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Voice, empowerment and youth-produced films about ‘gangs’[†]

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This article explores the dissonance between the expansive discourses imagined by the advocates for youth media as helping foster ‘empowerment’ and ‘voice’, versus the more circumscribed realities of participatory media production. I focus on a two-part case study – considering both a film-making project for ‘at risk’ young people in South London and the English national government funder that provided the resources for the young people to take part. This case study allows for an exploration of the political economy of youth media, and the relationship between youth media funding and how and why young people in my research often chose to make films about ‘gangs’, a striking topic of concern across 11 youth media case study sites. I use this empirical example as a means to analyse how ‘empowerment’ in youth media projects, understood as both *critical media literacy* and *youth voice*, moves from abstract discourse to on-the-ground practice.

Keywords: youth voice; gangs; participatory media; empowerment

1. Introduction

I see / too much lies and deceit / on the streets these days young people surprise me.

I see / you hiding behind a gun / only a real man wouldn’t need to hide behind one.

These lyrics are the chorus of a rap from a short film written, shot and edited by young people on a South London social housing estate. The film, made as part of a government-funded project called *This is My Story*, opens with the rap as a

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voiceover, telling the story of a young man who tries – ultimately unsuccessfully – to escape the pull of a ‘gang’.¹ The film concludes with a confrontation between the hero and his former gang where he is violently stabbed and ends up lying in a pool of his own blood.

As I detail below, several of the details of the film and the process that led to it are specific to this project and setting. And yet in many ways the genesis of this project, and its structure, are typical of many youth media projects. Operating in the non-formal learning sector (Sefton-Green 2013), which is characterized largely by non-statutory funding, youth media organizations must use an array of different instrumental justifications to find resources for their work (Gray 2002; Sefton-Green and Soep 2007). In many cases, these discourses are variations on the concept of ‘empowerment’, although this term can have myriad interpretations (Fleetwood 2005a; Buckingham and de Block 2007; Hague 2014).

To address this, this article offers a critical interrogation of the discourses of ‘empowerment’ as employed about and within participatory youth media projects. Following a description of my ethnographic fieldwork with youth media organizations in London, with additional practitioner interviews in New York which were held sporadically from 2006 to 2012, I analyse the literature on youth media, which outlines a range of overlapping definitions for ‘empowerment’, including both ‘critical media literacy’ (Goodman 2003) and ‘youth voice’ (Chan 2006; Soep 2006). I then turn to the example of *This is My Story*, a youth film-making project that took place in South London, and *Mediabox*, the English national funder that provided the resources to run it. My analysis begins with this particular case study and funder and extrapolates outwards, seeking to explain how and why youth violence is such an oft-included topic in youth media projects, and what this demonstrates about the clash between empowerment as an abstract goal and the realities of the interpersonal, economic, political and mediated ecologies that bound youth media.

This example demonstrates the dissonance between the expansive rhetoric of youth media and the more enclosed reality faced by many projects. I conclude that the broad aims of critical media literacy and youth voice were only partially realized within this example, noting the limitations that the means of funding, facilitating and circulating youth media places on the goals of ‘empowerment’. Matching the ‘micro’ context of youth media production within the ‘meso’ level of the political economy of youth media funding and policy allows us to understand how a single initiative is embedded within its ‘social, relational, or political context’ (Chávez and Soep 2005, 413), a perspective missing from some research on youth media to date.

2. Youth media and empowerment

Since the end of the 1960s when the advent of the portable video camera facilitated the use of media as a tool for engaging with marginalized groups (Boyle

1997), film- and video-making has emerged as a popular tool for engaging with young people across social, economic, ethnic or geographic lines (Halleck 2002; Tyner 2013). Young people have long been a key constituency for community media projects in part because young people are assumed to have greater familiarity with digital media (Helsper and Eynon 2010) and be most responsive to the ‘allure’ of technology (Chandler and Dunford 2012).

The availability of funding for participatory media has been changeable and politically influenced from the start, with young people (especially ‘hard to reach’ young people) a key target group for funders (Downumt 1987; te Riele 2006; Hague 2014). The political reasons behind investing in youth media have changed significantly over time, even if the actual practices of youth media facilitators have changed less substantially. From the rhetoric of ‘skills’ building that dominated in the 1980s (Buckingham 2003) to the emphasis on ‘creativity’ (Sefton-Green and Sinker 2000; Earle 2004) to the recent return to the discourses of ‘employability’ and building access to the ‘knowledge economies’ (Buckingham 2015; Quinlan 2015), youth media organizations have long had to speak the language of many different kinds of funders. One youth media organizer described this to me as being ‘bifocal’ – alternating between the vision of the funders and the requirements of the young people you actually want to engage.

Although all of the youth media organizations I worked with had at various points to incorporate changeable instrumental language to justify their funding, all also shared an interest in the two most oft-cited understandings of ‘empowerment’. The first is that through hands-on media production young people will become *critically literate* in understanding how ‘meaning is produced ... within specific relations of power’ (Lankshear and McLaren 1993, 10). Producing one’s own media is seen as a conduit towards critical engagement with consumption more generally (Sholle and Denski 1993; Buckingham 2006; Lemish 2011). This is seen as the ‘democratizing potential’ of media production (Taub-Pervizpour 2013) facilitated especially by utilizing the uniquely deconstructable properties of digital media as useful supports for critical analysis (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006; Hoechsmann and Poyntz 2012).

Another way in which ‘empowerment’ is envisioned as an objective of youth media participation is in the formation of *youth voice* (Poyntz 2013). The idea being that young people, when given access to the tools of media production, can use these to ‘overcom[e] powerlessness [and] represent themselves’ (Halleck 2002, 85). This expressive principle is articulated repeatedly across youth media sites, for instance in the words of a past major UK youth media funder who described their work as giving young people ‘the chance to tell their own stories in their own voice’ (Into Film 2014). One youth media facilitator who had worked for over 20 years in this field described to me in an interview how she saw the participatory production process as having ‘a power in it, the very process is about power and voice and identifying what [the young people] want to say’.

While there is evidence that media production can support young people in the formation of critical literacy (Goodman 2003; Kellner and Share 2007; Gillen and Passey 2011), Buckingham (2003) cautions that we cannot assume that participating in media production *inevitably* fosters empowerment through critical literacy or youth voice. There are often elisions present within the discourse of ‘voice’ – for instance the fact some voices are ‘legitimized, promoted and canonized’ while others are ‘neglected and devalued’ (Chan 2006), or that the adults involved might be influential over how youth ‘voices’ come to be articulated (Blum-Ross 2015; Dahya and Jenson 2015). There is a temptation towards unreflexive ‘pan-optimism’ in youth programmes (Lesko and Talburt 2012), as small projects try to compete for funding. Thus this critical examination provides an opportunity to investigate how these abstract concepts were operationalized in practice.

3. Methodology

This article draws from ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) conducted with youth media organizations primarily in London, but with additional interviews held in New York, from 2006 to 2012. The initial core research period in London was during 2006–2009, during my doctorate in Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford, and included over two years of non-continuous multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus and Myers 1995) focusing on the experiences of young people and adult practitioners in youth media settings. Further follow-up site visits and practitioner interviews were conducted while I was a researcher initially at the University of Surrey and later at the London School of Economics and Political Science in the Media and Communications Department, sporadically during 2010–2012. The New York interviews were held during a month-long research trip in 2012 aimed at interviewing practitioners to compare the financial, professional and pedagogical contexts of youth media facilitation and organization in New York and London. In particular, I was concerned with funding models for youth media organizations and how they differed significantly in the two national contexts, as I discuss below (see also Blum-Ross 2015).

I identified a series of organizations running film-making projects for young people in London (as opposed to initiatives where the young people simply planned or acted in the films) through opportunity and snowball sampling including: reading announcements from funders about projects recently awarded grants, drawing on my professional network as then-Education Manager of the London Film Festival, at the British Film Institute, contacting ‘City Learning Centres’ (then a series of centres to support media-learning in schools, most of which since been defunded), snowballing contacts from one organization/project to the next (no more than two contacts per project) and Google searching for organizations outside my own network of contacts. New York organizations were found through contacting a leading youth

media advocate in the city who introduced me to several contacts, and researching additional organizations via lists of funded projects on the websites of several foundations I knew to be active in funding youth media initiatives.

In each field site my data-collection methods included:

- Semi-structured interviews with adult project organizers and facilitators.
- Semi-structured interviews with children and young people throughout their participation.
- Participant-observation during project development, filming and editing sessions, and during final screenings and events where they were held.
- Analysis of textual documents including initial funding bids, project materials and final produced films.

In two cases I also returned to the site following the completion of the project to conduct follow-up interviews with the young people and facilitators. In these cases I brought print-outs of photographs either they had taken with my camera or I had taken during the filming process to ‘elicit’ (Harper 2002) memories of filming. In one case I was asked by the project organizers also to conduct ‘video-diaries’ with the young people during the filming days (Blum-Ross 2012a). I would have liked to do some form of follow-up for all of the case study projects but this proved impossible as in 9 of 11 case studies the young people quickly lost contact with the organization as soon as the screening had concluded – a problem of project funding as I discuss below. I was not able to contact the young people to follow up directly due to ethical concerns about child protection from both my ethics submission to my university and my agreement with the partnering organizations.

In the end my research comprised 11 case studies, or projects that I followed from initial funding bid through to completion. Of these all:

- Included between 6 and 20 young participants.
- Comprised young people aged 12–21.
- Were held in schools, youth and community centres, media organizations and NGOs.
- Included 30–100 hours of fieldwork, using the above-listed methods.

I also conducted additional interviews with facilitators and project organizers that were not subsequently part of a case study site. In all I interviewed 65 facilitators, organizers and funders from over 30 different youth media organizations and funders (including eight in New York City in 2012), and in-depth interviews (Skinner 2012) with approximately 40 young people (with a further 30–40 young people taking part in informal discussions and short interviews). Approximately 90% of these young people were aged 14–19 years. I prioritized studying media production in my research – noting that the ‘products’ of youth media are generally only partially reflective of the richness of the process that

went into making them (Dahya and Jenson 2015) – but nonetheless I also made a point of attending youth media events and watching youth media productions of several hundred other films from around the world.

I hand-coded my field notes and interview transcripts using a tailored spreadsheet which I had created to identify cross-cutting themes and questions. These themes included, for example: the role of gender in youth film-making teams, the designation of ‘at-risk’ or ‘disadvantage’ as a funding mechanism, the role of the facilitator as a mentor, collaborator or guide (Blum-Ross 2015), and beyond. I identified three main areas in which youth film-making projects attempted to engage young people in civic participation: by encouraging them to participate in formal political structures as ‘citizens’ (Blum-Ross 2012b), to foster a sense of ‘belonging’ by learning about familiar and unfamiliar geographic and human communities (Blum-Ross 2013) and encouraging empowerment and youth voice (discussed here).

4. Mediabox and this is my story

In 2008 when I asked the then-Executive Director of *Mediabox*, an English national funder specifically for youth media established in 2006, how the organization had come to be, she recounted how *Mediabox* was part of a wider ‘realisation that young people were portrayed quite poorly in the media and [it was also related to] this whole consultation thing that local government were mad for – the feeling that young people needed a voice’. Initially funded at £6 million pounds in the first year through what was then known as the Department for Education and Skills, *Mediabox* was aimed specifically at ‘enabling young people to gain new skills, express themselves, and get their voices heard’ (2010).

Mediabox was explicitly oriented towards ‘issues’ in its approach. Although the guidance for *Mediabox* underscored that ‘an “issue” is not necessarily a problem’ (2009) a vast majority of the funded projects tended to focus on what could be considered negative issues in young peoples’ lives, including teen pregnancy, youth violence and smoking. When I interviewed *Mediabox* staff I queried this. Some of the staff had concerns that the focus on ‘issues’ had led project organizers to sacrifice the ‘quality’ of outputs in order to emphasize the *process* of creation. As the Executive Director reported ‘as soon as you say it is about young peoples’ issues’ it becomes more about process than it is about product ... while there’s been some good stories there, they’ve not been executed very well’. The ‘low quality’, as a staff member described to me, of the films was particularly problematic for *Mediabox* as one of the central objectives was to get young people’s voices ‘heard’. It was more difficult for *Mediabox* to find audiences for films when often they were inaccessible for audiences who did not know the young people personally. Most of the outputs were seen by very few people including *This is My Story*, as discussed below.

This is My Story was funded by *Mediabox* in 2008 and took place on a South London housing estate. The estate had briefly jumped into public consciousness a year before when a 15-year-old boy had been shot and killed in his home on the estate – reputedly in relation to ‘gang’ activity. The facilitators of the project, Sheena and Peggy,² lived locally and knew many of the young people prior to the start of filming. Sheena and Peggy described how journalists had descended on the estate to interview young people just after the boy had been found dead. Despite their sadness, the young people seemed excited at the prospect of being on the news. Sheena described how ‘suddenly [the press were] transported into our patch with all the lights, camera, action! And then just as quickly away again’. Press manipulation was a controversial topic on the estate, so much so that a large-scale mural on one concrete wall read ‘Why don’t the press let the kids decide who they want to be?’

Running over several months, the project included morning sessions every Saturday along with two more intensive week-long sessions during the school holidays. On any given day the attendance ranged from 1 or 2 participants to over 20, with varying degrees of commitment to the project. Almost all the participants lived nearby, and although one or two girls attended at the start of the project, by the end almost all of the participants were boys between 12 and 16 years old (one 9-year old came along with his older brother). Sheena and Peggy speculated to me that they thought the girls had stopped coming because they had been put off by the rambunctiousness – ranging from noisy joking around to physical wrestling – of the sessions with the large group of teenage boys. Although one girl had come from the local area and was known to the group, the other had travelled a great distance to come and had spent the session she had attended only marginally engaged, looking at her phone for much of the morning she attended. While Sheena and Peggy mentioned the loss of the girls they were not especially concerned about it, concentrating instead on avoiding overt restrictions. With their dedication to making the space feel ‘not like school’ (as I discuss below) they did not want to discipline the boys or limit their high-energy playing in the space. The lack of participation from girls was indicative of a problematic power differential within the group – that the girls were marginalized but that this was not addressed was never discussed directly within the project.

Although the ‘drop-in’ nature of the sessions was chaotic at times, Sheena described to me that this was purposeful, that she did not want to be seen as a ‘shouty teacher’ and instead have the project be ‘fun’.³ The participants were mainly from either Afro-Caribbean or West African backgrounds, although there were some who identified as Mixed Race or White on the monitoring forms they were required to fill in by *Mediabox*.

The facilitators described the project as about the young people ‘getting their message across [about] whatever they want’. Sheena and Peggy were at pains to underscore that they did not feel that the murder needed to come out as a topic, even though it had featured pointedly in their funding bid to *Mediabox*. Peggy

said ‘We’re not really encouraging them or discouraging them [to discuss the murder], it *is* their film, it *is* their story’.

Although the murder was not dealt with directly during the sessions, the image of the murdered boy featured throughout. During a warm-up activity where young people created self-portrait collages using magazines and newspapers, a stack of colour photocopies of an article about the estate (featuring an image of another prominent mural on the estate that depicted the murdered boy) was placed into the pile of material. In examining the young people’s collages I asked why they had included the image of the boy. One of the youngest participants said it was ‘because I knew him and [I included it] so people know that I’m paying my respects to him’.

The facilitators had planned out a basic flow for each of the sessions, but had to remain flexible when the young people turned up late, left early or did not turn up at all. Although they would have liked to continue with the more free-form ‘playing’, the facilitators were aware of the pressure to deliver a final ‘product’. Peggy told me, ‘it’s all fun, but we do need to make a film for the funders’. In one early session they set up a TV and played a film they had made on another youth project for ‘inspiration’ – in order to demonstrate what was possible during the course of the project. There was little discussion of this film (a comedy about a girl who communicates with a dead boyfriend), however, and no more in-depth discussion of media representation, format or technical choices. Both facilitators told me that they did not want to build in too much watching of films in order to keep the group members’ minds open to different possibilities, and also in part to differentiate from the young peoples’ experiences at school. To learn to use the camera the facilitators had the young people conduct ‘vox pop’⁴ interviews and brief to-camera news pieces filmed around the estate, including in front of a mural depicting the murdered boy. Despite filming in what had the potential to be emotionally charged circumstances, several of the young participants wandered off or from filming; commenting that they were getting ‘bored’.

Several weeks into the project, with no central theme having emerged, a 15-year-old called Kaleel brought in a rap, the lyrics of which are quoted at the start of this article. Working in a collaborative mode – where the facilitator works closely as part of a team of ‘colleagues’ rather than standing outside the process (Soep and Chávez 2010; Blum-Ross 2015) – Sheena quickly suggested this could form the basis for a film. Kaleel took obvious but shy satisfaction from the choice to foreground his lyrics. Once the rap had been agreed on, the group chose visuals and a story to illustrate it, borrowing their aesthetic choices mainly from music videos of London ‘grime’ music, a style of hip hop which originated in East London which incorporates elements of dancehall, American hip hop and garage rock music (Frere-Jones 2005). They invented a loosely fictionalized story of a boy who wants to get out of a gang and ends up standing up to the gang leader and getting stabbed. One of the highlights of the project for many participants was choreographing the final fight scene, and

debating the best concoction to mix to approximate the texture of blood in the final shot (ketchup and Coca-Cola, it turned out).

A smaller group of young people then did a ‘rough edit’ of the main film using Apple iMovie on laptops the facilitators had brought to the estate. The young people created a sequential flow of the shots and then Sheena re-edited to ‘clean up’ and add the soundtrack prior to exhibition. The final film was screened at a local cinema on a Saturday morning, with a smattering of friends and family in attendance. Not all of the participants turned up, although several did and received their own copies of the DVD and a certificate of completion. The screening had not been heavily promoted either in the local community, and the fact that only a small part of the group turned up was due in part to competing draws on their time on a Saturday (many had other activities and family commitments) and the fact that the screening occurred several months after the completion of the film, so some of the young people had already physically or mentally ‘moved on’. For those that did come there was hot food and a celebratory atmosphere, but no feedback was given to the young people and there was no opportunity for Q&A, something that was notably absent given the emphasis on ‘voice’ throughout the project, as I discuss below.

Although when I had asked the young people who they thought should see their film, they had responded ‘everybody!’ none of the young people spear-headed efforts to get the film seen. The facilitators had little ability to do this themselves, as they were funded only for a short time by *Mediabox* and quickly had to move on. The film did not appear in *Mediabox*’s showcase on its website, possibly because of the choice to focus on process over product the final version was of fairly rudimentary ‘quality’. Sheena was unconcerned about that, and said that the project was about ‘giving them a voice, even though it’s not going to go on telly as such’. That the screening was not well attended and few efforts were made to circulate the film after its completion was not unusual in the context of my research, as I discuss below.

5. Empowerment in films about gangs?

As I noted above, *This is My Story* was far from the only youth film-making project I studied that chose to focus on gangs. Instead, this was one of the most oft-selected topics I encountered.⁵ The sociological literature on youth involvement in gangs supports that the imaginary of the ‘gang’ is often more broadly conceived than actual participation (Mizen 2004; Alexander 2008; Pitts 2008). Yet, in the projects I studied there was little critical interrogation about why the young people were so overwhelmingly interested in making films about ‘gangs’ despite this disparity. As I detailed above, one of the key rationales for the initiatives discussed here is precisely to respond to what is described as a mismatch between young people’s actual lives, and the way that they are represented. What, then, are we to make of the fact that *This is My Story*, like many other youth media projects funded by *Mediabox* and

beyond, resulted in films that seem to replicate rather than challenge existing forms of representation? In this section I consider the dual aspects of ‘empowerment’ I have outlined, and discuss how the example of *This is My Story* and *Mediabox* – within the context of wider films about ‘gangs’ – help us understand how the abstract concepts of critical media literacy and youth voice are operationalized in practice.

The central motivating idea behind *critical media literacy* is for young people to grow in their understanding of media conventions and representational practices, if not to create their own oppositional texts than at least to foster critical readings. However, across my research I noted innumerable instances where the decision to focus on ‘gangs’ was reflective of (and often replicated almost exactly) the wider image economy of the mainstream media that represented young people in specific ways. In fact just before *This is My Story*, Channel Four broadcast a documentary with the incendiary title ‘Why Kids Kill’ – much of which had been filmed on the same estate (Channel 4 2008), and many of the shots chosen by the young people unintentionally recreated the sequences in the documentary.

If critical literacy had not, in the end, featured heavily in the project, what of ‘youth voice’? I use Couldry’s (2010) definition of voice as the ‘capacity to *make and be recognized as making*, narratives about one’s life’ (my emphasis, 7). Thus, not only are youth media projects oriented towards fostering a form of voice that is *self-actualizing* (Fleetwood 2005b), they often also encourage young people to raise their voices to outside audiences by acting ‘as citizens’ (Taub-Pervizpour 2013). This definition includes both the *processes* and *products* of youth media.

The young people who participated in *This is My Story* felt that they had used their ‘voices’, for example, when Jamal, the main actor in the piece, told me that he had enjoyed coming because it had been a ‘chance for us youth to do what we want, to express how we feel in any way’. Yet the product itself found very little audience outside of the handful of attendees at the screening, and at the screening itself the adults had by and large spoken for the young people when presenting the film. These are the intractable ‘audience problems’ of youth media (Levine 2008). The internet may have opened up possibilities for exhibition, and these are actively being used by youth media organizations that now commonly place their outputs online on sites like YouTube or Vimeo (Tyner 2013). Yet there is little follow-up about whether young people are in charge of how films are presented and distributed, what happens once media outputs are circulated online or indeed how these outputs are packaged or whether they do reach wide or even narrow intended audiences (Soep 2012). For all the potential for young people to harness ‘spreadable media’ (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), in this example the potential of a global audience remained only imagined.

My reading of the case study of *This is My Story* is that the limited audience for the project was not in and of itself problematic – except insofar as it ran

counter to the hopes for the project from the facilitators, and espoused to the young people, and the stated aims of *Mediabox*. While I was surprised at the lack of Q&A with the young people at the screening, Sheena and Peggy told me that they had asked if anyone would like to present, an opportunity which was declined. Although engaging with a critically astute and questioning audience can provide an opportunity for young people to articulate their creative process, the lack of this does not mean a project has inherently ‘failed’. As I described above, in this case the facilitators were conscious of their desire to be ‘process-led’ – locating the contribution of the project as the making of the film rather than the viewing of it. This is a complete goal in and of itself, but yet is dissonant with the more grand claims made for the project in the funding bid and hoped for not only by the funder but also the facilitators. Although on *This is My Story* the young people seemed satisfied with the screening and happy to walk away from the project, in others I studied there was more frustration about the lack of an audience. In another film project I studied, also about ‘gangs’ one of the young people told me that he was motivated to take part in order to educate other young people about the dangers of gang life (having been incarcerated for gang-related activity himself) and that for him it was important to know if ‘the result, if it’s going to make any change or if it’s a waste of time’. Thus ‘youth voice’ is a complex goal that needs to be explored with the young people themselves in order to clarify where to place emphasis.

Why, then, is ‘empowerment’ only a partially realized aim in the example of *Mediabox* and *This is My Story*? These are my conclusions based on my analysis of the two-part case study above:

5.1. *The politics and structure of youth media funding*

The pragmatic and political limitations of funding structures for youth media have significant ramifications for empowerment. During *This is My Story* the fact that the funding was specifically for the making of the film and did not include follow-on funds for distribution (either by the organizers or by the young people themselves) meant that there was no support for following up with the film and that the young people and facilitators had to quickly move on. The screening was not well attended in part because there was a lapse in contact between the facilitators and young people, and so the enthusiasm and energy of the filming was lost. There were no further efforts to distribute the film except for amongst many others on the *Mediabox* website.

The impact of funding is not merely practical – it is also ideological. The political and financial ecologies – by and large government sources in the UK and a mix of government and private philanthropy in the USA – that surround and are essential to youth media initiatives play a determinative role in the scope of ‘voice’ goals within youth media (Charbonneau 2011). For example, the emphasis on youth ‘deficit’, or the principle that young people

have limited opportunities to ‘use their voices’, begins from the perspective that young people lack the ability or opportunity to express themselves – despite the fact that there is ample evidence that young people are already engaged in a wide variety of mediated civic activities (Jenkins 2006; Loader 2007; Bennett 2008; Cohen and Kahne 2012). The ‘deficit model’ (Lister et al. 2005; te Riele 2006) influences the ways in which youth media organizations gain access to funding. In the case of *This is My Story* Sheena and Peggy tacitly knew to emphasize the murder on the estate the year before, a successful strategy. But equally, this orientation also subtly influenced the outcome of the project – for instance by including stacks of pictures of the murdered boy in the promotional and project materials despite the facilitators saying they would be entirely youth-led at the outset. It is difficult for facilitators to resist the assumptions behind funding sources, even if they disagree with them. One facilitator I interviewed told me that the funding ‘comes with so many connotations and baggage. But ... if this is the money that is available out there and we really want to run this project, we will do it with the money that we get offered’.

5.2. Critical literacy at ‘not school’ and the pleasure of mainstream media

Non-formal learning sites, places Sefton-Green calls ‘not school’ (2013), occupy a different landscape to schools. For *This is My Story* the Saturday morning structure meant the project was competing with other enticing activities like swimming or football, or time hanging out with friends. This meant that the facilitators were especially reticent to undertake the possibly more challenging activity of watching and dissecting media in order to discuss it. It felt to ‘boring’ to risk taking on the task of critical media literacy when the project organizers wanted to keep the young people coming by incentivizing the ‘fun’ of getting to use the cameras. This is similarly why many projects I studied had only limited success in sustaining young peoples’ involvement in the editing process.

In addition to facilitator’s fears about emphasizing critical viewership causing young people to disengage, it is worth noting the pleasure of playing with and replicating existing media tropes, choreographing fight scenes and of using aspirational music forms (hip hop, music videos) brought to the young people. In discussions about youth media there is a sense that media production automatically allows young people to ‘peek behind the curtain’ of mainstream media, and form their own questioning narratives as a result (Masterman 1985; Goodman 2003). However Bragg (2002) sounds a note of caution, questioning whether oppositional readings need be necessarily privileged. In her research on young people making a horror film (rather than interrogating genre conventions) she sees a form of media literacy that foregrounds young people’s ‘existing and diverse pleasures and areas of expertise’

(50). Some young people often choose to make films about gangs because this allows them to draw on mainstream media that they admire, or consider relevant to young people, and explore issues like violence in a non-threatening environment. That this does not produce resistant narratives is not intrinsically a failure, but nor is it an example of critical literacy.

5.3. *The double-edged sword of youth 'voice'*

Several facilitators I interviewed told me that they were frustrated with the propensity to focus on topics like gangs and violence, but felt that the principle of 'youth voice' meant that they had to honour what the young people had chosen to make a film about. When I asked a facilitator on another project how she had responded when the young people she worked with had chosen to make a similarly plotted film about gangs she told me, 'I try really hard to steer them away from it but they really come back.' Another facilitator wondered whether the interest in gangs was 'really their immediate personal experience or one they feel they *should* have'. Of all the 65 facilitators I spoke with only one facilitator was universal in her blanket ban on films about gangs. This is because she said she refused to let young people 'stereotype themselves, or live up to the label'. This had occasionally led to accusations of censorship, she reported, but felt for the most part the young people she worked with had understood and accepted her rationale.

Youth 'voice' is thus problematic – to what extent should facilitators deter young people from making films about gangs if they feel they are doing so out of obligation? Have they not chosen to use their 'voices' in this way? Young people may be complicit in depicting themselves in 'stereotypical' ways. For instance during *This is My Story* when a local reporter visited the set; although two of the participants had been attentively editing on the laptop before the reporter arrived, when photographed they refused to stand near the computer and instead posed leaning back with their arms crossed over their chests. These performances of specific forms of masculinity (Goffman 1959) extended throughout the filming where the young people attempted to look as menacing as possible while the camera was rolling, and then returned to their jovial selves once the shot was completed. The facilitators never questioned the young people on these behaviours, though they noted them to me. However, as Cohen (2002) noted, simply because young people may be 'willing performers' in acting tough for the camera, it 'does not make the pattern any less exploitative' (117). Although some young people I interviewed expressed concern about being seen by mainstream media as violent, they also mirrored these same depictions. For example, a young woman I interviewed on another project told me she'd chosen to make a film about gangs 'because so many people have been dying recently and they're so young ... you have to make films that relate to people'. And yet the overwhelming majority of young people I interviewed did not appear to be involved in gangs, were in full-

time education (where they mainly did reasonably well) and were active contributors to both family and peer life. Somehow the imaginary of gang crime had become interpreted as a universal feature of young life in London, something that everyone could ‘relate’ to.

Furthermore, as detailed in the ethnographic section above, it is difficult to say whose ‘voice’ was represented by *This is My Story*, as the facilitators took an active role as collaborators in shaping (even pushing) the narrative of the project in a particular direction (Chávez and Soep 2005; Blum-Ross 2015). The interest in foregrounding the image of the murdered boy in the promotional leaflet for the project, and as available material culture for the collage activity, influenced the idea that the project should concentrate on violence, even as the facilitators told the young people the film could be about ‘whatever you want’. In speaking with *Mediabox* it was clear that the fact of the murder on the estate was evidence of the ‘need’ that the project might address.

This is My Story, in its title and in the way the project was conducted and how the film was ultimately ‘packaged’ (in a DVD with a heavy hip hop soundtrack and graffiti-font title sequence) is indicative of a tension around youth ‘authenticity’ in-built into youth media. As Nicole Fleetwood has previously described (2005a, 2005b), youth media projects are reliant on packaging specific notions of ‘realness’ in order to marshal resources and gain access to audiences. In this case, as in the project she describes, youth ‘realness’ is conflated with a particular ‘racialized and gendered subject position’ (2005b, 96) associated especially with young Black masculinity. Or, to put it a different way, in my research ‘youth’ films, especially those produced by young men in urban areas, are expected by the young people, facilitators and audiences to look a certain way, and deal with certain issues, drawn from urban imaginaries of young Black men.

The quote from my research above, where the young woman claims that ‘gangs’ are the topic that all young people can ‘relate to’ further demonstrates this point. In reality young Black men are not disproportionately ‘gang’ members (Mizen 2004), but they are often portrayed in the press and in the popular imaginary as such (Hall 1978). Thus when young people are asked to discuss ‘issues’ – invited subtly to do so by exhortations to them to ‘express themselves’ (Mediabox 2009), they turn towards the same kind of social images that also attract funders, including gangs and violence. Despite the wide rhetoric of this project, in the end the emphasis by the funder (and in turn, subtly by the facilitators and young people) on ‘issues’ like gang crime inadvertently underscored that the youth voices were ‘authentic’ (itself a labile and problematic distinction, as discussed by Banet-Weiser 2012) only when they conformed to accepted aesthetic and content tropes. That the structure of funding, the facilitation of this project, and the choices of the young people themselves served to confirm rather than undermine the equation of young Black men with violence is potentially evidence of problematic further exploitation.

6. Conclusion

A comparison between rhetoric and reality is almost inevitably going to show dissonance – especially within a messy and ideologically laden real-world example like youth media where young people, facilitators and funders all are located within an unequal system and competing for increasingly scarce resources. To an extent, I worry with ending only on a note of disjuncture for fear that it may not accurately portray what was my enduring sense of awe at the many achievements of the youth media participants and facilitators (and even funders) that I encountered across my fieldwork. Even with miniscule budgets, many youth media projects accomplished considerable feats – from teaching ‘hard’ technical skills relating to production to the more subtle social and interpersonal gains of young people (including some of those who participated in *This is My Story*) who came into the project taciturn and unwilling to engage.

However, conducting this analysis leads me to conclude that the wide discourse of ‘empowerment’ as used by youth media projects does not fully attend to the difficulties of putting values like ‘youth voice’ and ‘critical literacy’ into practice. The ways in which *This is My Story* was funded and facilitated had a significant impact on the way that ‘empowerment’ as both critical media literacy and youth voice was instantiated, or not. My analysis leads me to conclude that ‘empowerment’ cannot fully be said to have emerged in the way it was envisioned in the youth media rhetoric for several reasons.

The first is because the rhetoric of empowerment does not attend to the practical and ideological difficulties in the structure of youth media funding – as scant as it is – or the ways in which these funding structures limit the ways in which youth ‘voices’ might be heard. The second is because understandings of critical media literacy only account with difficulty for the fact that young people often take pleasure in replicating, rather than critiquing, existing mainstream media formats like music videos that depict violence. Finally, I described how concepts of ‘youth voice’ and ‘realness’ are two-fold. By being rigid about the principles of ‘youth voice’ facilitators may disallow themselves the ability to challenge young peoples’ sometimes-stereotypic representations, not wishing to undercut their self-expression. A facilitator told me ruefully, ‘a kid stabbing another kid in the street always makes the news unfortunately, because that’s the way of the world’, but in the end these same tropes were mirrored by young people who seemed to feel that was expected of them as well. Youth ‘realness’ is often conflated with specific depictions of youth (as urban, as Black, as male) that *This is My Story* supported, rather than challenged.

This article has sought to provide empirical evidence of the need to better ground the concepts of empowerment, critical literacy and youth voice in the practices of youth media production, in order to see where opportunities to enable these are being missed. These discourses imagine a universe of potential

stories that could be told, I believe we should question whether these imaginaries are inevitably true in practice.

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Notes

1. I bracket this term in order to underline, following Alexander (2008), the ideologically laden nature of the use of the word ‘gang’ in both popular language and academic literature. For the sake of readability I have not continued to bracket this term throughout the article but apply a great deal of scepticism to its use.
2. I have included the names of adults representing institutions and projects, at their request. I have, however, changed the names of the young people quoted here in order to preserve their anonymity in accordance with the ethics practices at my university.
3. The fact that the young people came late to the pre-established session times also meant that it was difficult to conduct lengthy interviews for my research, and so this case study relies heavily on participant-observation and informal discussions.
4. A ‘vox pop’ is a short informal interview usually conducted on the street to gather quick responses to a question or comment from strangers who are not otherwise engaged with the filming.
5. Undoubtedly the choice to site my research in urban areas influences the frequency with which ‘gangs’ appears as a topic, although this mirrors the disproportionate presence of youth media organizations in urban areas (Hu Dahl 2009). There is little research on youth media in rural areas to date (some exceptions being Charbonneau 2009; Lin, Grauer, and Castro 2011), although comparative future research in this area is warranted.

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