Alicia Blum-Ross

The filmmakers of tomorrow or the problems of today: creativity, skills and cultural identity in British youth filmmaking

Book section
(Accepted refereed)

Dr. Alicia Blum-Ross
Department of Media & Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science

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Introduction

The UK has been at the forefront of support for and developments in youth filmmaking. From the Media Studies curriculum in schools, which has long included a production element (Bazalgette 2000) to the dedicated resources for out-of-school youth production projects (Mediabox 2010, First Light 2009, Sefton-Green and Soep 2007) to the recent introduction of the nation-wide BFI Film Academies (British Film Institute 2014a), teaching young people how to produce films has gained traction in the UK as not only a youth but also a creative-industries policy. In addition to formal educational and cultural-policy interventions, youth filmmaking in Britain also draws substantially from the legacy of community media initiatives, which have sprung up to engage with diverse communities in order to encourage a wide spectrum of people to "tell their stories" (Rowbotham and Beynon 2001, Fountain 2001, Thumim 2012).

In this chapter I discuss the history of youth filmmaking in the UK and analyze in detail some of the central discourses that underpin youth filmmaking as an educational intervention. Through empirical case studies I show that youth filmmaking is justified in one of three ways: as enabling young people to feel a sense of belonging to physical and virtual communities, as giving young people the opportunity to "express themselves" as civic participants, and as giving young people essential technical and communicative skills for the future. These assumptions belie a set of narratives about young people, which, though both essentializing, are paradoxically opposite. These include the negative assumption that young people are politically apathetic (Coleman 2007), problematically relate to their local communities (Kintrea et al. 2008), and that they lack opportunities for future advancement (House of Lords: Select Committee on Digital Skills 2015). These "deficit" narratives (te Riele 2006) are counterbalanced by the

no-less troublesome view that young people are inherently creative "digital natives" (Prensky 2001) who will be intrinsically attracted by the appeal of technology to participate in youth filmmaking in order to learn skills to secure future employment (Chandler and Dunford 2012). The aims of this chapter are therefore to examine how these discourses produce images of youth that are problematic both in terms of positioning youth as "deficit" and as naturally "creative," and show how abstract discourses relate to the on-the-ground practice of youth filmmaking.

Methods

For eighteen months in total, spread out over a period of two-and-a-half years during 2006-2009 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with youth filmmaking sites in London (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). This included extensive participant-observation, semi-structured interviews with both young people and adults, and in some fieldsites I was able to incorporate participatory methods including video diaries and photo-elicitation(Gubrium and Harper 2013), where it was possible as part of the filmmaking process (e.g. making 'making of' films Blum-Ross 2012a). I also conducted textual analysis of the final films created by the young people, considering their visual, auditory and textual elements, along with the initial funding bids and other materials produced by the organizations themselves. This research is inspired by critical projects researching media production at the intersection of social anthropology (e.g. Bird 2010, Bräuchler and Postill 2010), education studies (e.g. Dahya and Jenson 2015, Thomson and Sefton-Green 2011), and media and communications studies (e.g. Fisherkeller 2011).

During my fieldwork I identified these 11 case study sites – projects I followed from initial funding bid through to final screening and sometimes beyond – through a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling in reading the announcements of awards available from public sector funders (Palys 2008). As is characteristic in the UK, all of these projects were funded at least in part by state bodies; including local government up to national funders. Therefore I was able to sit in on funding award discussions and conduct interviews with funders since they are by law open to public oversight. I conducted follow-up interviews with organizations in London where I had conducted my original intensive fieldwork sporadically during 2010-2012. Contact with filmmaking organizations was also facilitated by professional network as then-Education Manager of the London Film Festival at the British Film Institute. Since

the initial fieldwork period I have also occasionally acted as an external evaluation consultant for youth filmmaking organizations, and while these experiences are not reflected in the empirical case studies here this professional experience undoubtedly influences my analysis.

For each case study I conducted roughly 30-100 hours of fieldwork, as some projects met for full days for short periods (e.g. during a school holiday) whereas others met sporadically for up to a year. Although the age of participants varied from site to site, all worked with adolescents (aged 12-21) and outside of the formal curriculum, although some projects took part physically in schools. All projects had between six and 20 participants. The fieldwork was conducted iteratively, as transcription, coding and analysis took place throughout the period later fieldwork were influenced by insights and experiences from earlier case studies. The corpus of fieldwork (interview transcripts, transcribed fieldnotes, photo, video, audio, print and hand-drawn artifacts from case studies) were then hand-coded using a bespoke analysis I developed table by inductively coding themes fieldwork and then synthesizing them as fieldwork progressed.

All of the projects I studied were film-*making* projects, as opposed to initiatives where the young people simply acted in or wrote scripts for films. This was key as I was interested in studying the full spectrum of activities involved in *making* a film, proposing that filmmaking is a unique activity in simultaneously involving technical, social and creative skills. In comparison with photography, for example, filmmaking often involves a more substantive teamwork element and therefore opportunities to develop social ties within a team and with adults (photography can involve this process, but less automatically so than filmmaking as many photography projects are run for individuals). Equally technical skills from using a camera to learning editing software sit alongside creative choices about storyline, locations, shooting angles and beyond. Finally, the filmic "product" has the potential to be seen by a far greater audience than, say, a theater or dance production, meaning filmmaking projects also must consider dissemination routes, audiences and outlets as a central part of their work with young people.

History of UK youth filmmaking

With the launch of the Sony Portapak in the UK in 1969 creative activists began working with local residents in "communities" across the country to document daily life. These early projects were premised largely on the concept of access; the media itself was seen as "the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community" (Berrigan 1979 quoted in Carpentier 2003: 426). The utopianism of early community and youth media was evident not only in the projects themselves but also in the way in which they were resourced. One educator described how it was "much less evidence-based than it is now, you didn't have to say 'I'm going to get X number of bums on seats.'" The choice to work with young people was often opportunistic as, in his words, "they were the people who came forward to be worked with."

The 1980s saw the launch of Channel Four which provided a wider platform for underrepresented groups on mainstream television (Harvey 1989). A central remit of Channel Four was to "enabl[e] people who would never normally have had that possibility to be involved in the process of representation" (Fountain 2001: 203). Despite the civic emphasis on empowerment in the early days of youth and community media, into the 1980s there was a shift away from ad hoc arts funding based on a model of empowerment (Dickinson 1999) towards an institutionalization of the sector (Swinson 2001). Particularly for organizations that worked with young people, there was a growing emphasis on vocationalism (McCulloch 1986). Learning media production skills was seen as a method for growing the workforce of the future, rather than an intrinsic good in the here-and-now (Blum-Ross and Livingstone Forthcoming).

The 1990s saw a decline in support for youth and community media by public broadcasters, partly as television audiences became increasingly seen as consumers (Ang 1991) rather than publics (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2010). Eventually, these became replaced by wider institutional interests in participation wherein "ordinary people" could "speak for themselves"(Thumim 2012). For example, in 2001 the youth filmmaking funder First Light was launched, with money from the UK Film Council amounting to £1million/year. First Light was focused on youth *creativity*, by providing a "new generation of young filmmakers" access to the tools and opportunity to make their own films (First Light 2009). The funders wanted to see, as a senior staff member reported in an interview, not just films about "stereotypical subjects… [First Light] is very much about creative stories and ideas" and not just "what happens on our estate

at the weekend." This senior staffer emphasized that the organization was not primarily concerned with academic achievement, as none of the projects were tied to the curriculum, but were focused "very much on soft skills. But [these are] very hard to measure." She described the initiative as also oriented towards widening access to the film industry and that "what we should be undoing this terrible focus on the industry that it depends on who you know and how much money you have, rather than what your talent might be."

A few years later, in 2006, a related but distinct funding source called Mediabox, was founded less to encourage youth civic participation and engagement. Mediabox was part of a wider New Labour interest in gaining input from publics into policy, and involving young people in formal politics (Newman 2001). Technology was seen as a key way of engaging young people and overcoming "apathy" (Bennett 2008, Loader 2007), although arguably less attention was paid to listening to what young people actually had to say (Blum-Ross 2012b, Lister 2008, Biesta and Lawy 2006). Even though Mediabox was funded initially at £6million for the first year, the fund was significantly oversubscribed so the actual rate of successful applications in London was only about 5%. Unlike First Light, Mediabox had an explicit remit to enable young people to use their "voices" on "issues" of importance to them (Mediabox 2010). In an interview with the then Executive Director of Mediabox (who had previously worked for First Light) she described that First Light had been about:

> Getting young people together, whoever they are, to make a film. And they'll see it on the big screen and they'll think that's an interesting film, whatever it was about, like plasticine monsters... It was about learning the process they'd done it all themselves, it was very much their story but it was a film initiative. Whereas Mediabox has very much been about voices and platforms and opportunities to *have a say* so its very much using the media as a tool to enable that to happen, for young people to be able to express themselves.

Concurrent with Mediabox and First Light was also the national "Positive Activities for Young People" (PAYP) scheme which ran from 2003-6 and provided government funding for young people to take part in activities in order to support young people aged eight to 19 who were "most at risk of social exclusion, committing a crime or being a victim of a crime" (CRG Research Limited 2006). The arts, including filmmaking,

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were seen as uniquely able to deliver on the aim for young people to make a "positive contribution" (a key target of the concurrent government-wide initiative Every Child Matters), as through their creative participation they would be able to "develop their skills, talents and interests" (Museums Libraries and Archives and Arts Council England 2009: 9).

While the New Labour period has since been characterized as a "golden age" in terms of investment in the arts, this dovetailed problematically with commercialization and a host of wider social objectives the arts were not always well-placed to address (Hewison 2015). When the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in 2010 many of the funders that had been previously resourced youth filmmaking constricted or ceased operations. Mediabox was de-funded and First Light has since been integrated with the national film education organization Film Club to form Into Film which emphasizes film viewing and discussion in schools more than filmmaking, although does include some of the latter. The British Film Institute (newly reincorporating the duties of the UK Film Council, see Doyle et al. 2015) launched a filmmaking initiative called the BFI Film Academy, aimed at identifying and supporting "new and emerging filmmakers" who are "passionate about film" and "want a career in the film industry" (British Film Institute 2016). Select graduates from regional film academies take part in a 2-week residential "talent campus" at the National Film and Television School in the summer.

Both Into Film and the Film Academies are part of the BFI's education strategy, which renews its focus as on fostering "impact, relevance and excellence" in film education (British Film Institute 2014b). The BFI is explicit in balancing between older "media literacy" oriented approaches from educators and the reality that the increasing "visibility around the creative industries, and the skills they require" (ibid) are drivers both of government policy and of young peoples' interest in film and filmmaking. The strategy writers lament that the "policy initiative of the creative industries has been seized by the computer and video games sector" (see Livingstone and Hope 2011) but they reassert that film education can also be instrumental in contributing to the growth of the creative industries.

This overview illustrates both how the landscape of funding and policy that undergirds youth filmmaking practice has changed, and also how youth filmmaking organizations adapted to these changes. However, an overarching trajectory

throughout this period has been an increased interest in sustainability, an attempt to make what were once ad hoc organizations run on the enthusiasm of activists who were happy to "live on the dole" to support their work," in the words of one of my informants, into "sustainable organizations that [have] proper employment packages and all that sort of stuff." As these youth filmmaking projects have fought for survival, with long-standing organizations closing their doors while new generations of initiatives have sprung up, the field has both shifted and remained remarkably unaltered at the practice level. Yet, as I argue below, policy and funding language does impact on the actual practice of youth filmmaking. In the following sections I analyze some of the justifications for youth filmmaking, as described above, and demonstrate how these policy decisions and the way they are manifested on a practical level impact on the articulations of social and cultural diversity in youth filmmaking.

Youth filmmaking discourses

Youth filmmaking is justified as both an intrinsically valuable and instrumental activity. By describing youth filmmaking as being an "intrinsically" beneficial activity I mean that advocates highlight the experience of taking part in the project itself, rather than the "instrumental" impact that the project may later have on wider social or economic objectives (Belfiore 2012). As Gray (2002) described, many arts and cultural activities are "instrumentalized" in order to gain access to resources, a process he called "policy attachment." Most recently under new Labour, this practice became *de rigeur* for small arts organizations, who are generally now expected to deliver a host of social aims as a "return on the investment" of the funder. Yet, as this discussion of youth filmmaking indicates, this process is not without consequence. In each of the examples I discuss here there are ramifications for how young people are discursively positioned. It is not just that youth filmmaking projects *are* instrumentalized, but *why* and *how* this happens that influences the ways in which young people's social and cultural identities are represented, by themselves or others.

Something to do, someplace to belong

From the early days of filmmaking on social housing estates to current projects which focus on addressing issues of youth unemployment youth filmmaking has long been justified under the rubric of "positive" activities (HM Treasury and Department for Children Schools and Families 2007) and giving young people "somewhere to go." Of equal importance is helping young people feel they "belong to" their neighborhoods

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as part of a condition of "active citizenship" (Besch and Minson 2001). Yet at the same time, young people, especially young people of color, are often pathologized for "hanging about" in public spaces without permission (Corrigan 1979, Kehily 2007, France 2007), a growing problem as interstitial spaces become increasingly commercialized (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). Concerns regarding young peoples' occupation of public space reached a fever pitch in recent years when the popular press disseminated a narrative of "feral youth" (Narey 2008).

Of the many of the youth filmmaking projects I encountered during my fieldwork several specifically attempted to intervene in young peoples' supposedly problematic relationships to their local, regional and national communities. This included not only addressing what was sometimes characterized as "problematic territoriality" (for example "postcode gangs" as discussed in Kintrea et al. 2008), but more prosaically the fact that many young people in London from disadvantaged communities had only very rarely, if ever, reported traveling outside their immediate local areas. One educator I interviewed described this to me as an example of a circumscribed "village mentality" wherein the young people stayed only within the confines of their neighborhood. Another educator described this openly offensively as the young people being "territorial animals." Yet this contrasted dramatically with the global scales of migration that some of these young people had experienced – for example while they may never have been into central London they may have visited family in rural Bangladesh or the Caribbean during school holidays.

Many youth filmmaking projects were thus conceived of as an intervention into young peoples' sense of space and place (Blum-Ross 2013). For example, I studied a filmmaking project for young people in East London to study the River Lea, a formerly industrial river that wound through the site of the London Olympics in 2012. In 2008 a group of 16 young people made a series of films about the river, both from an historical perspective researching the industrial past and history of migration in the area, and a contemporary look at a nature reserve that was to be affected by the upcoming start of major construction for the Olympics. The young people came mainly from the local Bangladeshi community but additional students had been selected for participation by the partnering secondary school because they were recent migrants from the Sudan, Nigeria and China, or because they needed additional support for social reasons (e.g. having been bullied in school).

The project was both explicitly framed in the funding application as being about the instrumental aims of "neighborhood renewal" and "community cohesion," but by the facilitator of the project in terms of the intrinsic goal of and helping the young people "see the beauty in the world around [them] those little glimpses… which might not otherwise be accessed but which are really inspiring." For both the funder and the adult facilitators the initiative was oriented towards giving the young people something "constructive" to do outside of school, particularly for the young men who were more likely to be described as "disengaged" (by their own and the teachers' reports). The project was also aimed at enabling a new relationship to the surrounding area (and by extension, to both familiar and unfamiliar places), and in common with the "citizenship curriculum" helping foster a "sense of belonging – of identity – with the community around them" (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998: 61).

At the conclusion of the project some of the young people reported that they had experienced this aesthetically-oriented approach to their local area as changing in how they felt about their neighborhood. One young woman noted how she felt she could now see that the people "help each other from young to old, they help the neighborhood in a way that they treat people like their own member of a family." Another told me "you know with this film, it made our eyes get a bit bigger, like we can see things a bit more." In this sense the project was an intervention into their "practice" as citizens (Osler and Starkey 2003), deemed necessary because of the perception that they experienced few opportunities in the area and had a problematic relationship to venturing outside of it. Although the project can be said to have been successful in achieving the aim of engaging the young people with the community, the setup of the project did not privilege their already-existing local competencies or experiences. There was little effort made to establish what the young people *did* know, or how they currently experienced their area, before it was intervened on.

Youth Voice & Participation

Another central justification for youth filmmaking is that it enables young people to have a "voice" on issues of concern to them, and to "participate" in public spheres – something young people are limited in many ways from doing (Weller 2007). The emphasis on expression has long accompanied youth and community media as many projects specifically orient towards giving "voice to the voiceless" (Marchessault 1995). Youth media is seen as particularly able to deliver on the goal of "youth voice" (Poyntz 2013, Soep 2006) as teaching filmmaking becomes about helping young people "tell

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their own stories in their own voice" (Into Film 2014). The emphasis on youth "voice" is tied to a wider movement in recent decades towards privileging expression as a means of civic engagement and participation, even if there is little critical interrogation about whether and how voices enter into public spheres, whose is invited to speak, and whether they are listened to (Couldry 2010).

Many youth media projects, and indeed funding sources, are linked to the process of fostering youth voice, and to the goal of youth civic participation (Blum-Ross 2016). For example, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) funded a project around political engagement for young British Muslims (Blum-Ross 2012b). The initiative, called *Reelhood*, was run by an organization providing support and advocacy for Muslim young people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The aim of the project, as described in the initial proposal to DCLG, was to use film to "discuss and debate a wide variety of social issues" and by making a documentary highlight "the concerns of British Muslims in order to effect a positive social change and have an active effect on the political agenda." The project was funded under the DCLG "Prevent" remit aimed at targeting extremism amongst British Muslims. The project organizers hoped that the young people would gain "hard" technical skills in relationship to filmmaking (and had hired a professional filmmaking team with high-quality equipment to co-facilitate the sessions), alongside "soft" interpersonal and communication skills and specific skills relating to political organizing and lobbying on issues of importance to them.

The project ran over weekends and during school holidays for several months and in the end involved eight young people aged 16-22. The young people worked in three teams of a director, producer and cameraperson to make three separate documentary films exploring: youth gangs, the "stop and search" policing statute and the variety of forms of protest against the Iraq war. These relatively hard-hitting topics were in keeping with the remit of the project, which had an instrumental aim to help support young people to engage with "politics." Notably, however, there was a mismatch between the conception of "the political" as understood by the funders (formal/state political structures) and that of the young people who emphasized the informal or "personal" politics of practice rather than formal institutions (Mouffe 1993, Lister et al. 2003). In this project, as in many others, the final product was packaged in a specific vernacular form – the font used by the organization resembled a graffiti "tag" and all three films featured a hip hop soundtrack. As Fleetwood (2005a) has analyzed,

this use of supposedly youthful vernacular attempts to underline the "authenticity" of the young peoples' stories, an attempt made most visible in the choice to name the project "Reelhood" in the first place.

In actuality young people used the films, in particular the second two, as a way of questioning political decision-making itself. When I asked one of the young female participants, who was previously active in youth organizing, about whether she thought of "going into politics" she told me "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 miny mo what shall we talk about today?'" The young people also took exception to the premise of the funding source itself, one young woman described "Prevent" as "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."

The young people, thus, acted as "justice-oriented citizens" (Westheimer and Kahne 2004) in questioning structures of power, despite how they had been framed by the funder. Yet the premise of youth voice was important to the young people as well, for example when a young man told me that what was most important to him was not making the film itself but 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?" They demonstrated their own sophisticated awareness of the ways in which the premise of the funding and the organizational mandate had circumscribed them, and proposed their own critique.

Skills for the future

A third way in which youth filmmaking is seen as impacting on young people is in helping develop a host of skills for future employment, or even adulthood in general. In this sense young people are described either in terms of what they are in the *process* of becoming, or in terms of what they *cannot yet* do or comprehend (Buckingham 2000). The discourse of "growing up" itself belies the emphasis on an imagined future (Lesko 2001), positioning children and young people as in a state of "becoming rather than as a legitimate state of being-in-and-for-the-world" (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998: 13). Filmmaking is seen as "preparing" young people for the future in two

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overlapping but distinct ways – by providing practical training and experience should they seek a career in the creative industries (or encouraging them to do so) or by honing their "soft" interpersonal or communicative skills in order to prepare them for employment or "the future" more broadly (Chandler and Dunford 2012).

Across my research many organizations had anecdotal evidence of instances where young people, especially those otherwise unconfident or quiet, had risen to the opportunity occasioned by the film project and had performed well. For example one project organizer told me about a student who had been excluded from school whom she had encouraged to think of a future as a filmmaker. She described how he had been ask to sort out the food for the film and how:

> He was going to MacDonald's and blagging free burgers and stuff... we said that's really important, that's what a producer does on a film is blag stuff! And he said I thought I was just doing whatever, you know, because they see it almost as a negative thing to go and blag stuff whereas we're saying no it's a skill!

The "skills" proposed by youth filmmaking organizations are thus considered to be both essential for professional life, writ large, but also are conveyed to young people as being important for potential careers in the film and creative industries. Throughout my fieldwork there were similar exhortations to young people that they could "be a Director/Producer/Writer/Cameraperson" and beyond. Although many facilitators used this language simply as a way of attempting to support young people in broadening their horizons, rather than a specific hope that they would seek actual employment in the film or creative industries, for some projects this was one of the explicit goals. With a new generation of youth media organizations come some distancing of the initial strongly social justice –oriented beliefs of the first generation of youth filmmaking projects who privileged participation over "quality," a move towards identifying and supporting "excellence" that belies the new orientation of funders as well (Blum-Ross 2015). This interest does not just come from adult intermediaries, however, but also from young people who may frame their participation explicitly around gaining skills and work experience to help them achieve their future goals, rather than simply having something to do.

Another case study from my research was the OUT initiative which brought together young people who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT) and was sponsored by a major cultural institution in London in collaboration with a youth media production company. OUT consisted of a weeklong series of events as part of a film festival where the young people attended talks and master-classes led by professional filmmakers (including several who had films concurrently appearing in the festival), including directors, screen-writers and producers. Although the workshop had been quickly booked by 20 potential participants between 11 and 14 young people (aged 16-20) routinely showed up each day. In contrast to other groups I studied this group was mainly white (of the participants approximately six identified as being from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic communities) and skewed slightly older, which influenced the level of investment in filmmaking that the young people described. At the end of the film festival the young people made a short film in collaboration with a youth filmmaking organization, which was produced on Saturdays over a period of several months after intensive brainstorming and writing sessions, filming on location and an extended edit with a smaller sub-group of participants.

The project balanced between the intrinsic aim of finding like-minded young people (in terms of interest in film and in terms of their identification as LGBT) and the instrumental aim of future employment. The latter came as much from the young people as from the organization, for example when one young woman described "its just that I have characters in my head that I make stories up with and its that I want to let other people into them instead of just keeping them in." The creativity discourse was coupled with the skills discourse for the young people as well as for the project organizers, for instance when one young woman described how "if you really like films you'll want to make them yourself, so [coming here] is motivated by creativity and wanting to do better." Some of the young people worried about the conflation of their sexuality with the products of their creativity, noting that while they benefitted from being part of the LGBT community as part of the festival the filmmakers were "not seen as filmmakers, they are seen as *gay* filmmakers. But on the plus side there's film festivals [like this one] where you'll almost certainly find an audience." Ultimately the film they made as part of the OUT project was screened at the festival the following year and several of the young people (although by no means all) went on to remain involved with the cultural organization and pursue their own film careers using the film on their showreels. The project had not only taught the young people practical skills, but in many ways had also allowed them to join a community of practice (LGBT filmmakers)

and thus learn from professionals also how to leverage connections and identity to help access support.

Discussion

Seeking to understand the ways in which youth filmmaking, and the discourses that underpin it, activates or constrains wider social and cultural identities is undoubtedly complex. In outlining a history of the sector in the UK and detailing three of the many central justifications for youth filmmaking I have attempted to demonstrate the recurrent assumptions about young people that underlie these projects. Ultimately, there are two dominant narratives that are presented in each of the cases above, and while they contrast they also, paradoxically, overlap. The first narrative is of youth "deficit" wherein young people are rhetorically constructed as a problem in need of solution (te Riele 2006). This perspective locates the problem as with the young people, rather than society writ large. For example, discussions around young people having problematic relationships to their local area, demonstrating a lack of knowledge about or loyalty towards their neighborhood often do not account for the systematic lack of investment in youth services and education, or the increased privatization that actively prohibits young people from occupying public space.

For all the rhetoric around youth "voice" there is little investment in listening to what young people have to say (Macnamara 2013). The final screening of the *Reelhood* project was only sparsely attended by the MPs and political figures who had supported it initially, and those that did come told me in interviews that the films had largely just confirmed what they believed they knew already. Even Mediabox, a well-resourced government funder, also fell victim to the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of young people in the mainstream press. The Executive Director reported how the organization consistently tried to get the films that the young people had had more widely disseminated but that when "a kid stabs another kid in the street and it always makes the news unfortunately, because that's the way of the world." There are thus two possibly explanations in this example as to why young peoples' voices may be marginalized: the first is that the dominant narrative of young people is already established in the mainstream press (and thus attempts to undermine it fall on deaf ears) but surprisingly, that even youth filmmaking organizations and young people themselves often mirror these same forms of representation.

For example, although the Mediabox guidance read "don't forget that an 'issue' is not necessarily a 'problem' and that the young people may choose to highlight things in their community that they are proud of," (Mediabox 2009) the vast majority of funded projects highlighted negative issues. Of the many projects I encountered a strikingly high number (almost two thirds) dealt substantially with issues around gang crime and youth violence (Blum-Ross 2016). The reasons for this are myriad, but one possible explanation is that both project organizers and young people themselves subtly accept, and echo, the conception that projects about young people must present themselves in specific ways in order to be considered "authentic" (Fleetwood 2005b). The ubiquity of specific tropes associated with young (especially minority male) urban lives in youth filmmaking products, from the use of graffiti-like fonts to the omnipresent hip hop soundtrack, is difficult to resist. These tropes are both led by adult facilitators, and by young people, but in my fieldwork were little discussed or interrogated. Thus while the ideal of youth "voice" and participation remained a promise, young people were not often supported in developing critical reflexivity around these issues and the particular mechanics of funding did not encourage the adult facilitators or funders to do so either.

The second more positive, but no less problematic, view of young people revealed in this rhetoric is that of intrinsic creativity and technological *nous*. One facilitator described to me how when you get a group of young people "in a room, they can literally have leaps of imagination that are incredible and part of it is helping them manage that process." This discourse of youth potential is echoed by Halleck who assumes that young people are better able to fight the "duped acceptance of mass media" because children and young people have "natural curiosity and vigorous imaginations [that] can still function" (Halleck 2002: 50). Though the terms have changed, there are echoes of this depoliticized, untethered "creativity" discourse (Malik 2013, Banaji, Burn, and Buckingham 2010) found also in the hyper-inflated language of "digital natives" (Prensky 2001). This language assumes that young people are intrinsically attracted to digital technologies, and like the problematic language of "telling your own stories" erases the importance of diversity amongst young people and differential issues of access and of histories of representation (Helsper and Eynon 2010). Constructing young people as intrinsically creative and therefore able to produce a host of ground-breaking films that can energize not only the film industry but also the adults who work with them (young people being a "shot in the arm" according to one facilitator I interviewed) ignores the fact that young people are, like old people, both creative and uncreative, digitally able and digitally afraid. The emphasis on future

creative employment also potentially misleads young people, given that the film and creative industries are severely competitive for new entrants, especially those from minority or low-income backgrounds (O'Brien et al. 2016). Equally, as project facilitators themselves might be able to attest if pressed, the sector is often characterized by precarious employment can place significant pressures on creative workers (Morgan, Wood, and Nelligan 2013).

Conclusion

This discussion of youth filmmaking has demonstrated the variety of ways in which projects are discursively positioned and how these discourses impact on the ways in which youth filmmaking comes into being in practice. I have argued that three of the most oft-referenced justifications for youth media – as offering a positive source of belonging, as providing young people with a means of self-expression, and as a means to gain skills for the future – all rest on problematic foundations. These discourses demonstrate the assumption of youth deficits and of intrinsic aptitudes that both undermine the capacity for young people to be represented or represent themselves as fully socially and culturally diverse. While many youth filmmaking organizations do nuanced work on-the-ground, these discourses must nonetheless be examined in order to understand the possibilities afforded by youth filmmaking. Establishing youth as a period of "otherness" by highlighting an imagined universal ability does little to counter-act hegemonic depictions of youth or provide evidence for more nuanced and responsive youth provision. Finally, the element of futurity with which the creativity or digital abilities discourses are couched constructs young people as simply "people becoming" (Christensen and Prout 2002), of interest because of their potential rather than intrinsic benefits in the here-and-now. This future-orientation neither interrogates what kinds of futures are actually being achieved (for instance whether there are jobs in the creative industries, who can access them or what they might offer), nor does it address what young people might gain from participating in youth filmmaking as a process rather than as an outcome.

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