



Lauren S. Berliner: *Producing Queer Youth: The Paradox of Digital Media Empowerment*

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In *Producing Queer Youth: The Paradox of Digital Media Empowerment*, Lauren S. Berliner seeks to critically evaluate the prevalent conceptions of queer youth empowerment by examining the limitations of digital media expression as a means of cultural and social transformation. Berliner identifies the work as a departure from previous accounts of youth media and empowerment by considering how differences in race, social class, and other aspects of identity influence how young queer people engage with digital media and by challenging the widespread belief that access to means of digital production and distribution inherently improves the lives of queer youth. She argues that self-produced anti-gay-bullying public service announcements (PSAs), like the *It Gets Better Project*, create a one-dimensional narrative of queer experience as one of mere survival. Berliner tactfully draws on her experience working with queer youth media producers in a media production workshop, as well as from critical evaluations of queer youth-produced PSA-style videos, to caution researchers and educators against viewing digital media production as inherently liberating and empowering for queer youth.

Berliner begins by critiquing the prevailing academic and pedagogical discourse, which often treats participation in digital media production as innately empowering. While Berliner's research suggests that younger people are more comfortable engaging with digital media, broadly identifying youth as *digital natives* ignores how differences in sexual identity impact access to power and voice through the medium. For queer youth, digital media production requires identity management—managing when and how to reveal sexual/gender identity—to prevent dangerous

situations. Furthermore, Berliner argues that calls for youth video submissions should be viewed as prompts, rather than empowering opportunities for authentic self-expression. Such online video contests establish explicit guidelines for submissions and require specific groups of youth to represent themselves in terms of particular frames of identity. Here, Berliner successfully grounds the reader in contemporary discourse on youth and digital media production to establish a basis for her challenge of the *youth voice* mobilization framework.

Viewing the *It Gets Better Project* as a case study, Berliner highlights the constraints of viral PSA-style video in empowering queer youth. For Berliner, the videos are remarkably formulaic—each a direct address to the viewer, describing a personal story about being harassed and feeling alienated due to sexual identity, ultimate self-acceptance, and a plea to viewers to overcome suicidal urges. Berliner provides the tragic suicide of Jamey Rodemeyer, a bisexual teenager, to suggest that many queer teens and adolescents produce these videos due to a desire to be included in a popular narrative about queer lives rather than to express authentic feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance. Berliner explains that the success of public-generated video campaigns is dependent on the “spreadability” of the videos (Berliner 2018, p. 56). The *It Gets Better Project* quickly spread, according to Berliner, due to the campaign's one-size-fits all approach to digital production, with each video adhering to normative framing, style, and tonal conventions. Berliner criticizes this normative approach, in that it perpetuates queer identity as an identity that is quintessentially about survival. But digital media production is not entirely futile in empowering queer youth. Berliner recognizes the power of performative videos and vlogs, which rely on improvisation and artistic freedom, in reflecting the varied and often contradictory nature of queer youth identity.

Berliner seeks to critique the presentation of youth-produced PSAs and online videos as innovative forms of expression and self-advocacy. Berliner situates the PSA as a

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historic advertising strategy, which relies on perceived similarity and resemblances to the viewer's own life and experiences. This is accomplished through the use of *vernacular voices*—personal styles of address in which figures speak candidly and openly about their experiences as individuals and identify with the audience as individuals rather than as a generalized group. To be successful, PSAs must convert complex social issues into “easily digestible messages.” (Berliner 2018, p. 102). Berliner views “It’s Time to Talk About It,” a National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) PSA video competition, as a case study for identifying the generic conventions of PSAs. Berliner focuses her attention on a young woman’s video, entitled “I am....” The video is characterized by its brevity, simplicity, and positive, memorable taglines. As Berliner explains, the video ultimately provides the viewer with little information about the young woman’s experience with disordered eating. Berliner contrasts this with “goodbye, scale!,” another video produced by the same young woman, that offers a remarkably complex and personal view of the woman’s experience. As in the previous chapter, Berliner recognizes the potentially empowering quality of videos produced by youth outside of online video and PSA production contests.

Berliner uses her experience working with young, queer digital video producers to advance her claims about digital video production and empowerment from the preceding chapters. In 2010, Berliner directed a digital video workshop called *Changing Reels* at the Hillcrest Youth Center, a space for queer teenagers and allies. She explained that the anti-gay-bullying PSA video project was socially valuable for Center staff, and also served as exposure and a source of funding for the underfunded Center. Berliner conveyed the project as open-ended to encourage creativity and authentic expression. However, the teenagers understood the constraints of the PSA genre, and they sought out to produce a brief, emotionally triggering video with a direct and explicit message. She witnessed the teenagers cut valuable discussions and expressions of emotion from the video due to sound and visual quality, while cookie-cutter stories that overtly addressed bullying and suicidal ideation were kept in. She also saw the teenagers attempt to reproduce moments from previous interviews that best conveyed their desired message. Exasperated with the sound-bite reproduction process, one teen explained, “I can’t talk when I’m supposed to say something, you know?” (Berliner 2018, p. 131) Berliner explains that the finished video is hardly authentic self-representation and does little to improve the lives of the youth at the Center. Yet, she argues that the production process itself was beneficial to the teens, as it opened up new dialogue about queer identities and lives.

In her concluding chapter, Berliner explains that because of the viral expansion of anti-bullying discourse through projects like the *It Gets Better Project*, the focus has shifted

from away from concerns about the needs of queer youth and towards the ongoing publicity of a movement. For Berliner, to truly support queer and marginalized youth, scholars and educators must leave behind online media campaigns and instead focus on learning about what these youth actually need in order to feel safe and supported at home, at school, and in their communities. She identifies four actionable changes that should occur to promote youth empowerment. First, she argues that interdisciplinary collaborative research must be supported to understand contemporary youth media—memes, vlogs, selfies, etc.—and its effect on youth. Second, organizations must research the specific needs of the communities and individuals they aim to serve. Third, an understanding that authentic expression comes in unanticipated forms and in unexpected moments must be accepted to promote empowerment. Finally, she emphasizes the process of media-making as more valuable and important than the final work product in promoting queer youth empowerment.

While *Producing Queer Youth* is a clear departure from traditional accounts of youth-produced digital media and empowerment, Berliner’s claims are not without support from contemporary empirical researchers and academics. Grzanka and Mann (2014) express similar concerns about the *It Gets Better Project* and its normative lens toward queer youth suicide. They argue that the project does little to actually empower queer youth, but rather pushes them to “tough it out through the horror and violence of bullying” because of the far-off prospect of a better future (Grzanka and Mann 2014, p. 378). Craig et al. also suggest that the *It Gets Better Project* does little to empower queer youth. In contrast with celebrations of the project as a means of giving queer youth a voice, Craig et al.’s (2014) interviews with young queer people suggest that the project is a good starting point, but providing youth access with resources to actually share their feelings and concerns could contribute to decreasing suicide. Treva Lindsey’s (2013) work on African–American girlhood and visual culture supports Berliner’s conclusion that access to digital media is not inherently empowering. Lindsey argues that the production of digital media can be directly disempowering if the content is socially or culturally disagreeable. Berliner’s arguments are firmly grounded in reality, as evidenced by contemporary empirical research and statements from queer youth themselves.

Berliner’s *Producing Queer Youth* is a successful evaluation and critique of prevailing academic and pedagogical discourse, which frames access to digital media production as inherently empowering for youth. Berliner problematizes this view by offering strong support from case studies throughout the work, culminating in an analysis of her own experience as a workshop director for a queer youth video project. Further, she successfully discredits the perception

of youth-produced PSAs as novel forms of self-expression through her thorough, albeit lengthy, historical account of the evolution of the PSA genre and the *vernacular voice*. Berliner introduces her work in this book as a break from prevailing discourse in that she takes into consideration how differences in race, social class, and other aspects of identity impact access to power and voice. However, her consideration of these factors is fairly limited. Berliner briefly notes the intersecting oppressions one queer youth faces—being a person of color, being learning disabled, having a police record, experiencing periodic homelessness—but otherwise provides a limited analysis of how these differences impact queer youth in digital media production. While possibly conflicting with Berliner’s passive method of research and information gathering, her argument would benefit from interviews with queer youth on their perceptions of digital PSA production projects and competitions and perceived empowerment. Perhaps there is something still to be said about feeling empowered, even if the final product does little to empower others.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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