BY / WITH / FOR YOUTH

▶▶ INSPIRING
NEXT GEN ▶▶▶
PUBLIC MEDIA
▶▶ AUDIENCES

Content and Platform Innovation with Youth

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary Madden
Mary Madden is a veteran researcher, writer, and nationally recognized expert on privacy and technology, trends in social media use, and the impact of digital media on teens and parents. She is an affiliate at the Data & Society Research Institute in New York City, where she recently directed an initiative to explore the effects of data-centric systems on Americans' health and well-being and led several studies examining the intersection of privacy and digital inequality. Mary has been a senior researcher for the Pew Research Center's Internet, Science & Technology team in Washington, DC and an affiliate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

Elizabeth Rood, EdD
Elizabeth Rood is an education adviser, researcher, and writer with expertise in youth development, learning, and participatory program design. She is the founder and principal of Learning Designs Consulting, which provides advisory services in educational media and experiential learning. She has served as vice president of education at the Bay Area Discovery Museum and director of the Center for Childhood Creativity, the research arm of the museum. Elizabeth has a background in formal urban education, as a teacher, principal, and leadership coach in San Francisco public schools. She currently serves as the national vice president of the Children's Media Association, a professional organization connecting people in a wide range of kids' media and technology industries.

Josanne Buchanan
Josanne Buchanan is a children's media and psychology researcher who leverages high-quality arts and science research to support content creators in developing excellent children's media. Josanne has several years of experience developing educational digital media, consulting with media industry leaders, conducting user research, and working directly with children in the nonprofit sector. Situated at the nexus between psychology and the screen, Josanne's research and consulting roles provide industry leaders with insights that help them develop content that promotes diversity, inclusion, and prosocial learning. Her commitment to ensuring that all children see themselves fully represented on screen fuels her work supporting producers, game-developers, curriculum specialists, and more.

Digital Media Learning Alongside Tweens and Teens

The first two briefs in this series addressed the benefits and challenges of various youth-adult collaboration models and the need to understand youth, including their media behaviors and preferences, as public media organizations design approaches to working by/with/for youth. This brief provides an overview of existing project research about youth perspectives on content and platform innovation. When it comes to digital content production, distribution, and experimentation, youth can be invaluable partners in this process. As creators and consumers of digital culture, they are often at the leading edges of technological trends. Even as they may still be developing the skills needed to navigate these complex media ecosystems, they have valuable content and platform-specific expertise to share.

Within the commercial entertainment industry, youth have long been positioned as bellwethers of emerging audience behaviors and attitudes that eventually become popular across generations. Yet, even as youth preferences can signal the beginnings of long-term societal change, they can also reflect short-term, age-specific interests. Sorting out ephemeral behaviors from enduring audience changes when making strategic programming decisions requires listening to and learning from youth and the adults who work with them.

Where Youth Want to See Content Innovation

When we spoke to 50 middle and high school-aged youth for our *Missing Middle* research, we found five dominant themes in response to questions about how the public media community could respond to existing content gaps in the media landscape:

Stereotypes signal a disconnect
Tweens and teens are accustomed to having a great deal of control in how, and when, and where they express themselves online. By contrast, when they encounter content that is developed by adults without youth input, it often strikes them as perpetuating stereotypes about teens or as being out of touch.

> *When adults assume that we're all the same and hang out together, that's probably one of the bigger misconceptions. We're not all [outgoing], we're not all depressed...it's wrong to assume that we're one-sided.*
> —GIRL, AGE 13

> *The high school experience in shows and movies compared to real life, there's a huge difference, you know.*
> —BOY, AGE 17

Representation really matters
Youth audiences want to see stories about kids like them, as well as others who reflect the diversity they see in their generation. In order for youth-directed content to be perceived as authentic, it is important to integrate perspectives and stories that are developed with input from tweens and teens from different backgrounds.

> *I don't see a lot of culture now in shows, that would be really nice, just seeing different cultures and...how they dress, how they look, how they act.*
> —GIRL, AGE 14

" *I'd love to see more representation, like with the LGBTQ community, in children's media or overall, because I don't think there's enough. Also, I think people of color....People of color should be represented more in cartoons.*
—GIRL, AGE 13

Everyday experiences are relatable and valuable

Accustomed to the personalization of media content and delivery, the teens we spoke with had very clear ideas for types of content and how best to deliver it to their age group. The most frequent request for public media was to address the everyday challenges tweens and teens face. And regardless of format, tweens and teens felt they'd matured past the often simple storylines directed at their age group.

" *Make it more up-to-date....I would say things that you all think and you all want our generation to be educated on and to know about....Not super adult, but not something super childish.*
—GIRL, AGE 14

" *I was thinking about stuff like skills, shows that could teach other teens useful skills like how to do taxes or what's the stock market, or how to do plumbing, things they don't teach at school anymore. So, useful everyday skills that could help other teens get ready for the adult life on their own.*
—BOY, AGE 17

" *Shows on PBS that are, like, advice on how to go through something that most people my age would go through. Stuff kinda like how to survive middle school.*
—GIRL, AGE 11

Youth desire trusted perspectives on complex issues

Youth, like adults, encounter difficulties discerning fact from opinion online. While the value of "public media" as a concept was an afterthought to teens, the need for something trustworthy was frequently mentioned when discussing gaps in current media offerings. Some of the tweens and teens we spoke with also sought more mature content, particularly documentaries, for deeper dives into topics of interest to them.

" *Honestly, I don't know what'd be a reliable source, because sometimes, in our system, things are learned or supposed to be this kind of way in someone else's favor. So, what I would do is I'd probably talk to a source that you can trust. I have my dad, he's Black, so I could talk to him [about] his experiences, and I think people should be more open to sharing their experiences.*
—GIRL, AGE 13

" *They should...bring in real-world issues to spread awareness, and then basically give [youth] lessons on how they can solve these real-world issues, like more efficiently. One thing I have in mind is trust issues and the other is basically [the] environment. How the environment's changing.*
—BOY, AGE 14

" *Informational shows is one of your things, PBS's things. They always have informational shows. I feel like you could keep doing informational shows for older kids...but just kind of more teenager-based.*
—BOY, AGE 14

" *I've grown out of the side that caters to kids and moved on to stuff that suits older audiences, like documentaries and reality shows.*
—BOY, AGE 14

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Youth want to see *kids like them* featured in the development of programming

Tweens and teens said they turn to "real" youth their age for meaningful content, and they contribute their voices to media in different ways, by creating their own content or becoming part of online communities through commenting and other forms of engagement.

> ❝ *Yes, all the time, all the time [watching videos from people I know]. Like on TikTok, I always watch my friends' videos and stuff like that. I love seeing them either get a lot of likes or just the fun, cool things they're doing; I like to watch everything they're doing.*
>
> —GIRL, AGE 17

> ❝ *Yeah, I actually have a YouTube channel....It's gaming, and at first, I didn't really know what I wanna do with it, so I was doing, like, spicy noodle challenges and my spicy noodle challenges have gotten more popularity than my gaming.*
>
> —BOY, AGE 14

> ❝ *I watch much more often than I post, but I've posted probably about eight dance videos just for fun. My friends, some of my friends, like, post every day, some post once a month, some post never, some post super often that all their videos overwhelm your feed.*
>
> —GIRL, AGE 13

Platform Innovation: Meeting Youth Where They Are

The diversity of media preferences among the youth we interviewed was striking. When speaking about their daily patterns of technology use, they described how they fluently deploy different apps for specific purposes and move seamlessly across various media environments depending on their interests and needs. Watching broadcast and cable television were rarely mentioned as preferred pastimes. By contrast, online video—whether YouTube, streaming services, or short-form video-based social media like TikTok—was a nearly universal part of teens' and tweens' media diet. In addition to providing entertainment and learning, video content from a wide range of platforms augmented offline pursuits in a couple of important ways:

Video dominates media experiences for youth

Short-form video is the lifeblood for social media, gaming, and search activity for tweens and teens. In addition, informational, how-to videos often scaffold self-driven learning for tweens and teens across a range of settings. Youth use how-to videos to help them with homework, reinforce or review skills they have forgotten, and support their online learning in school.

> " *In my free time, I just like to draw, play games, and also watch videos. I really like watching videos that have to do [with] programming and drawing.*
> —BOY, AGE 11

> " *I like to go on my phone, and I also just started learning how to embroider, so I've been looking up stuff on YouTube and Pinterest and learning.*
> —GIRL, AGE 13

> " *I use YouTube a lot 'cause I play guitar. And so I'll use YouTube a lot to learn songs.*
> —BOY, AGE 17

> " *I watch how-tos on journaling. I'm really into journaling. And I also like to learn how to make stationery.*
> —GIRL, AGE 13

Social media, search, and recommendations are paramount for discovery

In particular, TikTok's personalized "For You" page and YouTube's "Recommended" videos were mentioned by many young people we spoke to as the primary platforms they use to find what to watch. These were often also the first places they would hear about new shows, apps, or other accounts they may want to follow.

> " *I find [new apps, games, and shows] either by my friends recommending them or YouTubers that I watch recommend them. I watch gaming YouTubers and comedians.*
> —BOY, AGE 12

> " *If I'm watching shows on Netflix, usually you find it on TikTok, and it's popular on TikTok. And usually, I scroll through the popular stuff on TikTok or anything recommended to me and then I would watch it.*
> —GIRL, AGE 15

> " *I find a lot of stuff through TikTok. I go on TikTok a lot, so....Any time I see something new, it's probably from TikTok, like a post that's 'top 10 shows' or something, and I'll see a show I've never heard before, so I'll check that out, and yeah, that's probably where I get most of them from.*
> —BOY, AGE 17

Inspiration Spotlight:
The CSS Youth Engagement Team

Spearheaded by UCLA's Center for Scholars and Storytellers (CSS), the Youth Engagement Team (YET) invites teens to collaborate with experienced researchers to lead research about adolescents, share their findings with leading content creators, and collaborate with content creators to produce multi-platform content for and about teens. Teens co-design research projects and digital content in order to inspire more authentic representations of teens in media.

Research: Over several months, teens collaborate with researchers to formulate questions pertaining to representations of teens in media, design a study, and run the study, interviewing teen participants from their communities across the United States. The teens then analyze the data and write a report summarizing their key findings. The youth researchers are then invited to share their findings with media creators in workshops, interacting with the producers, writers, and other storytellers who play a crucial role in shaping media depictions of teens.

Content: The program's teens also work with the CSS media team to create digital media content. Teens and university students recently collaborated to create _Teens Are Watching_, a YouTube and podcast series in which teens candidly discussed issues related to portrayals of teens and teen-related issues (e.g., mental health, masculinity) in media.

The Scholars & Storytellers Podcast features conversations in issues such as mental health and masculinity.

YET is an excellent case study of an approach that public media creators can use to conduct formative research with and about teens. The approach combines gathering authentic insights about the media ecosystem from youth and helping them develop professional research and presentation skills.

CSS publishes a range of resources that translate existing research into implications for design and innovation with youth. For example, two CSS tip sheets outline four evidenced-based strategies parents and the tech industry can use to support adolescent well-being online, as well as sources for further reading. While these materials are primarily directed at a commercial media audience, many of the recommendations are highly relevant and transferable to the public media ecosystem.

Conclusion

Youth are often on the cutting edge of new media adoption. Taking their perspectives on platform and content innovation into account will support stations in experimenting with new formats and approaches. Digital distribution, amplified through sharing and social media, is the norm for young people, and stations can increase their relevance by incorporating short-form video, prioritizing authenticity and representation, and highlighting public media's commitment to trustworthy content. Tweens and teens are excited to learn about issues that affect their lives and to hear from other young people about their stories and experiences. Public media has the opportunity to play an important role in meeting this need.

Additional reading

Bulger, M., Madden, M., Sobel, K., & Davison, D. (2021). *The missing middle: Reimagining a future for tweens, teens, and public media* [White paper]. Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop. *https://joanganzcooneycenter.org/publication/missing-middle/*

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SESAME WORKSHOP

Joan Ganz Cooney Center

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit research and innovation lab that focuses on the challenges of fostering smarter, stronger, and kinder children in a rapidly changing media landscape. We conduct original research on emerging learning technologies and collaborate with educators and media producers to put this research into action. We also aim to inform the national conversation on media and education by working with policymakers and investors. For more information, visit www.joanganzcooneycenter.org.