

7. Voicing young people's perspectives

Media influencing as a form of collaboration between youth organisations and the professional media

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Media influencing became a common media education practice in Finland around the turn of the millennium, with powerful support from citizen engagement policies. Media influencing is a form of youth participation and engagement that combines media literacy and citizen influencing. A distinguished example of municipal youth work is the Finnish Youth Voice News Centre (YVNC). The newsroom, founded in 2006, is an initiative to make the perspectives of young people more visible in mainstream media content. Its activities are run by the city of Helsinki, with the aim of engaging 13 to 20 year olds and based on collaboration with the established professional media. Unlike many other citizen engagement projects involving the professional media, the YVNC newsroom provides its young content producers with autonomy and integrity – separating them both physically and culturally from their commissioner – thus creating a “third space” that enables engagement through self-expression and peer support.

Young people are typically portrayed in the media as representatives of an allegedly homogenous group referred to as “*the young*”. This is often done in a negative manner, identifying young people as the cause of a wide range of problems, from cyberbullying to juvenile delinquency. At the other extreme, their representation is ultra-individualised to depict exceptional superheroes, such as youtubers and other “micro-celebrities”.

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This issue was one of the catalysts for the project that came into being in 2006 at a public discussion event about young people's participation and representation in Helsinki. Based on these discussions about the representation of young people in the mainstream media, a news production collective was founded. The Youth Voice News Centre (*Nuorten ääni-toimitus*, YVNC) has for more than a decade been giving 13 to 20-year olds the opportunity to experience media production in collaboration with the established nationwide media. The YVNC newsroom is part of the youth work carried out by the city of Helsinki. The YVNC community is an "involvement and influence community" within the municipal system for involving young citizens. The ultimate aim is to make young people's voices heard in the mainstream media, and the focus is therefore on influencing through the production of journalism. In this way, young people can exploit the legacy media for purposes of self-expression and influence.

In this chapter, I describe the pedagogical practices and challenges of media influencing within the youth work sector. The distinctive nature of the YVNC newsroom is that it attempts to turn local youth culture into a forum for voicing opinions – scaffolded by adults (youth workers and media professionals) – that are expressed in front of large, established mainstream audiences, side by side with professionally produced media content.

What is media influencing?

Young people's participation in the media that reach a wide audience is relevant, socially and democratically. According to international conventions, children and young people have a right to express their opinion and to be listened to.¹ The promotion of diversity of expression is not only a general societal aim; it also fits well with the need for news organisations to maintain representativeness of voices. Traditional media practice has, nevertheless, typically departed from giving a voice to the voiceless, marginalised groups who have been excluded from the modern public sphere.

Gaining access to young people's lives is challenging for professional newsrooms, as there are many practical issues in the way. To name but a few, observing and interviewing minors always requires parental consent. Approaching young people requires specific interviewing tech-

niques, as well as assessment of content and pedagogy that is different from the standard journalistic mode. It can be problematic to ensure that the people interviewed – children, young people or their parents – understand the consequences of appearing in the media. Adults, such as schoolteachers, may position themselves as protectors rather than as cooperative partners when faced with journalists.

Against this background, the YVNC newsroom has been a welcome venture in letting a neglected group *produce* their own voice. This is not something completely new, as newspapers and broadcasters have for a long time maintained special sections for content produced by children and young people. What is important in YVNC's case is the autonomy that is created by separating the youth newsroom from the publisher, both physically and mentally. Young people attend the newsroom on a voluntary basis. It is thus a free-time activity, like any hobby, and the work is carried out in the evenings after school. This can be described as using what Ray Oldenburg calls the “third place”² Oldenburg argued that third places are crucial for civil society, democracy and civic engagement, because they establish a sense of place and feelings of belonging to a community. Home, where people live, is the first place, and the workplace, where people tend to spend most of their time, is the second place. Third places exist beyond homes and places of economic production. As settings for voluntary socialising, they are the anchors of community life, such as cafes, churches, public libraries, parks, community houses or virtual communities. Third places are typically free to access, they thrive on emotional expressiveness and social roles, and qualifications play less a of role in them.³

In youth work, media participation has developed into a more specific notion of *media influencing*, or influencing through the media.⁴ From 2006 to 2013, a number of initiatives focused on this approach to media literacy.⁵

According to an EU project on media influencing in youth work, media influencing implies “combining media and citizen education”, “influencing the decisions and value basis of society and choices made by individuals with the help of media”, and providing “a channel for realising active citizenship among youth”.^{6,7} Media influencing thus incorporates elements of self-expression, civic engagement, involvement

and participation, as well as lobbying and communication, carried out through media production.

How to identify the voice of young people?

As the idea of the YVNC newsroom is to identify topics that are relevant for young people and to address them in a way that makes young people's voices audible, ideas for stories have to derive from the community and be developed within and by the community. Therefore, there are democratic structures for decision-making, featuring four chairpersons for each term. Meetings are normally attended by seven to 15 people who are at secondary school, senior high school or vocational school.

Stories take the form of journalistic projects that accommodate the roles of project leaders, reporters, editorial researchers and videographers. Having selected the appropriate media channel or channels, the young people present their ideas to their contact person in the professional media, who makes suggestions and elaborates the plan with them. A story project typically takes several months of production time.

Over the years, the YVNC newsroom has established permanent collaborations with the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle, the metropolitan daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat and the nationwide magazine Suomen Kuvalehti. On television, inserts are presented in the magazine programme A-Studio and special programmes (for example, before elections). The newsroom has also run a number of blogs.

The media influencing work targets politicians and other decision-makers who exert influence on citizens' issues in everyday life. The editorial work is led by two producers, both youth workers with a journalistic background, one focusing on writing and the other on television production. The producers describe themselves as facilitators who do not make decisions for the young people but help them make decisions by themselves. Ideally, they do not have any influence on what the young people decide to do. In reality, this is, of course, impossible, as informed decisions depend on facts that have to be put forward by the facilitator.

Even if the starting point of many projects is an individual opinion, the story is less about voicing that opinion and more about posing a question that leads to fact-based, often investigative stories carried out using journalistic means. The aim is to reach people (politicians)

who can make a difference and influence outcomes. For example, many television inserts have dealt with aspects of work life, including in 2018 the legal basis for the age limits set for summer jobs for young people and, in 2011, poor summer work contracts. The latter had a concrete impact: A television interview revealing shortcomings in the work conditions of young summer workers at an amusement park based in the capital became a nationwide scoop when the CEO of the amusement park walked out of the studio.⁸ As a result, a new Head of Human Resources was recruited.

What are young people learning and how?

The YVNC model is distinctive in that the young are positioned as producers, similar to freelancers or news agency workers, who collaborate with the professional media; in most projects, media production among young people is aimed at visibility in the local media and organised as peer-to-peer production. In terms of its organisation, the YVNC newsroom accommodates features of participatory and community media, citizen journalism and news agencies. Citizen journalists are often more controlled by the media, and community journalists typically create content for their own communities; YVNC, in contrast, is an autonomous producer, both physically and culturally separate from the media (which in this case function more as commissioners). Therefore, as a newsroom, YVNC is more like a news agency or a freelancers' collective, where individual story projects are sold separately to the professional media. The formal or legal position of a content producer is like a freelancer's, and the newsroom structure allows peers to provide support to each other.

In my interpretation, YVNC activities draw upon three types of pedagogy:

- *Individual-related pedagogy*: How to promote the expression of opinion so as to promote the young person's own voice and agency,
- *Community-related pedagogy*: How to advance youth engagement or involvement, group formation and a meaningful experience of being part of a local community and of society more broadly,
- *Media-related pedagogy*: How to produce media content for a specific channel; as the tool for influencing is a journalistic one, the activities require mastery of the basic skills of producing content.

To adapt pedagogy in these three directions, the community has developed a number of working methods with the aim of observing the environment, collecting information and expressing oneself using the means of the (journalistic) media.⁹ The pedagogies are highly intermingled, as self-expression is connected to being part of a community able to influence matters that concern them in society, in understanding and mastering the mechanics of media is key. Examples of typical individual exercises are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of exercises related to the different pedagogies applied in youth work.

Pedagogy	Exercise	Description	Objective
Individual-related	An opinion line-up	A line is marked on the floor by using sticky tape. One end stands for “I fully agree”, the other for “I fully disagree”. The young choose a position that corresponds to their opinion. A discussion is carried out with alternating lead in which people need to motivate their position and are able to ask questions to persons at the opposite end.	Creating, arguing for and discussing an opinion; finding out what interests and moves people
	I don't have a clue!	The young present each other issues (or individual newspaper articles) they don't understand. After the presentation of the issues, one issue is voted for. The young figure out questions they would like to know more about.	Helping the young to ask questions and finding out how to find what is relevant in complex and intangible issues
Community-related	Digital story	The young produce an unedited one-shot short film with their mobiles in small groups on the following topics: freedom, fear, courage, anxiousness	Applying digital storytelling to group formation
	Parents' night	The young plan and carry out an event for parents in which they discuss media- and/or youth-related issues with methods used in their own training.	Mediating the lessons learned to adults by using methods of media education, creating a sense of meaningfulness in front of parents and families and with regard to the youth's community
Media-related	Interview with 3 questions	People make short interviews by using the question pattern 1) one topical question, 2) one deepening question, 3) one personal or future-related question	Adopting the basics of interview techniques, improvising and quick reacting
	Telephone interview	People discuss the objectives and rules of a telephone interview, train making a call to each other, prepare a set of questions in pairs and make a real call to an unknown expert. After the call, the experiences are shared in bigger groups.	Overcoming the fear of making a phone call

Source: Lundvall & Kiesiläinen (2013), Kapanen et al. (2012), Juusola (2007).

A central issue is the positioning of the activity as a certain type of citizen and youth engagement journalism, thus providing the young producers with a certain identity. Previous research addressing YVNC has focused on citizenship abilities and identities.¹⁰ The young journalists are not meant to act as professional practitioners; newsroom descriptions carefully emphasise that the newsroom is not a journalism school and does not subscribe to any professional objectives.¹¹ This is how a 17-year old community member, active in the newsroom for two years, describes her motivations:

I like to gain new information by discussing with people, that's my cup of tea – to learn new things, to write about them and to tell about it to other people. [...] To me, journalism is a way of discovering the world and presenting these discoveries to others. [...] The thing I'm most worried about is that adults believe that we are trying to mimic adults. When I was interviewing the president, I didn't want to be compared with professional journalists, as I'm presenting an *alternative* type of journalism. I'm not pretending to be anything, I'm just being a young person. I'm not doing the same as professionals as a young person, but I'm doing this in my way, *as* a young person.¹²

Since influencing through media has been identified as the core concept, YVNC's relationship to journalism and news can be said to be instrumental; the specificity of journalism or journalistic ideology or storytelling is not emphasised. This detachment from the professional context may lead to some tensions: sources might speak to young reporters less carefully, revealing issues that they would otherwise not want to speak about with an adult journalist. Again, packaged as full-fledged journalistic products, the published news is likely to be read and to be taken seriously.

Back to the audience role?

When YVNC was founded around 2005, enhancing citizenship was a prominent goal in Finnish politics. The political programme for citizenship influence,¹³ presented in the government period 2003–2007, formed a solid basis for later developments in organising media education nationwide.¹⁴ Later on, it contributed greatly to the formation of a national media literacy strategy.¹⁵ Citizenship influence and identities were also prevalent in youth politics.¹⁶

Around 2010, the newsroom was at its heyday in terms of the number of people involved in the activities. Since then, the number of individuals involved in the activity has steadily decreased.¹⁷ This may be understood as a consequence of the increase in opportunities for third place youth citizen influence. Municipalities have developed more forms of engagement, a trend that is likely to be supported in future by the renewed Youth Act, implemented in 2017, which strives towards objectives strikingly similar to those of the YVNC activities. For example, the objectives of the Youth Act include the following: “to promote young people’s social inclusion and opportunities for exerting an influence”; to “improve their skills and capabilities to function in society”; to “support their growth, independence and sense of community and facilitate the acquisition of knowledge”; and to enhance the “adoption of skills and pursuit of free-time hobbies and activities in civic society”.^{18,19}

Besides the development of the third place, media organisations have themselves started taking on an educational role towards audiences. In 2014, based on the model retrieved from the BBC’s School Report, YLE started a media literacy project, Uutisluokka (Finnish) and Nyhetsskolan (Swedish), for 11 to 16-year olds to produce news for its own sites. This appears to have diminished YVNC’s opportunities for visibility on national television. Along with the saturation of citizen journalism in newsrooms and the establishment of journalistic practices that seek connections and dialogue with audiences, it has become more and more mainstream to let different groups of people produce content. Finally, because of the possibilities of easy content publishing, more and more young people are able to engage in content production online without any institutional intervention.

Whereas the establishment and development of media literacy guidelines were strongly rooted in citizenship and democracy education, the political focus in Finland has recently shifted more towards employment and employability, in which digital skills play a more prominent role. More attention is being given to notions of facts and truth. The producer of the YVNC newsroom describes this development as worrying, as it may easily put young people back in a less interventionalist audience role, something the newsroom specifically set out to avoid.^{20,21}

Conclusion

The YVNC newsroom is still unique in Finland in terms of its impact and visibility. The model has been replicated in bigger cities, such as Oulu, Tampere and Turku, but without close and permanent ties to professional media production.

The YVNC newsroom presents a form of media education and youth work that combines elements of citizen or democracy education and media literacy education with a focus on media influencing through journalistic production. In a way, it exploits the wide audience for print and broadcast culture to arrive at a win-win situation: A group of young people are empowered, and the media reach out to audiences with issues that would not otherwise be covered.

In this respect, the YVNC pedagogy crosses boundaries. Its foundation is the transgression from one world into another: providing young producers with an entry into a world which would otherwise be saturated with an adult perspective. This practice could also be applied to other neglected or vulnerable societal groups, to enable messages to reach audiences who would otherwise not come into contact with them. In this respect, the media still seem to be the arena in society – more than parliament or administrative organisations – where power is more easily and more flexibly reallocated between influential and neglected groups of people. As the YVNC experience demonstrates, young people are able to produce content with equal influence to that of adult professionals in media. In political and administrative decision-making processes, the roles between adults and young people's representatives are more fixed, and such coordinated dialogue seems to be more difficult to achieve.

Notes

1. OHCHR (1989).
2. Oldenburg (1989).
3. Oldenburg & Brissett (1982).
4. Kapanen et al. (2012), Kotalainen (2007).
5. Examples include Vaikuttamo in Hämeenlinna and the Youth Media Literacy Network Mediaskooppi.
6. Kapanen et al. (2012 p. 6).
7. Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences coordinated in 2010–2012 the project *The best European practices of youth media participation*, including workshop pilots in media influencing.
8. Nuorten ääni-toimitus (2011).

9. For a collection of exercises in Finnish, see Lundvall and Kiesiläinen (2013).
10. Kotilainen & Rantala (2008).
11. Lundvall & Kiesiläinen (2013).
12. A personal interview with the youth participant Nita Koivisto conducted by the author on the 25th April 2018 in Helsinki.
13. Ministry of Justice Finland (2007).
14. Ministry of Justice Finland (2005).
15. Ministry of Education and Culture Finland (2013).
16. Ministry of Education and Culture Finland (2012).
17. A personal interview with the producer and youth worker Ismo Kiesiläinen conducted by the author on the 25th April 2018 in Helsinki.
18. Ministry of Education and Culture Finland (2018).
19. Ministry of Education and Culture (2018).
20. A personal interview with the producer and youth worker Ismo Kiesiläinen conducted by the author on the 25th April 2018 in Helsinki.
21. A personal interview with the producer and youth worker Ismo Kiesiläinen conducted by the author on the 25th April 2018 in Helsinki.

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