

Media consumption as social organization in a New England primary school.

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Abstract

This paper considers how kids' media consumption is organized within a complex ordering of social space. At the small Vermont primary school that hosted this ethnographic project, portable music players circulate among lockers, desks, pockets, and backpacks. Kids pass earbuds among friends as they participate in the dense and expressive overlap of talk, touch, and gesture that characterize their unmonitored peer interactions, sharing access to media that for some is limited by parental resources or restrictions. Throughout the day, kids continually move between adult-structured classes and the relative freedom of the hallway, playground, and lunchroom, their music players disappearing at the classroom door. In class, kids listen surreptitiously to earbuds concealed in hoodies, talk "off-topic" about music, and imitate popular singers, contesting and destabilizing regulations of noise and disorder. These kids participate in an apparently binary organization of school into classroom and playground, teacher and student, structure and unstructure, engaging in a classic example of Certeau's "tactics" as they accommodate and resist school's institutional "strategies." Incorporating media use into this framework, kids marshal the global media industry's strategic cultivation of childhood consumerism in their local negotiations of authority with teachers. Examining kids' everyday talk and routines reveals that they link consumerist habitus with the intimate, engaged, and "natural" sociability of their peer groups. Positioning both in structural opposition to the behavioral and educational expectations of classroom teachers, kids situate themselves at a nexus of conflict between media and educational institutions, childhood sociability and adult authority, and local and global power structures.

Media consumption as social organization in a New England primary school

In this paper I present some data from an ethnographic project about popular media consumption by children in a small K–8 public school in Vermont, where I conducted research for my dissertation. The project's overall goal is to rigorously examine media consumption in everyday life, and especially to see how mass media texts, channels, paraphernalia, and modes of discourse are regulated as part of the complex social and institutional life of a school and community. I've written elsewhere about the interactive ways that kids used headphones and MP3 players. Here I

want to argue for understanding those media practices as part of what I would call the “expressive ecology” of school. Kids linked audio and oral channel of communication in a dense, chaotic, and layered repertoire of expressivity. This expressive ideology privileged an interactive and sociable peer culture that resisted teachers’ regulation of language and interaction and disputed the institutional legitimacy of the classroom. Claiming capitalist media as their own, kids adopted consumer practice as a powerful political resource in daily struggles with teachers over the structure of school interactions; they produced complex friendship networks stratified by age and gender and marked by specific vocal tropes and participatory technology practices; and they shared access to globally circulating media that for some was limited by parental resources or restrictions.

The town I’m going to call Heartsboro has a population of about eight hundred, and is located in the green mountains of southern Vermont, a half hour drive from the nearest grocery store. Heartsboro’s mills, factories, and ski slopes all closed in the last generation. In this white, low-income community, a rural, working-class ethos remains pretty dominant, as families adapt to a complex and changing regional economy that invests more and more in cultural tourism, arts and higher ed institutions, and the service industry.

Heartsboro Central School is attended by fewer than eighty students in pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, so classes are paired—first with second grade, third and fourth, fifth and sixth, seventh/eighth—and still the largest class has only seventeen students. A minority of students have NOT attended school here their whole lives; of the rest, many are taught by the same teachers that their parents had a generation ago. In many ways, few of which I’ll have time to discuss in this paper, the multi-generational rural/industrial history of Heartsboro can be seen to play out in kids’ relations with each other, with teachers, and with media.

Unlike many other local schools, Heartsboro had no policy about consumer electronics, and MP3 players bundled with headphone cables circulated among lockers, desks, pockets, and backpacks. Wires threaded under clothing and tangled across crowded lunchroom tables. Most often two friends would share a pair of earbuds, listening together with one ear as they participated in the dense overlap of talk, touch, and gesture that characterized their unmonitored peer interactions. A willingness or unwillingness to share earbuds with another kid was an important index of social affinity. And as kids moved from the relative freedom of the hallway, playground, and lunchroom into adult-structured classrooms, their music players disappeared at the door. Last Christmas represented a watershed in portable media use at Heartsboro.

Throughout the fall semester, kids without MP3 players talked constantly about desiring one and fawned over their friends' devices. By Christmas the products had become so available and affordable that in January nearly every kid in third grade and up returned to school with one. I was mildly surprised to find that the headphone sharing practices I made note of during the fall continued despite the new saturation of MP3-player ownership. Kids would listen together to a single device, one player dormant in a pocket, rather than each listening to their own music on their own device. These consumer products were tightly integrated into the social fabric of kids' lives.

[SLIDE—photo withheld to protect the subjects' privacy]

This picture represents a common configuration of middle-school girls during “free” time, here hanging out in the gym-slash-cafeteria one morning before class last winter. Megan hadn't heard the “Discovery Channel” song (actually “Bad Touch” by the Bloodhound Gang), so Kelly had Becky unwind her MP3 player and pass the earbuds to Megan, and she and Kelly bent over

the LCD screen to find the song. As it played, Kelly reached out to take one of the earbuds from Megan and listened along. Melissa piped in from the edge of this group, to ask me if I knew what the song's about, and Kelly responded for me by quoting the chorus, "do it like they do on the Discovery Channel." Becky blushed, and when the girls later had me listen to the song, it was clear that with lyrics like, "so put your hands down my pants / and I'll bet you'll feel nuts," the song was not very appropriate for adults. In the meantime, Amber B. and Amber G. had wandered over to join this emerging group. Amber G. pulled out her own MP3 player and passed an earbud to Melissa. Amber B. popped up onto the stage to sit quietly and chat with me. So six girls, eight ears, two players, four earbuds (and one ethnomusicologist).

Headphone cables traced out bonds between friends while excluding others, they tethered individuals together in joint activity, and they provided a shared, private channel through which kids could engage with topics whose audible expression would be quickly ruled out by adults. A basic point here is that Heartsboro kids used MP3 players in ways that problematize current narratives of portable media. Michael Bull writes that the iPod (and by extension portable music devices generally) represents an extreme "individualization" and "privatization" of culture, an increasing experience of "mediated isolation" (2008). Bull writes with a hint of technological determinism that "iPods are by their very nature primarily a privatizing technology" (2008:5). Primarily perhaps, but at least in the case of Heartsboro students (and this is confirmed by anecdotal evidence from correspondents around the country), kids use MP3 players in interactive and public social contexts, layering commercial music listening within sociable talk. Far from mediated isolation, MP3 players, these objects of powerful consumer desire, were used to enact specific connections between individuals. While discussions of personal and portable media in youth culture lately do emphasize connectivity—text messaging and mobile phones are the

canonical example—I want to foreground here the face-to-face connections mediated and facilitated by consumer devices. Wires literally tethered kids to one another; and when one ear was listening to a friend’s music device in a sort of back-channel co-presence, the other ear was occupied in conversation. With music devices, kids complicated their communicative interactions, splitting and layering the audible environment.

Expanding the frame beyond portable media, I want to turn to kids’ vocal-expressive practices, to see how the social structure of kids’ media use coincided with and shared many features with the structure of their talk and expression. Media and expressive practices shared an emphasis on dense, layered, and interactive sociability; audio and oral channels of communication were first and foremost charged with an indexicality that pointed to the relations between individuals in interaction. Whether linkage, contest, solidarity, or negotiation, the channels of communication, and the relationships those channels indexed, seemed more important than the content.

Building on a childish repertoire of hoots, howls, growls, and trills signaling pleasure or frustration to peers and adults, kids performed sound effects from games and TV to comment on lessons and punctuate stories. They sang quietly along with a friend’s headphones, imitated popular singers, and talked “off-topic” about celebrities and music during class.

Groups of students would cultivate poetic or musical phrases as social refrains. During the fall middle-school boys sang to themselves “dunna nunna nunna,” which is the “dungeon” melody from Nintendo’s Mario Bros video games. Gradually this was incorporated into talk, so a sixth grade boy demanded another’s lunchtime treat by singing “gimme gimme gimme.” For a couple weeks this spring a group of fourth graders, boys and girls, started saying “how you dooo-in?” in a singsong, faux-Irish accent. They quickly developed a response, “—fiiiine, you?”, and

would perform this call and response routine constantly, passing one another in the halls or sticking their head in at the bottom of the covered plastic playground slide and calling up to a friend waiting to come down—“how you dooooin?”—enjoying the echo and playing a game of chicken, moving their head out of the way of the sliding kid’s feet at the last minute. One day at lunch in May a few fourth grade girls started talking about Webkinz, a brand of stuffed toys with a kid-friendly social website tie-in. As a token (and a test) of friendship and trust, one whispered her password to the others. But then they repeated it too loudly—“S-Q-R-3-4”—and she feared it would be compromised. So she chimed in, even louder, with a slightly altered string of letters and numbers: “No that’s not it. It’s S-3-R-Q-1!” The neighboring boys heard this and repeated it, immediately catching on that this game, “who can remember the password,” was motivated by poetic contest, and began themselves to call out letters and numbers, challenging each other to repeat them back. Soon the table was awash in kids talking over one another, repeating and altering complex strings of letters and numbers in a poetic competition linking spelling, numeracy, and childish memory games with the lived tension between adult exhortations to online privacy and youthful conventions of gossip and sharing. Underneath all this, the cable from one girl’s music device snaked across the table, linking her with a friend whose memory she was challenging.

Like the headphone cables that passed from ear to ear, these sociable poetics were used to actively negotiate relationships, trust, power, and status (“gimme, gimme, gimme”), and also to foreground the backchannel, highlighting connectivity, sociability, linkage (“how you dooooin?”).

Such peer practices take on particular significance in the institutional context where these

interactions occurred. In contrast to kids' unsupervised interactions in the halls, lunchroom, and playground, in the classroom teachers emphasized individual over interactional competencies. They instructed students in formal genres of writing (exposition, narrative, personal essay), in the visual formatting of paragraphs and the rules of sentence construction, and in named "problem solving strategies." These lessons followed a set of goals and procedures laid out in the school's local "literacy action plan" and in the district's math curriculum, which in turn implemented standards outlined by the state, in partial response to federal guidelines and funding priorities. Teachers formalized and regulated the ways questions were asked and answered, the one-at-a-time structures of classroom talk, and "respectful" modes for students to address teachers and each other. The writing and speaking practices taught in the classroom competed with the chaotic and sometimes "inappropriate" vocalizations and media practices that bubbled up from kids when not directly regulated by teachers.

The classroom was less a space for imparting expressive ideologies to children than it was a site of continual contestation between repertoires of sound and expressivity governing when, where, and how noise, talk, and media use would frustrate or facilitate the goals and procedures of classroom instruction. Such contest was a prominent, audible force in the social organization of school, yielding a dynamic tension between peer sociability, consumption, and instruction to produce the complex, stratified, and mutable orderings of kids and adults, friends and peers, girls and boys, and older and younger. The power relations between kids, schools, and media played out in everyday interactions, where "silly" and sociable vocalizations overlapped with and incorporated entertainment forms from MP3s, the Internet, video games, and broadcast media, challenging communicative repertoires learned and enforced in the classroom.

In the context of classroom regulations of expression and interaction, kids' social poetics

were charged with an oppositional valence that often drew on media consumption as powerful resource. Claiming a rhyme she seems to have found on Myspace as “my saying,” a seventh grade girl would impishly greet her teachers with, “howdy ho Ranger Joe?” and object that, “it’s just what I say,” if a teacher challenged her for disrespect. This mischievous borrowing from the Internet shared features with unmediated expressions of defiance: For instance, a “problem” eighth grader never missed an opportunity during silent work periods to loudly say, “bless you,” in response to a sneeze, looking around defiantly. She asserted an unimpeachable right to sociable talk and dared teachers to correct her “politeness.” Students would listen surreptitiously to earbuds concealed in clothes. They’d thread the headphone cables under their sweatshirts and through a sleeve, palming the earbud and listening as they rested their head in their hand, while monitoring the attention of the teacher to avoid detection. Or during group work periods in seventh and eighth grade, one student might lay the headphones to her MP3 player on the table so that the maxed-out earbuds could act as lo-fi speakers. Of course teachers would challenge this, and would be met with loud, insistent argument from the whole group in defense of listening to music. Kids were sophisticated and clever, creatively using open group defiance or subtle interventions to destabilize the expressive order of the classroom, and claiming media use in class as both a goal and a tactic. They were also adaptive: kids at every age quickly noted that I was an adult in good standing with the teachers and also a friend who was always interested in what they had to say. So cleverly taking advantage of my liminal status at a desk near them, they’d talk to me rather than to a friend, knowing that teachers would be much less likely to correct my out-of-turn talk.

At the beginning of this year I returned to Heartsboro and sat in on art class, where the teacher was dedicating time during a couple of early classes to establish the rules and procedures

that would govern behavior for the coming year. For the second and third graders she explained the “take-a-break” chair she had set up in a corner. She demonstrated the procedure, tapping herself on the shoulder and calmly, with an air of dejection, walking over to the chair, emphasizing quiet, orderly acquiescence. But this sort of teacher-pretending-to-be-a-student routine will invariably elicit some sort of enthusiastic and uncontrollable response from younger students. As the teacher walked to the chair, two third grade boys sang “wah wah wah—,” like the “you lose!” music from a cartoon or video game. And before the teacher had a chance to correct, the whole class thrilled at this, and everyone raised their voices in a cacophony of finger-pointing “wah-wah-wah.” The teacher talked over the kids, trying to point out how such a response from the class would probably hurt the feelings of a kid going to the take-a-break chair, but as she talked, the first boy looked at his classmates and said “come on, on ‘three’—one, two, three,” and conducted the whole class together in saying “wah wah wah.” They laughed at how appropriately the familiar musical trope from media was applied to this real-world situation, taking pleasure in their “competent” performance. They collectively defied the teacher’s immediate instructional point thematizing quiet and order in response to discipline. And in ganging up as a class to point fingers and ridicule, they performed a familiar and not-so-savory aspect of the peer solidarity they cultivate so assiduously.

With the sixth and seventh graders later that day, the art teacher asked the students to help her compose a list of rules to govern their behavior for the year—a standard method for getting kids to take ownership of the classroom order. Going around the circle, each kid “passed,” declining to volunteer a rule. One seventh-grade girl, the same Kelly with her friend’s MP3 player in the earlier story, objected to the exercise: she said, “Our rules don’t fit with your rules.” I jumped in to point out that she hadn’t volunteered any of her rules, so didn’t have much

standing. Kelly shrugged: “well we don’t really have any rules . . . or our rules are just do whatever you want.” In my time at Heartsboro I heard mention of “kids rules” on numerous occasions. The only consistent rule seemed to be that kids got to tell adults what to do (this was usually invoked to get me to do their bidding in some mischief). Otherwise, kid rules were proposed as a legitimate counter to teachers’ classroom goals, but whose substance was a committed lack of actual rules—an anti-classroom, anti-adult, anti-structure framework where kids could “authentically” be kids in unstructured peer interactivity.

The bureaucratic ideologies of school expression have been outlined and critiqued in detail by a tradition of critical studies of schooling that begins with Paul Willis ([1977] 1981) and Douglas Foley (Foley 1990). Willis and Foley identify expressive practice as a central site of contest and negotiation between social groups in capitalist society. In this framework, schools’ regulation of expressive practices transforms social language into a bureaucratic tool of alienated labor, a process Willis calls a “commodification.” Consent to such ideologies of expression is seen to be characteristic of white, middle-class orientations toward school and eventual bureaucratic labor. In contrast, working-class and minority students, through oppositional strategies that privilege sociable interaction and expression, orient away from the bureaucratic modes of communication taught and enforced in the classroom. When Heartsboro kids claim unstructured interaction—kids’ rules—as a characteristic trope of children versus adults, we can see a broadly similar sort of opposition to bureaucratic, capitalist, educational orderings of expression, but for a variety of reasons I see the terms of contested power aligning along an axis of age rather than, or in addition to, class: kids and adults are constructed as students and teachers, a relationship that itself refers to bureaucratic, institutional, and governmental

hierarchies. Heartsboro kids don't unanimously or unambiguously resist the literacy practices taught in the classroom, but they do move through school in an ideologically binary framework that poses the commodified, structured, inauthentic expressive forms of the classroom against the supposedly uncommodified, unstructured, authentic expressivity of their peer interactions. The irony being that the most prominent commodities in school are the devices and content kids import into their peer culture from entertainment media. Kids' oppositional tactics in school certainly represent a critical "penetration," as Willis calls it, of the ideological structures of local adult institutional authority. But Heartsboro students are uncritical in their acceptance of texts, channels, paraphernalia, and modes of discourse from the mass media as natural elements of their peer culture. The idea that "kids can be kids" is a central trope of the children's culture industries, from Disney to Nickelodeon to Chuckie Cheese, which have actively cultivated and courted children as a consumer demographic. By articulating media consumption as an essential practice in their ideologically unstructured and uncommodified peer sociability, kids marshal the cultural logic of commodities and consumerism in their local negotiations of authority with teachers.

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