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Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in Blum-Ross, Alicia (2013) *Authentic representations? Ethical quandaries in participatory filmmaking with young people*. In: te Riele, Kitty and Brooks, Rachel, (eds.) *Negotiating Ethical Challenges in Youth Research*. Critical youth studies. [Routledge](#), London, UK, pp. 55-68. ISBN 9780415808477

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55617/>

Available in LSE Research Online: October 2015

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CHAPTER 5

‘AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATIONS?’ ETHICAL QUANDARIES IN PARTICIPATORY FILMMAKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Alicia Blum-Ross

Concurrent with the increasing accessibility of moving image recording technology,¹ the use of film and video in ethnographic research has begun to shift away from observational modes towards more dynamic and participatory methodologies that invite research subjects to act as co-researchers. As researchers increasingly acknowledge the ethical and academic advantages of researching *with*, rather than *on*, participants (Christensen and James 2008), digital recording devices have emerged as a potentially exciting means of conducting ethically robust research with children and young people.

Of particular salience to youth researchers is the awareness that many young people already are engaged actively in using various forms of moving image media, from recording videos on mobile phones to sharing them on social networking sites. Along with the ubiquity of recording technologies, researchers perceive that young people find these modes especially appealing, particularly in their capacity to communicate different and compelling insights in comparison with ‘speech and written word-based’ methods (Thomson 2008: 11). Yet while the use of moving image recording as a research methodology can be attractive to those working with young people,

nonetheless, their incorporation demands grappling with a number of difficult ethical quandaries.

In this chapter, I reflect on my own experiences dealing with some of these ethical questions. Focusing specifically on participatory video with and by young people, I draw on instances where I used video as a research method as well as where I analysed youth participatory video as an area of study. I conclude that participatory moving image work with young people should be considered both as an integral part of the *process* of doing research and as a set of *products* through which research insights can be disseminated. Understanding moving image research as both a process and a product helps us delineate different temporal stages at which ethical dilemmas may come to the fore. In this chapter, I identify three moments where the use of participatory video may serve to help ameliorate, or exacerbate, existing power differentials between adult researchers and young research participants.

First, I explore the difference between observational and participatory video recording strategies. Reflecting on the different methodologies used on the *Space2Cre8* research project (explained in more detail below), I demonstrate how the process of inviting young people to create their own forms of mediated self-representation allowed for a greater investment in the research process, but also challenged my own conception of research praxis. Second, I reflect on my doctoral research on youth filmmaking in order to challenge the conception that participatory video is an inherently ‘authentic’ form of representation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I show how the young participants in the *MyStory* filmmaking project (again, details provided below) drew on existing media forms in the creation of their films. Through exploring the acts of

creative production undertaken by young people, I propose that researchers, facilitators and young people can engage reflexively to examine the representational process within youth filmmaking, rather than accepting youth films as unproblematically 'real'. Finally, I conclude with a brief reflection on the choice of how and where to disseminate the image products of young people created during the process of research. The dissemination of images created by young people often invokes a number of regulatory ethical frameworks, including university ethics codes, and requires the researcher to triangulate between their own institutional positioning and the needs and desires of the young participants.

These three instances demonstrate various ways in which the practice of using moving-image recording can both provoke ethical dilemmas in youth research, as well as providing the means to resolve, or at least lessen, some of the unequal relationships of power that inevitably exist in this field. These are ethical quandaries on a number of levels, ranging from how to work within regulatory institutional or legal frameworks, to how to honour ontologically young people's agency as media producers and authors of their own lives, while also acknowledging the constructed and performative nature of representation. I offer these three examples not as a fixed response to ethical questioning, but rather as a processual exploration of how moving image recording both requires profound ethical reflexivity, and also might contribute to fostering youth research conducted with greater symmetry of power.

MAKING OF 'MAKING OFS'

Although the debate has since been re-visited by others, the disagreement between anthropologist Margaret Mead and her then-husband and research partner Gregory Bateson introduced two contrasting arguments regarding the use of filmmaking in ethnographic research. Mead was an early proponent of using filmmaking as a qualitative research tool. She described how an unobtrusive camera could be set up to collect a vast amount of data that later could be analysed with new tools and theories (2003). In contrast, Bateson was convinced that film was less of an objective recording device and more of a relational process (Jacknis 1988). For Bateson, as for other theorists (Berger 1972, MacDougall 2006), the choice of framing, to film one interaction instead of another, or the position of the filmmaker him or herself would inevitably influence the result of the exercise.

Rather than reducing the utility of filmmaking as a research method, researchers increasingly see the subjectivity of filmmaking as a benefit rather than a detriment. Some social scientists have noted that film allows for the communication of different forms of ethnographic insight beyond text (Grimshaw 2001) and a unique means of reflecting on the research process itself (Ruby 2000). Film is not simply an all-seeing eye, a meta note-taking device as Mead initially conceived of it, but a subjective and inflected process of arbitrating and communicating meaning, both in making and viewing.

If film is the product of a dynamic interaction between maker and subject, what does this then mean for youth research? The use of visual methods demands the same degree of reflexivity, sensitivity and attention to power as other forms of ethnographic research (Pink 2007). This requires paying attention to the institutional arrangements

surrounding the research. For example, young people's positioning in restrictive, age-based categories may undercut the egalitarian ethos of the research (Christensen & Prout 2002; Christensen & James 2008). Further, the use of film does not automatically guarantee 'child-centred visual methods [will] avoid the adultist assumptions of the cognitive school' (Young and Hazlett 2001: 144). Yet, when done sensitively, inviting young people to arbitrate their own representations can yield significant and powerful results for researchers.

In my own research, I have struggled with whether and how to use visual methods. As a researcher of youth media production, in particular media produced by 'disadvantaged' young people, I must always consider which methodologies are appropriate to varying research contexts. One central debate has been whether to use visual methods controlled by myself (or adult co-researchers, teachers or facilitators) as part of the research toolkit, or whether the young people might perceive this as negating or undercutting their own creative representational processes. At the core, this is about trying to avoid research relationships that might reproduce other structures of hierarchical power of which the young people are a part (see Chapter 8 by Farrugia in this book).

The *Space2Cre8* research project provides a good example. *Space2Cre8* is an international collaborative research initiative led by researchers in the Graduate School of Education at University of California, Berkeley. *Space2Cre8* is composed of a membership-only social network that connects students in schools in the US, UK, India, Norway, South Africa and Australia. At each site, a group of young people were invited to join the network and upload a series of creative outputs which

included links to favorite bands and YouTube videos along with original creations from digital stories using video and photography to a personalised profile page. The aim of the project is to explore how social networking sites like Facebook, Bebo and MySpace could be used in an educational context to promote, and study, the development of literacy and intercultural understanding.

At each of the sites, a research team works closely with teachers to lead or support the activities associated with *Space2Cre8*. As the main researcher for the London site, active in 2011, I collaborated closely with the researchers at Berkeley and elsewhere and with the teachers at the school. At the UK school with which we worked, Benson Academy,² a group of Year 9 students (aged 13-14) met weekly after school to explore the *Space2Cre8* site, create their personal profiles, work on short films to share with the other students and design other personal media-based products that could be uploaded to the site.

The research methodologies of the *Space2Cre8* project varied from site to site, depending on the exigencies of each location and the interests and backgrounds of the researchers. However, the lead researchers at Berkeley had suggested a number of different protocols including video and audio recording of interviews and project sessions as a starting point, with the hope that the individual research teams would complete as many of these research tasks as possible. The research products were shared with the Berkeley team and on an ad-hoc basis with other researchers.

In London, we worked with many of the research methods suggested by Berkeley, incorporating interviews, focus groups, an on-line survey, gathering of creative

materials and participant-observation during sessions. Early in the project, I discussed with the teachers at Benson the idea of videotaping the sessions, as the research design had recommended. Implicitly and explicitly they raised several concerns. They expressed trepidation about videoing the young people at work on the project, even if we had their consent; they felt it would undermine their own processes of creative exploration. The teachers felt that by taping them, we would be subtly negating the idea that they were in charge of their own representational processes. Also, the young people volunteering for this project were capable of recording sessions themselves, and their teachers wanted to encourage them to do so. ‘Outsider’ recording would have been contrary to that process.

The solution we collaboratively developed was to share the responsibility for filming the sessions between the young people, teachers and myself, but that the young people would be responsible for editing the footage. This drew on the young people’s existing competencies and understandings of media genres; they were familiar with forms like ‘making of,’ behind-the-scenes ‘bloopers,’ and ‘video diaries’ from watching Reality TV and popular films. While the group was off-site filming for their digital stories for the *Space2Cre8* site, the young people filmed and conducted interviews and then edited them during after-school project sessions.

This technique drew on existing genre conventions with which the young people were familiar and which excited them. Beyond the practical advantages of inspiring the young people and enabling them to engage in activities that they genuinely wanted to do (as opposed to being interviewed in a more static setting) the making of ‘making ofs’ also facilitated a form of reflexive engagement with the research that had ethical

benefit as well. Both in the process of creating the films, and in reflecting on them later, the young people were invited to consider their own learning process in a way that did not mirror or repeat more static forms of assessment in school or even in more straightforward research settings. The films themselves were an output used in the research, but additionally, while the young people were filming I also informally interviewed them about their technical and creative choices in putting together the films, and invited further reflection on the days of filming depicted in their behind-the-scenes work. This facilitated their own agency not just as research subjects but as filmmakers. Their technological prowess and control was validated by my appreciation of their editing skills and by their ability to direct my researchers 'gaze' to specific snippets and scenes that only they could locate in the in-process editing timeline.

There were practical and ethical drawbacks, however, to this methodology (as Bessant et al., describe in Chapter 3, often these are inextricably intertwined). Both the teachers and I found it challenging not to micro-manage the filming of interviews or prompt follow up questions where we thought appropriate. Equally, the young people participating in this project had pre-existing interests in media-making and considered themselves fairly capable. This meant that they edited the footage they collected into short films that closely approximated the snappy highly edited and packaged films that they watched on TV or the internet, thereby discarding some of the more nuanced, messy, additional footage that might have been intriguing from a research perspective. Ethically, we wanted them to have ownership over their own representational processes, but practically we also wanted the un-cut footage to preserve the more lengthy interviews that we needed for the research project.

Ultimately we decided to honour the young people's agency in creating their own products and include only their edited films as part of the project record, except in the instances where footage had been shot but no edited film had been made.

With regard to the relationships of power inherent in the research process, the choice to create 'making of' films allowed for a playful negotiation of subject positioning between adult researchers and young participants. In some respects, the creation of the films allowed the young people to 'direct' explicitly the process of research. Additionally, there were unique affordances to the combination of sound and image, and in particular the multi-sensory engagement with the filming locations. Fundamentally, the process of making films required the young people to work as a team, and to practice a collective form of authorship that was collaborative and negotiated. While both the teachers and I contributed to the young people's creative negotiations, there was a greater sense of autonomy than in other research projects I have been a part of. Filmmaking, in this sense, was a uniquely technical, social and imaginative practice. I would not claim, however, that this practice cannot completely remove the bifurcation of power between researcher and participant, but rather that this 'collaborative approach' fosters a sense of 'joint ownership of visual materials' (Pink 2007: 42).

POWER AND AUTHENTICITY

In contrast to the example of the use of participatory media as a research method, my doctoral research in social anthropology focused on participatory youth filmmaking projects as a field of study. My multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with youth

filmmaking projects was focused on two main arenas. I conducted both a macro-level political economic inquiry into the rhetorical justifications for funding these projects – the majority of youth filmmaking initiatives in the UK at the time of my research were funded through local or central government sources – and a micro-level study of the on-the-ground experiences of young participants as they took part in playful, and sometimes contentious, representational processes using moving image.

As Foucault (1980) proposed in his concept of ‘discourse,’ power is wielded not just through overt directives or the control of space but through diffuse ‘definitional processes’ (Cricher 2003: 174). Many youth filmmaking organisations explicitly conceive of their mandate as a moral one – they want to ‘empower’ young people to create forms of self-representation that are counter to those overwhelmingly negative images portrayed in the mainstream media. This work had added poignancy during the period of my fieldwork, as during the writing of this chapter, because of the overwhelmingly harsh imaginaries of young people being trafficked. While conducting my fieldwork from 2006-2008, rarely could I open a London newspaper without seeing a headline about another young Londoner who had been killed by what some called ‘knife culture’ or the ‘knife epidemic’ (Blunkett 2008; The Independent 2006). As I wrote this chapter, another spate of images of youth took over front-page placement, as the summer of 2011 riots broke out across the UK, often attributed to ‘feral youth’ (Unwin 2011).

Against this backdrop, many youth filmmaking organisations describe their mandate as supporting young people to voice a counter-discourse to mainstream media portrayals that almost exclusively represent young people in terms of deviance (Clark

et al. 2008). Acknowledging that many young people do not have the means or opportunity to present their side of the story, these grass-roots organisations seek to facilitate the dissemination of young people's perspectives. For instance, one London-based organisation described its work as 'enabl[ing] young people who are quite often misrepresented within society a space to be heard... We encourage young people to challenge mainstream opinion, highlighting their own individual perspective' (Mouth that Roars 2010). Steve Goodman, long-time Director of the Educational Video Centre in New York, underscores that youth filmmaking gives young people the chance to speak 'about their own lived experiences... [and] offer[s] an important alternative outside the dominant frame of consumption and crime' (2003: 30).

A preponderance of the project facilitators and young participants I interviewed for my ethnographic field research echoed the idea that youth filmmaking was fundamentally concerned with encouraging young people to define themselves in contrast to mainstream depictions. This was the centerpiece of engaging disenfranchised young people, or as one facilitator put it, 'I hate the word empowerment but there is a *power* in it, the very process is about power and voice and identifying what they want to say.'

While this section describes a participatory film project run by professional facilitators, rather than by researchers, there is a similarity in the rhetoric used to describe youth filmmaking as both an educational intervention, and as a research methodology. Like the facilitators described below, academic researchers (myself included, as above, and see also Chapter 12 by Wood and Kidman in this book) describe the potential that moving image recordings offer in the project of creating a

youth-led counter-discourse. Yet often we fail to acknowledge that the production of visual representations is still a production of discourse, and that emphasising ‘voice’ does not magically lead to the production of some ‘unproblematic real’ (Lather, 2007: 136).

The reification of ‘authenticity’ in youth filmmaking, both as an educational intervention and as a research methodology, is an ethical problem on two levels. First, because it obscures the iterative and performative nature of the *process* of creating representations, distilling the chaos and contextuality of young lives into a fixed notion of the ‘real’. Second, because it undermines the need for critical engagement with representations, both on the part of facilitators and researchers and on the part of young people. Yet as many projects (both research and educational) struggle to recruit and retain participants, how can these forms of reflection be included in ways that do not inadvertently stifle creative processes, bore young people, or undercut their sense of ownership over their own creations?

A case study from my doctoral research will help illustrate this. The *MyStory*³ project took place on a South London housing estate in the spring of 2008. The estate had been briefly prominent in public consciousness because it had been the location of a brutal murder of a local young man, known to many of those who later took part in the project. The project took place over a series of Saturdays and a half-term school holiday break. The project had succeeded in receiving funding from a central government funding body that was specifically premised on the idea of getting ‘young people’s voices heard.’

The project was facilitated by two women filmmaker-educators who lived locally. For the facilitators, the idea of ‘voice’ and creating a counter-discourse to the mainstream press coverage were central motivators (for discussion of a similar discussion in an academic context see Hadfield and Haw 2001). Negative feelings about the press coverage of the murder was evident on the estate, alongside a mural of the young man someone had created a striking graffiti-art scene inscribed with the statement ‘Why don’t the press let the kids decide who they want to be?’ As one of the facilitators told me, ‘a lot of them were saying when [he] died that no one’s actually listening to us, they’re writing all this stuff about us and they said no one’s actually asked us anything.’

To add insult to injury, only days before the project was due to commence, a mainstream television channel had broadcast a feature documentary filmed on and around the estate and which centrally posed the question ‘Why do kids kill?’ The idea that the film project would allow the young people to express themselves and give them ‘voice’ was not only imposed by the facilitators, but was also shared by the young people.

The main film made was a music video-style three minute short that featured a rap written by one of the participants, focusing on the story of a young man who wants to get out of his gang but is eventually killed for trying to break away. Visually, it is shot with ominous low-angles focusing on the grittier parts of the estate, featuring shots consciously composed both to mirror images in videos previously seen by the group, and to show the social isolation of the young man who wants out. The lyrics of the rap include:

Too many children are looking out of tearful eyes

Too many occasions where we got to pray and ask why...

I let the pen express how I'm feeling

I think there's too many youths addicted to drug dealing

Returning to the aim of the project, it is not entirely clear whether the film is indeed a form of 'counter-discourse.' It incorporates many of the same locations, shots and themes as the mainstream documentary, and similarly focuses entirely on the tragic consequences of youth violence. While the *MyStory* project is a consciously fictional account, and the mainstream report purports to depict the 'truth,' in some respects the youth-created project makes its own claims for authenticity. As Jacob, the star the film told me, he'd come along 'because it's a chance for us youth to do what we want, to express how we feel.'

This example presents two ethical dilemmas for researchers and practitioners. First, there is the inherent catch-22 in participatory filmmaking. While facilitators may want to invite young people to challenge conventions through making their own films, nonetheless, they have promised to *facilitate* rather than dictate what the young people choose to create. In order to achieve a more symmetrical power structure between adult researchers and young people, the facilitators often choose not to determine the course of the storytelling and allow young people to decide how they want to be represented. However, my research, and the example of *MyStory*, in particular, indicates that many young people choose to replicate, rather than resist, these mainstream representations. Which is the more ethically sound position for

youth facilitators – to hold to the aims of participation by taking a back seat, or to encourage young people to be more critical of forms of representation and interrogate their own choices?

The second concern is the notion of ‘authenticity’ or what Nicole Fleetwood calls ‘realness’ (2005). Drawing from her research in a similar context in San Francisco, Fleetwood argues that young people’s films are imbricated within a discourse that relies on what she describes as a ‘racialised’ urban aesthetic that presents a specific and narrow ‘framing of realness’ (157). This is problematic because it subtly negates the reality that young people’s media products, like other forms of media, are performances that both reflect and recreate reality. For instance, at no point during the production of the *MyStory* films did the facilitators encourage the young people to analyse or critique music video genres, raps or the other forms of media genre that they were clearly drawing on. The fast-pace of the project (demanded by the funding requirements), and the facilitators’ desire to keep the young people engaged and wanting to come back by avoiding what they considered a drier ‘school-like’ atmosphere meant that critical reflection was prioritised far less than producing new material.

Wood and Kidman (Chapter 12 in this book) argue that visual methods can help achieve a higher level of reflection, but in my experience this reflexivity is often assumed to be naturally occurring, rather than needing conscious support. As British sociologist Gerard Delanty has conceived it, ‘empowerment’ is more than simply “‘having a say;” it is rather ‘the power to name, create meaning, construct personal biographies and narratives by gaining control over the flow of information, goods and

cultural processes... [it is] a *constructivist* process' (author's emphasis, 2003: 602). Yet this process of *construction* is what is most often obscured through the rhetoric of 'authenticity' that often surrounds youth filmmaking. Youth films are valued on the basis of their being somehow more 'real' than other forms of representation, and are distributed and packaged in a way that reifies this seemingly naturalistic expression.

With a similar set of ambitions and constraints as educational facilitators, researchers looking to use participatory visual methods may also be tempted to celebrate the 'realness' of young people's self-depictions, and occlude the ways in which all representations are performances and constructs. However, as we have learned from decades of methodological writing within the social sciences, reflexivity within research is essential to understanding the different ways in which knowledge and definitions are produced (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Bourdieu 1990). By extension then, to conduct ethically grounded youth research we must resist the temptation to assume that all products made by young people are elevated into a higher category of realness, or that they are somehow representative either of the totality of identity of the individual young person, or of the category of youth in general (Thompson 2008). This is a process that requires reflection not only by researchers and facilitators, but also in close collaboration with young people.

THE PRODUCTS OF YOUTH FILMMAKING

If the two previous sections have discussed the *process* of youth filmmaking, both as a research method and as an area of study, I want to consider briefly how to use and disseminate the *products* of youth filmmaking within a research context. Unlike the

use of other participatory art forms, like theatre or dance for example, image-based research often travels far beyond the context of its initial creation. For example, as researchers we often choose to use imagery to support our 'data' in journals, on websites, or in conference presentations. Even if the methods of generation with young people have fulfilled an ideal, participatory model, in reality the limitations of time, energy, interest or funding mean that it often falls to researchers to choose where and how the images resulting from the research are disseminated.

The dissemination of these visual 'products' confronts researchers with a number of ethical dilemmas. First, should researchers use images created by young people when disseminating research findings? When transforming moving images to the still images necessary for publications in journals or books, an inevitable distillation process occurs where the nuance and multiple sensory registers created by young people is reduced to static images. Second, due to administrative and child protection arrangements in a researcher's institutional setting, the use of some of the materials may require anonymising the young people's images. In my own work, I have dealt with this on a case-by-case basis, but, thus far, have avoided altering still images using pixilation, black lines or other crude editing techniques that keep young people from being identified because I feel that it reinforces the visual equation of young people with criminality (see Bragg 2011). While there is a risk that young people may be identified, there is also a risk that using these techniques of anonymisation may undercut the work of the projects the images themselves chronicle.

This dilemma is complicated by the fact that often young people want to claim – visually and textually – credit for their own work. In some instances, they feel proud

of what they have created; some young people want to build an accessible portfolio of work as a budding filmmaker. Yet, in my experience, the terms of agreement within my own institution prohibited me from using the names of individuals, although I could credit organisations and adult facilitators where they had specifically requested and as appropriate to the dissemination context. Ironically, then, the young people's 'ownership' of the project ultimately was erased in the public distribution of the research.

The greater implications of disseminating images created by or of young people are denoted by Lissa Soep (2010) as the 'digital afterlife.' In a 2010 presentation, Soep recounted a story from her own work at Youth Radio International, in Oakland California. While Soep's work focused on the creation of podcasts, primarily of audio content, her discussion is germane here. In Soep's example, a young man had taken part in radio workshops and produced a series of highly personalised stories which had been broadcast both on the Youth Radio website and on radio and had won significant acclaim. Years later, Soep discovered a blog post that the same young man had written about his experience becoming known for his radio programmes. His reflections were sharply critical of the experience for essentialising his identity at the time that he created his programmes (2011, see also Chapter 13 by Young in this book).

Soep questions whether any of us, young people or adult facilitators, are aware of the 'afterlife' that digital products may have. This burden of responsibility must be measured against adopting an attitude of paternalism towards young people. For instance, in a recent project I observed, a young person chose to include a personal

reflection critical of another group member. Although he wanted to keep in the segment, knowing it would be seen by his peers, as facilitators we collectively decided to remove it. We emphasised that we could not know who ultimately might see the film, and whether the young man might experience repercussions socially or professionally as a result of the critique. The dissemination of the images created by young people, whether on-line or in publications, inevitably 'freeze' what was a dynamic and iterative experience at a single moment. None of us can know how and when peers or even future employers may see these products. This question of 'afterlife' is one that emerges frequently if there is something particularly questionable in the film product. Perhaps, however, it should be one which, given the 'afterlife' of these products, all youth researchers working with images should be careful to consider.

These examples are glimpses of some of the challenges and opportunities that the participatory use of moving images can have, both as a youth research method and as a field of study. As I have chronicled, there are myriad ways in which using participatory video can enable young people to take part in the project of doing research in ways that help draw together existing power differentials between researchers and participants. However, the fact that young people are familiar with a host of existing media genres and technologies and can draw on them in their creative work is both a possibility and a limitation to using media in research about and with young people. Visual methods such as 'making of' films should be considered an opportunity for research, but the need to encourage critical media literacy, question 'authenticity' and maintain an awareness of the 'afterlife' of projects is key towards fostering an ethical code of research practice. Ethically sound research needs to

engage with these debates on an on-going basis, and assume that new technologies can be an inspiring tool for research, but must be approached with careful and considered reflection.

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¹ I have chosen to use the terms 'film,' 'video' and 'moving image recording' relatively interchangeably here. My emphasis here is not the specifics of the recording technology (whether it is film or video-stock or digital memory-cards) but rather is on the social and creative processes instigated by the technology.

² All individual and organisation names have been changed.

³ While the project name has been changed, the tenor of the project (focusing on young peoples' personal and collective narratives), as communicated by the real project name, has been preserved.