

1

Micro-Celebrity Communities, and Media Education *Understanding Fan Practices on YouTube and Wattpad*

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Introduction

This chapter considers changes in children's and young people's opportunities for participation with digital media technologies and the implications for media education. In particular, it argues that the emergence of digital platforms over the past decade has promoted new entertainment forms that require ongoing revision of media education's content and form. Numerous media and communications scholars (Jenkins 2008; Hartley 2010; Papacharissi 2010; Burgess and Green 2018; Cunningham and Craig 2019) have argued that digital platforms provide greater opportunities for both vernacular and professional media production, and more participatory and socially connected audience practices. Therefore, the emergence of digital platforms challenges how researchers have understood media industries and audiences in the past, and how to teach about them. An example of these changes is the rise of social media entertainment (SME) on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, and on lesser-known platforms like Wattpad.

According to Cunningham and Craig (2019), SME's attractiveness to audiences contrasts in fundamental ways to Hollywood-produced media entertainment. For example, a key SME attribute is the emergence of the internet *micro-celebrity*, a figure who contrasts with the traditional media celebrity or star, particularly with regard to the kinds of relationships they develop with fans (Abidin 2018). This is just one example, albeit an important one, of how the digital media environment and technological innovation have altered young people's participation in entertainment and communication in recent years. It is within this context that the goals, content, and expected understandings

generated by media education programs should evolve to address changes in media industries and audience practices.

The argument developed in this chapter mainly responds to the version of media education that has become formalized through school curricula produced for the Australian education system. Media education curriculum policy has developed in a multitude of ways internationally, and other countries' approaches may be more responsive to changes in young people's digital media practices than is the case in Australia. Furthermore, around the world, many different approaches to "media education" and "media literacy" have been developed by government-sponsored programs, through charities and foundations, and through youth organizations that are possibly more agile and responsive to digital media than school-based curricula. Equally, this is not to give the impression that media education in Australia is somehow unresponsive to digital media. Of course, many Australian media teachers develop highly sophisticated educational programs that directly respond to developments in young people's digital media practices. However, when media education becomes formalized through curriculum, there is a danger that it is less able to respond to changes in how young people experience media in their everyday lives. Therefore, if media education is to make an impact wherever it is being implemented, ongoing research is needed to accurately understand young people's media experiences. Furthermore, there is a need to develop curricula that are responsive to these experiences.

To explore the impact of technological change on media industries and audience practices, and how these changes recast children's and young people's media experiences, it is revealing to explore case studies of how fans interact with SME content. One example is a micro-celebrity called StacyPlays, who is a *Let's Player* from Utah in the United States. StacyPlays has attracted 2 million subscribers and 802 million views on YouTube by making videos of herself playing Minecraft (www.minecraft.net). *Let's Plays* are a highly popular YouTube genre in which video game players record themselves playing a game, while they simultaneously record a voice-over commentary. StacyPlays is one of about 10 "family-friendly" Minecraft *Let's Players* who have formed a loose micro-industry producing content for children. Although she is by no means the most popular *Let's Player* in this category (for instance, DanTDM has over 22 million subscribers), she is particularly interesting to consider because her content is thematically organized around friendship with pets and animals, which has a special appeal for children.

This chapter provides a thematic analysis of fan comments made on one StacyPlays video. In addition, an analysis of fan fiction about StacyPlays circulated on the self-publishing platform Wattpad is considered. Together, these commenting and writing practices enable fans to construct communities that are largely socially supportive and affirming of both Minecraft play and fan adoration for Stacy. The chapter illustrates that the relationship between StacyPlays and her fans, the opportunities they have to interact with her, and how they participate online represent ways of participating with media that were not as common in the pre-digital era. These practices are not necessarily new or unique to digital contexts: scholars such as Fiske (1992) and Jenkins (2013) clearly established that participatory cultural practices were a significant feature of fandom in the pre-digital era. However, as Jenkins suggests (2013, p. xxiv), digital platforms make it

easier for a greater number of young people to take part in participatory media forms, bringing these practices closer to the center of everyday media practice.

Beyond the Pre-digital Media Curriculum

Film, media, and communications scholarship has explored new industry and audience practices, but the translation of this research into a formal media curriculum at the school level has been very slow, at least in Australia. Children's and young people's evolving media experiences in digital contexts present a particular challenge for media education in formal educational settings. It is not easy for education systems and policy-development processes to keep pace with changes in digital media, or research about it. One reason for this lag is that all curricula, including media education curricula, necessarily become systematized as they are defined within formal schooling. Although he is referring to the situation in the United Kingdom, David Buckingham's comments about media education reflect the Australian media education context. He argues that media education is relatively well established in the UK, suggesting it is "guided by a fairly coherent conceptual framework, and there is a good sense of what works in the classroom" (Buckingham 2016, p. 171).

Buckingham's point is that over 30 or so years, a consensus has emerged among educational authorities and teachers about media education's content and form. Buckingham recognizes, though, that media education may need to evolve to respond to digital media. One way to consider the tension between "settled" media curriculum and young people's digital media experiences is that the "trade-off" for predictability is less flexibility in what the curriculum can promote as core knowledge. As Deng and Luke (2008) suggest, "In theory and practice [...] curriculum entails the normative selection, classification, and framing of knowledge from the archive of human knowledge." Highlighting normativity is important because it suggests formal curriculum results from consensus about what is selected and accepted as core knowledge, which aspects of that knowledge are promoted and assessed, and how teachers frame knowledge as important (or not).

What ends up as official knowledge in the media curriculum, translated through "teacher knowledge" (Shulman 1987), constitutes what we understand to be media education's disciplinary subject matter. The knowledge base that supports media education has historically been informed by film, media, and communications research and the processes and conceptual frameworks developed within those disciplines. These processes and concepts are distilled down into teachable content that is shaped to fit within curriculum documents. However, there is an inevitable lag in the translation of research into policy development for schools. Once curriculum documents are developed, they are accompanied by a range of supplementary resources, including textbooks, websites, apps, and screen media content. Given market imperatives, commercial providers, broadcasters, and, increasingly, technology companies have entered the field and aim to produce curriculum-aligned materials to support teaching and learning (Cunningham et al. 2017) as part of their ongoing business enterprises. Alongside this, how school systems and their accreditation processes tend to demand predictable and stable subject matter and assessment standards impacts what is taught in the classroom.

The processes of systematization and normalization that shape curriculum present a distinct challenge for media education that purports to deal with an ever-evolving set of communication practices and technologies. In particular, a doctrine of disciplinarity exists in the establishment of curriculum that potentially marginalizes a range of knowledge that may be highly useful, responsive, and engaging. For instance, research undertaken into available Australian media curriculum documents across all states and territories (Dezuanni and Ryan 2014) showed only marginal engagement with digital media. Where digital media were addressed, examples mostly focused on encouraging teachers to include some digital texts and applying technology through media production. There was almost no focus at all on digital platforms, the rise of participatory culture, or changes in audience practices on digital platforms. In addition, there was very little attention on young people as an audience for digital media products and platforms, particularly social media. It was particularly concerning that there was little focus in the documents of the emergence of a focus on children's and young people's everyday uses of digital media platforms, their fandoms, or the sense that their personal experience of these media was being investigated, valued, or discussed. Although this research was conducted several years ago, little seems to have changed in the interim. Perhaps this is not surprising, though, given that Deng and Luke (2008, p. 76) argue that subject disciplinarity

fails to recognize or at best appropriate other kinds, sources, and modes of knowledge (e.g., practical knowledge, tacit knowledge, and commonsense knowledge; local community knowledges, received wisdom, oral narrative, and certainly, nondominant cultural knowledges, rituals, and practices).

Media education is often unresponsive to the localized and everyday practices of fans, particularly as they play out on digital platforms. Instead, it has been easier to focus on "settled" knowledge as it is defined in textbooks and established theory. This is true in Australia for particular historical and other contextual reasons and may not reflect practices in other countries. Where media education and media literacy efforts are less formalized via curricula policy, they are undoubtedly less hampered by officialdom and commercial forces such as the textbook industry. Nevertheless, ongoing research is required to ensure that media educators and researchers understand young people's evolving media experiences and the extent to which all types of educational interventions are responding to children's and young people's actual digital media experiences.

In summary, knowledge about young people's practices on digital platforms tends to go unrecognized as a form of official curriculum knowledge in media education policy in Australia. In addition, it seems likely that Deng and Luke's (2008) argument that tacit, practical, and everyday knowledge is often marginalized by the official curriculum may hold for media education policy. To explore this further, the remainder of this chapter provides insight into an aspect of children's internet participation and media culture that has emerged over the past five or so years: the rise of micro-celebrity culture within the Let's Play community and children's active participation as Let's Play fans. This example illustrates how current media and communications research may identify unique, important, and prescient digital media practices that should be addressed in media education classrooms for a range of reasons.

Investigating Let's Players

The findings presented in this chapter come from an ongoing study of the relationships between online micro-celebrity, children's fan cultures, and learning. The methodology has been to undertake case studies of family-friendly Minecraft Let's Players, including analysis of how fans interact with these Let's Players by leaving comments on YouTube¹ and through other forms of online content creation, including fan fiction. These different types of participatory cultural practices provide insights into how fans form particular kinds of relationships with Let's Players. On one level, the study is a narrowly focused industry analysis conducted during 2018 and 2019 that aims to uncover available industry metrics about the impact of a group of family-friendly Let's Players including Stampylonghead (9 million subscribers, 6.9 billion views), StacyPlays (2 million, 746 million), Grian (2.8 million, 526 million), and KarinaOMG (2.9 million, 985 million). These four Let's Players all record themselves playing Minecraft (and other games) and are part of what might be considered a YouTube centered "micro-industry" of family-friendly YouTubers whose primary audience consists of children from about 4 to 12 years of age. Other YouTubers in this micro-industry include DanTDM (22 million subscribers, 14.2 billion views), Big B Statz (1.8 million, 490.9 million), Squaishy Quack (960 thousand, 301 million), iBallisticSquid (4.2 million, 2.6 billion), and Amylee 33 (1 million, 352 million). This is a micro-industry because of the limited number of Let's Players producing content in this genre. However, the number of views gained by these producers makes it a multi-million dollar network, producing content viewed by a large number of children. Beyond content produced for YouTube, some of these YouTubers have published successful books (Garrett 2016; DanTDM 2016; Hinojosa 2018) and have merchandise lines available on Amazon and in department stores. DanTDM, the most successful of this group, has toured the world with a live show that frequently sells out major venues.

From an audience studies perspective, the study is an analysis of the relationships that form between Let's Players and their fans. Unlike celebrities within pre-digital media, micro-celebrities build their communities through performances in which authenticity is the gold standard by which their fans judge them (Marwick 2013; Abidin 2018). According to Marwick (2013, pp. 120–121), fan perception of authenticity on digital platforms relates to uniformity of presentation across platforms, the display of hidden inner life and revealing intimate information, and the ideals of personal integrity and honesty. She argues that authenticity is central to maintaining status as a micro-celebrity.

The creation of authenticity intersects with fan culture practices, leading to what may be referred to as "peer pedagogies" (Dezuanni 2019). Within these peer pedagogical relationships, children learn how to interact with and use media content, but also how to conduct themselves in and around media content as fan community members (Dezuanni 2019). These peer pedagogical relationships are particularly interesting for how researchers might understand audience practices on digital platforms, with specific implications for media education. To illustrate this further and to begin to tease out some of the consequences for media education, this analysis focuses on StacyPlays and some of her fans' online practices, particularly on YouTube via comments and on the fan fiction platform Wattpad.

Focusing on a Let's Player: StacyPlays

StacyPlays is the creation of a mid-30-something YouTuber called Stacy Hinojosa, who lives in Utah in the United States of America. Hinojosa produces videos of her Minecraft play, with a specific focus on animal and pet care. Her longest-running series, *Dogcraft*, features digital versions of her “real-life” pets, dogs Page, Molly, Polly, and her cat Milquetoast. A recurring theme in Hinojosa’s videos is pet rescue, something viewers are reminded of in the tagline that ends each episode in the *Dogcraft* series, which says, “Page and Molly love you, go rescue a dog.” A typical *Dogcraft* video consists of Hinojosa interacting with animals in her Minecraft world in various ways, and over time she has built a range of structures to support and pamper her pets. As she commentates her gameplay, Hinojosa discusses what she is doing during her play, and she directly addresses her audience. For instance, she invites them to comment on her video, and she discusses her offline life, particularly incidents involving her pets.

Most *Dogcraft* episodes also include specific appeals to the audience, and Hinojosa often names one of her 101 Dalmatian puppies after a fan whom she believes deserves special attention. She also shares fan art within her videos, which mostly consists of children’s drawings of Hinojosa and her pets. In addition to her StacyPlays channel featuring gameplay, Hinojosa records videos for the StacyVlogs channel where she more directly tells her fans about aspects of her life, including personal details about her day-to-day challenges. This includes her pets’ illnesses and visits to the vet and other personal challenges. In one revealing video, she discusses the impact of her mother’s cancer diagnosis on her life, and she shares footage of her mother being treated.

Hinojosa’s YouTube success has translated to other forms of media and publishing activity. She was one of a small number of Minecraft YouTubers to be included as a character in episode 5 of *Minecraft Story Mode* – a “playable television show” version of Minecraft – alongside Stampylonghead, DanTDM, and other popular Minecraft Let’s Players. In 2018, she published the first volume of her novel *Wild Rescuers: Guardians of the Taiga* (Hinojosa 2018), which briefly made the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Interestingly, Hinojosa is not a particularly sophisticated Minecraft player in terms of the kinds of activities she undertakes in the game or the builds she designs and produces. Early in the production of *Dogcraft*, she described herself as a “newbie” who was just trying to work out how to achieve things in the game. Her appeal to children relies on the emotional impact of her animal-related content, including pets and pet rescue, and her ability to remain authentic to her fans as someone approachable as a kind of friend. Marwick (2013, p. 119) argues that fans may form para-social relationships with micro-celebrities, whom they identify as friends. From a relatively low base of expertise and using readily available equipment, then, Hinojosa has developed a significant fan base that has led to success on YouTube and within the publishing industry. In some respects, Hinojosa has enjoyed modest YouTube success. At the time of writing, according to Socialblade.com, she is ranked 5057th in terms of subscribers, while Dan Middleton (DanTDM) is ranked 83rd. Unlike Stampylonghead and DanTDM, she has never been a top-10 subscribed channel. However, her various activities have enabled her to develop a successful career as a YouTuber and author with a loyal fan base.

StacyPlays Fan Activity

Fan activity around Hinojosa's content is crucial to her success, and this section illustrates that her fans seek recognition, self-affirmation, and participation in micro-celebrity communities and interactions that are socially supportive (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 2013). This is illustrated by fan comments in response to episode 116 of *Dogcraft*, "The Dog Show" (1.9 million views) (Hinojosa 2015). This 32-minute episode consists of Hinojosa starting a "Dog Hotel" build. About a third of the way into the episode, she explains she needs a place for "virtual" Molly and Page to stay when she goes out "on the road" to discover new dogs, which she has planned for upcoming episodes. Before beginning the build, she names Dalmatian 92 after a fan called Lilly, who sent a photograph to her on Twitter, consisting of a Styrofoam replica of Stacy's Minecraft apartment. Hinojosa says of the photograph:

Really reminded me of things I used to do when I was younger ... take left over bits and bobs and turn them into something that I love and I thought that this was really imaginative of her and it probably took a lot of time and ink, so I was very grateful to get that. So thank you very much Lilly and welcome to the Dalmatian plantation.

Next, Hinojosa visits the *Dogcraft* art gallery, where she shares approximately 15 images of fan art (Fiske 1992) that depict key scenes from the previous episode, and comments positively on several of the images. For the remainder of the video, Hinojosa goes on to collect materials for her build (from her chests of previously "mined" resources) and then begins the process of making the Dog Hotel. All the while, she is accompanied by one of her virtual dogs, Basil, to whom she sometimes directs her commentary. The majority of the video consists of Hinojosa describing her building process as she undertakes it. One part of the build is in fast motion, as she completes some of the more mundane building tasks. The episode ends with the hotel half-built and a promise from Hinojosa that it will be completed in episode 117.

The video has attracted 3392 comments since it was posted in 2015, with the most recent comments appearing in early 2019. Analysis of the comments indicates that they fall into several categories. The majority are comments directed toward Stacy. These include suggestions for improvement, ways Stacy can enhance *Dogcraft*, and ideas for new builds. For instance, in 2017, LuckyLeslie2 posted a comment with 82 "thumbs up" from other fans, in which she suggests,

Stacy you should add a dog restaurant or like a mini mall for the dogs and if you don't like that idea maybe you could add a spa for you and the dogs 😊.

In numerous comments, fans ask Stacy to be added to the Dalmatian Plantation, or for some other form of direct acknowledgment. Some comments ask Stacy to disclose personal information about whether she has a boyfriend or how old she is. Many more comments, however, are expressions of fandom that pay Stacy compliments for being a good YouTuber or that make comments about her physical appearance, thus reinforcing gender norms. Typical is a 2017 comment from Maddie&Taylor1:

You are amazing and sweet as Sugar and you are an amazing youtuber and you are pretty and you make the best [videos]. Love you Stacy.

Expressions of love for Stacy are among the most frequent comments. In 2016, for instance, Sad3 commented:

Stacy I need you to know this your channel is the best you are amazing and I love you I know almost everyone says that but I just thought I never give enough appreciation.

A small number of comments consist of negative feedback on the episode and Stacy's build, and a handful are negative comments about Stacy herself and her style of commentary.

In self-focused comments, fans discuss their pets, share the names of their pets, and talk about pets in general. In quite a few comments, fans discuss pets becoming ill or dying. A small number of self-focused comments disclose or claim personal illness, including some in which children reveal they have a cancer diagnosis. For example, in 2018, "Ruth Rock" says,

I have cancer I love dogcraft wish I had all the mods [Sic.].

Many self-focused comments include fans claiming a name, saying they are also called Stacy, share the name of the animals in the episode, or share the name of the fan who has been added to the Dalmatian Plantation (for instance, "Lilly"). Fans also seek connection with other fans through commenting. Many comments posted in the years after the video was initially uploaded seek a response from other fans who are viewing the video in a similar temporal moment, with comments like "Who else is watching in 2018?" A reasonable number of comments seek technical advice from Stacy or the community. Quite a few comments ask other fans or Stacy herself about how she has produced her video using "mods" – modifications of the original Minecraft platform. A small number ask about becoming a YouTuber or about Stacy's recording setup. Occasional comments might be described as random trouble-making, purposely mischievous, or hurtful comments. An example from "Mexicanlollipop" seems to mock Stacy's ability: "It took Stacy a whole day to craft 4 shelves. GG 😊😊"; and "Kari Miller" writes "Stacy sorry to say this but your town looks stupid."

In general, the comments might be considered "performative" (Butler 1990) in the sense that they "bring fans into being" as they seek affirmation and acknowledgment through expressions of connection to Stacy and other fans. Trust and declarations of love are often central to these acts within processes of relationship building, with Stacy being positioned more like a big sister or aunt than a celebrity or entertainer. In this sense, Hinojosa's claims to authenticity are based on the personal connections she invites, in which she positions herself as someone who can be trusted, particularly as an animal lover, pet owner, and friend. The next section discusses a more specific example of trust in Stacy, and love for her, in the form of fan fiction on the social writing platform Wattpad.

“Adopted-by” StacyPlays

Wattpad is described as a social storytelling platform (<https://company.wattpad.com>). It was established in 2006 by two Canadian digital entrepreneurs, and its founders claim it has over 70 million active users as of 2019, with over 400 million story uploads. Bold (2018 119–120) describes Wattpad as

A network of user generated content, which has also been described as the YouTube for stories (without the videos). Wattpad is an experimental platform for aspiring and experienced authors allowing them to publish their work, get feedback, and connect with other writers and readers. For readers, it is a platform – available on laptops, computers, mobile phones and tablets – with a diverse array, across a range of genres (mainstream and niche), of content available for free.

Although Wattpad is not as widely used or as well-known as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, it has a high profile within the writing community as the leading social network site for fiction self-publishing. It is similar to YouTube in that it relies on user-generated content, and like YouTube, it has launched some high-profile creators into mainstream publishing careers (Liptak 2019). One of the more interesting subgenres to emerge on Wattpad is *Adopted-by* stories, in which the main character of the story becomes orphaned and is subsequently adopted by a celebrity. A 2018 search on Wattpad for “Adopted-by” delivered almost 40000 results, with some of the most popular stories garnering several hundred thousand reads. Only a small number of these are “Adopted-by StacyPlays” stories, although a search on Wattpad for the more general term “StacyPlays” returns over 8000 results, indicating she features in many other fan fiction stories on the site. In a typical *Adopted-by* story, a child or teen living in a stereotypically horrible orphanage is rescued by a celebrity who is visiting either for the purpose of adopting or for some other reason and falls in love with the child or teenager. After adoption, the child/teen goes home to live with the celebrity.

Adopted ... By Stacyplays?! by purportedly young writer Avril Cole (1200 reads in 2019) is a typical example. The story provides particular insights into the importance of StacyPlays to her fans, at least in the fictional world of the story. Interestingly, the story is told through the first-person point of view of each of the characters in turn, so the audience reads Stacy’s perspective, as well as the girls’ perspectives. When the two main characters, best friends Robin and Ember, meet Stacy, who has come to the orphanage expressly to adopt a child, they tell her they are her biggest fans and are the only ones at the orphanage who know about her videos. Upon hearing this, Stacy decides to adopt them both. On the first night after the girls arrive at Stacy’s home, Ember has a dream in which she is a baby who is abandoned by her parents because they chose adoption over abortion. She says, “These can’t be my parents! I start to sob. THESE STUPID UNLOVING MONSTERS.” The story then switches to Stacy’s point of view:

I walk over to her and crouch down to her level. “What’s wrong sweetie?” I ask calmly. “I–I my ... par-parents!” She sobs. I pick her up cradle her in my arms running my hands through her hair. “It’s alright sweetie. Your with me now.” I say trying to soothe her. I continue to say soft calming words. (errors retained).

As the story unfolds, the girls and Stacy have to deal with the challenges and routines of family life, including Ember's misbehavior at school, but these challenges are resolved without the girls being returned to the orphanage, which is their biggest fear. Stacy is a supportive and loving "mom," and the audience reads from her point of view that she cannot imagine what life would be like if she had not adopted the girls:

I smiled to myself and thought the awful thought of what if I didn't choose to adopt them?
I smacked myself in the head and asked myself, "How dare you ever think that, ever?"
(errors retained).

The fantasy outlined in the story may be read as an extensive performative repetition of the norms of parental care and children's desire to be unconditionally cared for, loved, and accepted. Being adopted by someone "famous" adds a level of intrigue, but this does not override the desire to have a close and loving relationship. The story raises many questions about the social and psychological implications of children's perspectives on parenthood, love, and responsibility. The analysis in this chapter emphasizes how fan fiction reveals particular insights into the world of fandom that is otherwise difficult to access; and in the case of *Adopted-by StacyPlays* stories, it provides insights into the kind of relationships fans imagine they might have with Stacy. Jenkins argues that fan fiction often involves "emotional intensification" and frequently leads to "expressions within scenarios of growing intimacy and trust between two protagonists" (Jenkins 2013 p. 174). While Jenkins is referring to fan fiction that rewrites the relationships between fictional characters, his comments may be equally applied to fictional accounts of interactions between micro-celebrities and fans.

For fans of micro-celebrities using digital platforms, the prospect of a relationship with the celebrity is made more tantalizing because there is always the potential for direct acknowledgment from the micro-celebrity. The work of "being authentic" on YouTube requires micro-celebrities to be more accessible to their fans than a traditional Hollywood star has been in the past. On one level, this construction of authenticity may seem like an illusion or simply part of the creative labor required by YouTubers to build a fan base. *StacyPlays* deliberately and purposively acknowledges her fans within her YouTube videos and on her Twitter account, and she meets fans in person at conventions such as VidCon and at book signings for her novel. In her *StacyVlogs* videos, Hinojosa speaks as an "everyday" person dealing with everyday challenges, making her even more familiar and seemingly accessible to fans. While Hinojosa is "internet famous," she seems to represent herself self-consciously as an everyday person who just happens to play Minecraft. All this is obviously open to critique and criticism, and might very well raise important questions in a contemporary media education classroom.

Such a critique would not be straightforward, however. While *StacyPlays* has been successful in certain ways and has moved into the mainstream publishing industry, her fans seem to respond to her because she has remained "ordinary." Marwick argues that one of the keys to authenticity for micro-celebrities is that they remain consistent over time, suggesting "people's authenticity is determined by comparing their current actions against their past for consistency" (Marwick 2013, p. 120). Marwick suggests it is difficult to fake this across an extended period. *StacyPlays'* authenticity is built upon the idea that

she is accessible and trustworthy, particularly regarding her relationship with animals and pets, and this commitment has not changed throughout her online career.

It is easy to be cynical about young fans' commitment to StacyPlays. It might be argued, for instance, that she is manipulating fans for commercial gain. However, such criticism also risks ignoring the well-established literature that recognizes fans "as active producers and manipulators of meaning" (Jenkins 2013, p. 23). Therefore, the question of whether Stacy is "being real" may not be as pertinent as asking what kind of celebrity StacyPlays is in an era of micro-celebrity. It also may not be as important as asking how and why fans seek recognition, self-affirmation, and participation in micro-celebrity communities. Let's Players necessarily have a much more direct relationship with their audience than mainstream celebrities did in the past, and this influences the nature of the content they produce and how they produce it. A focus on these differences, and how they lead to new kinds of (complex) relationships between media content and audiences, is a good example of how media education might evolve to respond to new practices on digital platforms.

Implications for Research and Media Education

The beginning of this analysis suggested that research relates to media education in two ways: it informs what eventually becomes media education's subject matter, and it demonstrates how to conduct media research – the methodologies that may become part of students' curriculum experiences. The production of Let's Play videos and the fan cultures that exist around them have some very specific implications for research and media education, especially for notions of *industry* and *audience*. Concerning this, researchers and educators might ask what kind of industry StacyPlays represents, and what kind of audience her fans constitute.

This research has only touched on the micro-industry of Let's Play production, but even this brief discussion illustrates the significant differences between making Let's Plays for YouTube and production practices in the traditional film and television industries. Let's Players independently produce videos daily or several times a week from their own homes, allowing a small number of them to become adequately enough rewarded for their labor that it becomes a "job." The more views they gain, the more money they make, compensated by the economics of Google's AdSense system and other forms of income they earn as micro-celebrities. Despite the so-called "adpocalypse" in 2017, which saw some YouTubers lose a significant amount of their revenue-generating potential on the platform, a significant number of YouTubers still make a comfortable living on the site (Cunningham and Craig 2019, p. x). In some respects, this financial arrangement resembles the small business and cottage art industries in which individual artists are directly compensated for their daily creative activity and the degree to which they appeal to their audience (Cunningham and Craig 2019).

In addition, traditional and new media industries have enabled some Let's Players to bridge their careers to take advantage of more conventional commercial media opportunities like publishing and commercial sponsorship. However, the model remains very

different from the pre-digital media industry model where content production is highly industrialized and where the ownership of intellectual property and negotiated contracts ultimately determine how artists get paid. Meanwhile, audiences in digital contexts can interact with popular content and content producers in much more interactive ways than is the case with legacy media. The various ways fans use Let's Play content, from the more common practice of commenting on a YouTube video, to the less common practice of producing fan fiction (and many ways in between) represent opportunities for fans to connect with both micro-celebrities and other fans. This chapter shows how this may occur on a very personal level, and how trust and authenticity are crucial to both the micro-celebrity's success and the fan's pleasure and motivations for participating on digital platforms. From an academic perspective, the concept of "audience" on digital platforms differs significantly from the more established understandings of media audiences.

Although YouTube has existed as a significant cultural industry for well over a decade, efforts to include YouTube as an object of study have entered media education curricula very slowly, at least in the formal curriculum in Australia. This is one strand of research, then, that deserves much more attention within media education policy and practice. In addition, new research methods like studies of micro-celebrity produce new insights into fan practices and audience motivations. However, there is little evidence in Australian media education that teachers have begun to develop tools and techniques for students to study online commenting practices, fan fiction, or remix culture as an aspect of audience participation. In some ways, this is surprising, given that many young people take part in these practices, at least in a small way, as they watch their favorite YouTubers and participate on digital platforms.

Conclusion

The challenge for media education in digital times is to weigh what "counts" as knowledge in the media classroom and to determine whose knowledge should be valued. Research in the digital media space has traced significant disruption in the media industries that is most clearly represented by the fact that even a "niche" micro-industry such as family-friendly Minecraft YouTubers is generating income in the millions of dollars of revenue per year. Billions of views of videos in this subgenre are clocked on YouTube each year, drawing advertisers away from television to YouTube. Meanwhile, children and young people are much less likely to watch television regularly. At least some children and young people are interacting with their favorite online content and micro-celebrities in ways that indicate a desire to connect to content, knowledge, ideas, and practices. Digital platforms afford these young people with previously unavailable opportunities to respond to content, to request particular forms of entertainment, and to be much closer to the production of content themselves. It is not suggested, however, that these opportunities are benign.

This chapter has focused on a family-friendly YouTuber whose activities typically invite uncontroversial fan activity. Much more problematic examples, such as the

anti-Semitism associated with high-profile YouTuber Pew-Die-Pie (Herrman 2017), raise further questions and concerns about the kinds of content young people may be accessing and the kinds of relationships they may be developing with particular micro-celebrities. Regardless of whether young people's experiences are considered to be benign or problematic, though, the more significant point is that such examples may not be making their way into media classrooms. For this reason, if media education is to remain relevant and essential for young people, there will need to be a sustained and interconnected relationship between research in the digital media field and the design of school-based learning experiences. This may be occurring in some countries or outside formal education, but there is little evidence it is occurring in Australia at this point, despite the country having a well-deserved reputation for high-quality media education.

Note

- 1 Throughout 2019, YouTube progressively disabled comments on many YouTube accounts with a children's audience. As of 1 January 2020, comments were no longer available on the StacyPlays channel.

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