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Inside the House of SYN: Digital Literacy and Youth Media

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According to a 23 year old radio journalist, the media is like bob sledding: ‘I don't know how people start in bob sledding. It just seems to be a very dramatic thing’. The media experiences which count towards professional involvement can be a mystery. Rookie journalists and bob-sledders need something ‘that can ease you into it’.

Young people have higher levels of digital media use and consumption than their elders (Vromen, 2007: 50). However, there is a gap between media use amongst young people and the ‘dramatic’ step towards directing and contributing to the creative economy. Our task, in this paper, is to understand what digital literacy entails in relation to media industries and the creative workforce.

‘Digital literacy’ takes the concept of literacy beyond the written text, suggesting that there are social and economic benefits in extending media communication skills to the population at large (Daley, 2003). The emergence of the term coincides with changes in the media, in particular the shift from consumption as the principal form of engagement, to participation (Graham and Goodrum, 2007). In order to make the most of this newfound capacity, we need to effectively both ‘read and write’ in the audio-visual-textual languages of the media (Buckingham, 2007, 146). Digital literacy is more than simply a skill as it enables participation in society through a communicative system that is both elaborate and widespread. As with all literacies it must be examined beyond individual learners, within its social and economic context, for application in the world (Livingstone, 2007).

The young journalist quoted above found his way into the industry via SYN (the Student Youth Network), a not-for-profit media organisation and community radio licensee based in Melbourne’s inner-city. Through self-established community organisations, young people are creating their own structures to meet digital literacy needs. These organisations fit somewhere between industry, the education system and everyday media use. Teaching, producing and learning coexist in this setting.

When a volunteer or staff member discovers that someone from SYN has found employment in the media industries, they add the name to an alumni register. We know from that list that at least 80 of their volunteers have gone on to work in the media since the station commenced full-time community radio broadcasts in 2003. If SYN is teaching digital literacy then the alumni group are ‘literate’ to the point where they can participate as professionals in the economy of digital media (although many more would have attained a similar skills standard). Thirty SYN alumni agreed to talk to us about their experience at the station and beyond. We found them in regional commercial radio, in the press galleries, producing online media for the ABC, reading television news, writing comedy, running festivals, and even taking chances in entrepreneurial endeavours, such as mobile phone content development. Although the majority had been involved in radio during their time at SYN (as radio was SYN’s main activity in the early days), the alumni are now distributed across radio, television, film, print, publishing and online media. They are working in the
commercial, public service and community broadcasting sectors as media producers, technicians, administrators and managers.

A nation-wide youth media movement has emerged in the last decade, which, from the start, embraced digital communication. These organisations reflect a particular convergence culture where media use is spread across technologies from digital to ‘low-fi’ media – from blogs to zines and broadcasting (Jenkins, 2006). The definition of ‘digital literacy’ used in this paper therefore works across different media, although it is intimately tied to the cultural shifts produced as a result of digital technologies (Hartley, 2004). The behaviour of the youth media sector – in particular its tendency to create media of all forms – works against the assumption that young people have abandoned traditional media, even though their relationship to the media generally may have changed.

Although SYN is just one organisation, we know that the community sector as a whole is providing important outcomes in this area. In late 2007 we conducted an online survey of over 300 media professionals. More than 53% of all respondents had been involved in community media, a figure which rose to 64% in the under 30 category. 86% of the younger group said that community media was either important or vital for them getting work. On the surface, this figure points to the success of vocational education and the role of the third sector in industry development. However, by examining the experience of SYN, we were able to get a deeper understanding of the processes and challenges which are occurring as digital literacy grows in importance and scope for the youth sector and beyond.

The digital literacy training provided by youth media is less prescriptive than formal education and yet more targeted than the self-directed learning that occurs through commercial media spaces. As it is entirely voluntary and determined by young people themselves, this form of digital literacy stems from young people’s own cultural interests and economic imperatives. We open with the context of SYN and ask ‘why did they get involved?’ The second part looks at outcomes and how the youth media sector is successfully extending digital literacy

Starting Out

Digital media proficiency has become a defining issue of within the contemporary generation gap debate. Having grown up with digital technologies, Generation Y are depicted as confident and critical consumers, adept at making technologies suit their lifestyle, friendship groups and interests. At 26, Ryan Heath, in his generational assault, ‘Please Just F* Off, It’s Our Turn Now’, wrote that his life has been ‘about in-your-face technology from start to present’ (Heath, 2006: 40). Instant information, global shopping and the promise of constant social interaction are the rightful inheritance of Generation Y. For Heath, it adds up to a new level of independence. Digital technologies are the most positive thing to have happened in his lifetime (see also Crawford, 2006; Huntley, 2006).

SYN is ‘youth focused and operated, fully’ii. It asserts a culture of independence and provides a creative and social space away from school, university and home. The independence realised through media communication, the kind which Heath speaks of
and which SYN generates, is different to ‘empowerment’. Being independent means being a part of the world, on your own terms. Although a common concept in youth media evaluation (Livingstone, 2007: 495), ‘empowerment’ categorises youth as a group requiring assistance in order to become full participants and citizens, and assumes that young people are powerless to begin with. SYN is about young people figuring things out, creating new methods, sharing knowledge, enjoying themselves, expressing an opinion, participating as fans and critics and getting skills that will lead to work.

SYN’s ethos is partly explained by their history. The organisation was formed through the amalgamation of two aspirant community broadcasters. 3TD was located at Thornbury High School (previously Thornbury Darebin Secondary College), in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. A central feature of 3TD was its accessible programming grid, designed to give all students a chance to have a go at radio, regardless of their experience or music knowledge. Realising that one school was unlikely to get a full community broadcasting license, 3TD approached SRA, based at RMIT, to create a new, independent broadcaster with a large volunteer base made up of both secondary and tertiary aged young people.

The 3TD teachers originally envisaged that SYN would attain the educational status of the zoo or the museum; a school excursion destination, providing an organised learning opportunity outside of the classroom. To some extent this has occurred, with organisations such as City Centre (which gives country kids a city experience) building an afternoon at SYN into their school tours, designed to encourage responsibility and self-development through independent learning practices. SYN has built partnerships with around 150 schools and community associations, deriving the majority of its income from training programs. SYN offers them ‘Detention’, an afternoon timeslot reserved for school groups, and shorter tours. Accredited training is not currently provided, as they believe that too much emphasis on assessment is a disincentive for volunteers seeking experience rather than ‘pieces of paper’ (focus group). The majority of programmers find their way to SYN independently of school groups.

Volunteer meetings regularly attract in excess of 70 faces, many of them new to the organisation. SYN’s internal online discussion forum receives an average of 20 posts a day, with 50 individuals logging in over the course of a week. In 2006 the radio station had an audience of 124,000 weekly listeners (McNair Ingenuity Research, 2006), and their daily television program was, at times, attracting up to 30,000 viewers. SYN’s success raises a number of questions: Why are young people seeking out structures that accommodate media participation (as producers and audiences) on such a large scale? What does SYN provide that cannot be achieved through individual media use, via collaborative online environments or content sharing networks? How should the education sector respond?

**Why do they get involved?**

Steve Goodman writes that youth media is ‘a movement that is nurtured and sustained by non-school institutions. Unfortunately, none of the three main strands – technology integration, media literacy, and community arts production – have succeeded in penetrating the classroom or changing the system of schooling in pervasive and
enduring ways’ (Goodman, 2003: 18). Instead, organisations such as SYN are creating important partnerships with the education sector and may be stimulating greater interest in digital literacy than formal education alone. Amongst the SYN alumni, digital literacy is the indirect result of competing and complex motivations. People get involved for diverse reasons, from the desire to engage with youth culture, to be part of a social network, or to improve their employment prospects.

Many SYN alumni were determined to be journalists, audio technicians or media workers prior to joining. For them, SYN was ‘an amazing enabler’ which reinforced ‘what I wanted to do’. A large proportion of this group were already enrolled in a journalism or media studies higher degree. SYN was an instrumental opportunity to get practical experience, an advantage in a competitive job market. Media participation was a calculated strategy, a means to alleviate or resolve economic and status pressures. Their involvement was motivated by the perception (real or assumed) that formal education alone will not secure work. ‘I remember my first lecture [in a journalism degree course] and the lecturer getting up and saying ‘so many people want to be journalists and there’s so few jobs and you’re never going to get anywhere’ and just walking out feeling so deflated and defeated’.

SYN also allowed them to gain a broader understanding of media practice than course-work could provide. Participation was a means to explore the media and experiment with different forms. ‘I didn’t exactly know which field or medium I wanted to pursue’, commented one journalism student. One of the founders of SYN’s now defunct print publication, Pecado (which means ‘sin’ in Spanish), was set on being a journalist:

... but I wanted to learn a bit more about the background to it, all the production side of things, how it all worked, not just turning up and doing it. So I was interested in gaining a broader understanding of the industry that I wanted to work in. In terms of the magazine we started up I thought it would be a great challenge.

Two alumni commented that they were unsure whether to pursue careers in print or broadcast media: ‘SYN helped foster and grow my love for radio’. A student who missed out on a place in a journalism course found him/herself ‘faking being a [public relations] student… and sort of freaked out and went ‘what do I do’’?

Not all of those who ended up working in the media set out with that intention. One wanted to be a teacher, another was studying to be a paramedic. He commented that he is now left with the $13,000 debt from a degree which is no longer relevant to his career. A former aspiring fashion designer is now working at Triple J, the national ABC youth radio station. Some had no idea which career path they wanted to pursue and did not expect that SYN would lead them anywhere.

About a quarter of those alumni we interviewed joined ‘by accident’ or for social reasons. SYN was a social network for them; ‘people would draw their friends in’. The studios would be subdued at the beginning of a programming grid with just one person playing music on their show. As the weeks went by, programmers would introduce their friends to SYN, ending up with a ‘whole army of eight special correspondents popping in and out with their little segments and hanging out to do the
show’. A young man whose father worked in radio had decided to steer clear of SYN, not wanting to follow in his footsteps. When a friend asked him to fill-in for him on a SYN program he realised ‘I actually like this’. Three months later he was working at a major commercial radio network. A volunteer who ended up on the board joined SYN because her flatmate had a show. Others felt some social alienation after school and were looking for ‘a support network’. One mentioned feeling ‘cut-off’ from friends who had gone to university when ‘that wasn’t what I was doing’. A commerce student felt lost: ‘you’re not into sport and you’re not into the More Beer society… SYN had a mix of really, really interesting and eclectic people that you couldn’t find in other places. And SYN parties were excellent (laugh)’.

What worked?

The key to SYN’s success is the amalgamation of learning and producing. The alumni spoke of the pressure of producing for a listener/viewership and how it impacted on their work:

In the end there's nothing that can really prepare you for the first time being on air, seeing the red light outside flashing and realising you're speaking, even though it mightn't be to the same audience as a Triple M or Triple J get, but you still are speaking to a lot of people…

As a result, the formal processes of production (such as researching, interviewing, sourcing new music and comedy writing) were not so much rules that had to be studied, but useful steps in the creation of content. Technicians learnt the ropes during all-night working bees to keep the radio station on-air, music producers developed a language to deal with bands and record companies, online volunteers could see that their coding was contributing to maintenance of a substantial, active offline community. Many spoke of the personal impact – the desire to improve or come up with something original. SYN was, for them, a place where skills turned into action: ‘To be thrown to the wolves can prove your talent early on’.

One thing that SYN gave me is the confidence that you can do it. You're not making any money out of it, it's not professional, but that you can actually do it. And that's half the battle. [Then] you just have to find a place where someone's going to pay you.

Importantly, the alumni discovered that they had a responsibility to the audience and other volunteers (or ‘SYNners’, as they call themselves). The audience can be a compelling force, providing the impetus to produce and the possibility of connection and interaction. Community media organisations unite audiences, training and access in a way that formal education rarely achieves. Furthermore, their accessibility brings the categories of producer and audience closer together. Producers know that anyone within the age group can get involved, transforming the (imagined or interactive) audience into a knowable community for content-makers. As John Downing has pointed out, audience is largely ignored in discussions of community and alternative media (Downing, 2007: 12; Jauert and Prehn, 2003; with some exceptions, including Meadows et al., 2007). Youth media literature, in particular, is centred on production and self-expression rather than content or the role of audiences in influencing what
gets circulated. Our observations at SYN suggest that the audience is an important factor in the practice of media, enhancing digital literacy and its outcomes.

Moreover, the skills and capacities developed at SYN are not just about content production, but about how content circulates between producers, audiences and intermediaries. Participants soon realise that to communicate effectively in the media environment, certain forms, standards and methods are useful. SYN enables young people to learn basic skills, but also to practice and enact a suite of audio, visual and textual content forms.

The implications for digital literacy

SYN accommodates diverse interests through its accessible structures and social appeal. The motivations for participation can be both complex and varied, from calculated ideas about how to get by in the contemporary workplace to friendship networks. The latter can be just as likely to result in digital literacy, encourage public engagement and influence a life as the former.

The alumni generally felt that the formal education sector could not fully assist them to make the transition to paid work in the media industries. Those wanting to apply their media skills directly in work had to first overcome significant obstacles to do with the contemporary labour market. SYN enables many of its participants to bridge the gap between education and work in the media industries.

We have not, in this paper, examined whether SYN volunteers are finding work in other occupations as a result of their digital literacy skills. However, it is worth considering whether the value of, and need for, digital literacy alters when the primary issue facing young people today is not one of education but opportunity and job security. Young Australians are more educated than ever before. There is no shortage of low-wage jobs. However, as Rebecca Huntley writes, ‘interesting and secure employment for everyone coming out of university is a thing of the past’ (Huntley, 2006: 90). Whether this type of innovative organisation can fundamentally alter industry itself in favour of the aspirant creative workforce is a far more complex issue – and one which the community sector should possibly not have to carry.

Two related, but essential features differentiate SYN from school or university education. First, the presence of an audience means that SYN volunteers must learn from the outset to communicate and connect with other people: listeners, viewers, or readers. Second, the audience also places critical demands upon the organisation. SYN needs to retain and renew its audience, and that means that it must be organised, in some respects at least, along the lines of a professional media organisation, even if it is not professional. Volunteering at SYN needs to be recognised as a form of work as well as learning. SYN’s associational ethos and casual ambience does not make it less of a workplace: in fact it can only succeed if it functions as a media workplace. Further: that particular habitus of the media workplace, with its myriad disciplines, schedules, and technical demands, provides the vital space where mistakes can be made and arcane media knowledge can be rapidly absorbed and applied — the essential ‘forms, methods and standards’.
If this analysis is right, then the early idea of SYN as an educational destination, a media institution akin to a museum or a zoo, may not be so remote from what has actually been built. It is the specific place that matters — the house of SYN, as it is affectionately called — and the experience of working there. These insights suggest that institutions such as SYN provide an experience very different to that accrued through the self-guided digital media participation of user-led online spaces. Traditional media models involve systems of checks and balances as well as a professional, investigative approach to information dissemination. This is not an argument for or against the benefits of amateur media: the point is more that there may be a useful distinction between amateur media and not-for-profit media. Working in a not-for-profit media organisation such as SYN requires an awareness of how information circulates within the public sphere and the responsibilities tied to that, including the legal and ethical dimensions.

Finally, the process of ‘figuring things out’ at SYN is key to becoming literate in the language of media. Digital literacy is complicated by the fact that the ‘language’ of media is changing. This form of literacy is not something to arrive at, but an ongoing experiment. Participation means active development of the forms, industries and methods which are embedding new media within our social structures. On discussion lists, in studios and at computer terminals, SYNners conduct a continuous conversation on the best way to create content. The same conversations are occurring, with different frequency, in media workplaces and amateur forums everywhere. Ultimately, the system of digital literacy that SYN is engaged in remains unfinished business. Students, trainees and amateurs are just as likely to influence the way that media forms evolve as professionals (perhaps more likely, see Benkler, 2006). The seemingly unstructured, casual environments that the youth media sector has developed are, in many ways, an entirely appropriate response to the growing demands of the creative economy.

References


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1 Interviews and focus groups with SYN alumni took place between June 2006 and February 2007.
2 SYN Mission Statement.
3 Interview with Colin Thompson and Paul Van Eeden, March 2007, Melbourne.