – a media system that is, in many cases, poorly equipped to meet their civic information needs. At the same time, as some scholarly critics of the news industry have argued, journalism has not adapted well to meet the participatory expectations of a globalized, digital information ecosystem. In the past, information tended to flow in one direction: from gatekept, professional institutions to a passive recipient public. Now, though, information networks are multimodal, and the line between consumer and creator, citizen and journalist, is increasingly blurred. As expectations for how news institutions should relate to their audiences have changed, journalists, by and large, have remained entrenched in hierarchal professional norms. Thus, adolescents who are about to reach the age at which they can formally participate in the democratic process are alienated from the very media institutions that should be empowering them to engage with that process. Furthermore, by neglecting youth, news organizations are jeopardizing their own health; youth are both a key

advertising demographic for news and, presumably, the population that will be expected to sustain it in the future. As trust in traditional news media ebbs — along with revenue — it is imperative, then, to explore how relationships between youth and news professionals can be mutually beneficial. By examining how it might be possible to bridge the divide between news organizations and youth audiences through direct collaboration with youth, this research seeks to provide a foundation for, on one hand, providing adolescents access to high quality information about public issues, and on the other providing news organizations with a missing perspective that could enrich their reporting.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do the news media organizations who have incorporated youth-adult partnerships into their news making processes approach these collaborations with youth?

RQ2: What role, if any, does developmental theory play in undergirding the conception and delivery of youth-adult partnerships in news media?

Definitions of Key Terms

It is important to note that while the term “media,” especially in the singular sense of “the media” is often used as shorthand in American political culture to refer to those individuals and entities that produce news, I do not use these terms interchangeably. Rather, “media” used alone refers to any form of communication that transmits information or entertainment to an audience (Rice, 2017), while “news” and “news media” refer specifically to information about recent events or current affairs (Schwartz, 2015). However, the advent of social media, which can act as both an avenue for traditional news outlets to content and interact with audiences and as a platform for user-generated content, means that the definitions of “media” and “news” media are

continuously evolving. The entities that report and distribute news go by a number of interchangeable titles in the literature, including news outlets, news outfits, news agencies, and news organizations. I will primarily use the term “news organizations.”

“Youth” remains a nebulously defined term in the literature, sometimes encompassing individuals up to the age of 40, but for the purposes of this research, I will use it, along with the related term “young people” to refer primarily to adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18, unless otherwise noted.

Youth participation in community affairs exists along a continuum (Hart, 1992). When youth and adults work together on a project, it may not always be in equal capacity and may or may not involve youth as key decision-makers. Because youth participation in news media has been understudied, the extent to which newsmakers have invited youth into the process of creating news is largely unknown. Therefore, the word “collaboration” appears in this research to describe all instances in which adult newsmakers invite youth to partake in any stage of the news creation process, up to and including true partnership, characterized by shared decision-making and ownership of the product.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Civic identity development and news

When children reach adolescence, they often begin to seriously consider for the first time their role within the larger community outside of their family and friends (Knefelkamp, 2008). During this time, they are exposed to the organizational practices, processes, responsibilities, and privileges associated with community membership, and they begin to form the values and belief systems that will inform their later political behavior (Owen, 2016). This period of civic identity formation is particularly consequential for the health of democracies, which require reciprocal participation from the body politic in order to maintain their health and stability. However, civic identity formation does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, as Knefelkamp points out, it is socially constructed, developing “over time through engagement with others who bring a wide variety of interpretations, life experiences, and characteristics to any discussion of moral dilemmas” (Knefelkamp, 2008, p. 1). A variety of socializing agents can play a role in whether and how young people come to understand themselves as citizens, including families, peers, schools, and electoral policies.

The messages young people receive from mass media can also play a role in their civic development. In particular, news media have received a great deal of attention from researchers because of their centrality to American politics. A large body of research has associated news media consumption with institutional forms of civic and political participation (Pasek et. al, 2006; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Shehata, Ekström & Olsson, 2016; de Zúñiga, Diehl & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2018; Thorson, Chen & Lacy, 2020). Among youth, news is associated with greater levels of civic knowledge and awareness (Hao et. al, 2014; Boulianne, 2016). The ways

news messages frame public issues and political events also shapes how youth come to view their political environment and their ability to effect change within it. As Haenschen and Tedesco (2020, p. 666) point out:

The effects of news framing go beyond shaping readers' attitudes toward the subjects of reporting: negative emphasis framing of a social movement decreases readers' perceptions of government as responsive to them, and themselves capable of producing collective change around a policy issue.

It is important to note that the path from news consumption to political and civic participation is by no means a linear one, though. For the better part of three decades beginning in the 1960's, civic development models largely assumed a top-down structure that viewed young people as passive recipients of political information (McLeod, 2000). As developmental science has adopted new approaches that emphasize the role of personal and cultural context, researchers are beginning to better understand how a young person's environment and lived experience might influence whether and how news media inform their civic actions. Research suggests, for example, that factors in a young person's life like their parents' news consumption (Boyd et al, 2011), their feelings of positivity or negativity toward news in general (Hobbs, Donnelly, Friesem & Moen, 2013), and the conversations they have with peers and family members about current events (Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012) may all inform how they come to think of themselves as citizens of a community. However complex the relationship between news media and civic identity may be, though, the literature supports the assertion that giving young people meaningful opportunities to engage with news has benefit for their ability to understand and participate in civic life.

Youth interest in news and paradigms of youth civic engagement

Although young people value the news as a source of information (Costera Meijer, 2007; Robb, 2020; CIRCLE, 2021), their consumption of traditional forms of news media like network television and newspapers has tended to lag behind that of older generations (Mindich, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2016; Edgerly et al., 2017). Concerns over young people's apparent declining interest in news have existed since at least the 1970's (Buckingham, 2000), and understanding the news preferences and habits of youth has been a key existential interest for news producers who wish to maintain relevance by recapturing younger audience members (Mindich, 2005). According to Bennett (2008), academic examination this relative lack of youth presence in contemporary news audiences has tended to follow one of two paradigms of civic engagement: one that assumes disengaged youth and one that assumes engaged youth. In general, these two paradigms capture the spectrum of thought around youth news engagement represented in the literature. Scholars who emphasize institutional forms of citizenship like voting, membership in a political party, and attention to traditional forms of news media as proper indicators of healthy civic life tend to perceive shrinking news audiences as a threat to democracy (Putnam, 2000; Delli Carpini, 2000; Mindich, 2005). Under this disengaged youth paradigm, a young person's choice to withdraw from the news is a symptom of a larger, more problematic civic disinclination – a lack of interest not only in current events but also in social responsibility. Indeed, the motif of the politically uninformed and uninvolved young person is one that recycles itself perennially every election year. A sampling of headlines from Western news publications paints an almost apocalyptic picture of youth political uninvolvedness: In 2015, the Atlantic asked, "When It Comes to Politics, Do Millennials Care About Anything?" (The Atlantic, 2020). The following year, The Guardian wondered, "Have millennials given up on democracy?" (Safi,

2016) and in 2019, the Chicago Tribune speculated, “Ignorance, apathy, or just the weather? Why young people blew off Chicago's recent election” (Rhodes & Bowean, 2020). The through line is clear: whether through apathy, laziness or inconvenience, young people as a cohort have simply made the choice not to concern themselves with current events, their communities, or politics. Underlying the disengaged youth paradigm is a familiar, deficit-based notion of adolescent development. Lerner argues that traditional conceptualizations of adolescence have tended to view the transitional period between childhood and adulthood as a turbulent and stressful one (2005); positive behavior in this view, is characterized simply by an absence of negative behavior. Positive Youth Development, or PYD, challenges this conception of youth, arguing that young people are “resources to be developed” rather than “problems to be managed” (Lerner et al, 2002, pp. 11-12). One of its fundamental hypotheses holds that the strengths of young people, combined with contextual conditions that produce healthy development, can produce outcomes for youth that allow them to thrive and contribute to society in prosocial ways (Lerner, 2005).

Aligned with this perspective is the *engaged youth* paradigm. This paradigm argues that if young people neglect traditional forms of civic engagement like reading or watching the news, it is not because they are uninterested in participating, but because they are dissatisfied with political institutions. Applied to news, the engaged youth paradigm suggests a disconnect between the priorities of young people and the reporting styles and news values they see reflected in news media. Youth have consistently criticized the news as being irrelevant to their lives in both content and format (Huang, 2009), disconnected from them culturally, generationally and racially, and dismissive and neglectful of the issues that are important to people their age (Robb, 2017). While print news producers have sensed since at least the 1990’s

that the product they are providing is not meeting the needs of the youth market, their attempts to draw in younger audiences through more striking visuals, easier-to-read fonts, and reduced page counts have been largely unsuccessful (Kodrich, 1997; Picard and Brody, 1997; Schoenbach, 1999). Their attempts to remain relevant by appealing to a perceived attention span deficit and lowbrow obsession with celebrities, pop culture and sex have seen similarly little return (Mindich, 2005). This finding suggests that the disconnect between youth and news systems runs deeper than just visual design and instant gratification. Rather, news producers and young people seem to be misaligned in their notions of the fundamental purpose and function of news.

Young people's reasons for consuming news are broad and reach far beyond casting votes in electoral horse races. Rather, they seek a sense of belonging and meaning from the content they choose. They engage with it for personal utility and self-improvement, for the sake of a perceived identity, and for conversation topics (Reuters, 2021). Thus, their expectations for quality news reach far beyond just the delivery of information; they want substantive discussions of the implications of current events, a broader variety of perspectives and viewpoints represented, more reciprocity between journalists and their audiences, and more participatory opportunities (AP, 2008; Marchi, 2012; Drok & Hermans, 2015; Huang, 2009; Gutsche et al., 2015).

Research also suggests young people are disconnected from news systems racially. Many young people perceive a racial and gender bias in the news content they view (Robb, 2017), and they are not imagining it. Although the number of people from diverse racial backgrounds working in news has been steadily creeping up over the past three decades, white journalists remain noticeably overrepresented in the news industry generally, with more than three-quarters (77%) of newsroom employees identifying as white in 2018 (Grieco, 2018). This

is not only a poor reflection of the overall American population, but it is especially non-representative of the generation born after 1996, which has been called the most racially and ethnically diverse in history, with only 52% identifying as non-Hispanic white (Wang, 2018).

Youth representation in news

Representations of young people in news media – and just as importantly, their lack of representation in it – may also play a role in their disconnect from it. Carter (2013, p. 255) described news as a world “where children’s interests and opinions are rarely regarded as noteworthy.” In one content analysis of local television newscasts, only one in twelve stories dealt with young people (Gillam & Bales, 2001). When news reports do mention youth, they tend to overemphasize violence, victimization, crime and troubled behavior, particularly when the young people depicted come from racial minority backgrounds (Gillam & Bales, 2001; Parker et al., 2001; Bernier, 2012). These stories often present youth as in need of constant surveillance, engaging in problematic behavior like drug use and sex, or being at risk of engaging in such behaviors. Much of this news coverage has historically placed the blame for problem behaviors squarely on youth themselves without exploring the broader socioeconomic contexts impacting their lives, such as poverty, racism, and lack of investment in education (Dorfman & Woodruff, 1998). This lack of nuance does not go unnoticed by young people: in one survey more than two-thirds of teens and tweens said they felt that news media had no idea about the experiences of people their age (Robb, 2017).

A lack of youth involvement in the production of news may be one reason for these stereotypical depictions. Hart called children “undoubtedly the most photographed and the least listened to members of society,” (1992, p. 9) and indeed, young people often find voices and perspectives of people their age noticeably absent from stories that concern them. The 1989

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child codified the right of children not only “to give their opinions freely” on issues that affect them but also to have their voices heard and taken seriously by adults (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, p. 4). News media, though, largely fall short of this ideal. Borrowing language from feminist theory, Kaziaj (2016) coined the term “adult gaze,” to describe how news stories are constructed in ways that reinforce adult perspectives of young people. Stories that mention youth tend to be framed around an adult figure, Kaziaj claimed, often using youth as objects of emotional appeal. To be sure, this absence is not always malicious. Journalism ethics codes urge caution when dealing with vulnerable populations like children, who may not fully understand the potential consequences of talking to a member of the media. (Delta Sigma Chi, 1996; Stone, 1999, Tompkins, 2002). Scholars like Mackay (2008) have likewise called into question whether children can reliably provide factual information. Mackay, citing Piaget (1952), notes that young children may have difficulty separating fact from fantasy, may not have the reasoning ability to accurately recall events, and may not be able to explain their thoughts clearly to a reporter. This view is in line with the dominant narrative of childhood in the United States, which emphasizes the vulnerability and incompetence of children, considering them not as citizens in their own right, but rather as citizens in the making (Roche, 1999; Buckingham 2000). In this view, the requisite rights and responsibilities that come with citizenship, such as being informed about and contributing to the conversations and policies and affairs that affect one’s community, are considered both irrelevant to children and outside of their cognitive grasp.

Youth voice and media creation

If a lack of youth presence in the newsmaking process contributes, at least in part, to young people’s dissatisfaction with news, then soliciting the perspectives of more – and more

diverse – young people may be one way to address the gap. In addition to its potential to spur more relevant, useful, and accurate content for young audiences, youth involvement in media creation can be a powerful tool for civic identity building. Schofield Clark and Montserrat (2011), for example, found that high school students developed what they called a “collective sensibility,” or an awareness of one’s role as a member of a larger group, when they participated in school-sponsored student journalism activities. These activities, according to the researchers, required students to “consider what issues are of importance, beyond themselves and their immediate friendship networks.” An ever-growing body of work has also described the ways in which media creation can help young people feel empowered and informed (CIRCLE, 2021), develop their political voice, (Beatty, 2019), and think of themselves as active and engaged in their communities (Charmaraman, 2011).

Youth media organizations, which train youth to produce written or digital media, know this very well. Often situated within social justice-oriented missions, they have become adept at leveraging media creation for Positive Youth Development and community building. In one survey of program staff from 65 American youth media organizations, some of the most commonly cited organizational aims included “to give youth a voice,” “to encourage creative self-expression,” “to build and strengthen our community,” and “to encourage civic participation” (Tyner, 2015). Most structured media creation opportunities available to youth occur either in this context or in a scholastic media context such as a school newspaper or, less commonly, student radio or television. Although some schools have limited relationships with local news outlets, allowing youth to tell their own stories is not an approach that has found footing in most newsrooms. Still, there is precedent for collaborating more intentionally with community members as co-creators of news, and this “engaged journalism,” may provide a

useful framework for understanding how news professionals have introduced – and can introduce – youth voice into the newsmaking process.

Engaged Journalism

In a Web 2.0 era defined by user-generated content, participatory cultures, and a breakdown in gatekeeping, news media organizations are beginning to rethink their relationships to their audiences (Rosenberry, 2006; Lawrence, Radcliffe & Schmidt, 2018). Within the last two decades, commensurate with the rise of social media, newsrooms have seen a surge in hiring for new “engagement” positions oriented toward better understanding and responding to the consumption habits of their audiences (Wenzel & Nelson, 2020.) With the aid of digital participation features like comments sections, communication between journalists and their readers and viewers can now flow two ways – and the relationship is an increasingly fraught one. “Citizen journalism,” for example, or information distributed online by members of the public who are not affiliated with a news institution, has long been an area of scholarly interest. While critics remain skeptical of the accuracy, objectivity, and fairness of content produced by non-professional journalists, others have hailed citizen journalism as a more transparent and democratic form of journalism — one that shapes news agendas by bringing attention to stories that are not being covered by conventional news media (Jurrat, 2011) Meanwhile, only a minority of Americans report having trust in traditional news media (Newman et al., 2021), and consumption of traditional forms of news like newspapers and broadcast and cable television are continuing their decades-long downward trajectories.

In the midst of this crowded, rapidly changing, and trust-deficient media environment, a new “engagement” or “engaged” journalism has emerged. Drawing on the idea of reciprocity, in which exchanges between parties should be mutually beneficial, this new framework for

understanding news audiences proposes that a recentering of journalism as a public service will promote greater trust, social capital and community connectedness (Lewis, Holton & Coddington, 2014). Engaged journalism centers the needs and concerns of community members and, in doing so, challenges the traditional, top-down approach to journalism, in which news agendas are based solely on the value judgments of editors and reporters. As Green-Barber and Garcia McKinley (2019, p. 6) define it:

Engaged journalism is an inclusive practice that prioritizes the information needs and wants of the community members it serves, creates collaborative space for the audience in all aspects of the journalistic process, and is dedicated to building and preserving trusting relationships between journalists and the public.

In essence, communities as well as newsrooms should have a say in deciding what is important. Journalists have approached engaged journalism in a variety of ways, including in-person listening sessions and partnerships with local organizations (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, & Lewis, 2019), community advisory boards, and use of content created by citizen journalists. This requires, of course, an understanding of power differentials that exist in the journalist-audience relationship, as well as an intentional awareness of biases (Paulwels & Picone, 2012). Journalists have, at times, struggled to negotiate this sharing of control, caught between traditional notions of one-way communication and present participatory cultures (Lewis, 2012). At the same time, emerging research suggests that engaged journalism practices may help create meaningful opportunities for audience participation (Schmidt & Lawrence, 2020) and foster civic participation by promoting community connectedness (Green-Barber & Garcia McKinley, 2019; Wenzel, 2019). The application of engaged journalism principles to youth communities has not been well-studied, but a number of fields outside of journalism, including policymaking, urban

planning, and public health, have found the analogous construct of Youth-Adult Partnership helpful in their respective approaches to collaborating with youth.

Youth-Adult Partnership

Hart (1992), applying a child rights-based approach to an earlier model of citizen participation described by Arnstein (1969), imagines youth participation in community affairs as a ladder. The bottom rungs of the ladder represent an absence of youth voice in decision making, or else merely a shallow inclusion of it that has no real consequence. The middle range of the ladder represents a variety of approaches that value the input of youth, assign them meaningful roles, and keep them informed about ongoing decision-making, but are fundamentally initiated and controlled by adults. The top rungs of the ladder require much more deliberate, thoughtful intent on the part of adults to encourage youth ownership and shared decision-making. “Youth-Adult Partnership,” or Y-AP, falls within these top rungs. At its most basic, Y-AP is grounded in the notion that each person, regardless of age, has a stake in their community and a role to play in solving community problems. It emphasizes mutuality, co-learning, and shared control between generational groups. Perhaps the most substantive definition comes from Zeldin and his colleagues (2012, p. 388), who conceptualize Y-AP as:

“(a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue.”

According to Zeldin and colleagues, youth are most likely to achieve positive outcomes in their civic development, like empowerment and connection to community, when they have the power to make decisions with trust from adults (Zeldin et al., 2017). Indeed, several decades of research

have associated Y-AP with positive outcomes not only for youth, but also for communities. While youth seem to experience greater feelings of empowerment and efficacy in environments in which they are entrusted with decision-making (Akiva, Cortina & Smith, 2014), the adults partnering with them also report better organizational functioning (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2008). Y-AP's potential to break down generational stereotypes contributes to community building, and its centering of youth in leadership roles promotes positive youth development in the domains of knowledge, competence, and initiative (Zeldin, Larson & O'Connor, 2004). Zeldin and his colleagues identified four core elements of Y-AP:

1. Authentic decision making, referring to the inclusion of youth at the center, rather than the periphery, of consequential decisions
2. Natural mentors, referring to organically-occurring relationships between youth and supportive adults
3. Reciprocal activity, referring to the mutual exchange of experiences and perspectives that creates an environment of co-learning
4. Community connectedness, referring to opportunities for participants to build feelings of membership and commitment to a group

It might seem odd to apply a youth development principle to a field that is not, primarily, concerned with youth or their development. However, it would not be the first time social science research frameworks have been used as a lens through which to reflect upon and improve journalistic practices: for example, elements of Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) have shaped how journalists respond to tragic events (Brayne, 2007). Not all elements of Youth-Adult Partnership may be relevant to newsroom contexts; admittedly, true YA-P is resource-intensive and challenging even for youth development organizations to authentically implement. Nevertheless,

it does provide a starting point through which researchers may begin to understand the interconnectedness between news, youth development, and civic participation.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Participants

This research was conducted as a qualitative, interview-based study. The methodology described in this section was approved by the Social, Behavioral & Educational Research Institutional Review Board (SBER IRB) at Tufts University. The ten individuals included in the study each agreed to participate in a single, in-depth, semi-structured interview conducted virtually via Zoom. All ten participants consented to be identified by their name, title, and employer; this information is listed in the table in Appendix A. These individuals were journalists, media producers, and program staff selected based on the following criteria: (a) they had led an ongoing or past initiative to include youth voices in the production of news, (b) these initiatives had taken place at or been sponsored by an American news organization, (c) that organization's primary activities were original newsgathering and reporting, and (d) the organizations were not, according to their mission statements, primarily youth development organizations. Organizations like KQED Education and KUOW Public Radio, which prioritize education and/or child development under the umbrella of a parent news media organization, were considered to have met these criteria.

There are a number of influential youth-focused media organizations in the United States, like YR Media, Wide Angle Youth Media, and VOX ATL; however, because this study is concerned with news media as a civic institution and stakeholder in youth civic development, youth organizations have been excluded from the sample, as they do not reach the same general adult audiences that news media do, nor do they wield the same cultural power. Additionally, this study chose to focus specifically on the adults involved in these initiatives rather than the

youth participants themselves, for two reasons: (1) A great deal of communication research has explored young people’s news use, perceptions, and preferences. The question of “what young people want from news” is one that has been continuously answered by an ever-growing body of academic literature. Less attention has been paid to how adult journalists view young people as an audience, as creators, and as members of the community they serve. (2) Even in the most well-intentioned of collaborations between youth and adults, there is an inherent power imbalance. Adults, in the case of media, are gatekeepers of the metaphorical megaphone. Whether deliberately or not, they have the authority to include and exclude certain voices, which also means they also have the authority to shape public narratives. When a journalist makes a conscious, deliberate attempt to include more of a certain kind of voice, that is a consequential decision that merits scrutiny.

Brief descriptions of the youth voice initiatives and programs contained in this sample are included in the figure below:

Figure 1 – Project Descriptions

Project/Organization	Description
Chalkbeat	Chalkbeat is a nonprofit news organization covering education and education policy both nationally and on the local level in eight U.S. cities.
PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs	The PBS NewsHour’s Student Reporting Labs program trains middle and high school students across the country to produce video stories. Classroom educators facilitate the program with help from their local PBS station and journalism mentors within the community.
Teen Vogue	Teen Vogue is a fashion, pop culture, and political affairs magazine. This study focused primarily on the magazine’s Teen Vote 2020 Voter Committee, a group of high school and college students the magazine called on throughout the 2020

	election season to voice their thoughts and opinions on election-related matters through Q&A's, live chats, and opinion editorials.
San Diego Union Tribune	The San Diego Union Tribune, the daily newspaper of the San Diego, California metropolitan area, has experimented with a number of youth voice initiatives. Among these are its Community Voices Project, a series of editorials authored by members of the community, including high school students; and Hello Gen Z, a podcast that sought to explore the experiences, beliefs, hopes, and fears of members of the post-millennial generation.
The Future Is Ms.	<i>The Future Is Ms.</i> is a monthly series of news stories authored by teen reporters and published online and in print by Ms. Magazine. The stories primarily cover youth activists working to achieve change in the area of gender equality, reproductive rights, racial justice, and environmental sustainability.
KUNR Youth Media	<i>KUNR Youth Media</i> is a journalism training program for high school students conducted as a partnership between KUNR, a public radio station based in Reno, Nevada, and the Washoe County School District. The program is delivered as a Career and Technical Education (CTE) class.
KUOW RadioActive Youth Media	RadioActive Youth Media is a journalism workshop program for high school students offered by KUOW, a public radio station located in Seattle, Washington.
KRCL Loud and Clear Youth Radio	Loud and Clear Youth Radio is a youth-led, hour-long radio program that airs weekly on KRCL, an independent radio station located in Salt Lake City, Utah. A local youth media organization, Spy Hop, provides the curriculum and training for the program, while KRCL staff provide a platform, studio space, and additional mentorship.
Since Parkland	<i>Since Parkland</i> is a project of The Trace, a nonprofit news organization that covers issues related to gun violence. The project brought together a network of more than 200 teen journalists from across the United States to document the stories of children and teens killed in shootings in the United States in the 12 months following the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida.

KQED Education	The Education department at KQED, San Francisco's NPR and PBS affiliate, houses a number of youth voice programs. Among these are Youth Takeover, a journalism training program for high school students; Youth Media Challenges, a series of classroom-based projects that invite students to create media about specific political or social topics; and Above the Noise, a YouTube current affairs series co-created with youth that “investigates controversial topics relevant to students’ lives.”
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Procedure

Each participant was invited via direct email to participate in a virtual Zoom interview as a representative of their particular organization or youth voice initiative. Interviews lasted between 27 and 64 minutes, with the average interview length rounding out at about 39 minutes. Zoom was chosen as the medium of communication for convenience and transcription purposes. Each interview followed a similar guide of open-ended questions, included in Appendix B, although questions were modified to apply to the individual processes and structures of the different organizations represented. The semi-structured nature of the interview approach also allowed for probing and follow-up questions, as well as deviations from the prescribed interview protocol where appropriate. The questions explored:

- The goals of the project or initiative
- Who made decisions regarding the content and delivery of the project, as well as how these decisions were made
- The relationships between youth and adults involved in the project
- The values, philosophies, or “north stars” guiding the project’s design and delivery

- How the project fits within the organization's overall mission
- Any assessments or evaluations done on the project's efficacy or any feedback on the project participants had received from the community
- Any challenges, successes, or learning experiences associated with the project

Analytic Method

The interview transcripts collected for this study were analyzed for themes using both conventional and directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). My RQ1 was purposefully designed to be exploratory, and so an inductive method of analysis was most appropriate here for identifying emergent themes. However, because my RQ2 was more concerned with participants' implicit or explicit understanding of existing theoretical frameworks, answering this question required a more deductive approach. Thus, to measure considerations of development, I coded for instances in which participants either said they had witnessed or hoped to achieve change or transformation in the young people they were working with. Because this study is specifically concerned with Y-AP as a theoretical framework, I used the four core elements of Y-AP (Zeldin, Larson & O'Connor, 2004) and the Y-AP program evaluation rubric developed by Wu and colleagues (Wu et al., 2014) to create an initial coding scheme for RQ2, which used to I analyze how participants thought about their relationships to the young people they worked with. Findings are highlighted in the following section, and direct quotes are included with permission from participants.

Chapter 4

Results

Models of Youth Participation

The goal of this research was to describe the ways in which news media organizations have attempted to include and amplify youth voices in their work, and over the course of the ten interviews, it became clear that while many initiatives shared similarities, no two were exactly alike. Rather, each organization had created a structure and process that suited its individual goals, priorities, experiences, and resources. In general, though, the structures and processes that emerged tended to fall into one of four categories. Although significant variation exists within those categories, each of the four categories shares similar driving values, including mutual respect, co-learning, and validation of youth perspectives. It is important to note that my goal in delineating these models is not to evaluate or make any judgments about the efficacy of any of these approaches, but only to describe them. Future studies may wish to take a more evaluative approach.

Youth as trainees

By far the most common strategy for involving youth in news production, at least in this sample, was via a formal journalism training program. At least seven out of the ten individuals who participated in this study had led projects in which the primary goal was to provide educational benefit or skill-building opportunities for youth participants. While the logistics of this “workshop” model varied significantly from news organization to news organization, the essential themes remained the same: typically, adult journalists recruited and trained young people in the skills they would need to produce a piece of journalism – this training could cover topics such as how to interview, how to write a news story, how to run a camera, how to record

and mix audio, how to edit digital media, and so on. The youth participants then created content under the guidance of these adult journalists, and the news organization sponsoring the program then distributed that content on its own platforms. In some cases, like in the case of KUOW's RadioActive Youth Media program, the project is sponsored by, designed, and delivered in its entirety by the news organization itself. In other cases, like in the case of KRCL's Loud and Clear Youth Radio, the news outlet partners with a youth media organization in the community that is responsible for leading most of the program's training activities. In these cases, the news outlet's role in the partnership is to provide the distribution platform, and it may also provide studio space and additional mentorship. Similarly, some organizations partner with a school or school district – this is the case with KUNR Youth Media and the PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs. In these cases, students learn journalism and media production skills as part of a for-credit class with a predetermined curriculum, and the partner news organization provides mentorship to students as well as distribution of the media they create. Importantly, the relationships between adult journalists and youth trainees, as well as the amount of decision-making power youth held in these relationships, tended to vary along a spectrum that will be discussed later in this section.

Youth as sources

Another recurring model of youth involvement was the use of youth as experts or sources of information. Under this model, the youth were not typically producing media themselves, but their perspectives were represented, in some form, in the final journalism product. Chalkbeat community engagement manager Caroline Bauman, noting that “students should always be a part of every Chalkbeat article,” described one way that her organization included youth perspectives in their coverage of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic:

We've done several projects where we did these big Google surveys asking students to write in about how they were feeling at that moment in time, what school was like for them in a moment in time, and we were able to publish perspectives out of that.

Although activities like the one Bauman describes represent a lighter form of youth participation that requires less sustained interaction between individual youth adults than the youth-as-trainees model does, the frequency of Chalkbeat's attempts to solicit youth perspectives created its own kind of sustained interaction between the organization and its student audience. This kind of continual contact was a theme that arose for many of the participants in the study, who consistently emphasized the need for relationships with younger sources to be reciprocal and ongoing rather than transactional. As Amanda Vigil, Youth Media Program Manager for KQED Education, put it:

Collaborating with young people isn't just using them as a source and saying, "Thank you, bye," you know, and not following up and not being included in what happens to the recording and not updating them about how it went or anything like that.

Matthew T. Hall of the San Diego Union Tribune, who interviewed several youth sources for the newspaper's "Hello Gen Z" podcast affirmed this notion:

When I say, "turn the mic over to them," I really do mean, you know, it wasn't just us going to a rally and finding some kid who was a good quote and sharing that quote. It was sitting down with them for long interviews and asking them not just kind of targeted questions but having a free-flowing conversation.

These two quotes underscore a theme that emerged frequently in the interviews, which is the need for all interactions between youth and journalists contribute to deeper, trusting relationships between the two. Even in interactions where youth aren't receiving any direct mentorship or

creating content themselves, participants were intentional about cultivating relationships and respecting the input of youth.

Youth as regular contributors

In the same vein as the youth-as-sources model, some organizations invited youth to contribute content directly, often in the form of written essays or columns. For Teen Vogue, youth-authored content is built into the fabric of the organization. In addition to the four Teen Vote 2020 committee members who penned op-eds for the magazine, senior politics editor Allegra Kirkland noted that, across the board, most of the magazine's writers are high school or college-aged young people:

For everything we want to be a source of trustworthy, accessible information, and then we also want to be a platform where young people can speak for themselves, basically. They can be front and center in our coverage. They can write the stories themselves. They can, you know, really steer the conversation and what we cover.

Kirkland noted that, given that Teen Vogue's target audience is primarily comprised of teenage girls and young women, the publication is uniquely positioned to elevate youth voices. Still, the sentiment of inviting youth to "speak for themselves" was a common one even for news organizations that target an older audience. Ms. Magazine, for example, is not a solely youth-focused publication, but its ongoing series, "The Future Is Ms." provides young writers a regular platform to pitch and report on stories that are relevant to people their age. Similarly, The San Diego Union Tribune, regularly solicits content from young writers. Matthew T. Hall said the newspaper intentionally set out to include high school students in its Community Voices Project, an ongoing series of editorials authored by members of the community:

Some of the essays written by high schoolers are amazing, are really well thought out, are beautifully written, and are powerfully argued. And so, our thought was, well, we can publish that as a one off, or we could ask that person to write more.

Here, Hall again highlights the need for relationship building with youth to be a sustained, ongoing process. The Union Tribune does not just invite young people to contribute essays, but to contribute many essays with regular frequency. In doing so, it legitimizes their voices as continuously valuable to community conversations, rather than just a token novelty.

Youth as a sounding board

Another model that emerged with a number of interesting variations is what I have termed the “sounding board” model. Under this model, a news organization invites young people to give feedback or otherwise guide the organization’s coverage of a certain topic. This model differs from the previous models in that the youth who act as a sounding board may not produce any media at all for distribution by the news outlet – though in some cases, they do – but instead, they weigh in on the organization’s decisions behind-the-scenes. At some organizations, the sounding board takes the form of a formal youth advisory board. Amanda Vigil, Youth Program Manager for KQED Education, noted that KQED’s youth advisory board has been particularly involved in the production of *Above the Noise*, a YouTube current affairs series the organization produces for teenagers, and acting “as a regular checks and balance” for the show’s producers.

In many cases, though, the sounding board model took on a more informal quality. Rather than a structured convening of young people, it was sometimes a matter of journalists being implicitly guided by the ideas, concerns, or priorities of young people with whom they had had conversations. When the San Diego Union Tribune produced its *Hello Gen Z* podcast, for example, it took the novel step of inviting young people to the newspaper’s offices to have

unstructured conversations in small groups. Those conversations helped the podcast's producers refine the topics they wanted to approach and the provided direction for how they should approach them, according to opinion director Matthew T. Hall:

They helped us see that – you know, I think the younger generation in many ways was kind of more in touch with the difficulties of the pandemic and talking about it and talking about mental health. Like, you know, now, two years in, I think a lot of people are more upfront with their mental health, but also some people aren't and didn't want to talk about it at the beginning. And those young people were talking about it on social media for all to see, so I think that is another way that we realized that they could point us in the direction of a subject.

Thus, while the Union Tribune did not formally invite youth to be part of the podcast's initial planning phases, as the project's adult producers spent time listening to young people's experiences and input, youth naturally became a sort of steering committee implicitly informing the direction the podcast took.

It is important to note, also, that the models described are dynamic; that is, a young person's relationship with a news organization can evolve over time. Youth acting as sources and sounding boards can become contributors, for example, and contributors can receive additional, advanced training. Caroline Bauman of Chalkbeat described one example of a student whose relationship with the organization deepened significantly over time:

We had a student who wrote into a survey that we did in our Newark bureau and his responses were really interesting and awesome, and so we had more conversations with him about who he is, more conversations with his family, published an essay of his. He

later served on a panel of an event that we did and is a super loyal Chalkbeat reader, will, like, email us, email our Newark Bureau about articles and ideas.

In this example, the student transitioned from initially only being a source via his survey response, to being a contributor through his essay, to partnering with the organization in deeper and more intentional ways. While it's likely that not all youth will see their relationships with news media evolve in exactly the same way Bauman described, it is important to underscore that these relationships can often be fluid.

Spectrum of Youth Decision-Making

Since the practice of involving youth in organizational decision-making has been linked in the research to positive outcomes for both the youth and the organization (Zeldin et al., 2000; Akiva, Cortina & Smith, 2014), participants were asked about how decisions were made regarding the content, editorial strategy, and delivery of their programs. Common across all participants was the conviction that young people should be able to “tell their own stories,” and “speak for themselves,” or that adults should “pass the mic,” but this conviction manifested differently depending on the goals and resources of the individual project. What emerged, ultimately, was a spectrum of decision-making power that ranged from, on one end, allowing youth to provide input on the program’s direction to, on the other end, creating a program in which youth have near-full ownership of the product.

Youth input

Some projects, especially those that involved a very large number of young people or whose purpose was to create a one-off journalism product, found it most appropriate to allocate the bulk of decision-making responsibility to the adults leading the project rather than the young people helping to produce the content. In general, these projects were initiated and designed by

adult staff, who selected the subject and themes of the project's content, determined plans for its distribution, and determined the scope, pace, and curriculum, if any, of youth activities. Youth were then brought on board to produce the content after these decisions had already been made, though these decisions could be altered based on youth feedback. Katina Paron, a journalism educator who has worked with teen journalists on youth voice projects for several news organizations, including Ms. Magazine and The Trace, noted that her approach to creating journalism with youth allowed adults to provide guardrails for the students, which could then be adjusted based on youth feedback:

“What I found that works best in all of these [projects], and even for the Ms. project, too, is having the adults provide the structure and the focus – what is it we want for our readers, what's the focus of this project – and the teens get the training, provide the reporting work, provide the experience that allows the format to change if it needs to. But they're not making the initial call because that's not really their expertise yet. But nothing, you know – in a successful program – nothing the adults are doing goes against what they're hearing from the teens. It's always a listening process, and it's always incorporating that in terms of the timeline, of project scope, in terms of the process, especially.”

In this quote, Paron voices a tension that was present in many interviews: what, exactly, is the role of the adult in the youth-adult relationship? Participants were not always certain how much responsibility to entrust youth with, a caution that arose from a number of considerations, including a teen's school schedule, their comfort in completing the tasks, and, as Paron mentions here, their lack of work and leadership experience. At the same time, participants consistently underscored the importance of listening to youth input and validating the experiences of young

people, and those two inclinations created a tension that was not always fully resolved in every initiative. The “Relationship Dynamics” section will explore this tension in greater depth.

Youth ownership

On the opposite end of the spectrum is a more intensive form of power-sharing that relies more heavily on young people to generate the ideas that guide the content and delivery of the program. KRCL’s teen-led radio program, Loud and Clear Youth Radio, for example, allows its high school-age disc jockeys complete ownership over the hour-long time slot, according to Lara Jones, an executive producer at the station:

It's very hands on for the youth and very hands off by the adults, to a certain extent, to allow you the maximum freedom to make a mistake, to learn, to express yourself. So, not only do they learn the ins and outs of running a board, a radio board, broadcast board, how to present themselves on air, intro songs, talk about songs – the program also guides them in expressing their voice when it comes to social issues. I don't want to say social justice, necessarily – that's, I really feel, the phraseology of our current era. They're free to talk about whatever they'd like.

While Hart’s typology of child participation presents child-initiated projects with shared, intergenerational decision-making as an ideal (1992), fully youth-owned projects were in the minority in this sample. In fact, Loud and Clear Youth Radio is the only initiative I coded into this category. To be sure, the teens who participate in Loud and Clear Youth Radio do receive training from adults, as Jones mentions in the above quote, but they also benefit from a degree of editorial control not found in other youth voice initiatives. There are likely myriad reasons for this relative absence of youth control, some of which I’ll discuss in later sections, but many relate back to the tension articulated earlier by Katina Paron: while participants overall perceived

youth as capable, hardworking, and intelligent, there remained an uncertainty over whether they are equipped to manage projects and lead on their own without adult intervention.

Intergenerational collaboration

In between youth input and youth ownership, there is a large amount of gray area in which decision-making requires some negotiation between youth and adults. This negotiation can take a variety of forms, but the most common iteration I found saw adults designing the project and guiding the youth participants' activities in the form of prompts or assignments. The youth, however, could challenge that initial guidance with their own ideas or offer story pitches outside the scope of the project. In turn, adults can give feedback on those ideas and help the youth refine them. In this way, decision-making is a more interactive process that requires some intergenerational give-and-take. Michelle Billman of KUNR Youth Media describes her program's give-and-take this way:

We've had students do commentaries, and so they're given the assignment and kind of the parameters of an audio diary: you know, here are some examples and here's the length that we need, because we always have to have those length parameters for broadcast. And then they can pitch ideas and we usually, you know, just kind of talk through pitches and just figure out what's viable.

Typically, organizations who took a more collaborative approach to decision-making with young people incorporated youth input into the project's initial design. This is true of the PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs (SRL), in which students create video stories based on specific prompts generated by the SRL's leadership. Those prompts are created using feedback from the students and educators who participated in the labs during the previous year, according

to Elis Estrada, Senior Director for the Student Reporting Labs, who described the process by which that input is received and implemented:

Every year we have a moment where we say, okay, what do we want to focus on for the next year? And so we try to talk to as many students as possible. Part of that work is done throughout the year when teachers and students are telling us, "Oh, this is happening in our community at our school. We want to do a story about it. What do you think?" And then the other part of it comes from when we meet with students in person, traditionally – now it's virtually, still – but we talk to them about what they're seeing in the news that they're really gravitating towards, or the things that they're not seeing and they could produce stories around those things. What would it look like? What would it be? And so we really generate story ideas and prompts from those student conversations and also from talking to teachers, too, about what they think their districts will allow.

However, students can also pitch stories outside of the scope of those prompts. Leah Clapman, the founder of the Student Reporting Labs, described the process by which the organization's youth media producers help the students refine their pitches:

It really is the youth media producers looking at those pitch sheets and saying, like, is this doable? What is your story? Like, what are you going to film? Who are you going to talk to? Do you have a character to lead this story? So there's some, you know, kind of pretty basic first questions that help guide...the feedback that youth media producers will give to students who come with a pitch. But it's really driven by those – those are questions; they're not telling them what to do. They're really helping them dive deeper and figure out whether there's a video story that they will be able to do.”

Other programs, like KUOW's Radioactive Youth Media, extend this youth ownership framework to other organizational decisions beyond editorial decisions Program Manager Lila Lakehart said:

We created a committee of youth to help us plan what our hybrid programs should ideally look like, so they're actually helping us come up with program structure, length, what should be taught, how many youth should be involved, that sort of thing. At the moment, we're hiring for a new staff position, and we have youth on that hiring committee. So those are just two examples of how decisions are made bringing youth into the process.

In some cases, the collaboration model of youth decision-making stemmed from a desire on the part of adult journalists to give young people meaningful decision-making power while also remaining conscientious of their comparative lack of experience and their social-emotional vulnerabilities. Caroline Bauman of Chalkbeat noted that this dynamic came into play during panel events the organization hosted in which students acted as co-moderators:

Students should be in a place of authority and asking people in authority tough questions, but they also shouldn't be out there by themselves. And so having that co-moderator support [where] you are on the same level as the Chalkbeat journalist and you deserve the same platform is the kind of significant thought that we have there.

In the case described in this quote, elevating students to the same level of authority as an adult journalist while also ensuring the presence of an adult journalist as a support provided to a creative solution to a difficult balancing act. In this case, the organization weighed the comfort and confidence of the students against a commitment to affording the students a certain degree of agency. The resulting compromise provided the students the support they needed to lead. The

next section will further discuss how participants weighed the developmental needs of the young people with whom they worked.

Developmental considerations

One of the key questions guiding this research was the question of whether, and to what extent, youth voice initiatives in news media actively consider the developmental needs and outcomes of the youth they serve. In fact, benefits to the social-emotional and civic development of young people were among the motivations study participants cited most often for engaging in work with youth. As mentioned previously, most participants placed a high premium on building reciprocal relationships with youth, and it quickly became clear that many hoped those relationships would in some way be transformational. When participants were asked what, if anything, they hoped the young people they worked with took away from the interaction, common themes included a sense of confidence, a feeling of validation, a sense of community, and a newfound understanding of themselves, their beliefs, and their communities. As Lila Lakehart of KUOW's RadioActive Youth Media explained:

We believe that for youth, building social emotional skills like self-confidence and empathy at the same time as they build those technical skills, like storytelling and journalism and audio editing, results in higher success for them in RadioActive and also outside of RadioActive. So that's a big part of our program, is building in community and social-emotional skill building in addition to actually producing work and creating journalism.

KUOW was not alone in prioritizing direct developmental benefits to youth. Similarly, KRCL executive producer Lara Jones described her organization's youth program, Loud and Clear

Youth Radio, as a place where high school students can develop, negotiate, and express their identities:

I don't think you know what you are, I think you know what your parents think you are – and I think that's another value of the Loud and Clear program is it's a space for you to figure out yourself and not worry what your parents have to say about it, or even your peers. It really gives you the room to sit with yourself and decide what you want to say.

Some study participants also cited more explicitly civic goals for the young people they worked with, like Leah Clapman, who described the ultimate goal of the PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs as building a “more engaged and informed citizenry.” Elis Estrada, Senior Director for the Student Reporting Labs, echoed this sentiment, noting that the program’s media literacy goals were a vital part of achieving that mission:

I think that it's a really critical part of a young person's educational experience to understand how stories are told, how stories are made, because they're constantly consuming them... So why don't we kind of create a framework to support them and help them see all of the different types of media information and storytelling that is out there so that they can make their own decisions about what they want to see and create?

At the same time, study participants were keenly aware that the teens they worked with have different needs and capabilities than adult journalists. Many cited the challenge of weighing concerns about young people’s emotional well-being against the need to complete a reporting project. For Chalkbeat, working with student sources meant rethinking the pace of the organization’s reporting, engagement manager Caroline Bauman said:

The tension, of course, is that students should have a higher level of protection, and especially when dealing with young students. But even for high schoolers, the digital

media stage of our society is a pretty brutal one, right? And what you say online can be found for years and years and years later. And yet, when important big things happen, to not have students' voices represented often misses a really key and crucial part of the story. And so that is the tension as journalists, we have to sit in. And it's really, really hard...how do you walk that line well and how do you give students agency and power, as opposed to taking advantage of them, even if you're not trying to at all? And so it's really hard, I think that something we have tried to do, and definitely our journalists do well, is trying to think about thoughtful partnerships and also – so, thoughtful partnerships and also taking a step back from the journalism culture of urgency.

Likewise, Allegra Kirkland of Teen Vogue shared similar concerns about helping teenagers understand and navigate the consequences of their printed words:

Once things are on the internet, they're kind of there forever. So just sort of being really clear with our writers and the people who speak to us, you know, are you sure you're a hundred percent comfortable with this? Or walk them through the process and making sure they know journalistic terms like on the record, off the record, how to present information, all that kind of stuff. It's just kind of part of our responsibility.

Amanda Vigil at KQED Education wondered about the inherent power imbalance in a youth-adult professional relationship, saying that a young person may not feel they have the agency to disagree with an adult mentor:

The boundaries around young people are not as clear as the boundaries around an adult because there's an expectation that when you're an adult, you can say "I'm uncomfortable

by this, I'm not going to answer that,” or, “I'm okay with this or I'm not okay with that.”

That's not true for a young person in the same way, necessarily.

Similarly, Katina Paron, who worked with teen reporters on The Trace's “Since Parkland” project, noted that her team carefully considered the emotional consequences that reporting on gun violence might have for young journalists:

We had to hold them and make sure that they weren't, that this wasn't, like, seeping into their skin and into their dreams and into the rest of their lives, but there was a boundary put up. And so we had a lot of conversations about self care during that too.

Because news plays a central role in political socialization, in facilitating access to community life, and in providing a venue for public discussion, it is important to know the extent to which news professionals are considering the needs and well-being of members of the public. These results suggest that news professionals who work alongside youth are thinking about them not just as an audience or even as co-collaborators, but as actors in a complex political and social world. As such, they prioritized opportunities to help young people develop into healthy, actualized, and civically active individuals.

Relationship dynamics

Supportive relationships characterized by warmth, effective communication, and genuine connection are linked to positive outcomes for youth and are considered a key feature of effective PYD settings (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). Because of this, participants were asked to describe the relationships between the individuals participating in their youth voice projects.

Youth-to-adult relationships

While there was no consensus among participants about the “correct” way to structure their relationships with youth, these relationships tended to be supportive but hierarchical. The language participants used to describe their own roles and that of their staff tended, by and large, to imply an inherent power imbalance: these descriptions often included words like, “mentor,” “coach,” “educator,” and “teacher,” all of which necessitate a “mentee” or “learner.” However, given that most of those interviewed fell within the youth-as-trainees model, this hierarchal interpersonal dynamic is perhaps not surprising. In other cases, the relationships between youth and adults were a bit more informal. Allegra Kirkland of Teen Vogue, for example, described her role with the publication’s teen voter committee not in hierarchical terms, but as that of a “point person” who checked in with them monthly. While there was a general agreement that young people should be afforded respect, that their concerns and ideas should be treated as valuable assets, and that journalists should be conscientious of their unique needs, there were also varying perspectives about how to put these notions into practice. Lila Lakehart of KUOW’s RadioActive Youth Media noted that a student’s relationship with program staff could change depending on how long they had been in the program:

In the introductory workshop I think there tends to be more of a separation. Like, you have the youth, you have the mentors and the staff, and we're all working together, we're all on the same team, but I don't think that [the youth] feel as integrated yet into the fabric of RadioActive in the same way. But then we because we hire so many of our graduates in different roles, we see that relationship becoming more equal over time.

Some participants indicated they had had more success building rapport with youth when the adults guiding the adolescents' activities were closer in age to them, but Amanda Vigil of KQED

Education questioned this approach, cautioning that having friendship-like relationships with students can place them in a vulnerable position: “People think, oh, if I’m your friend then you’ll do something for me,” she said. At the same time, though, Vigil noted that “culturally responsive” practices with youth begin with listening and getting to know them:

That means modeling vulnerability, that means modeling being comfortable and relaxed, it means having to share a bit of yourself authentically – not inappropriately, because there’s a fine line there.

An adult’s relationship with the teens they worked with could also change considerably based on a number of circumstantial factors, including the number of youth involved in the project, the number of staff working on it, and the duration of the project.

Peer-to-peer relationships

Because one of the core elements of the Youth-Adult Partnership framework emphasizes community connectedness, participants were asked about any peer relationships the young people they worked with may have built with one another. Responses were incredibly diverse. Many initiatives were structured to favor independent work wherein a young person might receive guidance from an adult but engage in little or no collaboration with peers. A few participants, though, like Lila Lakehart of KUOW RadioActive Youth media, cited peer community building as a key goal:

We see them become really close friends through the intro workshop, and as they continue to collaborate, they go through – the summer workshop’s pretty intensive – so they’re going through this intense experience together. So we see that creating tight relationships, but, they’re also creating work together, so I think they’re helping to push each other and having high expectations of each other. Like, there are built in times in the

workshop where they're asking each other for feedback and they're counting on their team to help make their story better, they're counting on their team to listen when they're asking for feedback, when they're sharing their story.

Community building looked slightly different for the San Diego Union Tribune, whose “Hello Gen Z” podcast was, in part, informed by small group conversations the producers organized with local youth. Although the newspaper’s relationship with those young people was comparatively short-term in that it was limited to just a single product, the journalists who produced the podcast believed that by exposing their young sources to other young people with different experiences, identities, and perspectives, the depth of information flowing from the conversation would be richer, according to Matthew T. Hall:

I'm not sure that they became friends afterwards, but I thought it was important for us to not...you know, we were trying to get out of our comfort zone a little bit by talking to folks who see the world differently. And we wanted them to kind of do the same thing by being in those groups, to not just – it wasn't just them and their friends.

In other cases, peer relationships weren’t necessarily a primary goal, but developed incidentally. The members of Teen Vogue’s TeenVote2020 Voter Committee, for example, only met virtually, but developed friendships with one another independently through social media that continued even after the program ended. Peer relationships were one significant area where the youth voice initiatives represented in this study diverged from the Youth-Adult Partnership framework. Y-AP, as previously discussed, emphasizes collaboration between “Multiple youth and multiple adults” (cite) and is characterized by community connectedness. While participants placed a high premium on cultivating relationships between individual youth and adult journalists, there seemed to be less interest in cultivating mutually beneficial inter-peer

relationships. In most cases, if youth participating in the same program became friends, gave each other helpful feedback, or worked together to co-create a product, it was usually an incidental rather than an intentional outcome.

Motivations and Guiding Values

An organization's reasons for engaging in work with youth, as well as the institutional values that guide that decision, will necessarily affect how a youth voice initiative is designed and implemented. For this reason, participants were asked about their organization's motivations for working with youth, as well as any guiding values, philosophies, or "north stars" that they perceived as impacting decision making within the program.

Workforce development

For some respondents, working with youth people to co-create media presented an opportunity to strengthen the workforce pipeline for journalism. Many cited concerns about the long-term sustainability of news, and especially local news, and for them, working with youth presented an opportunity to give the next generation of journalists a leg up in the industry. Michelle Billman of KUNR Youth Media, for example, described her organization's youth initiative as an "internship" and that noted its students graduate the program with a portfolio of bylines – something Billman saw as an advantage for someone seeking to enter the journalism profession. Others said they hoped participating in a youth journalism program would enable young people to develop an interest in journalism generally – if not as journalists themselves, then at least as an audience member and informed member of society. Elis Estrada of the PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs noted that the journalism processes students learn in schools through, for example, their student newspapers, tend to function very differently from that of

news media. Co-creating media with youth, then, is an opportunity to expose them to “professional” journalism processes. Estrada explained:

What they're learning in school for student journalism is extremely valuable, no doubt about that, but it's also very different from what they need as – to be professional journalists. And so, being able to provide them that skill set, and also almost more importantly, is opening a door for them into a career that seemed closed off to them before, right. They don't belong there, they don't belong in this world of professional journalists. But they do, and we hold their hands in that process.

Importantly, as Estrada notes in this quote, working with youth might also allow young people from marginalized backgrounds or young people with lower levels of confidence to see journalism as a viable career path. In this way, participants demonstrated concern not only for youth as an underrepresented group, but for youth whose intersecting identities may keep them alienated from journalism as a profession.

Representation

Another theme that emerged repeatedly throughout the interview process was the notion that, by working with youth, a news organization could fill a representation gap. Several study participants alluded to young people as being “underrepresented” or even “unrepresented” in news, and there was a consensus that, as Caroline Bauman of Chalkbeat put it, “if your journalism is not representative of the people you say that you want to serve, it's not good journalism.” For these participants, youth voice initiatives were a form of diversification, something that allowed them to better reflect the demographics of the community they served, which they saw as being a core journalistic value. As such, they tended to perceive youth voice

initiatives as benefitting not only the young people helping to produce content, but also the audience members consuming it. As Lila Lakehart of KUOW explained:

There's value to our listeners because they get to hear unique perspectives. You know, the fact that we primarily serve underrepresented youth, we bring more diversity to the airwaves at KUOW, not just because they're young people, but also because they're from communities that are often not traditionally heard on KUOW.

In fact, nearly all participants used the language of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at some point to describe their work with youth, language that is often applied to marginalized racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender identities, but is less common in conversations about age. Indeed, a related theme that many participants brought up was the notion that listening to young people makes for better journalism in general. Several noted they had become aware of important stories they might not have otherwise known about because of their work with young people, and others noted that regularly seeking out youth perspectives allows journalists to ask questions they may not have thought to ask. Many also had a sense that the young people they worked with brought a refreshing energy and hopefulness into the work, which is consistent with past research findings that suggest youth decision-making can positively impact the commitment of energy of adults working within an organization (Zeldin et al., 2000).

Participants also cited an ethical commitment to authenticity as another motivating factor. There was agreement among the group that the people a story is about should be able to “speak for themselves” rather than having a journalist speak for them. For example, when the adults who led The Trace’s “Since Parkland” project set out to document the lives of children killed by gun violence, they made the decision to train teen reporters to document those stories because it was teens who were closest to that issue, according to Katina Paron, who helped lead the project:

This project existed because somebody asked who should be telling this story. This is their story, this is the story of their peers dying because of, essentially because of decisions adults are making.

However, if enriched coverage and authenticity are the carrots encouraging youth representation in news media, then there is also a stick: diminished audience relevance. For some study participants, youth representation was an existential issue: if young people don't see their voices or concerns reflected in a news organization's reporting, they are not a guaranteed audience. Rather, they can choose not to consume that reporting, which would, as Matthew T. Hall of the San Diego Union Tribune put it, send the organization "crashing into irrelevance." Katina Paron worded the argument this way:

Young people are as much a part of the community as anybody else. They're not reflected in newsrooms, nor are they reflected on pages of the publication. So what do you think they're going to do? They're going to deny your publication their money, their time, their trust, because you're not giving the same benefit to them.

It is interesting to note how, again, reciprocity and mutuality emerge here as a core value of journalism as the participants understand it. While journalists of decades past might have taken for granted a sense of a duty on the part of news audiences to remain informed about current events, here, participants demonstrate an awareness that expectations around how information is distributed and received have changed. To them, it is not a given that youth will "age into" being news consumers, but that their loyalty and engagement must be cultivated through authentic relationship.

Challenges

Participants were unanimous in their assessment that including youth voices in their news coverage was a positive decision with tangible benefits for youth, journalism content, and communities. This general sense of success, though, does not negate the fact that their efforts also came with considerable challenges. Of the wide array of barriers participants had to surmount on their way to meaningful youth inclusion, two emerged as particularly salient: the resource intensive nature of youth collaboration and the negotiation of power between youth and adults.

Resource intensive

Across the board, almost all the study participants arrived at a consensus that co-creating media with youth is a resource-intensive endeavor requiring significant intention, time, and of course, funding. In fact, about half cited funding as a challenge, and many cited a tension between the desire to provide a high-quality, meaningful experience for the young people they worked with and the need to create journalism on a deadline. Especially in understaffed and lower-funded newsrooms, creating space for youth voices could at times compete with the newsroom's other needs. KUNR News Director Michelle Billman said:

I think our big challenge is just that we are a really small newsroom, and so I've had to kind of dig my heels in and just make this a priority. But obviously there are many opinions on what a newsroom should be prioritizing, and this wouldn't be at the top of the list for everybody, but we just believe in it and feel it's important...we feel like it's really tied into our mission. But I do think, like, having limited resources, there are certain weeks where it's a little harder to get a KUNR staff member over to the class.

Like many organizations in this sample, KUNR relied on partnerships with local and community organizations to make up for their resource deficit. An educator within the Washoe County School District facilitated the curriculum, which allowed KUNR staff members the flexibility to meet with students only when they needed additional help or when their projects were ready for review by an editor. The radio station also benefited from having a Report for America Corps Member, who assisted with the Youth Media class as part of a required service project. This reliance on community partnerships was the norm rather than the exception across the sample, with many participants noting that they look to student groups, youth development organizations, youth activist groups, or schools for access to young people and assistance in training them. Caroline Bauman of Chalkbeat pointed out that partnering with youth organizations can not only help alleviate some of the logistical difficulties that a news outlet might not have the resources to handle itself, but also provide additional adult support to the young people involved:

Typically, working through partnership with a group that is already tuned in to students, whether it's a leadership type of group or debate or journalism, we really prioritize those relationships because it's a natural fit for us and also there's an element of, the students are already a part of something where they have things like waivers and release forms and also training and support that we can walk with them in.

This finding further emphasizes the interdependence between news organizations and communities, but as the next section will point out, this interdependence comes with its own set of challenges.

Power sharing

As in many kinds of engaged journalism, the negotiation of power between journalists and community members – in this case, youth – was at times challenging for the media creators

who were interviewed. While many participants indicated that mutual respect is key to successful working relationships with youth, Amanda Vigil of KQED Education found that expectations around how respect is given and received can sometimes differ along generational lines. She explained:

There is a disconnect intergenerationally between folks, very quickly in the last ten years. There's a mindset of "Oh, I'm an adult. Therefore, you should respect me." And folks who are coming up these days are like, respect is earned. It's mutual. You show me respect, we can share respect. And that includes how we approach creating work together.

Other participants acknowledged that working with youth required them to make space for new ways of thinking and creating journalism. Lara Jones of KRCL, for example, recounted a humorous anecdote about inviting students from a local community college to host her community affairs program, Radioactive:

It's funny because I asked them to write their own promos, and their language cracks me up: "Fresh journalists take over Radioactive!" Like, oh, I'm stale. That's one of the challenges, just putting my ego and my need to, you know, "no, do it this way, do it that way" on the back burner.

Related to issues of respect and power sharing, trust was another challenge voiced by many study participants as a formidable barrier to including youth voices in news media. Participants acknowledged that building working relationships with young people often necessitates surmounting a trust deficit, especially when those relationships are with marginalized youth communities who may have been harmed by careless, negative, or inaccurate news reporting in the past. Matthew T. Hall, who interviewed several young people for the San

Diego Union Tribune's Hello Gen Z podcast, wondered "Why should they give a lot of time to us, multiple interviews?" They don't trust us, they don't know us." While no universal answer to this question was offered, participants echoed a theme that has by now become familiar: building long-term relationships and creating quality journalism in tandem with young people are crucial in earning trust.

Chapter 5

Discussion

On the whole, the participants in this study described their experiments in working alongside youth as successes. However they defined success, overwhelmingly, participants perceived making space for youth voices as an endeavor worth the time, labor, and resources it took to accomplish. They articulated benefits not only to the youth participants they worked with, but also to the quality of their journalism and, by extension, to their audiences. For a journalism profession that is distrusted, concerned about its long-term sustainability, and struggling under the weight of its own financial precarity, this finding is a promising one: if youth voice initiatives provide meaningful and authentic opportunities to connect with an elusive audience segment, then the models described herein may provide a framework for beginning to redefine relationships with youth.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) arose as common framework for understanding approaches to working with youth. Participants repeatedly cited the notion that good journalism is produced not only for but also with the community in which it exists; for them, collaborations with young people represented an opportunity to reach a portion of that community that has historically been pushed to the margins. In many ways, their efforts mirror a larger push within the profession to recognize and elevate people with marginalized identities. DEI practices have received increasing amounts of attention from news professionals as the industry continues to grapple with both its relevance to marginalized communities and its role in upholding systemic oppression. Many news professionals report seeing recent, visible shifts in how their organizations cover marginalized communities, including creating formal positions devoted to

DEI and advocacy work, inclusive hiring practices, and changes in the language used to report on communities of color (Burns, 2022). Likewise, many participants considered youth to be a minority population unjustly excluded from media representation and deserving of the same opportunities to participate in conversations around political and social issues that adults receive. At the same time, while youth in general have been broadly ignored by conventional news media, youth are not a monolith. Many young people hold additional marginalized identities beyond just their age, such as their race, ethnicity, immigration status, disability status, or sexual orientation. The generation born after 1996 is, in fact, the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the history of the United States, and like any collective of people, its members have a vast array of lived experiences. Recognizing that a single youth voice — or even a handful of youth voices — can never be representative of an entire generation, many of the interviewees in this sample set out to include youth from different backgrounds over a sustained period. Furthermore, a young person's intersecting identities may complicate their relationship to journalists. As Wenzel and her colleagues (2018) point out, individuals whose communities have been historically stigmatized often perceive harm by conventional news media in ways that those from more privileged backgrounds may not. Overcoming that unique trust deficit, the researchers say, requires journalists to rethink their role “from providers of information to conveners of discussion around what issues are important to the communities they serve and how they should be covered” (Wenzel et al, 2018, para.5).

However, the question of how best to rethink this role with regard to youth remains a nebulous one. News professionals' strategies for amplifying youth voices varied considerably in terms of overall method, allocation of decision-making responsibility, and interpersonal dynamics. This finding makes sense given that neither youth nor news organizations are

monoliths; it's reasonable to expect that no single intervention will achieve the same degree of success in all contexts. That said, similar through lines run through all four models of youth participation identified in this study. All four are undergirded by a similar faith in the competence and character of young people; that is, all four share the conviction that youth have not only important contributions to make to social and political conversations, but also the ability to articulate their perspectives in ways that align with journalistic standards of quality. All four seek to represent those perspectives with fidelity and authenticity; participants tended to be cautious about speaking for or on behalf of young people, preferring to allow youth to speak for themselves, albeit with guidance. Furthermore, even those models that are characterized by relatively light or infrequent contact with youth, such as the youth-as-sources model, emphasize a desire for mutually beneficial, trusting relationships with young people.

It is significant to note that, in general, the approaches enumerated in this study were guided by value systems that were closely aligned with the strengths-based perspective of Positive Youth Development (PYD). As a cohort, youth were viewed as assets worth investing in: their ideas were seen as legitimate and their experiences valuable, they were considered competent enough to take on difficult tasks, and they were perceived as having both the desire and the capability to impact their community, political system, and world in positive ways. Additionally, the core elements of the Youth-Adult Partnership framework proved to be consistently important to the participants, with themes of reciprocity, meaningful decision-making opportunities, supportive relationships, and co-learning being constantly echoed. Youth media creation, as we've discussed, can have a powerful influence on the self-efficacy and political confidence of young people. When practiced in a setting that creates conditions for healthy personal development by emphasizing reciprocal, supportive relationships with adults,

it's possible that the benefits of creation can be magnified. At present, youth voice initiatives in news media have received neither widespread attention nor widespread adoption; however, the fact that the small handful of journalists who are actively engaging in collaborations with youth are doing so in a way that generally aligns with the broad goals of PYD has promising implications for the civic health of both youth and communities. If traditional media narratives around youth have tended to fall in line with a deficit-based perspective of youth development, adopting a PYD approach to thinking about youth as an audience and as community members may help journalists build trust and enrich community conversations.

Importantly, the models of youth participation described in this study all required marked shifts away from established professional norms of journalism. Scholars who have studied methods of engaged journalism have articulated a tension between the inclination of journalists toward gatekept, one-way publication practices and the participatory expectations of audience members (Lewis, 2012). Similarly, the participants in this study found that certain cultural norms guiding how journalism is produced needed to be discarded, refashioned, or negotiated to allow space for youth participation. The pace of news production, in many cases, needed to be slowed down to allow for the instruction, mentorship, and informed consent of young people less familiar with newsgathering practices. Thus, the projects that youth participated in tended to eschew the urgency of daily breaking news in favor of longer-form explanatory content. In the same vein, sustained relationship building with youth often required dedicated staff members and large blocks of time — not days or weeks, but months, semesters, or even years. News producers sometimes found themselves in the challenging position of having to consider and account for the particular developmental and media literacy needs of the young people with whom they collaborated, something for which most journalists receive no formal training. Fundamentally,

participants found that established professional norms guiding the relationships between journalists and community members were too often incompatible with the desire for meaningful youth inclusion, and that realization required them to redefine those relationships. It's possible, then, that news professionals seeking opportunities to deepen engagement with youth audiences may find more success with innovating or adapting models of youth-co creation than traditional professional norms might provide.

As more than one participant pointed out, though, re-working professional norms requires sustained commitment that not all newsrooms are willing, or perhaps able, to prioritize. It can be difficult for journalists to shift long-entrenched notions about their relationship to community and even more difficult for them to adapt to changes in professional culture (Ekdale et al., 2015). Further, because the predominant business model of American news outlets is largely dependent on audience revenue, it may be difficult to justify expending resources on a demographic that only comprises a small portion of those who pay for news (Walker, 2020). These challenges together raise the question of whether youth voice initiatives are scalable to the journalism profession broadly. This is not an easy question to answer, but it may be helpful to look to other uses of engaged journalism as a guide for what is possible. Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis (2019) have noted that at public media organizations, journalists are beginning to distinguish between the communities they cover and their actual audiences (i.e., the ones clicking on and consuming content). Their research revealed that journalists at these organizations tend to prioritize building relationships with the public at large over those actually interacting with their reporting, which suggests a view of community members as an investment. Other scholars have likewise documented ways in which news professionals have tried to transform their legacy journalism practices to integrate a more reciprocal approach to audience engagement, with both

success and challenges (Green-Barber & Garcia McKinley, 2019; Wenzel, 2019; Crittenden & Haywood, 2020; Schmidt & Lawrence, 2020). Taken together, this research points to a news system that is more flexible than one might expect, one that is actively innovating and seeking better ways of understanding audience relationships.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) can also provide a useful guide for understanding the scalability of youth voice initiatives. As mentioned previously, many participants in this study viewed youth as an underrepresented population and saw their contributions as aiding in the diversification of journalism content. News organizations of all stripes have, in recent years, been scrutinizing the hegemony of both their workforce and their content, and many have made substantive changes to their hiring practices, training, and reporting approaches in ways that attempt to elevate people from underrepresented groups (Burns, 2022). Certainly, efforts to increase diversity and inclusivity in journalism have been met with legitimate criticism. Journalists of color, in particular, have been skeptical about the longevity and authenticity of newsroom DEI efforts (Brown, 2022). That said, news organizations overall have articulated that diversity is important to them and that they are willing to make structural changes to their professional norms in order to address this priority. Given this commitment, it's not unreasonable for journalists to extend their existing DEI practices to those under the age of 18.

It's worth emphasizing here the considerable differences among the organizations included in this sample, as those differences have direct implications for the scalability of youth voice initiatives. The ten participants who were interviewed represent a diverse cross section of the American news media landscape in terms of in terms of staff size, audience reach, funding model, location, medium of distribution, and in some cases, subject matter. Nonetheless,

elevating youth voices proved to be an important concern for all participants, and this fact underscores the potential adaptability of youth collaboration practices. Importantly, no two initiatives represented in this sample were exactly alike. Each one was designed around the specific needs, goals, and culture of its parent organization, and each one sought creative solutions to the unique challenges it faced. It is unlikely that every model presented in this study will be successful in all contexts, but the very fact that youth voice initiatives have been adopted by news organizations of all kinds suggests the flexibility of collaboration. By understanding which models work most successfully in which conditions, news professionals can begin to seek out and elevate youth voices in ways that are most compatible with their organizational contexts.

Recommendations for Practice

Research has identified a wide gap between how journalism is currently produced and the information that young people need and want to become informed, active, and empowered members of their community. However, it has also suggested that youth media creation can play a role in helping youth develop a sense of civic identity that providing forums for public discussions can benefit greater community cohesion. The youth voice initiatives described in this study may provide a useful starting point for supporting greater inclusion of youth voice in public discussions and, by extension, greater opportunity for meaningful youth civic participation. Whether and how any of the models articulated in this study might be scalable to other news organizations will depend heavily on individual context. Factors such as organizational resources, staffing, values, and commitment appeared to play a large role in how youth voice initiatives were designed and implemented by the news organizations represented in this study, so it is difficult to provide universal recommendations to journalism practitioners.

That said, there were some key features common to all initiatives that participants consistently emphasized as important to the success of a youth voice initiative:

1. It must be reciprocal. In an ideal initiative, adult staff and youth participants benefit equally. Benefits to youth can include paid compensation, publication bylines, technical skill building, and mentorship opportunities, among others.
2. It must be sustained. Youth voice initiatives should be an ongoing exchange between youth and adults rather than a transaction with a single touch point. This is true of both relationships between adults and individual youth, which should ideally be ongoing to foster connection and mutual trust, and at an organizational level, i.e., youth voice initiatives they should involve multiple youth over time. As Green-Barber and Garcia McKinley (2019) point out, “civic engagement is an achievable short-term goal for engaged journalism projects, but long-term civic involvement requires a sustained process of engagement,” (p. 55).
3. It must authentically value the ideas and perspectives of youth. Relationships between youth and adults within the media organizations examined in this study tended to be top-down rather than perfectly democratic; even so, youth voice initiatives tend to view young people as guides and authorities who should be encouraged to contribute ideas and pursue stories they are interested in. In many cases, valuing youth perspectives also means amplifying their work to an organization’s general audience rather than distributing it only on a platform meant for youth.
4. It must give youth meaningful work. Youth voice initiatives should give young people the opportunity to use their voices in a way that is personally meaningful for them; that is, the media they create or co-create should allow them to build skills, internally reflect

on their own values and beliefs, and examine issues that are important to them. This work should be substantive rather than simply supportive.

5. It must account for the developmental needs of the youth without infantilizing them. Adult staff should consider how the relative inexperience and maturity level of adolescents may affect their ability to collaborate with journalists. Teenagers are not adults and should not be treated exactly like adults, but they should be challenged and given the support they need to express themselves meaningfully.

It's worth reiterating that these key themes map closely onto the core elements of Youth-Adult Partnership: authentic decision making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, and community connectedness. Although the Youth-Adult Partnership framework was not explicitly created with media organizations in mind, this study underscores its applicability to media. Because the framework's core elements seem to so often be at the center of what journalists consider successful youth voice initiatives indicates, it's reasonable to expect that designing future initiatives with the YA-P framework in mind may be a useful strategy for improving youth engagement practices in news. As discussed in the next section, additional research is needed to before a full set of best practices can be described; however, Appendix C contains a reflection guide for news organizations rethinking their relationships to youth audiences.

Recommendations for Research

The purpose of this study, ultimately, was to act as a descriptive foundation for further understanding the role youth-adult collaborations might play in fostering civic identity development in news media contexts. Because there is so little research directly examining youth voice initiatives in news media, it was crucial for me to first establish a baseline description of how news organizations are working with young people and why. The resulting

description raised many additional and salient questions this study is unable to answer, particularly about the efficacy of youth voice initiatives in developing civic identities. As I've mentioned, it was outside the scope of this study to evaluate the efficacy of any of the initiatives included in the sample. As such, the next step in the progression of this research should be to assess whether the actual developmental benefits to the youth who participate in these initiatives are indeed as positive as the participants in this study hoped for. In particular, it would be prudent for researchers to study whether or not there is a link between any of the identified models of youth participation and youth participants' sense of connection to their community, their feelings of empowerment and political efficacy, and their interest in political and social issues. Additionally, while the Youth-Adult Partnership framework was used in this study as a starting point for identifying emerging themes, it was not used as a tool for assessing the quality or effectiveness of any given program. Formally evaluating existing youth voice initiatives using the established of the Youth-Adult Partnership framework would be helpful in allowing news professionals and program staff currently leading these initiatives to know the extent their approaches to youth-adult relationships, decision-making, and power-sharing might be conducive to positive outcomes for youth. Finally, the participants in this study identified several other goals relating to developmental benefits to youth, including social-emotional and media literacy competencies, and the effectiveness of youth voice initiatives as an intervention in these domains should be assessed as well. Together, such research would help establish whether youth voice initiatives are an effective and positive intervention for achieving meaningful opportunities for youth civic participation. This will require examining the perspectives of youth participants, something I was unable to get because of the timeline limitations inherent in this project. To know and future research can only be enriched by considering the extent to which an

organization's goals for collaboration align with the experiences of the young people it serves. My hope, though, is that this research will not occur in isolation, but instead that it will enter into conversations with other examinations of engaged journalism. By considering youth as one important facet of the larger community of individuals building reciprocal relationships with news organizations, this research further legitimizes the place of young people in public discussions.

Limitations

It is important to consider that the small handful of news organizations represented in this study do not offer a comprehensive picture of all the ways in which youth voices are being included in American news media. This study does not factor in the myriad additional organizations who also practice youth voice initiatives and whose personnel I was unable to interview. Likewise, there are likely many more news organizations I'm unaware of that are practicing youth voice initiatives in some form. Some of these organizations may be working with youth in ways that fall outside the framework I have presented here, and those organizations' perspectives will be necessary in building a fuller understanding of how youth voices are being amplified in news. Furthermore, the perspectives included in this study may not reflect the full reality of how each youth voice initiative functions. The individuals included in this small sample could only represent their own views, and it's entirely possible that their assessments might diverge with that of youth participants, other program staff, or potential observations conducted by a third party.

I also want to highlight the possibility that my own background may have created implicit biases that informed how this research was conducted. As a former newspaper journalist, I brought into this research preconceived notions about how newsrooms can, do, and should

function based on my past experiences and value system. I am also, having been born in 1996, not far removed from the age demographic this study examines; it is possible that my proximity to the youth population colors my perception of how youth are represented in media and treated by media professionals. Either or both of these identities could have informed how I framed the questions I posed to interviewees, what follow-up questions I decided to ask, which themes I focused on in my analysis, and how I interpreted those themes. The interview protocol that guided my conversations with participants is included in Appendix B.

Conclusion

Youth voice initiatives in news media offer promising avenue for adolescents to develop the skills, competencies, and dispositions they need to become active and informed citizens in the 21st century. Moreover, these initiatives also represent an opportunity for news organizations to build relationships with an audience that remains alienated from traditional news. Both of these concerns will only become more salient as the interplay between American political life and the digital information ecosystem become ever more complex. My hope is that future research and practice can refine the process of collaborating with youth in journalism contexts, as there remain varying ideas about how much decision-making responsibility youth should have, how best to structure professional relationships between adults and teens, and how to surmount barriers like a lack of resources and trust. Still, the existence and success of youth voice initiatives indicate that, at least to some journalists, adolescents have valuable contributions to make to public conversations. For news organizations grappling with their relationship to community, their role in democracy, and their relevance to a new generation of citizens, these results can and should be a challenge. Whether and how organizations rise to meet

this challenge will be of intense interest to me. In the words of TheodoreSizer, “the students are watching.”

Appendix A

Table of Interviewees

Name	Role	Organization
Caroline Bauman	Community Engagement Manager	Chalkbeat
Michelle Billman	News Director	KUNR Public Radio
Leah Clapman	Founder	PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs
Elis Estrada	Senior Director	PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs
Matthew T. Hall	Editorial and Opinion Director	San Diego Union Tribune
Lara Jones	Executive Producer & Director of Social Impact	KRCL 90.0FM
Allegra Kirkland	Senior Politics Editor	Teen Vogue
Lila Lakehart	Director, RadioActive Youth Media	KUOW Public Radio
Katina Paron	Senior Editor, Since Parkland/ Editor, The Future is Ms.	The Trace/ Ms. Magazine
Amanda Vigil	Youth Media Manager	KQED Education

Appendix B

Sample Interview Guide

1. How would you describe [name of initiative or program]? (i.e. who are the young people involved and what activities do they engage in?)
2. How did your organization settle upon this particular approach to collaborating with young people?
 - a. Follow up: What values, philosophies, or “north stars” informed how the program was designed and implemented?
 - b. Follow up: What research, if any, informed how the program was designed and implemented?
 - c. Follow: Do you ever tailor the content of the program to young people at different developmental stages? If so, based on what kind of information?
3. Could you describe the ways in which your organization has collaborated with young people in the course of this initiative?
 - a. Follow up: How would you describe the relationships between the adults who guide these efforts and the young people who participate in them?
 - b. Follow up: How are decisions made about the content and delivery of the program/initiative?
 - i. Follow up: Who are the key decision-makers?
 - ii. Follow up: How much decision-making power do the young people involved in [program/initiative] have?
 - c. Follow up: What, to you, is the ultimate goal of these collaboration efforts?

- d. Follow up: From your perspective, how does [program/initiative] contribute to the overall mission of your organization/publication/company?
 - e. Follow up: How do you measure success? What metrics do you use?
4. From your perspective, what is the purpose of having young people participate in the creation of news?
5. What does “youth voice” mean to you?
6. How does your organization navigate the relationship dynamics that come with sharing power with young people?
7. How would you describe how the young people you collaborate with relate to one another?
8. What, if anything, do you hope the young people involved with [program/initiative] take away from it?
9. What **challenges** have you faced as you’ve set out to include more young voices in your work? What has **worked**?
10. What changes, if any, have you seen in the young people who have participated in the program?
 - a. Follow up: Have you done any evaluation of the efficacy program? If so, what were the conclusions?
11. What, if anything, has your organization learned from the young people with whom you’ve collaborated?
12. What impact, if any, has [program/initiative] had on your readers/viewers?
 - a. Follow up: How do you know?

- b. In your view and experience, what would most help to increase the reach, impact, and scale of efforts to amplify younger voices in news media?
- c. Follow-up: What would need to be in place to facilitate that scaling?
- d. Follow-up: What challenges exist, if any, to make scaling happen?
- e. Follow-up: In your view and experience, who needs to buy-in for scale to happen?

Appendix C

Reflection Guide for Journalism Practitioners

1. What barriers do we face to including more – and more diverse — youth voices in our reporting? Given our resources, staffing, mission, and organizational values, how can we begin surmounting those barriers?
2. How well do we understand our current youth audience — or our lack of it?
3. What are the information needs of the young people in our community? How well is our organization meeting those needs?
4. Do we create opportunities for young people to share feedback on our journalism? To what extent do we take their feedback into consideration?
5. How often do we produce stories about people under the age of 18, and how are those young people portrayed? What kinds of stories do they appear in?
6. What stories are we currently covering that are relevant to young people’s daily lives? How can we bring youth voices into those stories? Where do issues and concerns relevant to youth intersect with our existing beats?
7. What is our current approach to community engagement? How can we extend our existing community engagement practices to include youth?
8. Does the age diversity of our sources reflect the age diversity of community? How often do we turn to youth as experts on the stories that affect them?
9. Do we provide opportunities for young people to directly contribute to community conversations?

10. Who can help us better understand the youth in our community? Are there community organizations or schools we can partner with?
11. Are there communities of practice we can create or join? How are other organizations doing this work?

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