Youth Information-Seeking Behaviors II

Context, Theories, Models, and Issues

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Preface

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Youth Information-Seeking Behaviors II, edited by Mary K. Chelton and Colleen Cool, continues the work of the earlier volume of the same title published by Scarecrow Press in 2004. This collection of an introductory article and ten further contributed chapters is not a purposeful or thematic sample of youth information-seeking research. Nonetheless, as with the earlier book, it provides a snapshot of this work at this particular time, which will be useful to many people in a variety of ways. Individuals not familiar with young people’s information seeking—including students, practitioners, and established scholars in Library and Information Science (LIS) and related fields such as education—will appreciate this book as a first place to start exploring this topic. It is an excellent resource to support information behavior and youth services courses. It identifies, in one convenient place, many important researchers and research projects. And it will stimulate discussion and thinking among information behavior scholars and youth services librarians.

As with the previous volume, the articles collected here address varied topics. Five fall within the rubric of Savolainen’s (1995) everyday life information seeking (ELIS). Fisher and her colleagues at the University of Washington report on the preliminary findings of a National
Lynne (E. F.) McKechnie

Science Foundation funded study of the everyday information behaviors of children nine to thirteen years of age, so-called tweens. This is the first study to specifically target this age group, and some of the findings are particularly interesting. For example, the authors discovered that tweens differentiate between the sorts of questions and information asked of peers and those asked of adults, that the curiosity-fuelled drive toward information seeking that is characteristic of this age group was often tempered by peer pressure, and that adults frequently give children information they either do not want or regard as incorrect. What emerges in this chapter is a fascinating picture, captured from the perspective of the children themselves, of an information world that differs substantially from that of adults.

Hughes-Hassell and Agosto also firmly situate their work within the perspective of their participants, in this case urban teenagers fourteen to seventeen years old. The twenty-seven young adults who took part in this study were very active research partners, completing surveys, and for one week keeping written activity logs, maintaining a tape-recorded audio journal, and using disposable cameras to photograph places in their communities where they go for information. Hughes-Hassell and Agosto derive two models from their data, one that postulates how urban adolescents use ELIS behavior to support their development and another that provides a typology of their ELIS information needs. They note “[u]rban teens want and need information to support their emerging sexuality, their pressing financial needs, their attempts to understand the social worlds in which they live, their self-doubts about who they are and what role they can play in society.”

Jennifer Burek Pierce explores one of these adolescent information needs, the need for sexual health information, more closely. What differentiates this chapter from others in the book is that it is a meta-analysis of a sort, a literature search that focuses primarily on “contemporary peer-reviewed medical and public health research on adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health information” and associated public policy. Pierce identifies many findings common to both LIS and the health sciences literatures—significant information gaps; the importance of media of all types, especially the Internet; the problem of limited confidentiality protection for minors; teens’ poor information search skills; and differences between urban and rural contexts. While Pierce argues for more cooperation between LIS and health sciences researchers, she
also identifies significant differences in research culture and intellectual traditions that will prove challenging.

Mehra and Braquet’s work, based on narrative interviews with adults recalling adolescent experiences, “proposes a model to better understand the process of information-seeking during “queer” youth coming-out experiences.” Resources appropriate for different stages in the coming-out process are identified, and the author provides recommendations for realistic and achievable changes to library collections and services to better support these information needs.

Studies of reading practices such as those conducted by Catherine Ross and her colleagues at the University of Western Ontario, are now regarded as part of the literature of ELIS behavior. Howard and Jin’s chapter makes a substantial contribution to this area. They report the results of a survey of teen reading, book purchasing, and library use patterns in Nova Scotia, Canada. The pilot study for a future national survey, this work has the potential to provide badly needed benchmark data to track trends.

The formidable task of understanding and deconstructing the complex everyday information lives of children and young adults resonates in the chapters discussed above. This collection also includes four chapters that address the information seeking of youth in their role as students. Interestingly, all reflect a continuing interest in students’ use of electronic, online, and digital resources.

Dhillon focuses on an older cohort, third-year undergraduates in the United Kingdom studying leisure, tourism, and adventure. Unlike much of the work related to online resources and online searching, in addition to identifying use patterns, Dhillon’s survey explored how students behaved and felt while searching databases. This single case study of a particular group at a particular institution serves as a fine model for other practicing academic librarians wishing to understand and support student information-seeking behavior in their own programs.

While study after study indicates that students seldom use libraries when seeking information, Valenza’s chapter indicates that the students in at least one high school do use their high school’s virtual library. Through focus group interviews the students indicated they frequently used the school library website for academic research, appreciated having online access to resources and tools, had greater success with the school’s virtual library than with available commercial tools, and rec-
ognized the website as acting like a quality filter to help them find appropriate information they could trust. Further, excerpts from the focus group interview transcripts construct a picture of the students that is radically different from that of the more prevalent image of an inept, detached, and information-illiterate searcher. The participants were aware of many information sources, spoke about the varying authority and usefulness of the tools, and were self-reflective about their own abilities in information searching and seeking. This is a feel good study—we see the school library as being successful and students as active, self-reflective information seekers—which reintroduces a positive perspective to the research agenda needed to improve school library services and students’ experiences of them as information seekers.

Silverstein uses a systematic and innovative approach to study the use of what she refers to as traditional children’s digital reference services (TCDR) services. She starts with the premise that while children use such services, the services themselves typically are characterized by child-oriented content delivered through platforms developed for adults. Through a literature review Silverstein develops a list of “assumptions” about children’s use of TCDR services, which she then tests through an analysis of 297 questions submitted to a TCDR called “Ask a Scientist or Engineer.” Some of the assumptions (e.g., very young children use TCDR services less) were supported by Silverstein’s data, while others were not (e.g., children tend to ask broad rather than specific questions). More important, the author identified trends that were not anticipated through her examination of earlier literature (e.g., duplicate questions, which suggest that children experienced difficulty or confusion in using the TCDR service) and that merit further exploration. Silverstein’s chapter concludes with a call for a theoretically informed research agenda centered upon the information behavior of children themselves to inform the design and evaluation of CDR services.

Andrew Large and his team of researchers from McGill University in Montreal appear to have done just what Silverstein has suggested. They have been working on a multiyear, multistage project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada on the design and evaluation of web portals for use by elementary school students seeking information to support class projects. This chapter pro-
vides a synthesis of this work and is likely to become one of the landmark publications associated with this project.

A final chapter by Andrew Shenton falls neither within the framework of youth everyday life or school information seeking, but rather is holistic in its approach. Addressing information-seeking failures experienced by young people four through eighteen years of age, it might be appropriately subtitled “Close encounters with information sources.” Focus groups and individual interviews identified five categories of underlying factors associated with failures: “need/source mismatch, knowledge deficiency, skill shortcomings, psychological barriers, and social unease and inhibitions.” Shenton carefully points out that information-seeking failure is not always associated with deficiencies in children and young adults and provides implications and suggestions for practice in terms of collections and information literacy education.

Overall analysis of all the contributed chapters yields some interesting trends. Youth information behavior researchers, with only three of the ten chapters referencing child or adolescent developmental theory, appear to still not be seriously attending to the intrinsic developmentally different characteristics of young people in either the design or discussion and interpretation of studies. This is unfortunate, as the examples provided by Hughes-Hassell, Large et al., and Silverstein demonstrate that developmental theory can provide powerful tools for research design, data analysis, theory building, and simply understanding what one is observing. Only half of the studies used other theory (from either within or outside of library and information science) to frame and inform their work. This rate is lower than that for information behavior research in general (58.9 percent) as reported by McKechnie, Pettigrew, and Joyce (2001). However, in three of the chapters, new empirically based theories are proposed. Mehra and Braquet use grounded theory to develop a model of information seeking during queer youth coming-out experiences. Hughes-Hassell and Agosto derive a typology of teens’ preferred everyday life information sources. Large et al. describe the development of a new “Bonded Design Model” of technology design, arising from over three years of multi-method fieldwork with elementary school children. It may be argued that the “Bonded Design Model” is the first to adequately describe the process in terms of children and has the potential for application to some contexts involving adults as well.
Chelton and Cool’s second book on youth information-seeking behavior is as pleasing and useful as the prior volume in terms of its diversity. The contributed chapters are almost equally divided between the everyday life and school information-seeking contexts, reflecting an increasing interest in the full dimensions of children’s and young people’s lives. While the information worlds of teenagers were addressed in the most chapters (eight of ten, six exclusively), preschoolers (two of ten chapters), children (four of six chapters, two exclusively) and older youth (one chapter) have also been represented. Methods used across the reports of empirical research (nine of the ten chapters) include surveys, focus groups, interviews, and activity and question log analysis, with one-third of the studies using a multimethod approach and an overwhelming majority (seven of nine) choosing qualitative approaches. Clearly the exploration of youth information-seeking behavior is continuing to become methodologically richer. Contributing authors come from diverse backgrounds and include academics, students, and practitioners from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

I will not comment on Anthony Bernier’s chapter. His compelling call to develop a new research agenda for youth information-seeking research that puts the “joy” back into this work and encourages us all to think of children and young adults in different ways stands on its own and informs our responses to and understanding of the work that follows.

REFERENCES


Scholarly research on youth information-seeking behaviors through the 1980s emerged largely from teacher and librarian concerns with discrete student research and retrieval skills. Since the 1990s, researchers have sought to correct what has been viewed as that literature’s under-theorized approach to issues of cognitive development and its various relationships to information behaviors and learning. In other words, the research agenda shifted from examining what young people knew and learned, to how they learned.¹

This shift into issues of cognitive development and its relationship to information behaviors has yielded many and important insights into the ways young people gain bibliographic skills. Among these findings emerged an enhanced understanding that young people learn and acquire bibliographic skills differently from adults and that their instructors must take these differences more seriously.² We also learned that pedagogy itself must become more pliable, flexible, and take social factors into account, such as the ways in which student self-confidence contributes to higher functioning on discrete tasks like composing
search statements. Among the more rich and promising innovations in this work is the pressing of ethnographic research methods into the service of pursuing what young people themselves actually do and say about how they learn.

As this concentration on cognitive development matured, however, it naturally also began to reveal many important gaps in our understanding of how young people seek and behave with information. First, young people are reduced to rather one-dimensional student beings, for instance. Second, especially at odds with adolescents’ developmental needs, they are nearly always constructed as individual information seekers. Third, they are nearly always portrayed as lacking and deficient. Finally, given this scholarly backdrop of constructing or imagining young people as individual students with deficient skills is the construction of young people merely as information consumers.

At base, however, the current research agenda would be well served by dramatically expanding the scope of what counts as information gathering, of literacy tasks, and what mental labor in general qualifies as “information behavior.” We need to begin asking the “why questions” about youth information-seeking behaviors and taking young people more on their own terms than exclusively on terms dictated to them.

CURRENT RESEARCH

What becomes immediately apparent in reviewing recent research on youth information-seeking behaviors is the nearly ubiquitous conflation of all “youth” into “student” identities, and nearly all actions reduced to “skills.” Long a research imbalance in many disciplines, this self-imposed limit on the narrowly defined instrumental behaviors, skills, and cognitive development of young-people-as-students in librarianship has impaired the ways in which we conceive of and serve them across the wide spectrum of the library’s service profile. Among the topics more recently illustrating this pattern are concentrations on school discipline—specific information-seeking behavior, issues of school assignment plagiarism and report research skills, student perceptions of information technologies, as well as studies on student Web searching and Boolean search statements.
Introduction

What research considers as worthy information behavior is really the information seeking of students toiling away at curricular goals. While it seems logical, of course, that teachers and school librarians would represent young people as students, this ought not necessarily hold true of examining young people from the public library standpoint. When they do, however, public libraries risk excluding nearly all the complexity young people actually embody as well as contradicting the myriad ways in which young people themselves may want to be identified in the public sphere.

Closely related to a current research agenda reducing complex young people into one-dimensional students is the idea that information seeking is individuated. In an effort to test research model validity, to render findings more “relevant,” to measure skill acquisition against prescribed standards, scholars feel compelled to pluck young people from their often higher-functioning developmental postures as members of small groups and shoehorn them into lonely learning silos. Learning may be an intimate thing, but it does not always take place alone. This, too, is a function of constructing young-people-as-students. On the other hand, were we to investigate the information-seeking behavior of a youth group planning to raise money by hosting a neighborhood car-wash, one wonders how our perceptions of their behaviors would change. What might researchers find by examining the hierarchical and relationship recognition capacities, the strategizing and analytical skills, the multivariable problem solving exhibited by three fourteen-year-old boys in the participatory cognitive workout called computer gaming?

In addition to constructing nearly all young people as lone academic agents, much of the research on information-seeking behavior engages a rhetoric that, perhaps inadvertently, portrays young people in a decidedly negative light. In a 2002 study, students are characterized as “novice searchers” lacking in the ability “to form effective search plans and queries,” or to “cope with searching obstacles,” or “assess, refine and select results and synthesize data.” Young people are commonly referred to as “copying” from one another, as “cheating” or “plagiarizing,” when evidence goes wanting that they actually understand these often difficult-to-define behaviors, whether or not they know that these practices are inappropriate, or even how to tell the difference between collaborative learning and “cheating.” Further, while “copying” cer-
tainly can be an academic miscue, adolescents are widely known to work more effectively in successfully guided collaborative efforts. Public librarians will immediately recognize that young adults much prefer using the library in small groups. Librarians even increase bibliographic instruction efficiency when they use collaborative pedagogical models. That common bibliographic pedagogy itself, however, may lag behind our understanding and incorporation of youth’s developmental needs is seldom factored into the research design.

Likewise problematic is how young people are widely viewed in the research literature as “having difficulty” learning information-seeking techniques or are “challenged” by certain technical interfaces. It is usually their low skill levels, their short attention spans, lack of systematic planning, superficial browsing, inabilities to manage and reduce large volumes of information, difficulties in making relevance and authority judgments, and other inabilities and skill deficits that researchers identify as preventing or retarding an otherwise attained maximum efficiency in navigating search syntax execution.

Rarely does the research examine the field for the ground. Rarely cited, for instance, is software deploying highly technical language or unforgiving interfaces that render it not-yet-ready for serving its nominal customers. Hardly mentioned, identified, or evaluated are skill standards tailored to economic, demographic, linguistic, cultural, or ability-specific youth audiences. One interface apparently must fit all. And, considering that the content being taught may not capture the intrinsic interest of the young people involved, seldom do we read a study measuring information topics selected or nominated by young people themselves. And where is the research stream evaluating and recalibrating the skills, lessons, and pedagogies of school librarians and instructors, to say nothing of public librarians?

Some researchers actively caution against making searching simpler and more transparent, risking that young people might be “handed information on a plate.” No advanced features for you! “No pain, no gain,” one supposes. A contrary argument would justifiably posit that that is precisely what we should be doing.

In both the scholarly literature, as well as in practitioners’ journals, one generally does not need to look too far to find varying degrees of subtle denigration of the research subjects themselves. Young people
are characterized as “impatient” and “unprepared,” and nearly always just an act or two away from violating behavioral expectations.

Current research on information-seeking behaviors of young people is really less about “information seeking” than it is about constructing youth as library or database or Web users and about improving student achievement.

In all of this resides a curious tension. We lean toward treating young people as both entitled to our serious concerns for their information-seeking needs while at the same time constructing them as teetering on the precipice of their own failings: facing a desperate future without bibliographic skills.

Finally, in constructing young research subjects as individual information consumers, current scholarship eclipses any view that young people are increasingly producers of information as well. The nation is currently at perhaps only the beginning of a revolution in youth-produced media. In nearly every possible form, young people are individually and collectively growing their own sets of “information vocal chords” in various forms of print media, online, and in broadcast media as well. Each of these expressions requires high levels of information and literacy skills.

Aside from our need to eliminate denigrating, if perhaps only rhetorical slippages, from our scholarship, perhaps a more beneficial way to consider our young subjects would be to engage a more youth-centric approach. Rather than constructing them as impatient, we might alternatively view them as demanding. Rather than view them as unprepared or as needing instruction in this software application or that, we might view them as customers requiring better design from engineers and information managers. Rather than viewing young people as merely gatherers of information we can also begin to view them as entitled agents of literary production. And we might begin to do all this by opening up the domains of youth experience from which we draw our research questions.

NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR RESEARCH

Among the most obvious possibilities for a new research direction lies in balancing the vast majority of scholarship currently devoted to chil-
dren with more concentrated emphasis on adolescents. While researchers have valiantly attempted to stretch their theoretical formulations across wide boundaries, the results frequently stretch beyond where we know it should go, beyond developmentally significant frontiers. It may be true, for instance, that database software needs to provide better skill-appropriate search options to allow for children’s budding linguistic skills. But the array of options required to better facilitate the searching of a sixteen-year-old girl just learning English will differ substantially. In scenarios like this, however, the literature is silent. Given the current demographic explosion of adolescent-age youth, both native born and those new to the United States, this long-established and inequitable focus on children seems a bit puzzling.

The barriers young people find to information seeking likewise differs by age. Where children are still learning to manipulate basic cognitive categories, young adults confront far more complex barriers to information. As Ross J. Todd and Susan Edwards point out in a recently published article on adolescent information seeking about drug use, libraries were not viewed as effective resources for common, “real-life” information. And school libraries, they explain, were “perceived as a mechanism for control, a source of only socially sanctioned material.”

We need to test, validate, and feather out the complexities of these adolescent perceptions before we can address them.

But Todd and Edwards introduce an important and exciting new vista for young adult literacy-behaviors research: “daily life” and other “life concerns.” Their study of teenage girls and drug usage information reveals large gaps in our prevailing research agenda. They recognize that adolescents were “not passive, robot-like processors of information” but “active creators of new knowledge, manipulating information selectively, intentionally, and creatively to build opinions, viewpoints, arguments, explanations, and to change and/or verify facts.” This is literacy capacity at some of its highest levels. On the other hand, their work begins to shed light on how social contexts drive a good deal of adolescent information behavior. Their study shows, for instance: “that no matter how compelling or authoritative information might be in the minds of others, no matter how useful someone else might think the information is, these qualities do not guarantee its receptivity and utilization.”

So, like it or not, all adolescent literacy acts come embedded
in social contexts. All literacy is local. And research ignores this critical developmental fact at the risk of our own efficacy.

Todd and Edwards begin to pry open a way for future research. Daily life for a large percentage of American youth, however, extends far beyond information about illicit activities. It also includes work and the information behaviors connected to it. As sociologist Stuart Tannock points out, “texts are ubiquitous in the youth workplace.” Tannock’s study highlights the growing information demands on teenage grocery store bagging clerks. Like so many entry-level occupations to which teenager labor is confined, the workplace requires the management of a “remarkable proliferation of texts.” Bidders contend with work schedules and time sheets; accessing, completing, and maintaining forms and documents; print and online store inventory records; work-order databases; tracking advertising promotions (such as discount coupons); training and performance review documents; and ever-increasing “customer service scripts.” All of these tasks constitute literacy behaviors.

Clara M. Chu’s work on the often weighty family responsibilities of immigrant children also sheds light on everyday information-seeking behaviors, revealing another arena thick with research potential on what counts as “literacy.” Chu documents a long list of important information-based responsibilities assumed by immigrant children “mediators,” young people who must translate, research, negotiate, and facilitate the demands of a new culture for their elders. Among these responsibilities are finding and completing forms for immigration and tax requirements; locating bureaus, offices, and services; researching and translating information about schools and communicating with landlords, doctors, home repair specialists, and mechanics; writing letters and paying bills; and many other tasks. All of these literacy behaviors cross the boundaries of curricular support, but few of them register on the current research agenda.

JOY AND DAILY LITERACY

Expanding beyond the boundaries of bibliographic skills for curricular support, beyond the examination of common information behaviors of young adults, however, there remains much more to be studied. Young people read, seek, use, transfer, and interpret information well beyond
the boundaries of life’s “concerns” as well. Not all of their literacies help solve “problems” or make a serious decision. In other words, they also seek joy.

Somewhat outside the perimeter of the community of academic research, comes the Pew Internet and American Life Project study that pushes further into the “daily life” of young people. Along the way, however, it also helps reorder how young adults are constructed as research subjects as well. The Pew’s study views young people as leaders in new and proliferating online information behaviors, not mere students lacking skills. Responding to its more youth-friendly accessibility, 87 percent of U.S. teenagers report using the Internet, up 14 percent from Pew’s previous study in 2000. Online computer gaming has grown 52 percent since 2000. Online teen news gathering has climbed to 76 percent of U.S. teens surveyed, up 38 percent since 2000. Without reference to school or “problems,” teens reportedly increased their access to health information (47 percent during the same period). And teens also now nearly rival adults in seeking digital religious and spiritual material (26 percent of teens versus 30 percent of adults). The Pew study moreover contextualizes a broad array of teen/tech overlap: 84 percent report owning at least one “media device,” such as a laptop, cell phone, or a PDA (personal digital assistant)—nearly half own two or more such devices.

In the complex daily world of young adults, capacities for adaptability are outstripping the jokes told at their expense about e-mail addictions, too. Teens now consider e-mail “something you use to talk to ‘old people.’” Instead, so-called instant messaging (IM) has rocketed to the top of their technical world. Young adults report using IM for social purposes, for communicating with parents, as well as for talking to friends, even “about homework assignments.” In IM, this “multi-channel space of personal expression” contains a rich information gathering and sharing mélange of website links, photos, music, video, text, games, news, and more. One Pew subject, a high school girl, narrates the point nicely: “I know I rely a lot more on the internet for everyday stuff—looking up things that you know, I would have had to call a couple of people to find out. . . . I know I rely on the internet a lot more as I’ve gotten older.”

Little of the joy young people exhibit in this environment connects to curricular standards and search-strategy metrics. Yet, like the school
halway between third and fourth periods, the excitement manifested in young peoples’ literacy responses is palpable.

Are they by mere chance better at searching for what they want using these devices, as opposed to our databases, indexes, and shelved collections, or are these devices (driven as they are largely by market forces) simply better and more interestingly designed for their intended customers? In other words, why do they so quickly adapt and thrive with some tools and not others? Why do they so successfully engage some literacy acts over others?

Also, where the research literature finds young people as impatient and lacking in analytical skills, the Pew study finds young people’s literacy and communications skill sets sophisticated and strategically efficient. In the technical and information atmospheres of young people, in the domains over which they exhibit the greatest control, teenagers analytically select, modify, collect, and discard online identities. They cunningly open and close personal access, as illustrated by this young woman:

I can have my away message up, but I can still talk to people and my away message won’t go down. So if I don’t want to talk to somebody, I just put up [that] away message and talk to the people that I want to and the other people I can avoid.20

Teenagers also carefully monitor social behavior as well as critically evaluate the tools and skills that best fit their discrete and fluid literacy demands. They quickly determine, for instance, when it is more advantageous to send a text message rather than placing a cell phone call or engaging IM. Their quick mental labor considers timing, purpose, cost, amount of information required, and degrees of privacy desired, among other factors. In many ways they have become more facile at deploying these skills than adults. And unlike constructions of young people found in the research literature, this Pew study portrays young adults as sophisticated consumers as well:

I think text messaging is still too new. It’s too expensive and it doesn’t come with enough programs. And it’s not compatible enough between different kinds of cell phones and stuff for it to work as well as instant messaging yet. Maybe it will be someday, but right now it’s not worth it.21
Many other daily forms of adolescent literacy abound, and nearly all of them fall outside of the current research agenda on young adults. Many are not even connected to technology. “I probably read magazines most often,” wrote one young adult public library survey taker, “because you don’t have to start on a certain page for reading. You can choose what you do and don’t want to read.”

One of the valid criticisms of the Pew study is that it selected young people from more affluent and mainstream circumstances. But young people considered more on the “margins” of society also exhibit literacy skills in their own daily experiences, and few of those connect to achieving curricular goals. Elizabeth Birr Moje’s standout scholarship with young people reflects, for instance, how they synthesize meaning from a variety of creative forms in their literacy enactments. In one interview with a young women named “Chile,” Moje noted that Chile recounted stories from novels and movies that she had seen describing them all in exacting detail . . . providing me with seven pages of interview transcript that described the movie, Bound by Honor . . . [and] scenes from Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L. A., a novel. Chile was obviously a reader of both traditional print forms and many other forms of representations in the world.

Moreover, Moje is quick to point out that “virtually all of these literacy practices occurred outside of school.”

Indeed, the joy young people seek through their literacy enactments comes much less through keyboards, search boxes, and hardcover fiction, than it does through satisfying their real-world needs to develop and maintain relationships and to make their own meanings out of a complicated world.

In his outstanding ethnography of a community of young people in a small northern California town, architect Herb Childress documented one such magical moment in which youth deploy their own definitions of the literacy they had acquired, an instance in which they came together to enlist literacy in the very shape and substance of their relationships. The passage bares quoting at length:
Introduction

Irene and Mara and I left school on a Wednesday and stopped at Julian’s house at about 3:30. We’d intended to drop off his script for our upcoming performance and just take off; but we went in and sat down for a minute, and that became ten minutes, and that became five hours. And during that five hours, we discussed which soliloquy from Hamlet was our favorite. All three of them were actually passionate about their choices, interrupting one another to finish a passage in unison, as thought discussing a favorite song from the radio. We talked about thirty or forty movies, both current and historical; and about another dozen or so books; and about going out dancing at the Run Club in Port City; and about possible careers; and why Julian was confused about whether or not to keep on going toward being an elementary school teacher. We talked about friends and lovers; talked about why it’s so hard to have a really affectionate relationship between men; talked about the differences between friends and best friends. We talked about ideal educations and how we aren’t really close to them yet. In short...we had a five-hour-long, erudite, skilled conversation; the sort of wide-ranging and fearless talk that can only occur among people who trust one another, in settings not broken by someone else’s schedule, surrounded by visible proof of aspirations and desires.

This utopian scene brings information and literacy together in a youth community context, a local context. Young people defining for themselves (that is to say constructing themselves) in terms of how they will seek, define, and deploy their synthesized literacies. Those terms include integrating personal experiences, deepening relationships with conventional and unconventional texts, blending them toward visions of their own futures, all mixed together in an atmosphere of trust, community, and joy. For young people at least, there are local literacies of joy.

YOUNG PEOPLE AS LITERACY PRODUCERS

Finally, in addition to the research and scholarship constructing young people as solitary skill-lacking students, recent work also imagines their information-seeking skills and literacies exclusively within the context of information consumption. In other words, young people’s contribution to their own literacy experiences consists largely of consuming the instructional endeavors of teachers illuminating dazzling new databases or buying new digital communications products. Youth literacy has
worn the face of a consumer. Increasingly however, they produce their
own.

Young people themselves have begun to bend and twist new and ever
cheaper communications and information technologies toward develop-
ing literary vocal chords of their own. I call the manifestations of these
new literary vocal chords “fugitive materials” that engage “subver-
sive” literacies. Perhaps needless to say, these otherwise pejorative
terms refer to how our institutions and research agendas have treated
them early on, rather than how young people themselves characterize
them.

Fugitive literature is produced by and delivered to the youth market
not in huge, industrywide jobber tonnage, but in relatively small lots,
one-time printings, non-sequential, non-serial productions. Frequently
this is the kind of stuff designed to fly below the radar of the official
mediators of “true,” “legitimate,” and “profitable” literature.

The otherwise professional term for much of this body of work is
“ephemera,” a polite synonym for “not valuable.” And not without
some practical reasoning. These fugitive materials present researchers
and librarian allies of young people alike unique challenges with
respect to institutional embrace. Cataloging such ad hoc publications,
for instance, or shelving and providing access to these “fugitive” mate-
rials threaten to drive librarians to distraction. Even subscribing to or
collecting these acts of fugitive or subversive literacy challenge us in
unusual ways. As important and culturally relevant as these materials
have become to young readers and writers, however, few of our institu-
tions or our research models, appear ready to respond to them.

Nevertheless, fugitive productions embody a vast and rapidly grow-
ing landscape of young adult–produced literacy. In the San Francisco
Bay Area, to highlight just one growing media empire of young adults,
resides the Pacific News Service’s “Youth Communications Team”
(YCT), promoting no less than seven market-viable formats. These for-
mats range from hefty weekly literary newspapers containing the origi-
nal and creative content of incarcerated youth (The Beat Within), to
online collaborations of young poets and spoken-word artists (Poetry
Television). Other YCT formats include quarterly zines produced by
Bay Area young workers, artists, and activists; one-off resource publi-
cations; and websites featuring practical information, personal stories,
and art “by America’s nomadic homeless youth population (Road-
dawgz”); as well as a full-grown glossy-covered regional magazine circulating over twenty-five thousand copies monthly (YO! Youth Outlook).

And there are of course other non-YCT-affiliated youth-produced publications from the Bay Area. Oakland’s NexGeneration publishes quarterly on local and national news, profiles, and editorials. It’s motto: “Da magazine of truth from da youth.” The Bay Area is also home to, among other growing institutions, the Youth Media Council (YMC). YMC is a media watchdog outlet dedicated to “amplifying the public voice of marginalized youth and their communities.” In 2002 YMC published an essential and blistering media critique in “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage.”

Of course, the Bay Area does not hold a monopoly on burgeoning youth-produced media. Locally produced school newspapers, for instance, are published from one end of the nation to the other. New Expression has published monthly from Chicago since 1977. LAYouth in Los Angeles, rising from the ashes of the 1992 civil disturbances, publishes young journalists and writers monthly during the school year. The magazine represent publishes the writing exclusively of New York’s foster care youth.

And youth-produced radio is itself flowering. Witness the Peabody Award–winning Youth Radio, from Berkeley. Youth Radio’s journalism and editorials are syndicated across the country on National Public Radio. The Blunt Youth Radio Project comes from youth in Portland. Radio Diaries comes from New York. Voices of Youth broadcasts from Austin. RadioArte broadcasts live performance, news, local features, and music bilingually from Chicago. And this is not to mention numerous television programs produced throughout the nation in large and small cities alike informed by and/or entirely brought to air by young people.

These youth-produced formats are attracting the attention not only of their young audiences and the institutional supporters who help launch them, but increasingly of mass market advertisers, educators, and service organizations as well. As YCT says themselves, “communication enables America’s diverse youth cultures to come of age and find their place in society at large. They are the voices and stories that will shape the future, and they will not be ignored.” Well, perhaps they reveal a bit of unwarranted youthful optimism on that last point. Generally
speaking, our research agendas and collections holdings have indeed ignored them.

All of these formats, from newspapers through broadcast media, require not only high-level organizational skills and sophisticated resources management, but a wide and deep array of literacy capacities, including research and information seeking. Few of them, however, are executed by youth-as-students. None of them view youth literacy merely as a consumptive endeavor. And none of them are brought to audiences by lone rangers.

**SUMMARY**

As with the ever-increasing use of new communications devices, fugitive literacy exhibits new manifestations of youth vocal chords. Youth communication is coming alive during our current technical age, defined by its prevailing features: instantaneity, temporariness, portability, flexibility, and high customization. Neither do new communications devices nor fugitive literacies rely completely on national demographic or marketing trends. They rely instead on the up-close neighborhood, the local concerns of students at XYZ High School, on particular music affinity groups, around specific and youth-defined lifestyle identities and youth culture rituals. For so many young people, literacy is a highly local affair. On the other hand, the rather sinister coinage of “fugitive” accurately implies the negative attitude with which our research and institutions currently approach these emerging trends in young adult information seeking, literacy, and culture.

Youth literacies, in all their manifestations, are quickly becoming an ever more complex and fantastically exciting landscape. And if we are responsive to these changes, at least more responsive than we’ve been in the past, we can look forward to enjoying better and richer relationships with young people than we have ever had before.

Focusing on these emergent, fugitive, and subversive literacies is where at least some of our future research should go. But in so doing, we should focus on the “why” questions about young adult literacies. Why do so many boys, for instance, read so deeply about Darth Vader? Why is youth journalism (in all its forms) exploding? Why are Chicano youth drawn to Old English texts? From there we can pick up the chal-
lenge as information professionals to link those interests, or, as Frances Jacobson Harris recently put it, “merge bridging functions” at the crossroads of information and literacy in its many forms and flows. In this context, literacy is not an end in itself, and it does not reduce young people to one-dimensional utilitarian functionaries.

At least part of the answer to why boys seek Darth Vader, why young journalists flourish, and why Old English is popular is because that is how many young people find joy and meaning in their own definitions of literacy. Building on those reasons and practices should be as important to us as improving narrowly defined database retrieval results in the service of curricular goals.

NOTES


5. As long ago as 1978, Mary K. Chelton was calling for research on “non-school-related motivation factors” in public library use. It seems as though the introduction of information technology delayed the school bell from ringing for more than a quarter century. Cited in M. L. Shontz, “Selected Research Related to Children’s and Young Adult Services in Public Libraries,” Top of the News 38, no. 2 (1982): 125–42.

6. In her broad and synthetic treatment of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), school librarian Frances Jacobson Harris advocates for combining, rather than resisting, the ways in which young people are rapidly adapting information technologies for social purposes. Yet her purpose is nevertheless to


9. Only one recent study advocates a partnership between teachers and students in both the learning and teaching of new information resources. Watson, “If You Don’t Have It,” 176–77.


24. Moje, “All the Stories That We Have,” 39 (emphasis in text).

