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Youth and Digital Democracy: Intersections of Practice, Policy, and the Marketplace

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Since the advent of the World Wide Web in the early nineties, the so-called Digital Generation has been at the epicenter of major tectonic shifts that are transforming the media landscape. The more than 70 million individuals born in the United States during the last two decades of the twentieth century represent the largest cohort of young people in the nation's history, and the first to grow up in a world saturated with networks of information, digital devices, and the promise of perpetual connectivity. Youth are in many ways the defining users of the new media. As active creators of a new digital culture, they are developing their own Web sites, diaries, and blogs; launching their own online enterprises; and forging a new set of cultural practices.¹ A study by Forrester Research found that youth incorporate digital media into their lives at a faster rate than any other generation. "All generations adopt devices and Internet technologies, but younger consumers are Net natives," one of the report's coauthors explained to the press. They don't just go online; they "live online."²

Foundations, music industry celebrities, corporations, and wealthy donors in the United States have poured large sums of money into a variety of initiatives aimed at using digital media to reach and engage young people in civic and political activities. These ventures are based on the hope that new technologies may be able to help reverse the long-term declines in civic and political participation among youth.³ Experts such as Michael X. Delli Carpini, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, have expressed some cautious optimism. Commenting on some of the early Web-based efforts, he has identified several important Internet features that lend themselves to enhanced engagement. These include increased speed with which information can be gathered and transmitted, greater volume of information that is easily accessible, more flexibility in how and when information is accessed, and much greater opportunity to interact with others in a range of contexts (one to one, one to many, many to one, and many to many), using a variety of media types (text, audio, and video). As a result, Delli Carpini notes, the Internet both shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest-based and challenges traditional definitions of information gatekeepers and authoritative voices, of content producers and consumers. He suggests, however, that Internet-based initiatives are likely to be more useful in expanding the activities of youth already engaged in civic life, rather than encouraging those who do not participate to become involved.⁴

The growth and penetration of broadband and the development and distribution of new software applications—such as social networking platforms, blogging tools, and podcasting—have combined to create the next generation of the Internet, often called

“Web 2.0.”⁵ As legal scholar Yochai Benkler argues in *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, these innovations have enhanced the participatory capabilities of digital media, building on the core features of the Internet to create a new media environment that, by its very nature, is a democratizing force. “We are witnessing a fundamental change in how individuals can interact with their democracy and experience their role as citizens,” Benkler explains. “They are no longer constrained to occupy the role of mere readers, viewers, and listeners. They can be, instead, participants in a conversation.” Because digital media “shift the locus of content creation from the few professional journalists trolling society for issues and observations, to the people who make up society,” the public agenda

can be rooted in the life and experience of individual participants in society – in their observations, experiences, and obsessions. The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes.⁶

Digital Communication at the Crossroads

If Benkler’s assessment is correct, then the Digital Generation should be among the key beneficiaries of this new democratizing media system. But as with earlier media technologies, the fulfillment of this democratic potential will be determined not only by technological advances but also by political and economic forces. As a public medium, the Internet is really only a little more than a decade old. Its dramatic growth during that period parallels the rapid penetration of television a half century ago. Like television, the Internet has brought about enormous societal changes, many of which we are just beginning to understand. But this new medium is by no means static. The Internet as we know it is undergoing a fundamental transformation. In the United States, the major telephone and cable companies have gained control of 98 percent of residential broadband service. These companies have been engaged in a high-stakes competitive battle over the control of an array of services delivered through digital pathways on a variety of platforms, including computers, digital television, and wireless devices. Mergers and acquisitions in the telecommunication business (e.g., between AT&T and BellSouth, Verizon and MCI) have all been predicated on expectations for explosive growth in the broadband market.⁷ As the Internet continues to make its transition into the broadband era, some of its fundamental defining features that have been taken for granted by users will evolve and change.

The emergence of broadband is fueling a new boom in the digital marketplace, with advertising and marketing at its core. Because of the exponential rise in children’s spending power during the last several decades of the twentieth century, the Internet emerged as a new mass medium in the midst of a youth media culture that was already highly commercialized.⁸ Interactive technologies have created capabilities that alter the media marketing paradigm in significant ways, extending some of the practices that have already been put in place in conventional media but, more important, defining a new set of relationships between young people and corporations. As a consequence, marketing and advertising have become a pervasive presence in youth digital culture, creating new hybrid forms that blend communications, content, and commerce.⁹ Market forces are playing a central role in shaping both the online political youth sphere and the new participatory platforms that have come to define Web 2.0.

A constellation of interrelated public policy issues will also play a critical role in determining the nature of the emerging digital media environment. Many of these issues have been inserted into deliberations over revisions of the U.S. telecommunications laws, replaying some of the earlier debates of the nineties. Some have been thrust into the media spotlight, the topic of intense debate that is too often polarized, simplistic, and narrow. Others have been argued primarily in closed-door sessions at the offices of K Street lobbyists, before the Federal Communications Commission, or on Capitol Hill. Discussion of these complex and arcane policies has largely been confined to business and trade reporting, with virtually no consideration of their impact on civic and political discourse. Several scholars, including Benkler, have written persuasively about the importance of these policies to the future of the democratic media.¹⁰ A few issues have generated considerable online discussion and debate in the blogosphere.

All of these developments will have far-reaching impacts on the nature and extent of civic and political discourse in the new digital media culture, not only for youth but also for the public at large. In the following pages, I will explore the promises and perils of the new digital media as a vehicle for renewed youth engagement in public life. First, I will briefly summarize the findings of a study I coauthored in 2004 that examined the emergence of Web sites designed to foster youth civic and political engagement. Second, I will show how innovations in participatory technology were incorporated into the massive youth vote efforts of the 2004 election. Third, I will discuss some of those same get-out-the-vote initiatives to illustrate the ways in which commercial forces have become a pervasive presence in the new civic and political spaces for young people in the digital media. Fourth, I will outline five of the key policy issues whose outcome will significantly impact the participatory potential of the next generation of digital media. Finally, I will offer several recommendations for policy, research, and public education efforts that could help maximize the democratic capacities of the new digital media.

The Youth Civic Web

Beginning in the late nineties, a number of nonprofits began launching Web sites designed with the explicit purpose of engaging adolescents and young adults in civic and political life. A study completed in 2004 by myself and a team of researchers at American University surveyed more than three hundred Web sites created by and for young people.¹¹ The Web sites reflected a diversity of goals and constituencies. Some were aimed at a broad youth audience, while others were tailored to more specific communities, such as underserved youth, youth in urban or rural areas, and youth of various racial, ethnic, or sexual identities. Although most were rooted in preexisting organizations and institutions, a few were solely creatures of the digital universe. And while many of the Web sites were little more than static “brochureware,” the study also found numerous examples of innovative uses of the interactive digital technologies for a variety of civic and political purposes. A brief look at a handful of the sites in the study shows a richness and variety of content and style:

The Community Information Corps (<http://www.westsidetic.org/>) of St. Paul, Minnesota, enlists teens to develop an “online tour” of public art in St. Paul’s West Side, including clickable photos of the individual murals, many of which reflect the neighborhood’s immigrant roots, from its large Mexican American community to its more recent Hmong arrivals.

WireTap (<http://www.wiretapmag.org/>), an online magazine created by the progressive organization AlterNet refers to itself as “youth in pursuit of the dirty truth.” WireTap serves up youth-written reporting, analysis, and cultural reviews on a wide range of contemporary issues, from the job market for young people, to politicians’ attitudes toward youth, to the importance of hip-hop music in youth culture.

Tolerance.org (<http://www.tolerance.org/>), a Web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, offers young people information and skills for promoting tolerance and fighting hate, arranging its content according to age level, with separate sections for parents, teachers, teenagers, and children. “Mix It Up,” the teen section, promotes an activist approach to fighting self-segregation and “social boundaries” in schools, whether based on race, religion, or school-based cliques.

Out Proud (<http://www.outproud.org/>), the Web site of the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender Youth, is rich in resources designed to assist youth in coming to terms with their sexuality. Most notable of these is “Outpath” (<http://www.outpath.com/>), a searchable archive with hundreds of personal narratives about coming out, which includes an opportunity for visitors, both youth and their families, to add their own stories to the collection.

TakingITGlobal (<http://www.takingitglobal.org/>) features a set of interrelated online projects that offer young people connections, resources, and opportunities for international dialogue with their peers. Among the site’s many features are: message boards, an internal instant messaging system, live moderated chats, and the ability for members to create their own online groups.

Free the Planet! (<http://www.freetheplanet.org/>) provides resources for activists and helps students win campaigns for environmental protection. The group has taken aim at such corporate giants as Ford Motors and Kraft Foods, among others. In each case the Web site offers a “problem,” a “solution,” and “what you can do”—from sending an email to a corporate or political decision maker to urging colleges to opt for integrated pest management instead of heavy pesticide use.¹²

Though fragmented and not always in the foreground of the emerging media culture, these online ventures are nonetheless a noteworthy development, suggesting the beginnings of an emerging genre on the Internet that could be loosely called “youth civic culture.” While the study did not assess the *impact* of these online civic ventures on young people’s attitudes or behaviors, it did identify numerous opportunities for youth to acquire some of the key attributes of civic engagement.¹³ Civic Web sites offered a variety of tools for youth expression and communication, including online polls and questionnaires; invitations to submit essays, poetry, artwork, and other original materials; and discussion boards that encouraged collaboration and debate. Specific populations, including racial, ethnic, and gender groups, could take advantage of the Web to strengthen their identities, and to build knowledge, pride, and a sense of belonging through a network of contacts and resources. Civic sites also provided youth with the opportunity to hone such important civic skills as fundraising, volunteering, and communicating with political leaders.¹⁴

Most of these youth civic Web sites were launched with an “if we build it, they will come” strategy, and many of them have struggled for visibility and influence in a highly seductive and engaging online youth media environment.¹⁵ The growth of participatory online platforms has, in many ways, eclipsed some of the early Web-based efforts for engaging

youth. The popularity of YouTube, MySpace, and other user-generated content sites suggests that the emerging digital media culture is expanding the opportunities for young people to connect, engage, and create; and large numbers of them are taking advantage of these new outlets. “Young internet users—especially those with broadband at home—are the most likely contributors of content to cyberspace,” noted a 2006 report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. More than half of bloggers are under the age of thirty, and these young people are also “among the most enthusiastic communicators of the modern age, taking advantage of every opportunity to communicate.”¹⁶ While the Pew report found that the majority of bloggers view their online communication as vehicles for personal expression rather than civic discourse, there are also clear indications that many youth are using these tools to participate in public conversations. Some have joined the ranks of “citizen journalists.”¹⁷ For example, Guerrilla News Network, an online youth media site, offers members a complete toolbox of participatory software through its “GNN 2.0,” encouraging young people to “create and disseminate news themselves, through blogs, headlines, original articles, videos, photos, our own customized personal e-mail newsletters and collaborative, ongoing investigations that will allow GNNers to work together to cover important stories the mainstream media is missing.”¹⁸ (In another chapter of this volume, Kate Raynes-Goldie and Luke Walker document a variety of ways in which young people are using Web 2.0 to engage in debate and activism.)

Rocking the Vote—Digital Style

Digital software and technology were a central part of many of the orchestrated efforts to promote youth voting during the 2004 presidential election. While the Internet had already begun to play an increasingly prominent role in campaign politics, 2004 marked the first truly high-tech election. Researchers at George Washington University documented a new category of Internet users, which they labeled “Online Political Citizens.” Though not exclusively youth, this cohort of Internet-savvy political participants included a significant number of young people, with 36 percent of them between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, compared to 24 percent of the general public. A large majority of them (44 percent) had not been politically involved before and had never “worked for a campaign, made a campaign donation or attended a campaign event,” the study noted. “They visit campaign Web sites, donate money online, join Internet discussion groups, and read and post comments on Web logs.” They also “organize local events through Web sites such as Meetup.com or donate money to their causes on sites such as MoveOn.org or Grassfire.org.” They “use campaign Web sites as hubs” and “depend heavily on e-mail to stay in touch with the campaigns, receive news stories and muster support.”¹⁹ The successful primary campaign of Vermont presidential candidate Howard Dean, which introduced many of these online practices into the election cycle—with extensive involvement of young people—was hailed as a harbinger of a new era in digital politics.²⁰ But as Michael Xenos and Kirsten Foot point out in the next chapter in this volume, most of the candidates in the 2004 election failed to make full use of digital technologies to effectively engage youth, creating a “generation gap” between the needs and expectations of young people and the practices of political actors.²¹

In contrast to this pattern, the dozens of nonpartisan get-out-the-vote campaigns targeted at youth showcased a multiplicity of strategies and tactics for using digital media as a tool for political mobilization. Foundations and individual donors invested large sums of money to fund a variety of efforts aimed at various segments of the youth population.²² Some had

colorful and provocative names, such as Smack Down Your Vote and the League of Pissed Off Voters. Others reflected a diversity of constituencies and approaches. The Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), launched in 2001 by rap music mogul Russell Simmons, orchestrated a series of events headlined by hip-hop musicians and aimed at urban and Hispanic youth.²³ Rap star Sean “P. Diddy” Combs formed Citizen Change, with a compelling slogan that reflected the high-stakes nature of the upcoming election: Vote or Die! L.A.-based Voces del Pueblo (voices of the people) targeted Latino youth “who are most likely to opt out of participating in the electoral process.”²⁴ The Black Youth Vote project partnered with BET for a black college tour, with a budget of \$5 million.²⁵ The Youth Vote Coalition brought in \$660,000 for the election cycle, amassing a coalition of 106 national groups.²⁶

The Internet played a critical role in all these efforts, not only providing each initiative with a direct means for reaching its target audience but also facilitating collaboration among the groups, forging virtual coalitions through links and cross-promotion strategies, and creating a “youth engagement Web sphere” on the Internet that was far larger and more sophisticated than any before.²⁷ This online fluidity enabled visitors to travel across Web sites quickly and effortlessly, gathering information, communicating with others, and joining whatever effort matched their interests and passions.

One of the leading groups was Rock the Vote. Founded by the music industry in 1990, the nonprofit had been a pioneer of the youth vote movement for more than a decade. It played a central role in the deployment of digital tools for engaging youth voters during the 2004 election cycle, combining a range of cutting-edge practices and forging new ones. Thus, its campaign can be viewed as a compendium of state-of-the-art strategies that were replicated by other groups and that created a framework for future efforts.

Rock the Vote’s Web site served as the hub of this maelstrom of preelection activity, linking with the growing number of youth vote initiatives in a synergistic network of online relationships.²⁸ A “Register to Vote” tab linked to a pop-up window with a voter registration form that visitors could print and mail to their state elections office, under the slogan “Fill it and print it, lick it and mail it.”²⁹ By registering online, members could join Rock the Vote’s “Street Team,” connecting with others in their communities to become part of the army of volunteers who were registering new voters at concerts, clubs, and campuses across the country.³⁰ Donations could be made easily with a click of the mouse.³¹ Youth could also participate in the RTV blog, to learn “what Capitol Hill is saying and find young people’s response.”³² The nonprofit went to elaborate means to spread the Rock the Vote brand throughout the Web, including free downloads of RTV banners and radio ads, as well as links to its voter registration page. Groups and individuals could also import the Rock the Vote online voter registration tool and brand it for their own Web sites.³³ Rock the Vote forged a partnership with MySpace.com, using the site’s social networking platform to encourage members to spread the message among their peers and employing the latest MP3s, photos, and buddy icons “to inspire, organize and mobilize young people to vote.”³⁴

Other youth vote campaigns developed their own innovative digital strategies. For example, MoveOnStudentAction.org, a youth initiative started by the online group MoveOn.org, created a “Voter Multiplier” page on its Web site, inviting members to upload their friends’ names and e-mail addresses—from their Palm, Outlook, or Facebook programs—in order to create their own “personal precincts.” With a few strokes of a key, each individual could instantly contact hundreds of friends, e-mailing them personalized messages—from “virtual door hangers” to online voter registration links to election-day reminders to cast their ballot, along with directions to the right polling place.³⁵ James Hong and Jim Young, creators of

the successful online dating site, HotOrNot, launched VoteOrNot. The venture was based on the same principle that friends could do a much better job of influencing each other than could impersonal advertising messages. To attract people to the site, the sponsors offered a \$200,000 sweepstakes that would be split between the winner and the person who had referred him or her to the site. Members who joined VoteOrNot would be linked to another Web site where they could register to vote. Launched over Labor Day weekend 2004, VoteOrNot claimed to have signed up more than 100,000 people before the end of October.³⁶

It may be difficult to assess what role, if any, these Internet efforts played in the increased youth vote turnout of the 2004 election. According to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, it was a combination of factors, including “extensive voter outreach efforts, a close election, and high levels of interest in the 2004 campaign” that worked together “to drive voter turnout among young people to levels not seen since 1992.” Nor could predictions be made as to whether the increased turnout constituted a long-term trend.³⁷ It is notable, however, that the midterm election of 2006 also showed a marked increase in youth voter turnout, with two million more young people voting than in 2002.³⁸

Regardless of their ultimate political impact, the youth vote campaigns may be important indicators of future trends in the use of digital media for political mobilization of young people. Based on Rock the Vote’s own documentation, its 2004 online efforts were highly successful, bringing an unprecedented number of young people to its Web site, with more than 45 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds visiting the site in the months leading up to the election. Online voter registrations totaled 1.2 million.³⁹ At the very least, the youth vote campaigns of 2004 demonstrate that well-funded massive outreach efforts, combining cutting-edge digital tools and strategies and popular culture venues, may succeed in energizing large numbers of youth, at least in the short run.

The Branding of Political Discourse

To the extent that Rock the Vote may serve as a trendsetter in organizing young people through the Internet, it is important to take a closer look at some of the patterns and partnerships that were formed during the 2004 election. These, in turn, need to be understood against the backdrop of larger economic developments that are underway in the emerging youth digital culture.

One of the hallmarks of Rock the Vote’s youth-vote work is its ability to develop strong relationships with corporations. These companies not only provide financial support but also participate in “co-branding” many of the major elements of the nonprofit’s campaigns. While a number of other youth vote initiatives have also partnered with popular brands, Rock the Vote has forged a unique model of democratic participation that merges the roles of fan, consumer, and citizen. For example, in 2004, four corporate sponsors—Dr. Pepper/Seven Up, Unilever’s Ben & Jerry’s Homemade, Motorola, and Cingular Wireless—paid \$1 million each to support the Voter Registration Bus and Concert Tour.⁴⁰ In partnership with a company called Meca, the nonprofit created “Rock the Vote Communicator,” a “branded” version of instant messaging, offering “six available Rock the Vote-themed skins” that were “designed to appeal to the elusive 18–24 voter demographic.”⁴¹

Rock the Vote promoted its campaign, along with its affiliated brands, through software applications, wireless technologies, and commercial Web sites that married activism and advertising. “Rock the Vote Mobile” packaged appeals for political participation into user-friendly pop culture products designed for integration into the busy lives of young people.

According to its Web site, the mobile project was modeled on several successful “smart mob” political efforts in other countries, including campaigns by activists in Spain the night before the March 2004 elections, where “the spread of text messaging mobilized some thousands of people who congregated in front of the political party running the country, Partido Popular, in just a couple of hours.”⁴² But the youth vote version of these campaigns was an integrated marketing venture with Motorola. To launch the mobile campaign, the company sent e-mails to its thousands of cell phone users, attaching a video that featured Rachel Bilson, star of the popular Fox TV show *The O.C.*, inviting young people to sign up online for the campaign. As an added incentive, the company offered sweepstakes with prizes that included Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and Motorola handsets. Youth could be plugged into a constant stream of interactive content and activities through their cell phones.⁴³ Biweekly polls were able to “take the pulse of 18-30 year-olds on top-of-mind topics from education and economics to job creation and the war on terrorism,” campaign materials explained, and a regular feature asked voters which candidate was “likely to get their vote on Election Day.”⁴⁴ “Celebrity voice mails. . . explained how to find a polling place through the Web or through an automatic patch-through to 1800MYVOTE1.”⁴⁵ Users could also receive “wake-up calls” and ring tones from Rock the Vote musicians, enter election-related contests, and participate in a variety of text-messaging surveys. Undecided voters could take the “candidate match” survey. After answering ten questions on issues such as the war, the environment, and the economy, they would receive a text message with the name of the candidate who best fit their own values and interests.”⁴⁶ According to the nonprofit, more than 120,000 people joined its mobile campaign.

The synergistic relationships between Rock the Vote and its corporate partners are emblematic of the growing practice of “cause marketing,” in which companies link their products to causes and issues in order to build customer appreciation and loyalty. Brands seeking youth are particularly interested in aligning with well-known causes, often willing to pay nonprofits considerable sums of money for the association. Many companies have created specific line items in their marketing budgets for cause marketing.⁴⁷ Rock the Vote’s cause marketing model was the quintessential win-win strategy; the multi-million-dollar corporate investment played a crucial role in providing support and visibility for campaign, underwriting new digital applications that were invented and put in place for the election. And the brands that partnered with Rock the Vote were able to take advantage of the nonprofit’s ability to reach a wide spectrum of young people through the “youth engagement Web sphere.”

Incorporating social and political messages into the content of youth entertainment has already become a common practice in the social marketing and “entertainment-education” campaigns of public health organizations. Television programs, music, and other popular venues can be effective vehicles for reaching and educating young people about such issues as sexual health, smoking, and drug abuse.⁴⁸ Applying similar approaches to civic and political engagement initiatives may help to popularize and extend participation among youth. Given the elusiveness of the youth audience, and its value as a target market, more corporations are likely to partner with these causes, offering their financial largess in return for brand exposure. To the extent that corporate investment can help support such efforts, companies should be encouraged to become involved. However, there is also a danger that intertwining politics with brand marketing could ultimately undermine the potential of these campaigns.

Such practices also have important implications for adolescent development. Teenagers and young adults undergo a critical process as they acquire the necessary civic knowledge, skills, and emotional attachments that are central to their emerging roles as citizens. As

scholars Constance Flanagan and Nakesha Faison have pointed out, “the civic identities, political views, and values of young people are rooted in their social relations and the opportunities they have for civic practice.”⁴⁹ The ubiquitous and integrated nature of marketing in digital political engagement practices could serve to conflate civic identity and brand identity during this key formative stage.

Commercialized Communities

The extension of brands into youth online politics is part of a larger set of trends in the evolution of youth marketing in digital media. The forms of advertising, marketing, and selling that are emerging as part of the new media depart in significant ways from the more familiar types of advertising and promotion in conventional media. Companies can now forge intimate ongoing relationships with individuals. Digital technologies make it possible to track every move, online and off, compiling elaborate personal profiles that combine behavioral, psychological, and social information on individuals and aggregating that data across platforms and over time. Youth marketers have developed a full array of strategies, especially tailored to the needs and interests of youth, aiming to “become part of the communication structure” of their daily lives.⁵⁰

The practices that are becoming commonplace in the digital environment have important implications for the future of democratic discourse. Of particular concern is the increasing presence of marketing in online communities. Many of the same features of Web 2.0 that are so valued for their participatory capabilities are being designed to incorporate marketing applications, as investors seek to “monetize” the newest forms of digital media most popular among youth. According to marketers at a 2006 “Search Engine Strategies” show in Silicon Valley, social networking sites offer one of the most effective means for reaching the highly lucrative, but challenging, youth market segment. One participant advised marketers to track the content of blogs to find out the interests and needs of the bloggers, suggesting that interacting with them and participating in their postings is a great way to get to know them and to build trust. “To be accepted,” remarked another panelist, “means to be built into that culture.”⁵¹ A marketing conference in London—entitled “What MySpace Means: Lessons for Every Brand”—offered advice to companies for “cultivating communities” in these social networking spaces.⁵² Social networking sites have attracted huge investments in advertising dollars. Companies are particularly eager to take advantage of the large, highly detailed user profiles and expanding lists of “friends” on these sites. “The targeting we can do is phenomenal,” one industry executive told the press.⁵³ As companies insert themselves into these new social networks, they are intentionally seeking to blur the lines between advertising and content. Social networks are “breaking down that wall between what is marketing and what isn’t,” commented one youth marketing expert. “[S]ometimes the marketing is so embedded in the social network sphere that it draws users to interact with the brand as if they were e-mailing friends,” explained an article in *Marketing*.⁵⁴

The intrusion of marketing into these digital social spaces does not necessarily mean that youth cannot still use them to engage in political debate and civic discourse—sometimes challenging the very companies that are targeting them. Over the years, young people have launched both online and offline “culture jamming” campaigns against corporate media.⁵⁵ In their chapter in this volume, Jennifer Earl and Alan Schussman document a number of online campaigns by youth consumers around the world that have challenged corporations over the content of youth cultural products.⁵⁶ Nor has the presence of advertising thwarted

free expression on the Internet. For example, a number of bloggers carry advertising on their sites, enabling them to develop viable business models without interfering with their ability to articulate their views and find audiences.⁵⁷ And despite the increasing presence of advertising on YouTube, MySpace, and other peer-to-peer, social networking platforms, these venues have continued to spawn an abundance of diverse viewpoints and to serve as a forum for social protest.

However, the nature and extent of direct involvement by marketers into the daily communication and community-building activities of young people is unprecedented. Using sophisticated data mining, research, and targeting tools, companies are able to strategically penetrate MySpace, YouTube, and other social-networking platforms in order to exploit them for commercial purposes. Marketers speak of “recruiting evangelists” by seeking out the “influencing members of each social network” and turning them into “brand breeders” or “brand advocates” for products. Youth are offered incentives to incorporate brands into their user-generated content and distribute their work virally on the Internet, cell phones, and iPods.⁵⁸ The rampant commercialization of these nascent digital communities raises serious questions about their future role as sites for political and civic engagement by youth.

Corporate control and commodification of digital platforms could also bring about more fundamental changes in these spaces, especially in the emerging broadband era. The News Corporation’s purchase of MySpace for \$580 million is a harbinger of further consolidation trends in the online industry, as advertisers continue to seek out the youth market.⁵⁹ These trends have prompted some industry observers to predict that accommodating the needs of advertisers will result in a change in the “architecture” of such networks. “Look for them to make each entry into the many groups accessible via a portal for its users,” explained one trade article. “Today, the purely linear, viral nature of the MySpace that is so much fun for users is anything but fun for advertisers who require more content security and targeting precision than MySpace can provide for their messages. That seems certain to change soon.”⁶⁰

Key Policy Battles

In addition to these changing market practices and ownership patterns, there are several telecommunications policy issues that are particularly relevant to the future of youth democratic communications. Most of these issues have been highly contentious, sparking a series of ongoing political skirmishes, fought inside the beltway and online, part of what Yochai Benkler calls “the battle over the institutional ecology of the digital environment.”⁶¹ In the following pages, I briefly discuss four of the most critical policies that are likely to affect the basic structure and operating practices of digital communications—network neutrality, intellectual property, equitable access, and community broadband—including a few accounts of how some youth activists have become involved in the debates. I also address the debate over online safety. While not as directly connected to these “institutional ecology” concerns, this issue is nonetheless significantly related to the continuing role of youth in the public policy arena.

Network Neutrality. Although the term “network neutrality” is a recent invention (coined by Columbia University law professor Tim Wu in 2005), the concept (which is sometimes also called “open access”) has a long history in communications technology and regulation.⁶² Telephone monopolies in the United States have operated on a similar principle for many decades, regulated as “common carriers,” which are required to offer services to anyone on the basis of nondiscriminatory rates. As *conduits* for communication, the companies are

not involved in the *content* of what they carry. This tradition in the regulation of phone lines became a basic underpinning of Internet technology.⁶³ A combination of government regulation and funding of the basic infrastructure, along with principles of open-source technology, created the Internet as we know it. Even after it was privatized in the 1990s, the Internet has perpetuated many of these traditions that enable end-to-end and many-to-many communication. As Adam Cohen explained in a *New York Times* editorial, Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web (which runs on top of the Internet) “in a decentralized way that allowed anyone with a computer to connect to it and begin receiving and sending information. That open architecture is what has allowed for the growth of Internet commerce and communication.” These inherent technological features are also critical underpinnings to newer peer-to-peer applications.⁶⁴

The fundamental principles that underlie Internet architecture have eroded in recent years, owing to a series of regulatory decisions and market trends. In 2005, under lobbying pressure from telephone companies, the Federal Communications Commission eliminated the rules for nondiscrimination, content treatment, and interconnection that had been part of the common carrier paradigm.⁶⁵ (Unlike telephone companies, cable companies, which have become major providers of broadband Internet services, have never operated as common carriers.) Most consumers have a choice between one of two broadband providers—the local cable company or the local telephone company. While other technologies such as community broadband might provide viable competition in the future, there is no guarantee that this will be the case. (See discussion of community broadband later.) As a result, the diversity, openness, and competition that characterized the Internet in the dial-up era could be seriously undermined. The distribution policies of phone and cable companies could limit applications considered less financially profitable, favoring instead the content with which they have a financial relationship. Instead of nondiscriminatory carriage, network owners are likely to apply different policies to content they own or in which they invest.⁶⁶ (The cable industry has a long tradition of such discrimination, with many multisystem operators—MSOs—rejecting new channels in which they are not themselves invested or insisting on becoming financial partners with new programming ventures.)⁶⁷

The implications for democratic communications are significant. Developments in the business practices of the broadband industry threaten to undermine the archetypal “level playing field” that the Internet has long provided, in which content providers are accorded equal treatment in the online environment, and users enjoy access to any Internet resource, service, or application. Network neutrality could provide new openings for youth participation in emerging digital media platforms, ensuring continuation of the openness and free access that the public has come to expect with the Internet. However, in the absence of an affirmative policy to guarantee network neutrality, civic and political uses of new media could be undermined. Analysis of existing, as well as planned, policies by broadband providers indicate that discriminatory access and distribution could become commonplace in the networks of the future.⁶⁸ Internal industry documents from technology companies such as Cisco and Allot Communications have warned cable and phone companies about the need to “limit unprofitable peer-to-peer communications” or, in some cases, ban them altogether.⁶⁹

The political battle over network neutrality could be a precursor to future digital media policy campaigns, in which online users, including large numbers of youth, can be mobilized through the new participatory tools on the Internet. Advocacy groups on both sides of the issue have proactively reached out to the blogging community to advance their arguments.

Bloggers have also been quick to pounce on several statements by industry leaders that have served as a flashpoint for heated online debate. When AT&T Chairman Edward E. Whitacre, Jr., told *Business Week* that he thought companies such as Yahoo! and Google should be charged for using broadband to reach their customers, the remark sparked a storm of protest by bloggers. In a subsequent press article, an executive at BellSouth said that his company would consider charging Apple an additional five to ten cents every time a customer downloaded a song from iTunes. This remark triggered a second wave of turbulence in the blogosphere over concerns that such additional costs would inevitably be passed onto consumers.⁷⁰ Increased costs for downloads could affect not only music but also the full range of other content now available through broadband.

The pro-network neutrality Save the Internet Campaign, spearheaded by the nonprofit advocacy group Free Press, has made a strategic effort to enlist the involvement of bloggers. Working with MoveOn.org, Free Press cultivated a following of bloggers who were interested in the issue, using their blogrolls to build a list of more than six thousand bloggers and then providing them with links to the Save the Internet campaign site. The group also organized an exclusive “blogger only” press call, inviting experts to explain the policy issues surrounding network neutrality and to encourage further coverage online.⁷¹ Such efforts are a reflection of the growing importance of bloggers to issue advocates, who now routinely cultivate relationships with influential members of the blogosphere.⁷²

Network neutrality advocates also made a special effort to reach out to online youth through popular social networking and video sites. For its MySpace effort, Free Press enlisted the help of organizers who had been involved in the online youth vote mobilization efforts in 2004. The MySpace Save the Internet profile features blurbs, FAQs, cartoons, blog entries, and links to advocacy videos created by young people on the user-generated site YouTube.com. Members who create links to the Save the Internet Campaign on their own profiles can be rewarded with a free “exclusive MP3 download” with information on the issue.⁷³ As the network neutrality controversy became more prominent in the blogosphere, some individuals began making their own videos and distributing them on YouTube. Free Press quickly decided to take advantage of it, promoting the videos on the Save the Internet Web site and creating a gallery of more than twenty of them, thus spawning a “virtuous circle” as more and more people began viewing the videos on YouTube. Some of the videos became instant online phenomena, distributed virally to millions of individuals, and revealing how the issue resonates with many members of the digital generation.⁷⁴ Many reflect a passion and energy about the issue that is quite remarkable, as well as imaginative ways of rendering the complexities of media policy in understandable, visceral terms that other youth can easily grasp. For example, one video begins with a Web site featuring archival footage of old Warner Brothers cartoons. The cartoons are suddenly interrupted by the familiar multicolored bars of a television emergency broadcast. A young man comes on, playing the part of a media company executive, and tells the Web site operator that he is being shut down. But the Web site operator counters with his own threats against the virtual intruder. The video ends with the tag line “It’s your Internet.”⁷⁵ Such messages reflect the feelings of personal ownership that many youth hold about the digital media, as well as a sense of optimism about their ability to counter any threats to their continued use of these tools. However, in the real world of Washington politics, the battle for nondiscriminatory practices in the broadband era faces substantial opposition.

Activists did successfully intervene in the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC’s) 2006 approval of the merger of AT&T and BellSouth, winning concessions that the new

company would adhere to principles of network neutrality for two years. Members of the new Democratic-controlled Congress also promised to introduce legislation in 2007 to make net neutrality a Federal law.⁷⁶ But the ultimate outcome of the issue remains uncertain.

Intellectual Property. Intellectual property and copyright issues have been front and center in the digital experiences of young people, directly affecting their daily media practices. Much of the public discourse over copyright in the Internet era has been focused on peer-to-peer music file sharing, with youth at the center of the controversy, cast often as opportunistic freeloaders who are taking what they can for their own personal uses. In 2003, the music industry began filing lawsuits against individual users and their families, as well as against popular file sharing companies such as Napster and KaZaa. These efforts have produced significant changes in online business practices, forcing major file-sharing operators either to shut down or to dramatically change how they operate.⁷⁷ As the result of these aggressive legal and PR campaigns, as well as the rise in new music downloading pay services such as iTunes, illegal downloading has been on a decline. At the height of the first wave of lawsuits, surveys of young people suggested that many of them had decided to cease the practice, although subsequent studies indicated that a sizable number of youth still believed it both impractical and, in many cases, unfair to expect them to discontinue doing so.⁷⁸

The intense public focus on music and video piracy has obscured the broader impacts of intellectual property policies, especially on public discourse and democratic expression. Press coverage of crucial legislation and regulatory decisions has often been framed as a business issue, with little public knowledge of its wider implications. For example, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) received very little media attention at the time of its passage in 1998. The law criminalizes the production and dissemination of technologies that could circumvent encoded copy protection devices, imposing penalties as high as ten years in prison or \$1 million in fines for willful violations of the provision.⁷⁹

In *Free Culture*, legal scholar Lawrence Lessig provides a well-documented set of arguments that the current direction of intellectual property regulation in the United States threatens not only the Internet but also the larger culture.⁸⁰ In the digital era, where sharing, critiquing, modifying, and linking to the content created by others have become an expected and essential part of public discourse, digital copyright laws have created complication and confusion, and posed challenges to bloggers and other online content creators. The nonprofit Electronic Frontier Foundation, a leader in many of the legal battles against copyright infringement lawsuits, has created an online resource specifically for bloggers who are uncertain about what they can and cannot do on their own blogs. The site explains a number of important legal concepts, along with the procedures that must be followed if an Internet Service Provider chooses to remove a posting in response to a copyright infringement complaint. As the site points out, the DMCA has made it much easier for an ISP to take content down without risking liability. Although a blogger whose posting has been removed does have recourse, the entire discussion is a reminder of the complex legal framework within which bloggers and other online commentators must operate, whether they realize it or not.⁸¹

Passage of the DMCA has spawned a movement of intellectuals and nonprofits working to educate the public about the role of copyright law in free and open democratic discourse. The Creative Commons, a nonprofit founded by Lessig, enables copyright holders to create “flexible licenses” that set the terms under which others can use their work, thus providing an alternative to the rigidity of current copyright law.⁸² But additional intellectual property measures have been advanced that could have important implications for the future.⁸³ In

the ensuing years, copyright battles will continue to be fought in the courts, in Congress, and at the FCC.

Several youth activist groups have become involved in intellectual property issues, with music as a key touchstone. For example, Downhill Battle, founded by a group of college students in 2003, has used the Web to engage in “digital civil disobedience” over what it sees as repressive copyright laws.⁸⁴ One of the group’s key tactics is to create “stunt pages,” such as “iTunes is Bogus,” which is designed to look like the official iTunes home page, but carries a message attacking the company for some of its business practices.⁸⁵ Downhill Battle’s “Grey Tuesday” Internet campaign earned the group widespread recognition within the online activist community, as well as mainstream press coverage. After EMI and Capitol Records threatened legal action against the creator of the “mash-up” Grey Album, and anyone who distributed it, the activist group staged an online protest, offering free downloads of the album on its Web site, and encouraging 400 Web sites to turn their sites “grey” for a day. Activists at Downhill Battle used the event as a way to publicize their concerns over copyright law, generating attention from major news outlets, including the *New York Times*, MTV, and the BBC.⁸⁶ Downhill Battle has established a nonprofit Participatory Culture Foundation, developing and promoting new software applications and technologies for creating a do-it-yourself “free culture.”⁸⁷ The foundation has launched a new open-source platform for producing and distributing video online, called “the Democracy Internet TV Platform.” The activists see this project as part of their mission to “create a television culture that is fluid, diverse, exciting, and beautiful.”⁸⁸

Whether these efforts will be effective at changing any of the existing intellectual and copyright policies, or at preventing further privatization of culture in the digital media, remains to be seen. But engaging young people around the policies that directly affect their own media culture may help them to see the larger connections between their everyday experiences with digital media and the political and cultural forces that are shaping the overall new-media environment.

Equitable Access. Ensuring equitable access to technology is a policy issue that has largely fallen off the public radar, but nonetheless remains important. During the early nineties, as the Internet was beginning to make its way into the mainstream, the federal government made “bridging the digital divide” a national priority. The Clinton administration’s 1993 Agenda for Action called for all schools, libraries, and hospitals to be connected to the Internet by the year 2000.⁸⁹ Library and education groups lobbied a provision into the 1996 Telecommunications Act that extended the FCC’s Universal Service program to advanced telecommunications services. The act established subsidies (often called the “e-rate”) for eligible schools and libraries and for rural health care providers to connect to the Internet.⁹⁰ This law, combined with a number of public/private initiatives at the local and state levels, has helped to close the digital divide in the nation’s schools. Between 1996 and 2002, the number of schools wired to the Internet went from 65 to 99 percent, with the percentage of wired classrooms rising from 14 to 92 percent. Libraries more than tripled their Internet connections, increasing from 28 to 95 percent during those same years.⁹¹ A 2004 report released by the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) found that 95 percent of all classrooms nationwide had high-speed access.⁹²

But while public policies have helped ensure greater access through schools and libraries, they have not yet erased the troubling gap between young people with access at home and those without it.⁹³ Although teens and young adults are more likely to have Internet access than other age groups, 13 percent of youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen

remained disconnected from the digital universe. As a 2005 Pew Internet & American Life report explained, “Those who remain offline are clearly defined by lower levels of income and limited access to technology,” with African American youth underrepresented online in disproportionate numbers. These patterns were consistent with overall Internet penetration.⁹⁴ A 2004 report by the Leadership Council on Civil Rights found similar racial disparities in Internet access. Blacks and Latinos, the study noted, are “much less likely than whites to have access to home computers than are white, non-Latinos (50.6 and 48.7 percent compared to 74.6 percent). They are also less likely to have Internet access at home (40.5 and 38.1 percent compared to 67.3 percent). Ethnic and racial disparities in home computer and Internet access rates are larger for children than for adults.”⁹⁵

A 2006 survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project presented a somewhat more hopeful prospect for equitable access to broadband, finding that high-speed connections in the United States had jumped in the previous year, due in part to the fact that many people have moved directly to cable or DSL broadband when they go online, skipping dial-up connections altogether. This rapid growth in broadband adoption, the report explained, is “very strong in middle-income households, particularly for African Americans and those with low levels of education.”⁹⁶ However, further progress is needed before broadband access will be available to all young people, regardless of geography or income. In an article in the *Washington Monthly*, Robert McChesney and John Podesta note that while both President Bush and the FCC have made commitments to ensuring universal access to broadband technology by 2007, progress remains slow, with the United States lagging far behind many other countries, falling from fourth to sixteenth in broadband penetration since 2001. “In the not-so-distant future,” the authors explain, “broadband will be an indispensable part of economic, personal, and public life.”⁹⁷ For the time being at least, many youth—especially those in poorer households—may have to rely on their schools or local libraries to take advantage of high-speed Internet.

Community Broadband. Community broadband (especially wireless, or “WiFi”) networks could go a long way to ensuring that universal access becomes a reality. Advocates point out that there is a long tradition of cities and counties operating electricity and other utility systems for their communities. In the contemporary communications era, publicly run telecommunications systems could provide needed competition to the local telephone and cable monopolies. As public services, such systems can ensure not only more affordable rates but also more effective participation by local civic and political organizations. Many of the youth community projects that are using the Internet to interact with their members and with the public could benefit from community broadband. Municipally operated networks could also help guarantee expanded capacity and services for local schools, libraries, and other public institutions. According to a study by the DC-based Media Access Project, “hundreds of local governments have begun exploring how to provide high-speed broadband through municipal or community networks, either directly or in partnership with others.”⁹⁸

Despite these promising developments, however, there are a number of obstacles that could thwart efforts to promote community broadband across the country. One of the largest is organized opposition from telephone and cable companies that fear competition from municipalities. Telecommunications industry lobbyists have successfully lobbied in legislation in fourteen states that restrict future public broadband projects, with a number of other states considering such moves.⁹⁹ Another obstacle is the lack of usable spectrum. As McChesney and Podesta point out, many existing WiFi networks have to operate in “junk bands” that are “cluttered with signals from cordless phones, microwave ovens, baby monitors, and other

consumer devices. At lower frequencies—like the television band—signals travel farther and can go through walls, trees, and mountains. Opening up some of this spectrum would make Community Internet systems much faster and cheaper to deploy.¹⁰⁰ Many of the same non-profits that are fighting for affirmative national network neutrality policies are also leading the community broadband movement, including Media Access Project, Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America, and Free Press. Prometheus Radio Project—a Philadelphia-based group of young people who have been advocating release of low-power radio spectrum for community purposes and organizing “barnstorming” of new low-power radio stations across the country—has embraced the goal of promoting community broadband.¹⁰¹

Online Safety. Concerns over “cyberporn” and its impact on the safety of children and youth began during the midnineties. The Communications Decency Act (CDA), passed as part of the omnibus Telecommunications Act of 1996, imposed fines and possible jail sentences on anyone found guilty of transmitting obscene or indecent material, knowing that minors under eighteen could receive it. But as Marjorie Heins, one of the lawyers who opposed the CDA, has noted, the wording of the law was “a masterwork of internal confusion,” reflecting a failure by Congress to understand fully the nature of the Internet and creating an opening for a legal challenge.¹⁰² Civil liberty groups fought throughout the two years of congressional deliberations to prevent the bill from passing, staging an online day of protest on the eve of the final vote. Failing in this effort, they immediately challenged the CDA in the courts, and the Supreme Court struck it down within a year of its original passage.¹⁰³

Despite this clear victory, numerous bills have been introduced in the ten years since the passage of the CDA, and several have become law. The Child Online Protection Act (COPA), enacted in 1998, would make it a crime for commercial organizations to allow access by minors under seventeen to sexual material deemed “harmful to minors.”¹⁰⁴ Because of challenges by civil liberty groups, the law has been blocked in a series of court decisions. In 2004, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the most recent court injunction but sent the case back down to a lower court, instructing it to evaluate whether technological advances would provide adequate protections and eliminate the need for the law.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to COPA, the Child Internet Protection Act (CIPA), passed in 2000, has been successfully implemented. That law requires libraries and schools receiving Federal discounts and funding for computers and Internet access (under the U.S. government’s e-rate program) to install filters on computers used by minors, in order to restrict their access to harmful material on the Internet.¹⁰⁶

CIPA has created a legal framework for subsequent legislative vehicles specifically focused on social networking software such as MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook. Under the proposed Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA), which was passed overwhelmingly by the U.S. House of Representatives in July 2006, CIPA would have been extended to require schools and libraries in the e-rate program to limit young peoples’ access to social networking sites, blogs, and wiki’s.¹⁰⁷ The blog search site Technorati revealed nearly 1,200 mentions of the controversial legislation, including an informative discussion with scholars Henry Jenkins and danah boyd, who pointed out that such a law would be far too broad.¹⁰⁸ As boyd explained, the proposed legislation would have limited “access to any commercial site that allows users to create a profile and communicate with strangers,” blocking not only MySpace but also “blogging tools, mailing lists, video and podcast sites, photo sharing sites, and educational sites.” boyd and others have also noted that the statistics on on-line predators are much lower than many in the public may think, with less than .01 percent of all youth abductions nationwide occurring between strangers. Nor is there

any evidence as yet that stranger abductions have occurred because of social network services."¹⁰⁹

But the politics of cultural policy have often skewed the facts in order to promote particular agendas. For policy makers, protecting children is a compelling issue that can easily be exploited. The possibility, however remote, of children being harmed by strangers on MySpace is more palpable than the concept of ensuring a participatory culture for young people in the digital media. Whether or not legislative efforts to regulate social networking sites are ultimately successful, the debate and press coverage surrounding the issue of online safety could have a chilling effect on youth expression in the digital media. For example, school districts and libraries, fearing controversy and parental objections, may decide voluntarily to block youth access to an entire class of new tools for online participation.

These events are also reminders that the Internet's potential as a tool for unfettered political expression by youth is not immune to political forces. The controversy over MySpace is in many ways a replay of earlier debates that have accompanied the growth of the Internet. Since the early nineties, when the Internet began to make its way into mainstream culture, public discourse over the new medium and its role in the lives of children and youth has been dominated by concerns over harms. The persistent public focus on Internet safety has not only dominated much of the public debate over youth and new media but has also created a climate within the government, the educational community, and the industry that positions young people primarily as potential victims in need of protections, rather than productive participants in digital media culture. In addition to repeated attempts to regulate Internet content, ongoing public concern over Internet harms has spawned a spectrum of protective software and technologies, including filtering and blocking services, as well as labeling and rating systems, all aimed at shielding children and youth from harmful online content.¹¹⁰ But more important, such fears have diverted attention away from developing a broader understanding of the role of digital media as a positive force in the lives of children and youth.

Although government action on some of the policies described in the preceding pages could take place in the near future, most of these issues are likely to remain in play for quite some time, creating opportunities to enlarge the terms of the debate over the future of digital media, and to enlist the involvement of a broader segment of the public.

Reframing the Debate, Fulfilling the Promise

By examining the myriad ways in which youth are engaging in the new media, we can begin to rethink the role of young people in the media culture and in the society as a whole. As other authors in this volume have documented, we already have abundant evidence of the ways in which many youth are seizing the new digital tools to participate more fully in democracy. The hundreds of civic Web sites created in the last decade are helping to provide young people with some of the essential skills for civic and political engagement. Interactive media make it much easier for them to learn about critical issues of the day, insert their own voices into the public discourse, and actively participate in a wide range of political causes. The 2004 youth vote initiatives are powerful illustrations of how the Internet can be harnessed as an effective mobilizing force in electoral politics. The online efforts of Downhill Battle, FreeCulture.org, and other Internet activist groups demonstrate how some young people are not only creating and distributing their own cultural products but are also fighting some of the crucial policy battles over the future of the digital media system.

To the extent that they are indicators of larger trends, these developments give us reason to celebrate. But despite the numerous examples of young people's empowerment through digital media, serious questions remain about whether such forms of participation can be extended to a broader segment of the youth population, and sustained beyond the occasional bursts of activity surrounding extraordinary events, such as high-stakes national elections. There are also opposing tendencies in the new media that could serve both to enhance and to undermine its democratic potential in the lives of young people. For example, the capacity for collective action, community building, and mobilization are unprecedented. But the move toward increasingly personalized media and one-to-one marketing may encourage self-obsession, instant gratification, and impulsive behaviors.

Whether the Internet ultimately becomes a force for civic and political renewal among youth remains to be seen. However, even though many of the business practices are already in place, there is still enough fluidity in the emerging digital media system to enable decisions to be made to help guide its future. With the support of foundations and government agencies in the United States and abroad, some scholars have begun to explore this potential.¹¹¹ Hopefully, these efforts will grow into a broader movement. To deepen our understanding of the new media culture, its institutions, and its varied and complex roles in the lives of children and youth, we will need a broader, more comprehensive multidisciplinary effort, combining the contributions of communications researchers, political scientists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and young people themselves. In addition to studies of individual uses of new media, there is an urgent need for serious ongoing examination of the institutions that are creating this digital culture, both its commercial and its noncommercial sectors.

As we consider the policy issues for the next phase of the Digital Age, the goal of fostering a healthy, democratic media culture for young people must be a top priority. These policies need to be understood as the building blocks for a framework that will support democratic communications in the future. The exact shape of the policy framework is less important than the key set of principles that must guide it. These include equitable access to technology, open architecture and nondiscrimination for both consumers and producers of digital content, flexible and fair copyright rules that allow for creativity and sharing of cultural content, and open-source applications that will encourage collaboration and innovation.

Finally, we need a series of national and international conversations, informed by research, on how digital technologies can best serve the needs of children and youth. Youth should be involved directly in that dialogue as key stakeholders, innovators, and leaders. If done well, this process could lead to major public and private initiatives that would help ensure that the democratic potential of the Internet is fulfilled and sustained over the long run, benefiting successive generations of young people.

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