Alicia Blum-Ross

Youth filmmaking and justice-oriented citizenship

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Dr. Alicia Blum-Ross
DOB: 16 May 1979
LSE Fellow in Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London
WC2A 2AE
United Kingdom
Email: a.blum-ross@lse.ac.uk
Tel: 07747 018 474

Title: Youth Filmmaking and 'Justice-Oriented Citizenship'

Abstract:

Based on the ethnographic example of the *Reelhood* project, this article explores the different discourses of 'citizenship' that emerged within a youth filmmaking project for young British Muslims. Using Westheimer and Kahne's distinction between the competing understandings of 'citizenship' that often inform educational interventions, I demonstrate how project funders and organizers proposed a different version of citizenship to that privileged by the young participants. Considering the particular technical, creative and social affordances of filmmaking, I examine whether these different visions were able to be reconciled.

Keywords:

- Youth Media
- Citizenship
- Critical Literacy

Total number of characters (excluding references): 32,244

Establishing shot

It is a sunny Saturday afternoon near Whitechapel market in East London. Throngs of shoppers peruse fabric swinging from metal stands, as hawkers announce the falling prices of fruit and vegetables. Amidst the clamor a small band of young filmmakers is choosing where to set up the camera. The director wants to get a long-shot of the market, to establish where in London we find ourselves and to show the diversity of the street scene. As the producer finds someone to interview, the cameraman goes to get a few shots of local street signs written in Bengali and graffitied walls as backdrop to their film on police 'stop and search.'

The young filmmakers are part of an initiative called *Reelhood,*[1] run by the organization Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH), and have elected to come to make films in their spare time over evenings and weekends over several months. They learn how to use the camera, record sound, come up with ideas for interview subjects, write questions, and contribute to a website maintained by the organization running the project about their experiences. Other groups are simultaneously developing films on the relationship between gangs and religion and on protests against the Iraq war.

Based on the example of the *Reelhood* project, this article explores the different discourses of 'citizenship' that emerged within a youth filmmaking project. Using Westheimer and Kahne's distinction between the competing understandings of 'citizenship' that often inform educational interventions (2004b), I demonstrate how project funders and organizers proposed a different version of citizenship to that privileged by the young participants. By illustrating how the young people worked with the specific technical, creative and social affordances of filmmaking, I explore the ways in which filmmaking lent itself to a model of what Westheimer and Kahne call 'justice-oriented citizenship.' This model, which echoes wider discussions of critical media and digital literacy, stands in contrast to the more 'participatory' model privileged by the funders and project organizers. Finally, I question whether there was a means for

[1] During my fieldwork I assigned each of my fieldsites an anonymized reference and then gave the organization the option to use their real name once they had read and we had discussed my findings. Each organization made different choices in this regard. In all cases the names of the young people have been anonymized to preserve confidentially.

challenge in the films presented by the young people to the accepted limited boundaries of 'the political' (Mouffe, 1993) was engaged with after the conclusion of the project.

To illustrate, I first define what I mean by 'youth filmmaking' as a non-formal educational sector, along with an outline of the methodology I employed. Before turning to the empirical case study, I give a brief overview of how youth citizenship has been conceived of theoretically, along with more detail regarding Westheimer and Kahne's typology of citizenship interventions. I also outline some of the synchronicities between conceptions of citizenship and critical media literacy. Finally, I conclude with a narrative of the *Reelhood* project and an analysis of the competing citizenship narratives within the initiative, and the implications of these for understanding youth filmmaking as a citizenship intervention more broadly.

Studying youth filmmaking

Youth filmmaking initiatives can take many forms. In my research, I chose to focus on non-formal educational media projects, or organized initiatives that had specific articulated learning objectives but took place outside of the formal curriculum. I chose not to focus on filmmaking in the formal curriculum (for instance in ICT or Media Studies in the UK) because the format and the content of those programs are often heavily prescribed. Although, to an extent, many youth filmmaking projects in non-formal education do follow a pre-determined format or deal with previously identified content, there often remains a greater degree of autonomy for young people to make creative decisions about their films. That being said, there remain a number of constraints on young peoples' choices even in seemingly 'open' projects like *Reelhood* – for instance the requirement to make a film about 'issues' affecting young Muslims – described below.

Using ethnographic methodologies, I conducted fieldwork non-continuously across eighteen months from 2006-9. I conducted interviews, focus group discussions and participant-observation with adult facilitators, funders and young participants in youth filmmaking projects. These were identified through a combination of convenience and

snowball sampling, working with initiatives recommended to me directly through previous sites.

In all, I conducted eleven in-depth case studies where I followed projects from before filming began prior through to the final edit and screening, and beyond in some cases. Additionally, I spoke with individuals from over thirty organizations, encompassing both short and longer-term projects, and reviewed hundreds of additional hours of youth-produced films. In some cases, I incorporated additional creative and visual methodologies – including video diaries, photo-elicitation and asking young people to draw or create collages about their experiences of taking part in the youth filmmaking initiatives (Blum-Ross, 2012). Once the material had been amassed, I sifted through my fieldnotes, transcripts and visual material to identify overarching themes or points of contention across the sites. In each case I focused on projects where the young people learned the technical filmmaking skills, including writing, camerawork, sound recording and digital editing. Unlike schools-based projects, the initiatives I looked at were not bound by prescribed age categories. The young participants self-selected to take part, and therefore encompassed a range of ages – from 12 to 22 but concentrated mainly in the 14-19 range.

All based in London, the projects I studied were all funded through non-statutory government sources – ranging from specific government funds for youth media to funding from local authorities, foundations or NGOs. Rather than evaluating the success or failure of these projects, I instead chose to closely examine the discursive justifications of the youth filmmaking organizations themselves, by looking at the language they used to gain support for and describe their projects, and the relationship that the young participants had to these often-ideological project goals.

Educating 'citizens'

There is no single understanding of what 'citizenship' means (Heater, 2004), but this labile keyword is nonetheless a term of currency for youth media initiatives. While it is beyond the scope of this empirical paper to fully summarize the wide range of literature on 'citizenship,' it is nonetheless necessary to offer a brief definition for how I

am using the term. In common with other youth researchers (Osler & Starkey, 2003; Weller, 2007), I find consonance with Ruth Lister's work on feminism and citizenship (Lister, 2003, 2008) which foregrounds citizenship 'practice' over citizenship 'status.' Rather than thinking of citizenship as something that one *has*, a practice-based model looks for what one *does* as a citizen (Oldfield, 1990; Siim & Squires, 2008). This definition functions descriptively, based in actual interests and behaviors, as opposed to more normative definitions that focus on what citizens *should* be or do. As researchers have noted (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a), normativity is a constant current running underneath citizenship education projects, where the idea of a 'good' citizen is held up as the ideal to which young people should aspire.

Yet as Westheimer and Kahne establish (2004b), there are competing definitions of what makes for a 'good' citizen. Based on research in the US, they differentiate between what they define as the three dominant models of citizenship that most educational initiatives employ: the 'personally-responsible citizen,' the 'participatory citizen' and the 'justice-oriented citizen.' What each of these perspectives have in common is that they are premised on a baseline construct of young peoples' deficiency. Westheimer and Llewellyn (2009) observe that unlike establishing citizenship education on the *actual* practices of young people, most initiatives take as a given that young people need to be 'improved' in some way rather than 'the possibility that curriculum might better focus on the knowledge and experiences do have as a means of promoting further participation and political engagement' (p. 57). What this article demonstrates, and Westheimer and Kahne also underscore, is that even within a single initiative competing or contrasting models of citizenship may be applied. While acknowledging that there are many differences in the orientation of US-based civic education projects versus citizenship education in Europe, I nonetheless argue that the typology they propose has echoes in many of the non-formal citizenship education projects I observed in the UK, as well as with the formal national Citizenship Curriculum (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998).

In Westheimer and Kahne's model, the personally responsible citizen 'acts responsibly in his/her community' whereas the participatory citizen is an 'active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts,' and the justice-oriented citizen

'critically assesses social, political, and economic structures' (2004b: 240). The example they give is that their theoretical personally responsible citizen might donate a can to a food drive, whereas the participatory citizen would organize the drive itself, and the justice-oriented citizen would 'explore why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes' (*ibid*). The personally responsible model has a neo-liberal tone, based in individual responsibility and action. The participatory model is perhaps the most institutionalized – this is the model evident in the statutory Citizenship Curriculum in the UK (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998) – where the learner is expected to join an established organization (for instance a school council or a political party) but not to question the structure that underpins it.

The third category, the justice-oriented citizen is in contrast the most potentially transgressive. Justice-oriented citizenship foregrounds the critical elements of active citizenship, encouraging young people not to just participate in society, but to engage with learning about the inequalities and relationships of power that underpin the world around them. In this sense, the model of 'justice-oriented citizenship' has echoes of Paolo Friere's Critical Pedagogy (1993) in taking understandings of and critiques of power as a central concern. In this sense the perspective of justice-oriented citizenship relies heavily on the idea of 'critical literacy' or the ability to understand, critique and challenge dominant discourses (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). The language of Critical Pedagogy and critical literacy infuses many projects in both the US (Boyle, 1997; Goodman, 2003) and the UK – as evidenced in interviews with youth media facilitators throughout my fieldwork (see also Dowmunt, 1987; Dowmunt, 1993).

Citizenship and Digital Literacy

For many educators, fostering multiple literacies – including critical, media and digital literacies – is one of the key ambitions of youth media (Goodman, 2003). Although literacy is sometimes measured in terms of 'skills' (Hargittai, 2009), I prefer the more expansive definition that construes literacy as not just a set of instrumental actions, but instead a body of practices and competencies that are embedded, contextual and iterative (Erstad, 2010). In the case of digital literacy, for example, the 'skills'

included are not only mechanical skills to utilize digital tools, but also cognitive skills required to assess and understand information, social skills necessary to navigate different environments and creative skills required for the construction of artifacts and meaning (Eshet-Alkali & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004).

Although not a constant across different citizenship conceptions, within the more interrogative constructs the idea of critical literacy is paramount. Critical literacy emphasizes uncovering the 'relational manner in which meaning is produced, unveiling the interplay between subjectivities, objects, and social practices within specific relations of power' (Lankshear & McLaren 1993: 10). While there are a number of ways of encouraging the development of critical literacy, researchers suggest that media production, in particular using digital technologies, lends itself towards creating critical *media* literacy in inviting young people to consider their own practices of media consumption (Buckingham, 2006; Sholle & Denski, 1993) and to discern how ideological positions are created and perpetuated through media.

Digital literacy, like media literacy or critical literacy, is more than a 'functional matter' but also encompasses the process of critical inquiry, questioning of meaning, and reflexivity (Buckingham 2006). Digital media, with their ease of use, appeal, replicability and accessibility lend themselves to creating interactive learning environments for young people (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). There is ample evidence that learning to make their own productions can enable young people to negotiate the process of making critical judgments and selections (Gillen & Passey, 2011). Yet Buckingham (2003) cautions against technological determinism, noting that while the affordances of digital media may help to reveal processes of selection and framing, they do not *inevitably* lead to critique, but rather young people need to be supported in developing their own abilities to be reflexive.

Recent research has shown that digital media has a potentially major role to play in civic participation for young people (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Jenkins, 2006) but Westheimer and Kahne's distinctions remind us that the form of citizenship that these activities is not necessarily universal. In this article, I use the case study of the *Reelhood* project as a means of exploring some of the civic potentials of youth filmmaking, and some of the limitations. Ultimately, my research centers on understanding how these

different understandings of citizenship are marshaled and contested within youth filmmaking, for 'the way we define citizenship is intimately liked to the kind of society and political community we want' (Mouffe, 1993: 60).

The Reelhood project

MYH was created to provide support and counseling to young Muslims, through operating an advice line, a website with discussion forums, and sporadic creative and advocacy campaigns. One of the *Reelhood* organizers, Rukaiya, told me that there was interest within the organization to do work specifically around the theme of 'political engagement'[2] – above all a key topic for them after the 7/7 London bombings – but there was a concern about the lack of funding.

The MYH organizers went to contacts at the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to present the idea of creating a participatory film project for 'disengaged' young Muslims. Given the theme, DCLG suggested that this would fit within their Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) remit, developed in relationship to the government-wide *Prevent* strategy. The *Prevent* strategy is one of four elements in the government's counter-terrorism strategy that aims at stopping 'people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism' (Home Office, 2010).

The concept for the project was that the young people would not only learn filmmaking skills but, as described in the proposal, would use film to 'discuss and debate a wide variety of social issues' through making 'a documentary that highlights the concerns of British Muslims in order to effect a positive social change and have an active effect on the political agenda.' The objectives for the project were both to develop 'hard' technological skills associated with filmmaking, as well as 'soft' interpersonal and communication skills amongst the participants, as well as more content-based skills in terms of accessing political parties and lobbying groups.

MYH contracted the filmmaking facilitation out to a small documentary production company called Diverse Collective, based in East London. Tom and Anoop,

---

[2] Quotations without in-text citation are either from interviews or discussions with project organizers and participants, or from the funding bid submitted by MYH to DCLG and the accompanying publicity material.

the filmmaker-facilitators, described themselves as specializing in 'cinematic, socially conscious documentaries.' The filmmakers led on the technical aspects of the project, while the staff from MYH remained involved in providing pastoral care and supporting the young participants with sourcing contacts and filming locations.

Rizwan, the project manager from MYH, was in charge of recruiting young participants to the scheme. Early on, he learned that trying to find 15 young people from diverse Muslim backgrounds who were 'politically disengaged' but who wanted to participate in filmmaking in their own time was no straightforward task. In addition to marketing material, Rizwan went in person to youth groups, mosques and schools to present the project. Though he recruited a larger number initially, the final group who stayed involved throughout the project was composed of eight young people, aged 16-22.

The group was broken up into three smaller teams. They were tasked with coming up with ideas for films about 'local', 'national' and 'international' issues. The local group chose to make a film about gangs and the relationship between gang culture, religion and hip hop music. The national group chose to focus on a particular legal statute in the UK called 'Section 44' which widened the ability for police to conduct 'stop and searches.' This statute was extended after the London bombings in 2005 and is widely believed to target Muslims and young people, for reasons relating to both anti-terrorism and anti-gang policing. Rahim, one of the members of the national group, recounted how he felt passionately about the issue of 'stop and search' because 'the police should always fear the public because they're working for us if you think about it. If they make us feel scared, if they make us feel stupid, there's no use of them because they're supposed to be out there making us feel safe.'

The international group had the most difficult time deciding on a final topic, but eventually settled on investigating different forms of protest against the Iraq war. One member of the group, Imran, worked as a youth worker and wanted explicitly to use the opportunity of taking part in the film project to focus on 'this topic, to give [the young people he worked with] a voice.' Another team member, Hejan, who had originally come to London as a refugee from Iraq, described that he felt 'caught in limbo' with this topic because he did not think of himself as being wholly opposed to the war. Though he felt the topic was slightly 'clichéd' he was ultimately overruled by Imran and Zefina (a quiet

young woman who started as part of the group but later dropped out of the project) who liked the concept.

Once the concepts were settled on, the young people fleshed out their topics and began to create a 'wish list' of experts and individuals they would like to interview, and divided up into groups of camera-people, directors and producers. Unlike some of the other projects I studied where responsibilities were rotated throughout the projects, on *Reelhood* the young people stayed in their assigned roles and notably, in each group it ended up that the female participants acted as the producers. The producers worked most closely with Tom to plan the interviews and make arrangements, and the directors and camera operators worked more closely with Anoop to learn camera skills or, as directors, take charge of the overall narrative direction and the look and feel of the films. They used both a professional-grade Sony HD camera and a more mid-range Sony camcorder for backup shots. Anoop explained how to use the cameras and the sound recording equipment, and noted that they would need both interview and 'cutaway' shots to fill in.[3]

After creating a shooting schedule and plan, the producers went about contacting interview subjects. Given the contacts from MYH and the tenacity of the producers, they had a high degree of success – ultimately interviewing the first British-born Muslim MP, a correspondent for the national Guardian newspaper and campaigners from nationally recognized groups. In addition to the formal interviews, each of the groups also interviewed young people, films on-street *vox pops* and shot hours filler material including shots of London streets, reenactments and contextual shots.

Once the shoots had been completed, Tom and Anoop uploaded the footage at Diverse Collective for the edit. The editing was done on a relatively ad hoc basis, the young people arranged to go to the studio in their own time (mainly the three directors although others turned up at various points as well). With Tom and Anoop's guidance the young people created a 'rough edit' of each of the three films using the editing software Final Cut Pro, which included shot selection, basic sequencing, overall content selection

---

[3] The *Reelhood* project utilized relatively straightforward professional-grade digital technologies (an HD camera to shoot and Final Cut Pro to edit) to produce the films, and then used the organisational website to distribute them, after the initial screening. While some of the youth media projects I studied incorporated a wider variety of digital tools (including still cameras, mobile phones or software like Garage Band) many of the projects followed a relatively 'standard' format. This is partly indicative of the timing of the projects (2008) yet remains true of more recent initiatives. This is a key difference between organized educational projects and the more quotidian media-making practices undertaken by some young people.

and input into the soundtrack. Ultimately Tom and Anoop, with guidance from MYH, added their own editorial touches by cleaning up and sequencing the shots, packaging the film on a DVD with a menu, and adding logos and credits. The DVD cover was designed by Rizwan and the menu page featured a 'grime' music soundtrack supplied by one of the interviewees in the 'local' film.

Exhibition

As with all youth media projects, the *Reelhood* project was made up of both the *process* of creating the films, and the films as *products* in and of themselves. In every youth media project, there is a fine balance between these two – projects that prioritize the final product sometimes sacrifice some degree of participation during the process or those which prioritize the latter may give up a more 'professional' looking product (Dowmunt, 1987; Fleetwood, 2005a). However, on *Reelhood* the fact that the product was designed to reach a potentially wide audience was a central motivator for both the participants and the organization, and as such the final product was much more than an afterthought. [4] Khalid, the cameraman on the 'local' project and himself a self-described 'former gang-member' told me that the exhibition for him was the most important part. He told me that he was most looking forward to 'the outcome, the result. If it's going to make any change or if it's a waste of time. I mean, obviously it's not a waste of time because I [will learn] quite a lot of skills but is anyone else going to get any aspect from it or anything?'

Although both the process and products of all three films inform the analysis presented in this article, for the purpose of brevity I focus my analysis on the making of and final text of the film *Voices*, created by the international group. Before moving to the analysis, I include a brief synopsis of the film, although I am aware this text-based summary does little to give the reader the full flavor of its content.

<u>Voices</u>

---

[4] This mirrors Gillen and Passey's (2011) description of how the fact that the BBC School Report project was to be shown in such a high-profile outlet was an explicit motivator for both young people and organizers.

The title slowly scrolls over the screen as the sound of the video-note left by one of the bombers from the 7/7 attacks reads out, saying 'our words have no impact on you, therefore I'm going to talk to you in a language that you understand.' The film then cuts to a rainbow 'peace' flag flying at a protest. There are a series of interviews with protesters at a march in Central London and a journalist. The scene then changes from the boisterous outdoor protest to extreme close ups inside a low-lit room. There are close ups of the fringe of a prayer shawl, of a man's hands grasped together, of feet curled under a body in prayer. As the shots continue there is a voice-over of a young man saying 'if someone writes letter after letter and sees nothing happen then he will look for other measures.' From the darkened room there is a transition to exterior brightly colored shots of a group of twenty and thirty-something British-Pakistani men enjoying a meal at an outdoor café on Edgeware Road. One complains that 'nothing makes a difference' while another, in a thick Glaswegian accent, says, 'we all complain about it but if we all did something we could make a difference.' The two scenes (the outdoor café and the darkened room at the youth center) are cross-cut, there is a juxtaposition of a man in the café saying 'my priority is my immediate family, that's what I care about not something happening thousands of miles away' and then one of the young men in the darkened room saying 'as a Muslim you learn that people are your brother and sisters so it makes you angry.'

The films were shown at a culminating screening at the Houses of Parliament at the end of the project. Although MYH had invited a number of high-ranking MPs, the evening of the screening happened to be the same night that Parliament was debating the controversial introduction of an extension of the detention term for terrorism suspects to 42-days (BBC News, 2008). Thus, many of those who had been invited were otherwise engaged. The screening nonetheless had a decent turnout of about 100 people, including friends and family of the participants and MYH staff.

Ultimately, the DVD of the films was circulated to a wide range of stakeholders in the MYH community, including youth workers and educators working with Young Muslims in a range of settings – including with young offenders in the prison system. The films were also added to the organization's website and additional comments were left by viewers. The organization created a brief evaluation about the filmmaking process, to which I added input, but did not (as of this writing) have the resources to follow up with an evaluation of how the films were ultimately used.

Competing visions of citizenship

Taking into consideration the initial aims of the project organizers, along with the processes of making and circulating the films, I argue that there were two competing narratives of citizenship being circulated within the *Reelhood* project. In this final analysis section I demonstrate how the young peoples' vision of citizenship was realized through the creative, technical and social affordances of filmmaking – and how these different properties both enabled and inhibited the circulation of their alternative narratives. I end by distinguishing between these two contrasting articulations – the 'participatory' model espoused by MYH and their funders, and the 'justice-oriented' model pursued by the young participants.

Creative and Technical Affordances

From a creative standpoint, the filmmakers of *Voices* chose to delve into the roots of where extremism comes from and grapple with the perceptions of justice and injustice that drive different forms of political engagement – including violence – for young Muslims. They had to think laterally about where they would be able to film contrasting 'voices' and think creatively about what kinds of questions to ask, and how to respond to the interviewees. The filmmakers had to construct an overall narrative with appealing characters, and incorporate interwoven settings and tones.

Technically, they had to think about the best way in which to realize their creative vision. In terms of the camera angles, for instance, they had to consider how their subjects would be portrayed. Hejan and Imran discussed with the facilitators at length while filming *Voices* about whether the interviews with the young men exploring the concept of jihad should visually appear sympathetic or violent. They chose to use extreme close-ups of hands and feet, to humanize their subjects without giving away their identities, but also worried that anonymizing them would make them appear more threatening. In filming the men at the café in the bright sunshine, and then cross-cutting between the two scenes, they made both creative and technical choices in terms of how to frame and construct the debate visually, a conscious choice that was made possible through discussion and digital editing software.

Social and power relations

Socially, the process of making *Voices* was complex. In contrast to other participatory visual art forms (for instance photography or painting) the negotiation over different dynamics within a team is most often an intrinsic part of filmmaking, especially within the context of youth media projects. In this case, the young filmmakers had competing visions of what they wanted to make a film about, and how they would move from concept to execution. Eventually, they settled into their roles but Imran, who was older and whose idea the film had been, had more of a clear overall vision. Thus there was a differential of power in the small team itself, with Imran taking more control over the overall content and story. However Hejan, as the cameraman, retained creative control over how the film would look and feel, and therefore played a central role in visually differentiating between the different perspectives espoused by the interviewees.

The social relationships during the filmmaking process also encompassed the relationships between the young people and the adult facilitators. *Reelhood* was, in a sense, a previously determined project in that MYH had bid for the funding according to their organizational objectives and therefore wanted to encourage the young people to make films about 'issues.' This might have precluded, for instance, a light romantic comedy or a horror film. However it would be misleading to characterize this focus as purely 'adult-led.' As other youth media researchers have commented, the relationship between facilitators and young people is often one of 'collaboration' (Soep & Chávez, 2010) where facilitators act to guide and hone the ideas of the young people. The tradition of 'social issue documentary' in youth media has been previously charted (Goodman, 2003; Halleck, 2002) but this does not mean it is entirely determined by adults. In the case of *Reelhood* the particular young people who were attracted to the project described some of their primary motivation to draw on their experiences as young Muslims to highlight 'issues that affect us not only personally but [also] people that we live around' (Rahim) or to 'get some experience of filming… and you know, filming on an important topic as well, like British Muslims, our feelings. Obviously we don't get heard enough in the media' (Hejan).

Participatory filmmaking is therefore both social in this micro-sense of the project itself, as well as being bound up within wider social and political relationships. The *Reelhood* project itself was part of a wider political economy where funding and resources were distributed along ideological lines. The funding for the project came from a source tied to an idea of youth deficiency – where the young people were considered potential problems in need of a solution. Although to an extent this was true across my case studies in the case of *Reelhood* this was especially fraught. The source of funding, the PVE stream, by its very nature implied an existing or potentially serious and dangerous form of citizenship deficiency. This was not lost on the participants, for instance when Aswini told me that she found the PVE scheme 'quite insulting really, it suggests that you don't have your own mind to make your own decisions and they have to put in measures to prevent you from becoming brainwashed… just because you're young and you're Muslim [it doesn't mean] that you're going to turn to that side.'

Citizenship and politics multiply defined

Once the project was underway it seemed that the requirements of the funders were limited mainly to the point of application. During the process of making the films themselves I found no evidence that DCLG tried to intervene or direct the content of the films to fulfill a set mandate. In contrast, in different ways the films made by all three groups actually seemed to an extent to identify the government itself as problematic. In the films *Section 44* and *Voices*, in particular, it was the government policies of stop and search and the decision to pursue war in Iraq that were under fire. Although the purpose of the project had been to foster 'political engagement' with formal political structures, in the end the overall picture from the films was that the ability to create social change often takes the form of campaigning for social justice outside of formal structures of government.

As described above, the DCLG stream of funding that supported the *Reelhood* project was geared specifically towards encouraging inclusion in 'mainstream society.' In the initial project description, MYH echoed this participatory language by also emphasizing the sanctioned ways of airing grievances and concerns – for instance

through lobbying political parties or voting. This definition citizenship relies on a fairly narrow understanding of what is 'political,' one which in many ways negates the wide range of more small 'p' political activities that young people may be already participating in but not define as such (Smith, Lister, & Middleton, 2005).

In the case of *Reelhood*, this contrast can be seen in the word 'disengaged' – used to describe the target group of young people the organizers sought to attract. The project itself was premised on a normative concept of citizenship that explicitly looked towards 'formal' politics, the politics of government and elected leadership, as the ultimate aim of the engagement. Coincidentally, the project itself took place during the hotly contested 2008 London Mayoral elections, and only one participant said he would like to vote in the election and he was too young to actually do so. So while in one sense the young people could be described as 'politically disengaged,' on the other hand most of the participants were active in activities that displayed a sense of social responsibility, like youth work, or school and college-based organizations like Model UN.

When I asked the participants directly whether they considered themselves to be 'politically engaged' I received a wide spectrum of responses. Husna, one of the young women, who was setting up a non-alcoholic youth space in her area, told me 'I've had people say to me you should go into politics which is kind of strange… When I think of politics, I think of a bunch of old guys sitting around a table having their cigars and cups of tea or coffee or whatever and saying 'eeny meeny miney moe what shall we talk about today?''[5] On the other hand, Imran, the young man who had advocated making a film about the Iraq war protests, told me that he did consider himself to be politically engaged and that 'the nature of my work, the fact that I do youth work… shows that I feel there's something wrong out there and I'm trying to make a change.' However, equally, he was not registered to vote and did not belong to a political party.

Instead of mirroring the organizer's definition of participatory citizenship as working within (narrowly) defined political structures, the young people chose to make films that critically examined sources of power through evidence-based analysis of some of the structural limitations of government. Though many of the young people did not

---

[5] These responses mirror the wider academic literature that demonstrates that young people are more likely to 'downgrade their already-enacted interests as being merely 'personal'' (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993: 3).

define themselves as interested in 'politics' in the formal sense, they nonetheless implicitly identified themselves as 'social actor[s] shaped by relations with others' who were not only able to make a difference, but actively wanted to (Delanty, 2003: 602). This form of justice-oriented citizenship is therefore a shift in identity, enabled by the formation of critical literacy, in that the young person gains a sense of his or her own agency and ability to contest and re-imagine social realities. Media production is key to this by, as Husna said, allowing young people to 'voice [their] views and opinions.'

In the case of *Reelhood*, where the difference in these two visions of citizenship became problematic was at the point of exhibition. Though the young people provided a form of challenge to the funders in indirectly responding to the premise of the funding itself, there was no clear response. At the final screening, I interviewed several people in attendance about what they had thought of the films. While universally impressed with the 'quality' several representatives of other government agencies were slightly dismissive of the content as being views that they already 'knew existed.' As none of the invited MPs were in attendance, the crowd was largely sympathetic but there was no sense in which the challenges offered in the films would be transmitted to or engaged with by the funders.

Ultimately both the young people and the organizers described the project to me as a 'success.' Several participants felt that they had challenged themselves to take on new areas of responsibility and develop skills. While the young filmmakers and project organizers felt disheartened at the lack of turnout to the screening, they universally deemed themselves to be proud of the films, and planned on exploring possibilities to send them to educational organizations after the project finished.

Conclusion

As the example of the *Reelhood* project illustrates, youth filmmaking is in a real sense part of a political economic 'food-chain' in which priorities are established at the

funding level[6] and are passed down to organizations and later to young people. This is both direct in the sense of establishing variably inflexible criteria for funding, and requiring organizations to collect quantitative data on rigid categories like ethnicity, disability, religion or sexuality, and indirect in the sense of implicitly privileging projects that seem to mirror existing language over others (Fleetwood, 2005b). In the case of *Reelhood*, though the project organizers echoed the participatory citizenship ethos presented by the funder (DCLG) the young people did not. As the funders had no reason to meaningfully engage with or respond to the project, the challenge presented by the young people did not in a real sense travel back 'up' to the funders.

In this article I have demonstrated some of the ways in which citizenship discourses are incorporated into the process and product of youth filmmaking. I argued that very different conceptions of citizenship might emerge during filmmaking projects, and that there are ways in which the varying affordances of youth filmmaking facilitate different modes of critical media literacy. The *Reelhood* project shows how young people may use digital media to explore notions of citizenship, but that this is a contextual possibility of the technology, not an inevitable one. The young participants in *Reelhood* were able to use their experiences of making films to create informed critiques, supported by the adult facilitators, but these commentaries did not necessarily match up with the aims of the project itself. Ultimately, this case study provides ample evidence to make the case that digital media can help foster aspects of active citizenship, but the forms of citizenship that the young people prioritize might be different to those initially intended.

---

[6] By and large the main funders in the UK and Europe are government funders at local and national levels, although in the US the priorities are more likely to be set by a combination of government and private foundations.

References

BBC News. (2008). The 42-day detention vote. Retrieved 7 August, 2012, from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7448819.stm

Blum-Ross, A. (2012). Authentic Representations? Ethical Quandaries in Participatory Filmmaking with Young People. In K. te Riele & R. Brooks (Eds.), *Negotiating Ethical Challenges in Youth Research*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Boyle, D. (1997). *Subject to change: guerrilla television revisited*. New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. Cambridge: Polity.

Buckingham, D. (2006). Defining digital literacy - What do young people need to know about digital media? *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy, 4*, 263-276.

Cohen, C. J., & Kahne, J. (2012). *Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action*: MacArthur Foundation.

Delanty, G. (2003). Citizenship as a Learning Process: Disciplinary Citizenship versus Cultural Citizenship. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 22*(6), 597-605.

Dowmunt, T. (1987). *Video with young people*. London: Cassell.

Dowmunt, T. (1993). *Channels of resistance: global television and local empowerment*: London: BFI Publishing.

Erstad, O. (2010). Educating the Digital Generation: Exploring Media Literacy for the 21st Century. *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*(1), 56-71.

Eshet-Alkali, Y., & Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2004). Experiments in Digital Literacy. *CyberPsychology and Behavior, 7*(4), 421-429.

Fleetwood, N. R. (2005a). Authenticating Practices: Producing Realness, Performing 'Youth'. In S. Maira & E. Soep (Eds.), *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fleetwood, N. R. (2005b). Mediating Youth: Community-Based Video Production and the Politics of Race and Authenticity. *Social Text, 82*(1), 83-109.

Friere, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.

Gillen, J., & Passey, D. (2011). Digital Literacies in the Making: Schools Producing News with the BBC. *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy, 01-02*, 37-51.

Goodman, S. (2003). *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production and Social Change*. New York and London: Teachers College Press.

Halleck, D. (2002). *Hand-held visions: the impossible possibilities of community media*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Hargittai, E. (2009). An Update on Survey Measures of Web-Oriented Digital Literacy. *Social Science Computer Review, 27*(1), 130-137.

Heater, D. B. (2004). *Citizenship: the civic ideal in world history, politics and education* (3rd ed.). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Home Office. (2010). Counter-terrorism strategy. Retrieved 10 April 2010, from http://security.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism-strategy

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Essays on Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Lankshear, C., & McLaren, P. (1993). *Critical literacy: politics, praxis, and the postmodern*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Lievrouw, L. A., & Livingstone, S. M. (2006). *Handbook of new media : social shaping and social consequences of ICTs*. London: SAGE.

Lister, R. (2003). *Citizenship: feminist perspectives* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lister, R. (2008). Unpacking Children's Citizenship. In A. I. a. J. Williams (Ed.), *Children and Citizenship*. London: Sage Publications.

Llewellyn, K., & Westheimer, J. (2009). Beyond Facts and Acts: The Implications of 'Ordinary Politics' for Youth Political Engagement. *International Journal of Citizenship Teaching and Learning, Special Issue: Canadian Perspectives on Democracy, Diversity and Citizenship Education, 5*(2).

Mouffe, C. (1993). *The return of the political*. London: Verso.

Oldfield, A. (1990). *Citizenship and community: civic republicanism and the modern world*. London: Routledge.

Osler, A., & Starkey, H. (2003). Learning for Cosmopolitan Citizenship: Theoretical debates and young people's experiences. *Educational Review, 55*(3), 243-254.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (1998). *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools: final report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Sholle, D., & Denski, S. (1993). Reading and writing the media: Critical media literacy and postmodernism. In C. Lankshear & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical Literacy: Politics, praxis and the postmodern*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Siim, B., & Squires, J. (2008). *Contesting citizenship*. London: Routledge.

Smith, N., Lister, R., & Middleton, S. (2005). Young People as 'Active Citizens'. In C. Pole, J. Pilcher & J. Williams (Eds.), *Young People in Transition: Becoming Citizens?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Soep, E., & Chávez, V. (2010). *Drop That Knowledge: Youth Radio Stories*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Weller, S. (2007). *Teenagers' citizenship: experiences and education*. London: Routledge.

Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004a). Educating the "Good" Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals. *PS: Political Science and Politics, 37*(2), 241-247.

Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004b). What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal, 41*(2), 237-269.