

## Leadership Report for Global MIL

### **Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later) 02**

*CML is pleased and proud to present this Special Report, Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later), with Henry Jenkins as Editor. Henry is the Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education at the University of Southern California – but we know him best as a strong and faithful champion for media literacy world-wide...*

### **Report 03**

*The white paper, Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture, was published by the MacArthur Foundation sixteen years ago. This original document, prepared by Henry Jenkins and a team of researchers at MIT, offered an important reframing of media literacy which reflected the shifting realities of the digital era – new affordances, new practices, and new opportunities were leading to new forms of informal learning that were playing an important role in the lives of many American youth. Educators were often slow to recognize the value of these new spaces as a site for developing new skills or the ways literacy changed in a world where young people were creating and sharing media with each other in record numbers.*

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### Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later)

CML is pleased and proud to present this Special Report, *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later)*, with Henry Jenkins as Editor. Henry is the Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education at the University of Southern California – but we know him best as a strong and faithful champion for media literacy world-wide.

We remember well the global excitement and the accolades for Henry and his team that accompanied the publication of the original report. A new era, a new digital revolution was still dawning, and people in the media literacy field were wondering how these new developments would impact the theory and practice of media literacy. One thing was clear: just deconstructing television ads or asking students to construct PSA's were rapidly becoming practices that showed their age; the digital world was far more compelling for critical analysis and more importantly, for interaction and yes, participation. *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture* both embraced media literacy and helped pave a path to the future – it was both reassuring and insightful, with new frameworks and points of departure that built on the foundations already laid.

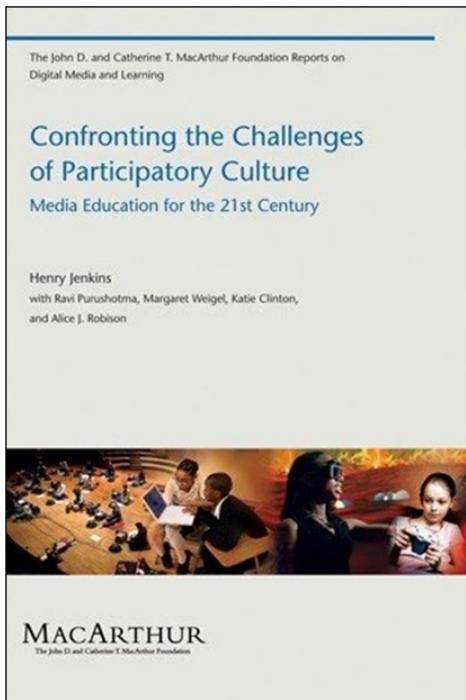
With this report being such an important marker between the old and the new, it is important to look back and see how the field has since developed. The genesis of this retrospective report was a 2018 dinner between Henry Jenkins and Tessa Jolls in Los Angeles, where a discussion led to the idea of doing a 15-year retrospective during 2019 on the *Participatory Culture* report through a series of interviews of those involved. Life intervened, and neither Henry or Tessa could tackle the project until 2020, with first publication in Henry's blog in February, 2021.

And here it is! This special issue of *Connections* will provide the entire Retrospective Report on *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later)*, which Henry broke into four sections in his blog. Henry and Tessa conceptualized the report content and participants; Tessa conducted recorded interviews; and Henry organized and edited the multitude of documents which comprise this Retrospective. We hope it stimulates reflection and discussion, just as the original report did, since there are seldom opportunities to look back and see what really happened.

**HENRY JENKINS, EDITOR**

## **Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later)**

### **PART ONE**



The white paper, *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture*, was published by the MacArthur Foundation sixteen years ago. This original document, prepared by Henry Jenkins and a team of researchers at MIT, offered an important reframing of media literacy which reflected the shifting realities of the digital era -- new affordances, new practices, and new opportunities were leading to new forms of informal learning that were playing an important role in the lives of many American youth. Educators were often slow to recognize the value of these new spaces as a site for developing new skills or the ways literacy changed in a world where young people were creating and sharing media with each other in record numbers.

Across this series, we are going to provide an oral history of how that report came to be written and what its impact was at the time of publication. In this opening segment, we

speak to Connie Yowell, who headed the Digital Media and Learning Initiative for the MacArthur Foundation; Mimi Ito, who was a second pillar of the initial research for the Digital Media and Learning Initiative; and Henry Jenkins, who was the primary author of the Participatory Culture White Paper. Long time media literacy advocate Tessa Jolls conducted the interviews.



*"We need to think about our communities as eco-systems for learning and opportunity, using new tools and technologies with a shifted mindset."*

Connie M. Yowell, Education Reformer  
CEO of Collective Shift  
Founder, LRNG

**Connie Yowell:** In 2004, we were coming out of a \$30 million initiative and district reform that was focused on teacher professional development and evidence-based approaches to teacher professional development. It was state of the art. It was a really thoughtful, forward looking set of commitments we had made revolving around the notion that the teacher was going to be the core unit of change in transforming schools and that we needed to focus on professional development. We were in three districts doing district wide reform, and within three years, we cycled through 11 superintendents and made almost no progress.

The MacArthur Board was paying attention. They said, there's got to be something different we can do. We had John Seely Brown on our board, the former head of Xerox. John said we should be looking over the horizon and thinking about the impact of digital media, and these new tools that are coming out, and what they mean for learning. I was like, well, I don't do that. I'm a hardcore educator. I don't believe in technology making a difference. I'm out of here.

What we decided in the meantime was to split the difference, because MacArthur didn't want me to leave, which I appreciated, and to do three exploratory pieces of work. Henry's piece was one of the three. Another one was Mimi Ito's research. We asked her, with her group of 25 researchers, to do an ethnographic study of how young people were using digital media outside of school. We had Nicole Pinker in Chicago, who's a computer scientist, and we just said, "you're in our backyard". It allowed us, the staff, to be able to come and spend some time with teachers and kids to see how they were doing intervention with technology.

Great. But neither of those was the conceptual piece. Neither of those pieces were really grounded. In reading Henry's stuff, I was really coming to understand the transformation in the culture. We needed somebody who understood the relationship between culture and media and what it means for thinking and production and creativity and all the things that Henry focuses on. Then, the third piece was for Henry to really dive deep conceptually to help us and to help the field understand what was happening both from a theoretical and a more practical perspective. He was able to understand the media in a much different way and explain a new set of literacies. We were looking for Henry and his team to conceptually, intellectually drive that work.

I mean, he's got all those literacies. His team has all those literacies. He's deep in it, but to have him start writing about it and really make explicit what the combination of these new digital tools plus culture was going to create.

That was the genesis of the work. We had brought Henry with Mimi and Nicole to be our consultants to help make us be smarter. It really became clear that we needed him to be our intellectual center, and his team to push that thinking to the world of education, because this new thinking wasn't going to come out of the world of education.

**Tessa Jolls:** I think that's a really important point – how we can shift education easily. I mean, it's a real challenge, but I always felt that this work was really important in terms of holding up this mirror for where we were and trying to help educators see that we needed to move in a different direction.

**Connie Yowell:** Yes. In order to do that, educators, we all do, need a conceptual frame. We need to know the categories and the buckets that matter in this new world and why they matter. A big piece of the work that Henry was doing and his team was doing, from my perspective, was coming up with those key conceptual categories that are grounded in pop culture. In our vision of innovation, we needed to go deep on the adjacencies to education. We weren't funding directly within the education space; instead, we were funding all of the adjacent places where new ideas were coming to life then figuring out what they would mean for education and for learning. Henry's work is clearly a core adjacency that needed to become infused inside education. Connie Yowell is currently serving as Senior Vice Chancellor of Education Innovation at Northeastern University and was founder of LRNG.

**Henry Jenkins:** This was my very first opportunity to work with the MacArthur Foundation. We've been working with them continuously for the last 15 years since the report was written. I was midway through my time co-directing the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT. We had launched the program with the goal of providing a new kind of master's program in media studies, one that was committed to preparing people to go out in the world and make a difference in industry, journalism, public policy and academia. It was a program that would have a very strong applied logic to it. We wanted students to take what they were studying in their classes and to apply that in an immediate way to pressing problems in conversation with real world stakeholders. Project New Media Literacies was one of our major research initiatives but one among others. We were also researching games-based education, games and innovation, global media policy, civic media, and the creative industries. Each of those projects allowed a mix of students to engage in an active research process based on their own career goals and commitments.

As we were reaching out to identify what those research opportunities were, I was in a dialogue with danah boyd, who took some classes under me when she was a master's student at the MIT Media Lab. She was advising Connie Yowell at MacArthur, about the launch of some new initiatives around digital media and learning. Through her intervention, I was invited out to San Francisco for a conference at the old Exploratorium, where we were to present some insights into the current media environment, with the idea of impressing the MacArthur leadership, and hopefully getting some grant funds out of it. As I was doing that first presentation, something went wrong with the PowerPoint. It was basically shuffling the slides randomly throughout the entire presentation. So I had a rich deck of stuff prepared to share, but on the fly, I was having to adjust my talk to reflect the images on the screen, with no sense of what might pop up next. No one ever dared to say to me, was that a random presentation or did you plan it that way? But it must have been strong enough because that launched one of the most important relationships of my academic career.

Connie had situated me next to the President of the MacArthur Foundation on the bus trip back to the hotel, and asked me to explain to him why media literacy should be part of their initiative. I did so. I don't remember anything I said in that conversation. By the time we got off the bus, he was sold on the idea that media literacy should be part of MacArthur's agenda. Everyone, all the staff at MacArthur seemed really thrilled that I somehow convinced him of this. I was asked to both write a white paper and to do some proof of concept demos.

I was already dabbling in media literacy. I'd written the column for Technology Review that a number of people had seen and responded to. I was starting to get invitations to speak at media literacy conferences in the New England area. We had begun to do a series of conferences called We've Wired the Classroom – Now What? They were designed for local educators to think about the next steps towards online education – what kinds of curricular materials and professional development were required, what new projects were emerging.

Right now, we're suddenly relying on online education nationwide, but a lot of the work we were advocating then never took place. Many of the challenges we now confront were being discussed at these conferences decades ago.

Many of us saw a need for advocacy for the digital realm, something like National Public Radio or National Public Television that was going to generate content, develop curricular materials, take advantage of the experiments that were going on, and bring the teachers along. As the conference title suggests, it's not enough to wire the classroom and just assume that everything else falls into place because it doesn't. The wires are the least of it. The Clinton administration at that time was pushing them to wire all the classrooms in America, saying this would close the digital divide, and we knew it wouldn't.

The main thinkers of that period were passing through MIT— like Howard Rheingold who was doing groundbreaking thinking about the virtual community, and regularly speaking at MIT. Sherry Turkle was a colleague at MIT who was raising important questions about online conversations, identity in a networked world, and the blurring of reality and the imaginary online. We had great students like danah boyd passing through MIT. She was shaking up our thinking because she was so grounded in the youth culture and what they were doing online.

Part of our mandate from MacArthur had been to look across the research that had been done on learning and fandom and gaming spaces. This helped us gain insight into learning in other online communities and bringing that back to schools. Throughout that report are signs of the conversations we were engaged with MIT on games-based learning. Alongside the work we were doing for MacArthur, we were doing Microsoft-funded research making the educational case for how games might serve educational purposes. We called that initiative Games to Teach and as we expanded our funding, it became The Education Arcade. Kurt Squire, the original Research Director for Games to Teach, left MIT and ended up at University of Wisconsin-Madison with James Paul Gee. It's no accident that two of James Paul Gee's students are on the team that wrote the MacArthur white paper with me. So, there was a cross-pollination with one of the major centers for thinking about games-based education. I am still seeing the importance of that pioneering work even as I fear that this language of gamification has rigidified a lot of the creative experiments that were going on into the narrowest possible version of what games-based education could look like. I am very pleased to see this new book *Locally Played* by Benjamin Stokes who was, at the time, one of my foundation officers at MacArthur and later became my PhD student at USC. Ben's new book stresses how games played in real world spaces can enhance community building.

I don't think that report could have come out of any place other than MIT. Being at MIT left us ahead of the curve in the midst of ongoing conversations about the social and cultural impact of emerging platforms and practices. I was housemaster in an MIT dormitory, and I could walk up and down the halls, and just see what students were doing online. That was part of my night job, so it wasn't even necessarily formalized research. But there were lots of insights that made their way into that report that grew out of just living in an MIT environment with those students.

**Tessa Jolls:** Yes, and I think it's fascinating how all of that came together at this special time. How then was that connection made in terms of, hey, we need a report, we need this theoretical framework outlined?

**Henry Jenkins:** As Connie Yowell describes in her interview, she was working with Nicole Pinker. She was working with Mimi Ito. She was working with me. There were conversations amongst us about how we were progressing. I certainly was following Mimi Ito's research. She invited me to participate in discussions with her research groups at multiple points along the way, and vice versa. I think it was very clear that we needed a shared vocabulary to talk about learning in this environment.

I also felt that we needed to make the case to educators for why the kinds of informal learning that were taking place in young people's lives outside of school were in fact pertinent to what teachers did in their classrooms.

Mimi's work was documenting youth digital practices out in the world. She ended up using youth vernacular to frame her theories. She talks about “hanging out, messing around, geeking out”. Those are terms that emerged organically from the young people she interviewed. My task was the opposite: to take what we knew from research on informal learning, fan communities, gaming communities, and write it up in a way that would speak to teachers, to principals, the school board members, the state policymakers, grant funders. So I was giving academic terms to practices that probably would have been described rather differently by the young people themselves.

As we got into it, it was also clear that young people were being taught to devalue their own experiences, to devalue the ways they were learning and what they were learning in these informal spaces. I've come to recognize the importance of helping young people think about why it's important to take seriously those opportunities, as alongside helping teachers think about how to incorporate those skills and practices into the schools.

**Tessa Jolls:** Yes, absolutely. You really were at this confluence of all of these ideas swirling around. Fortunately, it seems, like, I know and talking with Connie and with Mimi, they saw a need to really articulate more of the theoretical foundations and then they turned to you. It was just incredible timing, well, not really coincidence, but definitely you were the man of the time and that really made all the difference. Henry Jenkins is currently Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California and is the Principal Investigator for the Civic Imagination Project (funded by MacArthur).

**Mimi Ito:** Henry was focused on writing a more conceptual summative piece and then around the same time, we had started fieldwork on what young people were doing in the digital landscape. We were looking at kids who were on Myspace and instant messenger primarily and had not really made the leap to text messaging, which is hard to believe. The US was very late to text messaging compared to the rest of the post-industrial world. The US was an outlier, so kids were still using a lot of instant messengers around then. This is pre-iPhone. Sometimes I get my chronology wrong ... yes, it was definitely pre-iPhone. MacArthur deciding to look at the online world as an arena for understanding learning was ahead of the time. John Seely Brown had just joined the board and it was a bold move at that time.

**Tessa Jolls:** Yes, it certainly was. It was interesting, too, because the emphasis was on the education, but not education in schools. It was centered around the technology and, of course, that was rapidly developing. We didn't even have a clue about what was coming, but I guess that isn't quite fair. We did have some clues, but nevertheless, we didn't have, as you said, the adoption of the social media and so on, but what did you feel then was your major challenge in terms of the research you were doing?



**Mimi Ito:** I was in that post-doctoral phase when all of this started. I had been studying how kids learn with video games and socializing and other things. I was an educational researcher as well as a cultural anthropologist by training. I wrote the first dissertation about digital culture in our anthropology department, but a lot of the perspective came from youth culture studies and so on.

I was very familiar with Henry's work because there weren't many people doing work in the States. Henry had written an early paper on videogames and had been one of the few senior media study scholars who would look at video games at all. At that time, I don't think Henry was that deep into learning and education. I was delighted that he was brought into the MacArthur initiative and was writing the paper around literacy, which is obviously a great bridge to the education side. I was always the black sheep of educational research because I looked at what kids did for fun, like play videogames. I had just finished the study of Yu-Gi-Oh!, which is a post-Pokémon trading card game and I described what kids learn from playing those kinds of complex games. Early networks, multiplayer games, text-based games were really the only environment at the time that I could see kids connecting socially via digital media because none of this other stuff had taken off yet. I had done research on mobile phones and texting in Japan, but the MacArthur Initiative kicked off right at that time when those things were starting to converge.

Henry was writing his book on convergence culture and suddenly you were at the beginning of seeing rich digital media in a social environment and games turned into real-time multiplayer network for the first time. ... there was a five-year period when all of that was converging, which was also that period that this paper that Henry was working on was pulled together and our digital youth study started.

For me, it was very much an extension of work I had already been doing theoretically and conceptually, but suddenly, it became a big thing in the world...

I had just spent two years in Japan studying the birth of camera phones and the mobile Internet and these weird videogames that were very social and then suddenly the rest of the world got interested. That was when MacArthur stepped in, yes.

I was starting to write about this stuff, suddenly the whole world was interested. I had already seen how youth culture was an incubator of trends around the digital. By 2004, people were paying attention to the mobile internet. It wasn't just high school girls in Tokyo.

I was pretty confident in the topics I was choosing that they were going to become global phenomena that transcended ages. If you were an observer of the digital environment, you knew this was going to explode. That part was not surprising. I think the question of whether educators would pay attention, that was not preordained. MacArthur had important influence supporting a counter-narrative. Henry's paper was really instrumental in that.

**Tessa Jolls:** Again, the impact on the different audience, splinters, educators versus the technology people and so on is really interesting because traditionally the education segment has always lagged and not necessarily been there. It was important to have some impact on that particular audience and I think these reports did. That was something very different.

**Mimi Ito:** MacArthur's choices of scholars were not in the educational mainstream. Bringing people like Henry into the conversation around education was an interesting move because Henry has credibility within the media and gaming space. That helped knit those worlds together, I think, in an important way.

*Mizuko "Mimi" Ito is a Professor in Residence at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine*

## Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later)

### PART TWO

In part two of this series on the writing and publication of *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture*, longtime media literacy advocate Tessa Jolls interviews two of my co-authors for the report: Alice Robison and Ravi Purushotma about their experience, what ideas from the report they think has survived the test of time, and how these ideas about education relate to their current professional and family lives. Margaret Weigel, the Research Director for the project, tragically passed away a few years ago. Katie Clinton was unable to participate.

**Henry Jenkins:** Ravi Purushotma was one of the master's students at the time. He came to us with a very strong commitment to thinking about new media in relation to learning and education. His particular fascination was language learning. He was doing really interesting things in his own life to try to learn languages using everything from video games to his iPod, to immerse himself into new language. He seemed absolutely the right person to do this work.

Margaret Weigel had just graduated from the program and was looking for work after her time with us. We hired her as the research director of that project. The research directors play a really crucial role in my approach. As co-director of the program, I was pulled in so many different directions. I was on planes constantly, raising money, trying to manage a lot of different research initiatives. I would be distracted from one moment to the next, and I needed people for each project who would wake up every morning thinking about that project and would grab my attention when things needed to happen. Margaret played this role admirably through this phase of the research.

Alice Robison was hired as our postdoc to work on this project. She was a classmate of Katie Clinton who had just moved to Boston. Katie and Alice had been students of James Paul Gee at University of Wisconsin, Madison. I had met them during trips to visit Gee and Kurt Squire and they had made strong impressions on me. I'd liked both of them very much and felt that they would cross pollinate between the game centered research that Gee was doing and the more fan directed research that I had been doing. This was a good team, especially given MIT did not have its own education school for me to draw upon.

**Tessa Jolls:** It's interesting to look back on it and see the takeaways, and definitely, the participatory culture went worldwide. It was just incredible that it just spread like wildfire. So definitely, there was a need out there. There was a hunger out there for this new way of looking at the world. Were you expecting that kind of reaction, Henry? How did you feel at the time in terms of having done the work and released it?

**Henry Jenkins:** We had no idea what the response was going to be. MacArthur told me that they had very mixed reception on previous white papers that they had issued from research. So my expectations were relatively low. We wrote it collaboratively using software that allowed us to share the text in process with each other, we were really trying to apply the technologies we were talking about. Ravi kept us state of the art in terms of the tools we were using to write the report.

As we finished that first draft, Connie Yowell decided it made sense to bring in a developmental editor to increase the clarity and make it more widely accessible. We worked with that editor closely. Yowell saw that there was real potential with us and our report became something that was targeted at diverse stakeholders.

Fairly late in the process, we realized that we needed not just to describe the skills and the research behind them, but also give concrete examples of how teachers could deploy them in their classes. That's where the postdocs particularly came into play. We had these brainstorming sessions where we brought that whole team together and just said, here's a skill, what do we know that's going on out there, where do we look for more examples. We reached out to media literacy organizations of all kinds to fill in those holes there. That's become an important part of the report, even though that may be the most dated part because it was describing prototypes, some of which took off, some of which didn't but it captures what was happening in the world as people saw this change coming. We were trying to get ready for it.

But no, I didn't expect anywhere near the reception that that report got. I'm still floored by the number of discussions that I've heard about that took place as that report was released to the world. It's worth saying the two reports were released in parallel, meaning, Ito's report and my report were announced at this event at the Museum of Natural History and simultaneously a press event was held in Second Life. So that was MacArthur trying to use a new toolkit to release its reports to the world.



**Alice Robison**



**Margaret Weigel**

**Alice Robison:** I wanted to make sure that... Henry talked about Margaret because, as you know, she had breast cancer, and it was pretty severe, and she passed very quickly, and we all miss her. Margaret was just an incredibly, cool, Gen-X chick, and – she was a true artist, and a radical and really representative of the Gen Xers. She played bass. She wore Doc Martens every day. She’s just a really cool chick and having her be a part of this paper, I miss

her and I really think she would have loved to have talked to you about it. I’m sure Margaret would be thrilled to know you were doing this.

In a true Margaret way, actually, she announced it on Facebook. She said, “Look guys, it’s not looking good, and I’ve got breast cancer, and I’m going to go in for one more round of treatment,” but it was very quick with her, like she did not catch it early. She said, “I’d appreciate it if you could just post something here,” and we did, and we all wrote to her and posted things, and her brother read them to her, and then it was I think a day or two later that he posted and said, “Thank you all. I read them all to her. She heard everything you said before...” and then she just died. It was, of course, shocking and awful, but at the same time, it was cool that she allowed us all to use that space to tell her how much we love her, and that she got to know that, and she used that tool in order to...

I do remember presenting the report at the National Media Literacy Conference in St. Louis, and I just remember how incredibly well received it was by a small minority of people who were excited about what we were talking about. It’s always true whenever you present radical ideas to educators. It’s always the minority who are most enthusiastic and most excited because they’re the closest to those changes that are happening. The further away you are, the more skeptical you are and that’s just true of anything. That minority of people were excited to know that they weren’t the only ones who were seeing the changes that we were seeing and they were so thrilled to get the validation that they had been seeking for a long time, and so for that, I’m still incredibly grateful.

There’s always going to be changes in platforms, right? There’s always going to be changes in applications and tools, but I think the principles that we described in the paper are still true. What we wrote in that paper is still very much true about distributed storytelling, and distributed cognition, and the ways that all of these media are specifically designed and created by teams of people in a very social way in a way that’s meant to be appreciated in social ways by people who love that content.

I have a nine-year-old and a seven-year-old. I was explaining to their teachers, not too long ago, that for them, YouTube stars are what rock stars were to us when we were young. My nine-year-old is begging me to have her own YouTube channel because she wants to be a media creator and create content for large groups of fans. She's not thinking about, "Oh, this is going to appeal to a specific tailored-group." She's thinking, "I want everyone to love Minecraft as much as I do." I think that was one thing that we probably could have been more articulate about.

We talked about the transparency problem, the participation gap, and the ethics challenge. The transparency problem is the one that most people are surprised by, meaning the persistence of the myths of the digital native will never die and I fought for years against this, and it still persists, engrained in millennial parents because a lot of these folks we were writing about then are now parents of their own children.

I'm part of an online summer camp for kids here, and we are spending hours talking about how to get all of our kids together on the same Minecraft server, and these other parents are just really resistant to think about how they might have something to offer their kids about how to be present in a collaborative online space and it's so surprising to me that they would be so resistant to think, "Hey, maybe I should teach my kids a little bit about 'password,' or why you might want to think about muting yourself, or turning off your video, or think about what you say to others, or what does 'griefing' mean and why is it important not to grief someone, or why do we want to be careful about respecting what other people build in that space," and they just assume that their kids can just jump right onto this game and its online space with other people and know what to do. The transparency problem is still a huge concern of mine, and we don't talk about it enough.

We do talk a lot about the participation gap and the ethics challenge; but for example, rural internet is still very weak, still very limited, and it's... we're looking at things like how are we going to have distributed learning come August. Out here, we start school the very first week in August, some districts start at the end of July, and we still don't have plans for how we're going to do online learning for rural districts here in Arizona, how are we going to get them access, yeah, or what can be done on mobile devices. The Navajo Nation here in Arizona is one of the worst-hit COVID-19 population. I don't imagine anyone that's going to want to put those kids in classroom. What do we do if you don't even have access to water? How are you going to have access to the internet? These things are really difficult, and I do believe that schools want the best for their students. I do strongly believe that there are limited numbers of things that can be covered in any given day, but the participation gap is still just as powerful as it was 16 years ago and the transparency issue is barely studied at all, so that's something that frustrates me.



**Katie Salen Tekinbas**

I don't know if you know Katie Salen Tekinbas. She's at UC Irvine. Katie Salen Tekinbas did the school project called "Quest to Learn" in New York City, that's a school based on principles of gaming, Salen and Mimi Ito created something called "Connected Camps." My nine-year-old is participating... she's done every single camp they've

offered. It's been wonderful to see how the principles that we wrote about are enacted in online digital curriculum and folks who are teaching these classes have no idea where this stuff comes from. They're just thrilled to be teaching a class in Minecraft, but it's fun for me to see my kid do the kinds of things that I wrote about 16 years ago.

Katie Clinton and I are very close, and we went to graduate school together, and we both went to work with Henry together. Katie's son, same thing. It's been so great to see and... I feel like all we did was really articulate what everyone who is immersed in digital media consumption at that time already knew. We just put it down on paper.

At the time Katie Clinton and I were finishing our dissertations and we were doing research on how video games were particularly good instantiations of what we already knew about learning science and how people learn, that's different from saying, "Video games should be used to teach content areas," okay? We were constantly trying to distinguish between video games as good instantiations of the research on learning versus folks who were in classroom being told to teach content with curriculum that was handed to them who wanted to use video games as a vehicle for that. Those are two different things, and so in the media literacy paper, we didn't want to make that same mistake. We didn't want to reduce what we were observing to a set of skills because we didn't want that to be interpreted as, "Here's the formula that you should be teaching in your class. Teach them how to blog, how to create YouTube channel." Instead we were saying, "No, no, no. You need to teach them how to look at these phases in a different way. What you do with that is up to you," but these phases are being created, and interpreted, and used in all kinds of fascinating new ways, what that ends up being translated to in the classroom is up to you because it's your classroom, but we don't want to reduce it down to a simple activity.

Those little sections on what might be done, those are really tough to write. We understood the need. When we got feedback from readers, “Well, we want examples. We want examples,” and so we offered those examples, and I think they were good examples, but if you’ll notice, they’re not curriculum. Each of those sections, what might be done. They’re ideas, they’re examples, they’re meant to be taken as such. They’re instantiations of the framework and examples of things that we had seen people do, and so we wanted to hold them up as good examples of the kinds of things we’re talking about without saying, “Here. Go teach X.”

Let’s say you’re teaching world history, that’s very, very different from teaching in a radio and TV lab. You can still use these principles in both content areas, but maybe one is going to be much more applied and the other one is going to be much more conceptual, but both can use these principles and use the framework in equally successful ways. There are so many fantastic examples of how you could talk about distributed cognition in a whole class on the video game, Legends and use it for example, in the Connected Camp. My daughter takes a weekly class in Minecraft, learning about ancient history of Rome, and they’re using all these principles, appropriation, distributed cognition, multitasking, all of the same things that we describe in the paper, they’re doing in that space and it’s because Katie Salen said, “Hey, Minecraft is a great place to explore what it was like to be a citizen in Ancient Rome,” but it’s not a class on ancient Roman history for a nine-year-old.

... AliceRobison, Ph.D., is co-founder of Quick Brown Fox Consulting, LLC.



**Katie Salen Tekinbas**

**Ravi Purushotma:** Henry was just always a brilliant mind and able to predict things quite well. It’s been a blast over the last couple decades to have had such insight into where things would be going. I mean, we really took it for granted, just how aware of the direction things were changing. and how we became, by being around him.

If we were re-writing the report today, we might use some different language. There was a lot of talk about things like affinity spaces back in the time and maybe today we’d be using slightly different vocabulary. But, fundamentally, the underlying concepts of how we need to develop the skills to be able to take in information from society accurately, the skills to produce content and share information back with society in the best means possible – that students need to find their voice. I think the underlying concepts still form the same fundamental conversation we’re having today.

**Tessa Jolls:** Conceptually, you think, “Hey, yeah, we captured it,” and so that’s really gratifying to feel like it’s being used or could be used today. I think in that regard, the report really did make an impact at that time. What was your perspective about the impact that the report had?



**Ravi Puralena:** I'm actually probably not super aware of the impact. I definitely got a sense it was getting good distribution. I would meet people randomly in social circles who would say, "Oh, my God. We just read your report in my grad seminar at Stanford!" So, events like that definitely gave me a sense that it seemed to have been an impactful report. But, for the most part, I had switched over to educational game design after graduating and I was a bit out of the media literacy discussion afterwards.

I guess I was trusting Henry a bit on where the report would land and where it would all go. Back at that age, I was much less attached to the process and just super excited to be a part of it all. I knew I wanted to make a difference in the Education and Media landscapes, but there was always, and there still is, a lot of uncertainty in my mind about where the best insertion point for making a change is. For change to happen, a lot of different efforts have to come together in parallel: some people need to take on arguing with the skeptics or traditionalists or policy-makers; some people need to be mentoring the open-minded but hesitant people looking to take their first steps; some people need to be trailblazing with the savvy early adopters and inventing the best possible solutions. In this field, there're different media forms associated with each of those: the first one needs to be books and whitepapers like the one we wrote, the second might be things like YouTube guides and the latter might be things like programming mobile apps. Given my strong technical background, I always felt suited to the latter. There also was simply more job opportunities being in the latter than the former. Also, I tend to get better energy being on the creative/trailblazing side of things rather than the arguing with the skeptics side. Though I'm super grateful for people like Henry who are able to do that role so well, after I graduate I somewhat left that role to them. Instead I was doing things like working with a Fortune 100 company to program an app to help kids in Latin America to create, tell and record stories.

I guess, even when starting the whole paper writing process, I didn't fully understand what it was and where it could go. I think it's really stunning for me to think back retrospectively about actually writing the paper. At the start, I don't think I actually understood what the term "Media Literacy" meant or how to articulate it. I got "21st Century Skills." But, even half-way through writing the paper, if you had told me "People think about 'Literacy' as the ability to read a book or write a paper. But, it's really the skill of taking information in from society and producing information to contribute to society. You need to be able to take information in from more than just books and create more than just papers in order to really be 'Literate' today or have a voice." I would have responded "Wooooah! I totally never thought of it that way!!!" But, piecing it all together while writing it – it was a crazy journey to think about how that all came together.

I guess maybe to back up a bit. Originally, I don't think even Henry knew that the paper was going to be such a big scope or the core focus it ended up being. I got the sense, originally, at the very beginning, that this was kind of my project personally and that maybe he would come in at the end, do a bit of fine touching and what not, but, fundamentally a simple paper I was to write about 21st Century Skills. I had written over a hundred pages of the original first draft before anybody had seen anything. Then, it started to evolve with more discussions from the Foundation and become clear that we were going to turn it into a much more involved paper. Henry was able to step in and pull together the huge gaps in my understanding of the field at the time and take my hundreds of pages, and really expand then edited it into just a much more polished and comprehensively articulated work. Originally, though, it started with a very different scope before evolving to what it became.

Looking back on it, one really unique thing about the paper for the time was the way it involved having multiple people writing it simultaneously. It's something we take for granted nowadays, having such easy access to Google Docs, but, I think the tools used for collaborating really impact the content of the writing. Perhaps one reason the paper was received so well is because of how unified the different voices of the authors felt compared to other papers at the time. And perhaps one reason for that was because it was one of the first papers of its scope to be written entirely in an online collaborative environment. At the time Google Docs didn't exist. There was a small startup tool called "Writely" which I had identified and thought could be a good tool for this paper. It was still in beta at the time and incredibly buggy. I knew it was a big ask for all these academics to take a tool as fundamental to them as their word processor and ask them to replace it with the totally new way of doing things in the midst of a project with important deadlines. And the interface was totally unintuitive. I remember how frustrating it was for Henry: at one dinner someone made a comment about what a genius he was and he replied something like "I'm no genius, I can't even figure out how to operate my word processor!" But, I really admired his willingness to give it a try, to show humility in always asking me for help learning to use a new technical tool and navigating through all its quirks and bugs. I think most people would have just said "Just send me a Word Docs with track changes turned on like I've been doing for 20 years. We're in the middle of a big project. This isn't the time for me to be learning this Writely thing that you're fixated on [and is making me feel inept]." Perhaps it's because they would have felt embarrassed to be the one to say that given the content of what we were writing about. But, for whatever reason, we persevered and I think the level of collaboration we had as a result really changed the tone and voicing of the paper for the better and was a first for its time. Writely was eventually acquired by Google and became Google Docs, so, nowadays it's essentially the standard way of writing a collaborative paper. But, at the time of Writely Beta – or 'Writerly' as Henry kept calling it – it was unique.

After I graduated, I then moved from the media literacy side of Henry's department to the educational video game side. I worked as a research manager in the Education Arcade lab, then for a spin-off, for many years focusing on educational video games design. I had a fellowship in Germany for almost two years teaching classes and meeting with various government officials for discussions about how technology can enhance language learning & education. Then, eventually, I moved to California and have been working largely in the tech industry here, gaining a lot more programming skills and more the technical side of media development. Some more work in educational games, but also just in general industry – web programming, mobile app development, things like that. When I first got married, I needed to focus on income and so I was working for an artificial intelligence company creating tools for doing financial audits. Now that my wife is further in her career, I have more flexibility to go back into Educational design. I started making some content for Coursera. I'm hoping someday there'll be more opportunities to utilize my tech background for more Media Literacy work. Perhaps once I'm a parent I'll find a way of creating more creative activities and apps for parents and kids. But, currently Media Literacy is more just a hobby. Like, a week or two ago, I made a little video I posted on my facebook page discussing religious texts and what it means for someone from today's literate society to try and interpret something from an oral tradition 2,000 years ago and apply it to their life. I've been putting out little videos and things on those kinds of topics and constantly discussing it with people in my religious community, and work life. So, even though I've left academia, it's still a discussion and a movement I love at heart and hope all my different backgrounds will intersect again someday.

*Ravi Purushotma currently authors videos, games and apps for clients looking to use digital media to make learning & instruction more engaging.*

## Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later)

### PART THREE

In part three in our series about the production and impact of *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture*, we spend a little more time with Connie Yowell, who commissioned the report on behalf of the MacArthur Foundation; Alice Robison, who was one of the co-authors of the report; Mimi Ito, who was another key leader of the Digital Media and Learning Movement; and of course, Henry. We also check in with John Palfrey, who is now President of the MacArthur Foundation and was running an important center at Harvard focused around how “digital natives” learn at the time Jenkins was up the road at MIT. Each of them addressed Tessa Jolls’ questions about the lasting legacy of the white paper and of the Digital Media and Learning Project more generally.

**Connie Yowell:** I thought the reaction was two-fold. In general, it was like breathing fresh, new life into education and how people think about literacy and how they think about learning. There was a hunger, amongst teachers in particular, to really understand the report and understand what to do with it. Once they saw it, and read it, and understood it, they were eager to figure out what to do with it. One of the core challenges for teachers is engaging students and finding ways to connect learning to the things that young people care about. Henry’s brilliance was sitting at the intersection of culture, media, literacy and education. It was a new intersection for educators and one that had the potential to pave the way to paradigmatic changes in how we think about learning, technology and learner empowerment. It’s where learner interest, engagement and action intersect.

Later on, Henry’s work on the Harry Potter Alliance as an illustrative case of how these things come together was equally significant and enabled educators and learners to break out of their traditional learning as transmission of information box, giving us a whole new imagination on where learning can happen, how it can happen and how its supported and embedded in affinity groups. That was the first step in creating a whole pathway into thinking about a different way of teaching literacy.

There was a broad uptake. There were fringes of people who were way more conservative, who really struggled with it, but we saw a massive uptake and interest.

If we had actually had even more uptake and more engagement, we would have had a way of helping our young people understand this shift in online tools that became more ad-based and more focused on capturing their attention rather than engaging them in participation.

Henry was writing about the first wave of tools that came out, which were all around participation, and making and creating a more extraordinary youth culture – whether it was LiveJournal or some of the other tools he was looking at. Even MySpace was more maker and creator focused than Facebook. But we took a serious turn with Twitter and Facebook and their use of media to capture and sell attention as opposed to creating onramps to participation and production. The new media literacy took an invaluable approach to enabling youth to both be critical of and participatory in media. We needed more time to scale the approach, but it's not too late. It's time for another wave of the work.

*Connie Yowell is currently serving as Senior Vice Chancellor of Education Innovation at Northeastern University and was founder of LRNG.*



**John Palfrey**

**John Palfrey:** It's great to be able to reflect on a previous time in a set of ideas and how they've then tracked through. It's kind of a cool intellectual history journey, which is fun to go on. I would say, clearly, your white paper was a catalytic piece in the context of the digital media and learning work that MacArthur committed many, many years and hundreds of millions of

dollars to. You can take great pride in having set up a philosophical framework for a lot of that investment. Then, as Connie Yowell went on to take the LRNG spinoff out of the DML work, trying to focus on the new media literacies of young people outside of schools and in places from Chicago to Birmingham, Alabama, to New Hampshire, she's really taken the same set of ideas and implemented them in a variety of contexts. So it absolutely was one of several, very important blueprints from MacArthur's work and a huge amount of investment.

In some ways, it may be even unusual to say that scholars would have had such a huge impact on what such a program ended up doing. That's actually a hallmark of the Digital Media and Learning project. It took so many cues from the field and from leaders in the field, obviously, but it wasn't so much the brainchild necessarily just of one or two program officers. MacArthur was leaning into what the field thought was required for the next series of directions and then invested behind it.

**Henry Jenkins:** Well, thanks for that. So you were at Harvard at the time we were doing this and you were doing your work on digital natives?

**John Palfrey:** We had a great interest in how kids were learning and engaging with information in different ways, and obviously, very focused on what are the ways that we could understand that and support it and then understand some of the ramifications of it. As you know, it was a fun time with danah boyd and, of course, your work and many others in the field kicking around Cambridge and to have interlocutors and people who are kind of writing in public together, both informally and formally. It was actually a pretty generative time, at least from my perspective in terms of thinking through how kids were learning, how that was changing, what was important about it, what was enduring. It kicked off a lot of work that followed.

**Henry Jenkins:** The joke has always been that Harvard and MIT are two stops down the Red line and opposite ends of the planet at the same time. But, in those days, we were finding ourselves on somewhat similar trajectories and involved in some productive conversations.

**John Palfrey:** I think it's a good example of not necessarily being in the same institution, but being focused on some similar questions and then being able to have a semi-public dialogue that actually could be quite constructive. I certainly am personally grateful for that.

**Henry Jenkins:** Me too. What do you think were the biggest insights that came out of that moment in time in terms in terms of understanding young people's relation to new media technologies?

**John Palfrey:** The insights around agency are always ones I keep coming back to – the things that kids can do relative to media. It's not simply a passive experience. You and I both have had a great interest in the ways that young people can be involved in shaping, not just communities, but democracy itself. Those insights you included in the paper are important and enduring. The other piece of it, I would say, which is more of this moment, but it may well be enduring too, is that so many kids are learning outside of the classroom and outside of the formal structure of learning. An insight that came through your work, but then was amplified through the DML work broadly is how much learning is happening across a variety of things, whether it's cognitive or social-emotional. It's harder to describe the kinds of learning kids do when they engage with media outside of school, independent of adult control, and removed from formal education. Right now, that's so important for all reasons – some fatigue; kids not having access to the technology, not being able to participate in the formal learning. It's important to see that broader set of new media literacies come into play and understand why they matter. Where we can make that available for kids, there's a huge benefit from an equity perspective. The work that one teacher is doing in that 30 minutes or 45 minutes or whatever it is on Zoom with kids who are not able to be physically proximate to each other actually isn't the end of the story. That may feel like it's sort of a pandemic answer to your question, but I think it could be an enduring answer too.

**Henry Jenkins:** The pandemic obviously keeps cropping up in all of these conversations because suddenly, everyone's focused on schools, online education and what that looks like at the current moment. Notions like screen time just has blown up because everything is screen time and we need to be asking what kids are doing on those screens and not just whether there are screens involved.

**John Palfrey:** What are you supposed to say? The data have not borne out the idea that screen time in aggregate is a bad thing for most kids. In fact, there's plenty of evidence to say that a bunch of screen time can be quite good for most kids.

**Henry Jenkins:** So, any further thoughts?

**John Palfrey:** Just gratitude. I'm grateful for the ideas and the enduring connection and the fact that I get to talk with you for a few minutes across this divide. John Palfrey is the President of the MacArthur Foundation.

**Mimi Ito:** Our report was empirical and descriptive unlike Henry's work, which was actually suggesting stuff that educators might do. We reissued the Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out book. We've issued a tenth anniversary version where we have a new foreword that looks back on the ten years and what we missed, or not necessarily what we missed, but how the ecosystem changed or what we were surprised about. I think the speed at which the grown-up world gobbled the internet was surprising, or maybe not surprising, but just how quickly it became this arena where grown-ups were doing their grown-up things and they got colonized by politics and commerce.



When we were doing our research, it was much more of a youth and academic-centered space. It was very different. It was perceived as the space of freedom for young people. Now, it's not at all. Kids are retreating to private spaces and the open internet is not a happy place anymore.

It was a pleasant surprise how many educators embraced our

work. I often take a critical view of educational institutions, and I'm not a big fan of teaching myself. I do research and mentor students but I don't do classroom instruction. I actually enjoyed school myself, but I don't look to the classroom as a place that is spearheading digital innovation. I wasn't holding my breath about educator response to our work, but I was pleasantly surprised. Over the years I've learned to appreciate and collaborate with more educational institutions instead of just engaging with youth outside of school. It's a good thing.

One of the big outcomes was the establishment of the YouMedia Learning Lab at the Chicago Public Library and the network of youth media labs that were based off of our research, at least in part. MacArthur incentivized those, but they also brought in a Federal funder, the Institute of Museum and Library Services. That was pretty exciting just to see actual programs being launched. It wasn't like it was an application of the research. It was because we were all in conversation with one another. Then a lot of our subsequent work around connected learning was really knitted around bringing insights from the empirical research, which my study was part of the design and agenda studying stuff, like Henry's report and then people who were actually building and rolling out tests and innovations and practice. Those things all fed together into the two research networks that Henry (Youth and Participatory Politics) and I (Connected Learning) were a part of to build frameworks that were evidenced-driven but were also setting the agenda for innovations and results. Because of MacArthur's funding of all of the subsequent work, there's this ongoing influence that this work has had and because they used the Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out framework for the youth media learning labs and they shortened it to an acronym, HOMAGO. Now, even the library spaces, they're routinely described as HOMAGO spaces.

*Mizuko "Mimi" Ito is a Professor in Residence at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine.*

**Tessa Jolls:** When you think back on it, do you feel like you were surprised by anything? Were there surprises that you just didn't expect as a result of the reporting being published?

**Alice Robinson:** I shouldn't have been, but I was surprised that some media literacy educators were resentful that the report got so much attention. That was unfortunate; however, I don't necessarily think they were wrong. We didn't do enough to acknowledge the deep history of media literacy to begin with. However, I don't think any of us wrote the paper with the intent of reaching an audience beyond media study folks. None of us was an expert in any way on media literacy and we should have brought in media literacy folks. We were a group of literacy scholars and media scholars, and it got taken up by the media literacy audience, but it was not written for the media literacy audience. We should have anticipated that, and we didn't, and that was I think unfortunate. However, it was incredibly well received by literacy, especially digital literacy, scholars and educators, and that made me really happy because I really wanted them to look at literacy in different ways as not just sort of an acquisition problem and so I thought that that was really great. I was really thrilled that media folks found themselves thinking more about learning and literacy.

**Tessa Jolls:** Agreed. Media people, in general, were just in shock at that point in time and they were really scrambling to understand this new world. The report was so awakening for a lot of them; it gave them something to go to, to be able to understand the framework.

*AliceRobison, Ph.D., is co-founder of Quick Brown Fox Consulting, LLC.*





**Mimi Ito**

**Mimi Ito:** I certainly don't think that our reports would have had the influence they did if there wasn't for the additional support MacArthur was giving to other organizations that were taking up the work. I'm guessing the same for Henry's report as well, but I don't have as much insight into that.

**Tessa Jolls:** Yes, understandable. Do you think we're in one of those innovative moments now

with COVID and all the homeschooling going on? It's hard to tell, but at the same time it seems like things are really shaking up right now. That can be an opportunity, as well as certainly disruptive.

**Mimi Ito:** I think it's hard to know. I mean it's definitely going to change things. Whether it's an opportunity for the things we care about to survive – that I think is less certain. It does feel to me similar to that moment in history that we were talking about earlier. COVID has really accelerated the next wave of mainstreaming of online learning. Before COVID, when people said online learning, they actually didn't think of the things that I study, like kids geeking out on videogames and things like that. They wouldn't have considered the more expansive version of literacy that Henry talks about. A lot of people would not associate that with digital learning because they think of online teaching as the delivery of standardized formal education for the most part. I think that has changed because people understand the importance of digital and social connection because of COVID.

COVID has accelerated the recognition that kids can't learn academic subjects unless they feel connected and safe and/or well-fed. It seemed obvious but it's a big deal that is officially being recognized. Before COVID, homeschooling was growing slowly, but it was still a fringe set of groups that consider themselves homeschoolers and schools repeatedly ignored the home context and saw their mission as residing within the four walls of the school.

We had been seeing a lot of growth in online learning in the Higher Ed because you have a lot of non-traditional learners there, but it had been really slow in the K12 sector. Suddenly all doctors are doing telemedicine. It's like, "Okay. Now, we actually have to think about not only what it means for kids to be able to access the school content from home, but also how do you design an online learning environment, which has never been a mainstream concern within education?"

The fact that Zoom has come to dominate online learning is unfortunate. Why aren't virtual worlds where learners can interact socially and create things being used? I am running a nonprofit, Connected Camps, that is trying to do this more social and project-based kind of online learning, together with Katie Salen, also from the MacArthur network. Our focus has been offering live, social, online learning experiences in platforms like Minecraft and Roblox. These are some of the only learning platforms that some educators use, that allows for kids to engage in a social, hands-on way. Compare that to Zoom, which often translates to a second-rate version of lectures or classroom discussion. Minecraft is a digital environment that gives you new and different powers that you don't have in the physical environment.

There were never resources or thoughts from educational community of putting imagination as a priority. Imagine if we had invested in a metaverse that was actually good for kids where they could build things together and where a teacher could circulate among groups of kids instead of having this metaphor of face-to-face and breakout rooms, which is not how educators work. If you want to do project-based stuff, you can't. It's very difficult to do anything that's inquiry-based in Zoom. Since March, we expanded our team from a group of 25 to 125 and we're still not able to meet the demand for this summer.

**Tessa Jolls:** Wow! That's really something, Mimi. Congratulations. You kept at it.

**Mimi Ito:** Yes, it almost killed us. We're still trying to keep things afloat, but there wasn't much out there. Families were just desperate for a step that was social and engaging and meaningful for their kids.

**Tessa Jolls:** Yes, I believe it. It's been so helpful to explore this with you because the timing is good, with all of this change going on, and yet it's also important to recognize how some of the work that was done early on has really blossomed. The work that MacArthur undertook has made a contribution and, in a way, we're probably going to see more from that contribution now even then we did in the past, especially when we look at the education space. Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share on MacArthur and the impacts that it had?

**Mimi Ito:** For a lot of people who are touched by it, it created a set of relationships in a community that has been very resilient. Some of what I have tried to inherit and steward even, after the official DML initiative ended a couple of years ago, I recruited eight faculty who were involved in the DML initiative to our campus at UC Irvine and started a new research institute, the Connected Learning Lab as a steward of some of the community and the resources that came out of that work. We have a website, the Connected Learning Alliance, where we continue to blog and publish reports. My team at UC Irvine has been running the annual DML conference. Henry was our very first chair for the very first DML. We merged with Games, Learning, and Society and the Sandbox Summit, into a new event called the Connected Learning Summit, which we had to cancel this year. This year would have been the third year in this new format.

Yes, the community is still very robust. I have no idea if we're going to be able to continue it in the world post-COVID, but at least for the first two years, even after MacArthur ended its funding, it was sustainable as a community supported event. I think that the people like to see each other. They like to stay connected with each other. I think that's also a really nice outcome of that work.

*Mizuko "Mimi" Ito is a Professor in Residence at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine.*

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**Henry Jenkins:** We wanted to make the report as concrete for teachers as we could. That was part of the writing process. So when the report came out, the first stories we were hearing were that groups of teachers were sitting down at the faculty lounge in schools across the country, reading the report, discussing it, trying to identify what they were already doing, trying to identify what next steps they wanted to take. I heard from so many teachers through the years, that they had department-wide or school-wide discussions over the report when it came out. That was really a surprise to me.

Then we started getting requests to translate it into foreign languages. We soon lost track of the number of different languages it got translated into. We are hearing reports, particularly in Scandinavia, was one pocket that really embraced it and was discussing it very far and wide. I was invited to Latin America after the report came out, to a Buenos Aires conference with delegates of all the school superintendents and educational policy-makers of the Latin American countries. So, we know it had an impact. We don't know how big an impact it was or where the impact was best felt because it was beyond our control. MacArthur put the report out in the public domain and people were translating themselves and studying it themselves. So, there is no way to estimate the scale of where it traveled.

The media literacy movement embraced the report in a very serious and thoughtful way. There was some unfortunate divides. Some people didn't understand why we were not sticking with the traditional framework media literacy had developed through the years. We challenged them in some ways that we thought were productive. We saw the existing media literacy work as part of a larger framework we were describing, and didn't feel the need to reinvent the wheel or to reproduce what was already out there, but instead, to direct people to read that existing material. Some connected learning people probably did not appreciate fully the work that has already gone on in terms of the media literacy movement: the recruitment of teachers, the building up of the vocabulary, and so forth. I tried in my own work to bridge that divide and to be someone who had a toe in both of those camps and saw the potential of us working together to achieve a more literate culture in all senses of the word.

**Tessa Jolls:** You have really lived with those words, Henry. I know from my perspective, you cited the Center for Media Literacy's framework and called the attention to the fact that it was geared toward more of a passive kind of questioning for deconstruction, in terms of questioning media being developed by someone else. I think that your report had a huge impact. I know it did on our organization because we subsequently used your research and then developed a process of inquiry for producers of media so questioning can be done from an active standpoint. So, I think the research was very timely and very informative.

**Henry Jenkins:** Yes, you did an excellent job of revisiting that and responding to that critique in a very constructive and generative way. I appreciate it, that the critique got taken in the spirit in which it was meant.



The work that we did for the white paper led directly to the work we did with Ricardo Pitts Wiley, Wyn Kelly, Katie Clinton and others on the Moby-Dick project, which became the book, *Reading in a Participatory Culture*. Erin Reilly took over the leadership of Project New Media Literacies from Margaret Weigel as we moved towards a fuller application of the ideas in the white paper, and we ended up, among other things, developing a professional development program for teachers associated with the Los Angeles Unified School District, helping them apply participatory learning practices into their classrooms. The conversations I was having with danah boyd and Mimi Ito were commemorated in the book, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, which is a book-long conversation about our intersecting research through the Digital Media and Learning initiative.

I continued to work with the MacArthur Foundation, moving gradually from work on new media literacies (with Erin Reilly) to work (with Sangita Shresthova) on civic media, civic engagement, the political lives of young people, first through the Youth in Participatory Politics Research Network. Our work in that phase culminated with *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activists*. More recently, our Civic Imagination Project is part of the civic media grant making that MacArthur is doing. So participatory

culture has continued to drive a lot of the research that I've done. It doesn't shape everything that I do. I've done work on comics and some other things that are largely unrelated to that strand, although you can always see the connections. But that strand on participatory culture runs from *Textual Poachers* at the beginning of my career down to our current projects on Popular Culture and the Civic imagination and onward into the future.

## Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture (Fifteen Plus Years Later)

### PART FOUR

In this final installment of our series, Henry Jenkins and Tessa Jolls offer some final reflections on Confronting the Challenge of a Participatory Culture in the current context.

**Tessa Jolls:** How did you react when you re-read the report?

**Henry Jenkins:** There are certain things I wrote that when I reread I don't remember hardly anything. This whitepaper, I reread and remembered almost every word of it. There were things that surprised me, but the conversations of that era were still so vivid in my memory. I can remember the thinking that went behind this paragraph and that paragraph, as we went to that writing process.

**Tessa Jolls:** Where do you see things going in terms of participatory culture? Certainly, we're at a moment right now, and you had mentioned earlier that some of the things that you had predicted, are all happening right now. It's interesting that it's taken that long to catch up, but nevertheless, it's happening. How do you see that? How do you see the moment today and where it's going to?

**Henry Jenkins:** In the wake of COVID-19, we've seen the widespread embrace of networked technologies and particularly Zoom in response to the social isolation we're all feeling. Ironically, we were attacked as advocates of digital media for a long time because digital media was isolating us from going out into the world and engaging with the people around us. Now, we're trapped in our apartments, have no way of going out or engaging with the world, we're isolated from the people around us. I haven't seen the guy in the apartment next to mine since this thing began but we're communicating via Zoom and email on an ongoing basis. Schools have had to revert overnight to online teaching. I'm teaching online exclusively right now. We're hearing stories of kindergarteners being asked to spend three or four hours blocks online, engaging with their teachers. This conversion was done without the support that the white paper was calling for. The professional development never took place. The development of new content and techniques never took place. People do traditional teaching on Zoom and largely receive technical advice rather than pedagogical advice. So the white paper still offers tools to rethink what's going on. Of course, there are innovative teachers across America doing that thinking now. We've heard from some of them through the Civic Imagination Project. We're working regularly with some great teachers in the LA area and we do work with the National Writing Project. But teachers still need more guidance.

As for participatory culture, we now see it in its best and in its worse, right. We are seeing some of the challenges of networking and navigation and the verification of reliable information in a world of disinformation, misinformation, and sheer confusion. We've seen the breakdown of civility and the nastiness of cultural divides in the online world but also groups rallying to take social action in incredible ways. We've seen commercialization leaving young people particularly vulnerable to various mechanisms of data collection. Sonia Livingstone often talks about risks and benefits of children and families online and the challenge is to keep both in focus at once.

I still would remain firm in the idea that literacy in a network era is a social skill and a cultural competency; that young people need to think through together, with mentorship from adults, how to respond to the social challenges they face in this online world and that the way out of our current crisis is to foster a generation that thinks more deeply than previous generations about the human beings they're interacting with and their accountability for the information they put in the circulation. I would still like to see us raise a generation with a mouse in one hand and a book in the other.

**Tessa Jolls:** My take on it was that the report represents the dawn of the social media era. It came out right at the beginning of Facebook. There was a reference in the report to Myspace, and Friendster. We've seen a lot of change in that particular environment and yet it was right on the cusp of this enormous explosion of social media. What's your take on that, Henry?

**Henry Jenkins:** Convergence Culture – which I wrote just before writing this report – makes almost no reference to social media. That's always striking to me when I look back that it's still about discussion boards and not about social media. Convergence Culture also does not reference Web 2.0 and *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* picks up on both of those. So it's somewhere in that transitional period when social media is first becoming visible to us and where the concept of Web 2.0 is starting to become popular. Certainly, I was well situated to know about social media as it was coming into being: dana boyd has been an early researcher on social media, a very important figure in that space. I remembered email correspondence with her where she started describing the work she was doing on Friendster and some of the earlier social media spaces. Some of the younger graduate students on the committee were more deeply immersed in social media at that point than I would have been.

I'm proud to have an early Facebook account because of the connections between MIT and Harvard, where Facebook was first created but we weren't using it very heavily during that period of time. When I read the stuff about Web 2.0, I cringe a little because it's still written in this moment of celebration about what a transformation in business model and orientation Web 2.0 would represent. It's not yet reflective of some of the critiques of Web 2.0 that would start to emerge in the years following that. I've become more and more clear trying to draw a distinction between participatory culture and Web 2.0 and the work we've done then.

The idealism of some of the Silicon Valley companies that I was interacting with during that period is very tangible. When I spoke to them they weren't quite in the grasp of the venture capitalists. This is something danad boyd and Mimi Ito and I talked about in our book on Participatory Culture in a Networked Era, that shifts in the way we thought about Web 2.0.

**Tessa Jolls:** Yes. That's why the word prescient is called for here, because the content of the report anticipated so many of the cultural aspects that would emerge with the increased use of Web 2.0 and social media. Was that your impression as well?



**Henry Jenkins:** Yes. I feel good about how it reads today. There's very little in it that I would change if I rewrote it now. With any of the skills we identified, you could drill as deeply as you wanted to. Many of these skills have been taken up by other specialists. Some of those skills reflect conversations that were taking place in the educational world at the time, like distributive

cognition, which was something that the more education-trained members of our team brought to my attention. So, we were synthesizing what was in the air at the time. It is not that we invented collective intelligence; instead, we were consolidating it, and researchers that continue to do important work in each of those areas.

After it came out, we did some work to add one additional skill visualization, because when we talked to science teachers and math teachers and so forth, it became abundantly clear that visualization is quite distinct from simulation. If we looked at it more closely, we might identify a couple of more skills that would need to be on that agenda. I don't think any of the skills that we identified seem wrong or out of date. They're all things that we need more urgently today than ever before. I think the balancing act we did in terms of acknowledging traditional research, traditional literacy, media literacy in relation to the new media literacy seems more as important, if not more so than ever before. This is an era of misinformation and disinformation. We need to have all of those skills to sort through what's going on day by day and the flow of information right now.

**Tessa Jolls:** I thought the skills you cited are all relevant and more important than ever, as you said. If anything, it is disappointing to me that we haven't made more progress, from the standpoint of institutionalizing new media literacies. You called for a systemic approach to education regarding the new media literacies. In some ways, I think we're still stuck right where we were. What do you think?



**Henry Jenkins:** The MacArthur Initiative, in general, identified large numbers of people who shared a common vision of what needed to be done and recruited a lot of individual teachers who were willing to take risks and experiment and do things in their classroom. At the end of the MacArthur-funded Digital Media and Learning Initiative, there is a much more, much stronger body of evidence in support of some of the hypotheses we put forth in that report. There were some nuances on how it needs to be taught and what it means to bring it into the classroom which are really significant.

What we didn't see was the institutionalization of it, the scalability of it. It's been hard to get even individual school districts on board. There's been good luck coming out of the Youth and Participatory Politics Initiative. Their Civic Tool Kit has been picked up in citywide or district-wide standards, but not on state or national standards so far. So in some ways, this experience taught me a lot about how hard it is to make institutional change in education.

## Digital Civics Toolkit



Change still comes on the backs of individual teachers who are willing to do the hard work, to bring new resources and approaches into their school and to fight their department chairs and their principals in order to do something that still seems risky. It shouldn't be risky, this many years later. I think getting wide adoption is really, really hard and MacArthur pushed against that, and still didn't inspire much momentum. We're

still seeing the Connected Learning Network trying to fight that battle and again, they are running up against a lot of stone wall.

**Tessa Jolls:** In the report, you also called for the informal learning environment to be involved. Do you feel that there's been progress in that arena or do you feel like it's pretty much the same story as formal learning, in terms of scaling?

**Henry Jenkins:** There have been some large scale initiatives, for example, the YouMedia project out of the Chicago Public Library. The MacArthur promoted this program and it led to many, many other libraries adopting that model. It may be the biggest success story coming out of Digital Media and Learning. The librarians have taken up the calling. I spent time after the report was released talking to library organizations and I found them much more receptive than teacher organizations. If anything the role of the librarian as an information coach has now been firmly established in the way they conceptualize themselves. Many of them have been really

open to the new media literacies in one way or another. So definitely we had much more freedom outside of school than inside school through libraries and even through school librarians. You have more freedom than the sort of standardized educational test-driven curriculum, but there is so much more that should be done to fully integrate those skills into the afterschool space.

**Tessa Jolls:** Regarding institutional barriers, you mentioned in the report that there's the participation gap the transparency problem, and the ethics challenge.

**Henry Jenkins:** Credibility issues seem more acute after 2016 and the misinformation campaigns and the debates about fake news and so forth. That's a huge problem that we're confronting today and we're realizing that our concerns are not just casual use of information but active massive misinformation campaigns that are undermining the idea of standards of truth.

Similarly, we need to address the intractability of the participation gap. This is what led me some years after the report to shift talking about living in a more participatory culture because that phrase means every time I say it, I have to call attention to who's left out, what groups are not allowed to fully participate, and what the barriers the participation look like.

Those barriers seem ever more real in the age of COVID. We wired the classrooms and promised people access to computers through libraries. Now we're hearing that as many as a quarter of students in LA don't have access to public education during the quarantine because they don't have home access. They can't go on Zoom calls with their teachers and participate with their classmates. They're locked-out. Regarding the most basic level of technological access, we are as bad as we've ever been in serving the needs of the lowest-income students. We're hearing stories of students writing papers on their mobile phones because they don't have access to computers at home. We're also seeing young people who lack mentorship. They need to fully understand the world they're traveling through and to have someone who's watching their back and giving them insight about some of the choices they're making along the way.

The ethics challenge increasingly came to focus on questions of mentorship because in the report we talked about some of the work that had been done on high school journalism as a space for mentoring future journalists. We called out the degree to which at least some young people had greater access to the communication capacity than ever before, and less mentorship than ever before. The research I've seen more recently shows that this is still the case, that most young people don't have access to mentors who can help them confront the challenges they encounter as they move through the world online.

Looking back, I don't think we understood the full complexities of the picture. I think the fact that since this systemic racism, for example, doesn't surface anywhere in the report. We understood the participation gap almost entirely in terms of economic barriers to access. Today, it's clear that it's not just access to technology, it's access

to knowledge and skills, but it's also access to certain kinds of privilege. It's access to people who are willing to listen and respond to what you have to say. If the message given is that what you say is unimportant because of the color of your skin, then that outweighs almost anything else we do in the space of new media literacy. That problem is more and more visible to us today than it was when we were writing that report, and I feel we were almost naive when I reread the report.

**Tessa Jolls:** Yes. We need to give hope to everyone and yet it has to be a real hope in terms of our culture, in our leadership, in our mentors, and being open to listening and exchanging ideas.

**Henry Jenkins:** It doesn't do anything to ensure a voice for everyone if people aren't making ethical commitments to listen to each other. Without that commitment, what I say about participatory culture as a learning environment is at best a set of ideals and not a description of reality. Students can develop a document to send government officials or a newspaper and even their own parents, but if they don't get a response back, then is anyone listening? That's a big problem for us as a society. So to have a participatory culture there has to be a reciprocity of communication. This is something that Nico Carpentier and I have been talking about a lot in recent years. How do you build that willingness to listen and willingness to hear? Otherwise, you've just got noise and to some degree, the divisiveness of Twitter grows out of that sense of growing frustration with lots of people talking and no one's hearing what it is they have to say.

At the same time I'm seeing the updated numbers on young people producing media. I had a chance to observe it in an interesting way. When I traveled to India three years ago, an anthropologist took my wife and me into the center of one of the biggest slums in India, where they filmed *Slumdog Millionaire*. We went into homes of people and talked to young people about their use of technology. Even under those conditions most of the young people we talked to had made some media. There was a really powerful story of a young man, who told me his best friend had died of tuberculosis. A friend of his had access to an office and smuggled the man at night so they could use the office computers to produce a video tribute to their friends from footage shot using cell phone cameras and put it out on YouTube. So that was a really powerful story to me of the young people fighting against every circumstance to create and share something with the world, but you see so many other young voices being unheard, despite all of that.

**Tessa Jolls:** In the report, there was a statement that we should look at the new media literacies as a social skill. In a sense, I think that's exactly what we're talking about here. There are social skills that are involved in speaking and listening and being respectful and having dialogue and using all kinds of different ways of communicating, whether it's transmedia or whether it's a particular form of media. So could you comment on that a bit?

**Henry Jenkins:** If we look at traditional print-based literacy, it could be understood as an individual skill. I think that grew out of the fact that most people lack the capacity to communicate beyond an immediate circle of friends and family. So reading was understood as reading things that had been produced by someone else. Writing was understood as writing letters or maybe at most writing a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. There was almost an assumption that literacy didn't have large-scale social and cultural effects. In a networked society, we need to think of literacy as a collective experience, not just an individual experience. So we look at a world where all the research shows young people get their news not by sitting down and reading the newspaper in the morning by grazing information throughout the day through social media. So, what they see of the world is what their friends pass along to them. A sense of social accountability/responsibility needs to go hand in hand with this expanded communication capacity.

When we live in a world where hate speech has such an enormous, divisive effect on the culture then understanding the consequences of our own speech is really important. That has to be understood in the social context and not just an individual context. The problem is people see it as, "Oh, that is just my personal opinion or I was just expressing myself." They are not necessarily thinking of themselves as part of a larger information echo system that has a ripple effect across the world.

**Tessa Jolls:** That too, is a very important point for today's society and the way that we use technology. It also builds on an idea that you introduced in the report, which was that we should be expanding literacies, not pushing aside literacies. So, in other words, with the new media literacies, we should be looking at enhancing people's ability to critically engage, to be able to understand that social context. You put your finger on the pulse! Henry, where do you see the field going at this point? Having taken this look back, when you look forward, what do you see it? Do you feel that the report is a guide to the future?

**Henry Jenkins:** My own current work for the last how-many years has been in the area of civics, which picks up on a number of the themes from the report. When I re-read the report, I see my current thinking about the civic imagination as in some ways growing out of the discussion of play and out of the discussion of performance, but also, the act of imagining is something that is not in that report. I wasn't sure what skills I would add, but I find myself pondering whether something like imagination or world-building is not a skill that is more visible to us today than it was when we wrote that report. That skill set is one that in fact, I am spending much of my time working on, not just helping students or young people think about it. We certainly are still doing work with schools and libraries and after-school programs. We are also working with adult communities. We have done workshops with churches and mosques. We have done activities with governmental officials. We have done activities with labor unions. We have done projects all over the world on thinking about the civic imagination.

In some ways, this new work is an extension of the toolkit that we identify in that report. It is designed to specifically enhance the sense of possibility within the culture at large, and particularly the sense of civic connection. In that way, the sense of civics I am talking about in our new work probably connects with the social skills and cultural competency we are describing here. We are trying to figure out what the skills are that we need to live with each other, rather than continually grinding down at the core of our democracy with each election cycle and every battle in between, to the point that we are no longer speaking to each other. To me, that is the most urgent thing. In some ways, that is about extending our notion of new media literacy, to talk to adults as well as young people. All of us in our society need networking skills, negotiation skills, judgment skills, as we process this new world we are living in. Now, we need to figure out how to inhabit a global society, and within the United States, to live in a much more diverse society than many of us grew up in.



*Tessa Jolls is President of the Center for Media Literacy, and Founder of the Consortium for Media Literacy. She recently was selected for the Fulbright-NATO Research Award in Brussels, where she will also be Visiting Scholar at UCLouvain and American University.*

**The Hope Educational & Research Center** sponsored an online conference for educators on Feb. 12, 2021, where Tessa Jolls addressed the topic: From Concrete to Conceptual: Media Literacy for Elementary Education.

**CML's Empowerment Spiral Framework** was peer-reviewed in the 2018/2019 MILID Yearbook, with an article entitled "Evidence-based frameworks: key to learning and scaling globally," by Kathryn Fingar and Tessa Jolls. Found on page 117:

<https://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/MILIDYearbook2018-19%20copy%202.pdf>

## Media Literacy Resources

The original report, *Confronting the Challenge of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, can be found here:

[https://www.macfound.org/media/article\\_pdfs/jenkins\\_white\\_paper.pdf](https://www.macfound.org/media/article_pdfs/jenkins_white_paper.pdf)

Henry Jenkins and Tessa Jolls have collaborated before; their writings are contained here:

- Jenkins and Jolls Address Foundational Media Literacy and New Media Literacies: ResearchGate: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309736836\\_Jenkins\\_and\\_Jolls\\_How\\_do\\_Digital\\_Media\\_Learning\\_DML\\_and\\_Media\\_Literacy\\_Connect#fullTextFileContent](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309736836_Jenkins_and_Jolls_How_do_Digital_Media_Learning_DML_and_Media_Literacy_Connect#fullTextFileContent)
- Jenkins and Jolls Address David Bordwell in the February 2018 issue of *Connections*: <http://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/connections/Empowerment%20Theory%20Practice%20Activism%20.pdf>

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### About Us...

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents. The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communications that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for democracy: <http://www.consortiumformedia literacy.org>

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*Uniting for Development*

## Med!aLit Moments

### Exploring Cultural Narratives

COVID 19 continues to ravage disparate populations, but it also is seen as a national security threat. A recent report and webinar by the Atlantic Council, through its Digital Forensic Lab, explored these issues and connected them to narratives which can be explored by analyzing (sometimes) millions of digital documents through online research. Understanding how these narratives originate and are driven, often through social media but also through traditional media, by key players who have a definitive purpose. This is a key to understanding today's news cycles and the human agency involved in perpetuating and amplifying various issues.

**Weaponized:** Understanding the COVID-19 Narrative Arms Race is the Atlantic Council's explanation of these narratives; the report and webinar can be found here: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/covid-narrative-arms-race/> Today, these narratives – just like a single image or advertisement – can be subjected to a media literacy interrogation. Who created the narrative? Who's behind it? Who benefits? How? Why? Who can be left behind? How? Why? What values, lifestyles and points of view does the narrative represent? What is omitted? What techniques are being used to attract attention?

**AHA!** When I continue to hear that certain countries are our enemies or our friends, I am apt to agree.

**Ages:** 16-18+

**Key Question #4:** What values, lifestyles or points of view are included in – or omitted from – this message?

**Core Concept:** Media have embedded values and points of view.

**Materials:** Web Access  
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/covid-narrative-arms-race/>  
Report, Webinar



## ACTIVITY:

This activity takes longer than most MediaLit Moments! because it involves reading a report and/or watching a one-hour webinar.

Divide the class into two parts. Assign reading the report on the Covid Narrative Arms Race to one group; assign watching the webinar to the other group. Then, as homework have each group either watch the webinar or read the report and be prepared to participate.

### **Individually, as Homework:**

Using all 5 Key Questions (<http://www.medialit.org/new-you>), make notes as you review the report or webinar. Then, pay particular attention to Key Question #4 (above), think about the lifestyles, values and points of view that stand out for you. Do you personally agree with these stand-outs? Why or why not? Be prepared to discuss in class with your group.

### **In class:**

**As a group:** (About 15 minutes, depending upon maturity of the class.) Appoint one person as a “respondent” who will represent the group to the class. Review notes from the group’s responses to the Five Key Questions. Was there a lot of overlap on what people noticed? Did people in the group agree with the various lifestyles, values and points of view that were represented? If so, what were some overlaps? What were some differences? Were there any omissions that your group felt were not represented in the report or webinar?

**Whole Class:** (About 15 minutes) The two respondents report on the group discussions. They list on a whiteboard or computer (with projector) the main lifestyles, values and points of view for each group.

**Pairs:** (About 10 minutes) Pairs of participants compare how they see at least one choice from the listing of lifestyles, values and points of view. Do they agree or not with these points? Why or why not?

**Each Pair Shares with Class** (About 10 minutes) Each pair presents their point of view to the entire class.