BY / WITH / FOR YOUTH
INSPIRING NEXT GEN PUBLIC MEDIA AUDIENCES

Gen Z in the Room

Making Public Media By and With Youth for the Future

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When the Joan Ganz Cooney Center launched Next Gen Public Media in January 2020, we found ourselves at the confluence of several important developments. We saw an exciting wave of interactive, participatory media that was connecting young people and amplifying the voices of a new generation; a growing sentiment that while they were inundated with an endless stream of content, young people were underserved by the media they consumed every day; and a desire within the public media community to offer young people a meaningful alternative that might address some of their unmet media needs. (And we didn't know a global pandemic was around the corner, making the accessibility of virtual content essential!)

Thanks to generous support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Cooney Center has been exploring how young people use media in their daily lives, and how they understand and think about public media. We have also convened stakeholders from across the public media community to learn more about their aspirations and goals for engaging young audiences. And we have been working to share these insights with our public media colleagues to help shape strategic priorities that can guide stations toward a successful future.

In 2021, we published *The Missing Middle: Reimagining a Future for Tweens, Teens, and Public Media* to explore young people's media practices and interests as well as their hopes for the future. While stopping short of offering a blueprint for action, the report aimed to orient the field to today's tween and teen audiences and suggested a range of possible directions to consider, including some that would be experimental for public media.

Our next step has been to gain a better understanding of the public media landscape itself—including how tweens and teens are already actively collaborating with public media professionals in ways that meaningfully include their voices and perspectives in content and production. *Gen Z in the Room* is designed as a companion to *The Missing Middle* by centering the stories of youth alumni and leaders of youth-facing programs offered by public media stations and their partners.

We see youth-oriented work as potentially transformational for stations, enabling them to innovate across internal departments, experiment with new digital strategies, create new and engaging content, bring diverse voices into newsrooms and production departments, and demonstrate how media created with young people can resonate with general audiences.

Through our research and collaboration with stations, we have learned about the public media system's past and present impact, and we have considered its potential for the future. Our efforts to better understand the landscape have included a systemwide station survey about youth programming, support for a growing peer learning community of public media professionals, an accelerator to encourage stations to pilot new programs, and targeted outreach to program staff across the field.

On behalf of the Cooney Center team, we are pleased to share this new report about how public media stations across the country have been collaborating with young people. We believe it brings to life the strengths that come with engaging young people in public media and highlights how stations might continue to build from their strong foundation with children as they grow into adults.

We are grateful to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for its support throughout this project and honored to have made such rich connections with colleagues in the public media system.

Michael Preston
Executive Director
Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop

Gen Z in the Room summarizes insights from 30 in-depth interviews with stakeholders involved in public media youth projects. The projects represent public media organizations of various sizes from across the country, serving middle school- or high school-aged youth, and centering youth as part of their station offerings. Interviewees included professionals within the stations and young adults who participated in station projects when they were younger.

The report documents what public media stations have learned from these youth projects. By looking at the various ways participants have thought about, approached, and experimented with youth engagement, the public media system can develop more thoughtful strategies for serving and providing a platform for this missing middle audience.

The research reveals four project approaches that align well with broader station strategies. Youth projects may:

+ **provide educational resources and programs** to youth and/or their teachers;
+ **feature stories and perspectives** from young people for a general audience;
+ **learn from youth** about changes in the cultural and media landscape; and/or
+ **mentor and train young people** in order to cultivate a **diverse pipeline** of public media professionals.

Insights

Youth projects can catalyze station transformation to reach new audiences

Project leads emphasized the digital-first transformation underway across the system. Youth initiatives, particularly those aligned with station priorities, can support innovation and lead to new understanding about relevance for younger audiences engaging on digital platforms.

Youth perspectives prompt valuable intergenerational dialogue

Youth projects amplify young voices in wide-ranging ways, from including youth as sources to engaging them in co-production. Widely distributed content from these projects forges intergenerational discussion of complex issues.

Youth projects can help build a diverse pipeline of public media professionals

Inviting young people into the station serves critical goals related to workforce diversity and inclusion. Education and community engagement programs that recruit diverse young people and equip them with technology, skills, and mentorship yield young professionals that better reflect the full community.

Youth bring important insights about platform innovations and digital reach

For Gen Z, the lines between media content, the internet, and social media are blurred. Social media is not just a marketing tool; it's a space for original content creation and authentic engagement. While it can be challenging to produce content in the condensed formats common in social media, there is an opportunity for public media to offer high-quality content that is responsive to trending issues.

Youth desire for authenticity may challenge station standards and norms

For Gen Z, relevance often hinges on whether content is deemed authentic. This plays out in various ways, including expectations about the hosts of shows, various styles of humor, and transparency in the creation process. The bar for adult media producers to achieve relevance for this audience is notoriously high and often results in disconnects when youth are not involved in the process. There can be ethical tensions in how newsrooms balance journalistic standards with what young people deem authentic.

Youth participants value broadcast media because of its legitimacy and reach

The interviews revealed a fundamental challenge facing public media as it transitions to digital distribution: even as youth are not consumers of broadcast media themselves, it continues to hold sway as a venue for youth projects because it enables reach that is difficult to achieve consistently through digital distribution. Content that is produced with youth rarely reaches wide audiences on digital platforms.

How stations position youth work affects funding potential

Nearly every project lead described challenges related to securing or maintaining funding. Stations should consider whether and under what conditions they would commit operating funds. This will look different for stations with youth projects that generate high-quality content reaching many viewers or listeners, compared to those focused on youth education.

Recommendations

As stations move forward in their work with youth, we offer four key recommendations:

+ Youth project goals should align with core station institutional needs, and station leadership should embrace and communicate the role of youth projects in advancing strategic direction to both internal and external stakeholders..
+ Stations should strengthen their capacity to recognize stories that need a youth angle and train staff to include young people's voices and experiences.
+ The public media system should experiment and share light-touch, sustainable ways to involve youth and center their perspectives in station work.
+ Stations should look to youth to help identify opportunities to make public media more relevant to younger audiences.

Public media has a long history of successfully engaging young children and adults, but it often faces challenges meeting the needs of tweens and teens. With limited infrastructure and staff resources, many stations struggle to prioritize projects that involve or are meant for young people. This research seeks to illuminate the lessons learned from a selection of pioneering projects from across the public media system in an effort to inform future work with tweens and teens.

As public media stakeholders increasingly invest in various forms of youth-adult collaboration, it is important to reflect on the nature of the work that will be done with youth. To start, what is the audience for media created by or with youth? Related to this is the question of youth agency: how do intentions related to end products inform the degree to which adult facilitation and scaffolding will be needed for youth project work? What approaches to youth-adult collaboration are most sustainable? What enables youth-adult collaboration to become institutionalized and central to station strategy? How do public media's offerings or impact change when young people are involved, and what sorts of projects should be prioritized for youth involvement?

This report documents what stations have learned from starting, leading, and sustaining youth projects. It offers insights, gathered from both project leads and youth project alumni, of ways public media might expand its offerings by, with, and for young people. It also attempts to center youth perspective in the development of station strategy, toward serving communities with trustworthy content, programs, and services.

While we prioritized longer-running projects in our interview sample, it was notable, in light of widespread post-pandemic staffing changes, that several project leads had been at their stations for 10 years or more. Without large investments in production, early generations of youth-centric projects often depended on one or two champions at a station to secure funding and establish the infrastructure to support youth involvement. Early projects often hinged on the passion and commitment of individuals.

One specific challenge named by some was the loss of system-wide infrastructure and support that resulted from PBS KIDS's decision to focus on younger children:

> *[Since PBS decided] to double down on 8 and under...[that] is what led to the whole system no longer creating content for tweens and teens. There is no PBS money coming in, no RFPs, no place to put it in the schedule, etc. So it was sort of a fait accompli: once they said "no," all the "for" content went away. So our thought was: "we're public media. We can't not serve an audience. It doesn't work that way.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Without the equivalent infrastructure and production dollars for tween and teen station work, youth-produced and youth-involved media have become valued as a way of amplifying a more diverse array of voices from the community.

As the ecosystem of public media stations doing youth-centric work across the country grows, these early champions provide inspiration to others looking to expand station engagement with tweens and teens. By looking at the various ways they have thought

about, approached, and experimented with youth initiatives, the public media system can develop more thoughtful strategies for centering, serving, and featuring this missing middle audience.

Throughout this report, we refer to station professionals we interviewed as **project leads**. This includes people running education media programs that work directly with young people or create resources for their schools, reporters platforming young people in their stories, and producers inviting young people to collaborate on shows.

The young people referenced in this report are all alumni of station-run education media programs. We refer to them as **youth project alumni**.

Methods Overview

This report is based on in-depth interviews with 30 stakeholders from what we refer to as "youth projects" within public media. These projects, based in nine stations and one production and distribution company, represent a range of public media organizations: radio, television, and joint license stations. They are located in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West. They have a variety of budget and staff sizes, and they have existed anywhere from two years to two decades or more. They serve middle school- or high school-aged youth with educational programs or content and highlight young people's voices for their general audiences. All share a commitment to centering youth as part of their station offerings.

Hour-long interviews were conducted via Zoom with 13 adult staff who are involved in leading youth projects, as well as 17 young adult alumni (ranging in age from 18–30) of these projects.

While the findings from these interviews cannot be considered representative of all public media youth engagement work, the outcomes and lessons for the future of youth projects have been highlighted, with attention to trends, tensions, and opportunities that have been echoed in other aspects of our work.

Prioritizing Goals for Youth Participation

> *You just can't do it* for *this audience. It has to be* with, *even if, ultimately, [it's] a balance of who's editing or who's in the producing seats. You can't do it without this particular audience very, very much involved.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSEE STATION

Across the public media system, stations are considering the return on investment (ROI) for youth-centric work. Whether developing an educational program, amplifying the perspectives of youth for an adult audience, or experimenting with content creation for a tween or teen audience, stations need and benefit from young people's input and viewpoints. This chapter details a range of motivations described by project leads and explains how prioritization of goals shapes project design, changing the resources required and the outcomes that are possible.

Aligning youth work with station priorities strengthens both projects and stations

While the public media system is called to serve the broad community in its mission, the impact of youth work can be hard to quantify. Staff time and other resources must be justified for long-term sustainability. For these reasons, we sought to understand how project leads determine and think about their project goals, how goals align with broader station strategy, and how youth participation may have ripple effects across the station—both intended and serendipitous.

Stations that consider youth engagement as core to their institutional efforts tend to have greater cross-departmental collaboration, which may increase the likelihood that they will fund youth engagement through operating funds. As one project lead articulated, successful youth work is valuable to a station and builds institutional support over time:

> *I think that as we have succeeded in reaching more communities, producing more work, creating career pipelines, having some award-winning stories out there, people have seen that we are really valuable to the station. And I think one of the things that makes our program really unique is the institutional support that we have.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER RADIO STATION

Goal-setting for youth work and the alignment of project goals with one or more station strategies emerged in our interviews as a key theme. Project leads who articulated connections between their work and the challenges and opportunities at the heart of their stations' strategic planning seemed to benefit from broader support and buy-in.

Youth participation in station work may serve multiple goals. How projects prioritize those goals shifts approaches, affects the ways that resources (including staff, space, technology, and time) are allocated, and changes what outcomes can be expected and measured.

Interviewees described four high-level project approaches that align well with broader station strategies. Youth projects may:

+ **provide educational resources and programs** to youth and/or their teachers;
+ **feature stories and perspectives** from young people for a general audience;
+ **learn from youth** about changes in the cultural and media landscape; and/or
+ **mentor and train young people** in order to cultivate a **diverse pipeline** of public media professionals.

These four approaches do not represent all of the possible ways that public media stations currently (or in the future might) understand the value of their tween or teen initiatives. It is worth noting, for instance, that developing content for youth audiences, outside of formal education settings is not a common goal at this point. At present, there are only a handful of examples of public media content specifically intended for tween and teen audiences, distributed on the platforms they use.

Prioritizing goals helps to direct project design

Our interviews, coupled with insights gleaned from the 2022 Next Gen Public Media Peer Learning Community and Accelerator, indicate that clarifying and prioritizing youth project goals early in the planning process helps stations direct their youth project work. Projects may have multiple goals, but being clear about which goals take precedence determines the approach that will be taken and the resources needed during different stages. This applies to planning for staff, physical spaces, technology resources, and partnerships.

We talked with project leads from two radio stations that each have a youth production program. Comparing them shows how prioritizing goals shifts designs. While both stations leverage community partnerships to recruit diverse young people and to support them to take a story idea through to production, they did so in different ways.

The first station prioritizes *incorporating youth voices into widely distributed content*, while the second prioritizes the *learning and experience of youth in the program*. The first program is housed within a content team, while the second is housed in education. The first accepts very few youth participants and matches each with a producer in order to work intensively, while the second involves more youth participants and uses a peer mentorship model, with more limited support from station professionals. The first promises broadcast, while the second publishes pieces primarily on a station website, promoting a select few to air.

SCENARIOS FOR MEASURING SUCCESS

With limited resources, stations must weigh trade-offs between designing youth projects that prioritize serving youth or reaching the broader community:

YOUTH IMPACT: Stations with strong education teams, access to private foundation dollars, and/or established community-based partnerships may choose to develop youth-development programs for youth. Their success should be measured in the impact for youth participants, rather than on production quality or reach of content.

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION AND REACH: For stations that are just starting out and do not have dedicated education team members, focusing on approaches that bring youth voice and perspective into the station's existing work, making current productions more representative of the full community, including youth, may be a preferred approach. Success would be measured by the ways that incorporating young people enhances public media for its general audience.

Youth perspectives prompt valuable intergenerational conversation

Another resonant theme in the interviews was the power and value of using public media's platform to share young people's stories and perspectives in content intended for a station's established audience. Stations do this in different ways. Some focus on including young people as sources in news stories, while others highlight youth achievement in their communities. Others engage in deeper partnership (and even co-production with young people) on youth-generated stories. Across all of these approaches is a shared rationale about the return on investment: young perspectives are needed to forge intergenerational discussions on complex issues, and established audiences appreciate understanding what matters to Gen Z.

One interviewee framed this value as central to the station's mission to reflect the full community:

> *[It's a] necessary investment. If stations want to be representative of the city that they're covering, if stations want to have voices on the air that have not traditionally been on the air, young people are a huge part of that....Being able to hear directly from people is a very unique thing. And I think it adds a lot of value, too, for the listeners, for the content overall.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER RADIO STATION

Youth project alumni reflected on the value of their contributions and the ways that their stories helped to illuminate perspectives and issues that might otherwise be missed. For instance, across multiple interviews, youth alumni proudly noted how broadly distributed content could build audiences' empathy for the personal experiences of young people and of communities of color:

> *When I speak to older generations, a lot of times you get back the, "oh, I didn't know that was offensive, or I didn't know about that. Or how did I not know that was happening in America?" So by bringing the Black experience to a more white audience, I'm letting you know it's happening, I'm telling you, I'm showing you. I'm letting their voices speak and allowing you to hear them, allowing you to understand and see a more inclusive America that we should be pushing towards.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *It is important to have youth voices in broadcast media, even if these voices aren't consuming media, because [listeners] have a lot of power, they can vote, they're in the workforce....It's important to bring awareness to any issue that young people see as important.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Echoing these youth alumni, one project lead said that offering the station's platform to youth was a way of sparking intergenerational conversation about issues that matter to young people:

> *These are the young people that are growing up in our city. These are the things that they care about. These are the things that they're interested in and want to have discussions around. And having that on air is really important.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER RADIO STATION

Another station spoke of the power of highlighting stories of promise and achievement in youth as a way of combating negative stereotypes and assumptions:

> *These are the stories I want people to know, not all the negative stuff kids are doing. And, certainly, sometimes those stories have a struggle that they go through; that is really good to illustrate, because they come out on the other side of it.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER TELEVISION STATION

One project lead reflected on the intergenerational dialogue that arose from the station dedicating a full week to sharing youth perspectives on many of its most significant shows:

> *The more often that they [general audiences] hear youth voices integrated onto the air, the more the producers of this show start hearing this positive feedback about how great it is to hear young people, the more they recognize that it's such a big ROI for not only building the next generation of young people as future audience, but the current audience. The current adult audience really wants to hear those youth perspectives and have more opportunities for intergenerational conversations.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Project leads spoke positively about the value of youth voices platformed to the general audience. At the same time, a number of interviewees referenced how valuing youth voices sometimes led them to examine long-held assumptions about expertise:

> *We have really made diverse voices, including in academia and careers, our primary criteria for who we select as experts. Then young people, themselves, positioning them as experts on issues that affect [them]... Just experiencing something that we're talking about as a topic on the show and have that direct experience. They are experts as much as the Harvard professor.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

> *The best thing we can possibly do is to learn how to more authentically pull in the voices and the perspectives of young people. Because we're so used to talking to experts all the time. It's something we don't know how to do right now. In talking to young people, what they're saying is that we're just getting them wrong over and over and over again. And that if we, as a system, want to solve for something for that age group—young adults, teens, and young adults—that is something that we could do that would be significant, potentially.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

QUESTIONS ABOUT PLATFORMING YOUTH VOICE FOR FUTURE WORK:

+ What kinds of public media projects most benefit from youth involvement?
+ What sorts of stories and reporting look fundamentally different when and because young people are participants in their creation?
+ How can stations lift up young people's expertise authentically, respectfully, and appropriately?
+ How does adding youth voice inspire financial support and sustainability?

"Media literacy" anchors many youth education programs

More than half of interviewees (and all interviewees who are situated in education departments) spoke of some form of media literacy education as a cornerstone of their work. According to the National Association of Media Literacy (NAMLE), media literacy is the "ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication." In other words, it includes a broad suite of decoding and creative skills, including making sense of media messages, thinking critically about their intention and veracity, and conveying them with different technologies. News literacy—with its focus on verifying information—and journalism training that includes production and editing processes are niches within media literacy that are present in the educational offerings of many stations.

Stations that focus on media literacy tend to engage young people either directly, through youth-development programs, or indirectly, through the creation of educational resources for teachers. These resources may take the form of learning media, educator professional development, field trips to stations, and station-supported media programs within schools.

While stations may provide educational resources on a wide range of media literacy topics, teaching students to critically evaluate information was an animating goal for many youth projects:

> *We wanted to do more to fulfill the media analysis and evaluation-of-information part of media literacy education. So we thought, let's try to create a video series [show] aimed particularly at middle school and high school students. Really lean on teachers as our distribution partners for that show and that content. Create a really comprehensive curriculum around the videos that would be centered in media literacy pedagogy.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

One youth project alum who had participated in an advanced media production program, where she learned a wide range of technical skills, reflected on the deep value of media literacy education that the program provided:

> *What was imparted on to me [was] the ability to question narratives....[The program] wasn't necessarily imparting anything political to me, but they were saying,* ***every single message that you see ever is constructed****. And it's the duty of public media to construct these messages by and for the public. We need to do it in a way that maximizes what people get out of our stations, so they feel seen, they feel represented, and they're also getting the most accurate information. Rigorous information.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

A handful of project leads we interviewed work directly with students through their schools, teaching production and supporting journalism projects as part of in-class experiences. One project lead articulated the critical role of supporting teachers in promoting a holistic approach to media literacy:

> *One of things we're most excited about is that we can bring media literacy into classrooms.... Oftentimes, teachers will assign a video project without having any idea of how difficult they are to actually pull off. You know, how much work goes into it....We want media literacy to be just a part of literacy. That includes...decoding messages, but we think that [the producing side] is just as important.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Another project lead who uses the Student Reporting Labs curriculum emphasized that, in his mind, the most important goal is to help young people understand how journalism is made so they can become more critical consumers of it. He said,

> *I view Student Reporting Labs as not training the next generation of public media journalists, which is one of the many pitches that the NewsHour has, but as producing a next generation of citizen journalists. They go on and become, you know, plumbers or bus drivers or doctors or whatever; if this training teaches them one thing, it's how to spot misinformation and disinformation, which is a social harm. And how to call it out.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, SMALLER TELEVISION STATION

Media literacy is an increasingly important area of learning for tweens and teens who are immersed in a media-rich world. Yet schools are often challenged to meet the demands of this evolving need due to a variety of educational system barriers. These include a focus on instructional areas aligned with standardized testing, inequitable access to technology, constraints on teacher time, and limited training to support technology integration or project-based learning.

As youth project work evolves, we anticipate that stations will refine their goals to address this critical area of need, including media literacy related to both consuming and creating content.

Involving young people in station work brings insight needed for institutional change

Interviews and other sources reveal that digital distribution, internet streaming, and social media are core drivers in the transformation taking place across the public media system. At the same time, cultural shifts are occurring as Gen Z enters adulthood. Stations find youth perspectives invaluable for tackling both of these challenges. The opportunity afforded by young people's involvement was energizing to many interviewees, even if the need to evolve, particularly in the face of financial constraints, was daunting:

> *We're trying to flip all of our mentalities from "we're a broadcast station that puts our stuff on digital and social media" to "we're a digital and social media station that puts our content as well on broadcast." That's where we see the future going. So that whole flip in terms of our production structure, our funding structure, the technology.... It's very big. What we need to do right now in order to survive is to completely change the way we do what we do and why we do it. And how we engage, because there's a completely different expectation around engagement. It's not viewing anymore, it's engaging.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

The digital transformation was described as interrupting previous patterns related to viewership/listenership. As one project lead noted, understanding youth perspectives and media behaviors is important for weathering this change:

> *This is going to be the first generation that doesn't age into our content, our traditional public media content. So we really need to understand where they are, why they're there, who they are. They're not going to just age into the structure that we have in place.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Accompanying the digital transformation is a parallel cultural change that is underway. Gen Z, the nation's most diverse and educated generation,[1] whose members are particularly focused on issues such as human rights and climate action, are moving into adulthood. Multiple project leads reflected on the benefits, to both adult professional staff and the institution, of involving youth in station work. Interviewees relayed the power of learning from young people, particularly as their organizations evolve to meet this moment of technological and cultural change:

> *Obviously, the industry has to change, to adapt. And the youth are the experts that we need in this moment. So I don't think we're at a point where it's what it needs to be. But I think that if people will step aside and really center what the youth have, I think that's vital to the industry in general.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, MID-SIZED RADIO STATION

> *[We're] actively asking young people for what they authentically think. And that act of listening... in the long term [changes] the workforce, the industry, the perspectives that are being highlighted as valid.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Youth projects can diversify the professional pipeline

Project leads, particularly those offering media and journalism training to young people, talked often in their interviews about the ways that collaboration with young people can support station-level strategic goals around recruitment of staff. These interviewees shared how their work supports the development of a diverse pipeline of young professionals by involving youth from communities that are underrepresented among staff:

> *[Our station has] started to make efforts to diversify its workforce, real good faith efforts that have paid off. Although that work is still a constant effort...it was pretty clear that the kids who we were bringing into the studio were more diverse, racially, than the people who worked in the studio. And so...not just the people that work in my department, but I think the organization started to see this as...there are important downstream effects from working with kids. For the kids and for us. And it's mutually beneficial. And these kids have so much to contribute, and if there's ways to have them contribute here, that's a win-win.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

> *I think that adds to this pipeline....We're not just here to extract the stories from the community, and then diversify our content for the summer; it's more planting the seeds for these students to be able to come into the radio world with the training and the confidence that they need to hopefully lead this program one day.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, MID-SIZED RADIO STATION

One approach that a handful of stations have taken is to offer advanced programs, which are often paid and can involve mentorships with producers, to build a pathway for young creators. One station, for example, has seen success in supporting the career development of young people with this approach:

[1] Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2020, October 29). "Statistics Snapshot: Generation Z and Education." blog post. https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-education

> *One huge ripple effect is that in the last year at [our station], four program graduates have been hired as full-time staff members.... That's not typical, that we would get four hires in a single year. But I think it speaks to the long-running support of our program and how we've been able to continue to work with graduates over many years.... We [have] really tried to provide opportunities and career pathways for graduates who want to stay involved in this industry. It's a challenge that is not always easily met. I think that there's a real desire at [our station] to provide more structured career pathways for our graduates to enter the workforce. People recognize the value of having graduates on staff.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER RADIO STATION

Another project lead described youth programs as a "virtuous cycle": as more young people positively associate with stations as places of belonging and relevance, more young people will seek out public media as a career pathway. If these programs involve young people of color, youth from immigrant communities, and multilingual young people, a diverse pipeline of professionals can be cultivated. Given the large number of private funders committed to workforce development with underrepresented groups in technology fields, a focus on this goal might help stations to secure additional funds, particularly for program work with youth.

/ CHAPTER 2 /

Considering the Range of Youth Project Models

This chapter presents a range of types of youth involvement, from lighter-touch collaborations to more intensive partnership work involving shared decision-making. In all of these examples, interviewees emphasized the importance of inviting youth into station work in collaborative ways.

The Next Gen Public Media project database provides additional details on approaches used by stations across the system.

Stations can start by highlighting youth perspectives and stories

One relatively light-touch approach to engaging young people in station work focuses on incorporating youth perspectives in stories. This can be as straightforward as including young people as sources. News that has a particular youth angle, such as stories about the impacts of COVID-19, changing demographics, or concerns about climate change, were cited by interviewees as deserving a youth-specific perspective. Inviting young people into station-led productions can have dual benefits: youth develop trust in public media, and their perspectives are more authentically shared and represented.

Project leads noted that the involvement of young people as sources may require news teams to develop new skills and knowledge. Inviting youth into the reporting process in collaborative, responsive, and non-hierarchical ways is essential to building trust and cross-generational relationships:

> *When I started talking to [different content teams] and going with the news team to talk to young people, it occurred to me very quickly that they actually don't really know how to talk to young people. They come in with preconceptions; they don't carve out enough time. Now this is me generalizing for sure, but we need an education as a station about how to even work with young people. And that as a first step...what I'm doing, or trying to do, in the next year, is help our news team...learn how to listen to and talk to young people. So it's peer to peer and not hierarchical, which is really hard.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Another relatively light-touch approach is to highlight the stories of young people's achievements in the community. One station involved in our research has been producing segments that profile individual young people's stories of success and triumph. Yet, rather than just telling that young person's story, the station producers spend extended time with the featured young person, recording a responsive conversation that lets them drive their own storytelling:

> *I believe it's essential in the pre-production planning to create a collaborative relationship, so the youth have a voice in the content and development of ideas and feel supported in voicing opinions and feedback. It's their story, and we can work together and determine how best to share it in our video medium. Also, when recording on location, creating a process that is flexible, in which youth have input and understand it's not live television, and that we can take breaks and discuss ideas before moving forward, can bring more of their individuality to the storytelling.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER TELEVISION STATION

INSPIRATION FROM THE FIELD

Stations involved in the Next Gen Public Media professional learning community have been exploring many ways they can invite youth perspectives and center youth stories in their work. Radio stations, such as WFPL in Louisville, are providing training to journalists on how to interview young people. GBH in Boston is ensuring young voices are represented in its productions, such as a recent series documenting the effects of COVID-19. WBUR is experimenting with using its live event space for civic dialogue with young people.

Nothing about youth, without youth[2]

Interviewees emphasized the importance of hearing from young people and using their feedback to inform decisions. They cautioned that public media will miss the mark if young people are not invited to shape station work that is for them or about them. As one project lead explained, this kind of audience-centered work is well-known to stations; doing it with teens and tweens is what is new.

One station relied heavily on focus groups with young people as it conceptualized a new show for their age group. It selected diverse youth, drawn from a range of school partners, to give feedback on early ideas, including content, format, hosts, and distribution:

> *We kind of went on a focus group tour...meeting with students at a pretty wide range of schools [in two cities]. And we got tons of feedback on the different concepts that we were putting out there.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

[2] The phrase, "Nothing about them, without them" is a centuries old motto communicating the importance of involving people who will be affected in decision-making; in the last few decades, the term has been used in advocacy of persons with disabilities.

As the idea for the show gelled, the station shifted its structure for inviting feedback and launched a youth advisory board to provide a forum for more substantial, ongoing youth input:

> *We were pretty responsive every step of the way to their feedback—everything from the performance, to our graphic style, to pacing, to jokes—you know, everything. We tried to be really responsive to their feedback and then go back to them and say, "Hey, does this reflect what you were thinking about?"*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

This station now solicits the group's feedback on a wide range of productions, including those for its general audience.

Project leads that have worked with focus groups and other structures for inviting youth feedback told us about the enormous value of this kind of youth-adult partnership. They emphasized the importance of approaching it collaboratively, rather than as a transaction. Gaining the trust of youth from communities that have been marginalized also demands relational trust:

> *Something that people often misunderstand is this idea that when you ask a group of young people...who live with the experience of oppression in our society..."Well, what do you think?" and you get crickets, you get silence, it means they're not thinking anything. It's just not true. We actually have to be able to create and have the patience to listen and cultivate a community of trust in order for those thoughts to be shared with us.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Investing time and energy to gain young people's feedback can yield profound insights. Project leads described how intentional, and often sustained, youth feedback allowed creators to recognize disconnects between adult assumptions and young people's feelings about engagement, relevance, or cultural norms:

> *Sometimes the feedback we got was really helpful, but in a way that was probably not intended by the [young person]. Like, once we were testing this fiction show, and one of the kids said, "Oh, this is pretty good. I think I'd listen to it while I was doing something else"....That's not what we wanted for this show. We wanted the show to pack a punch, like, get you sitting up in your seat. So that was a really insightful piece of feedback.... We just had to dial it up several notches.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD INVOLVED IN PRODUCTION

> *[The youth said to us]: "If you're trying to teach us something, stop trying to be funny. When we go on YouTube, and we want to know something, we go and we want to know something; we don't want a lot of other garbage. And also, funny to us isn't like a joke, funny to us is when something organically happens during the process of production that you include....So leave that in, but take out all the stupid other stuff that you that you think is funny that we don't." So that happens all the time.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

> *They thought it'd be cool to have a young journalist as a host. And they gave us really specific feedback that they did not want a peer as a host. They're like, "we're not interested in getting the kind of information and the trustworthiness of the information from someone who is our age." But they didn't want anyone too old, either. They wanted someone who's, like, a badass young journalist that they could identify with who seemed like they understood the world they were coming from, realities that they were confronting, but also had really good professional journalistic chops.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Regardless of the station approach to youth work, the interviews made clear that stations need structured ways to invite youth feedback. Building relationships with youth is a critical first step.

KEY INGREDIENTS OF YOUTH PROJECTS: ADVISORY BOARDS, MENTORSHIP, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS

Youth advisory boards are increasingly common in participatory projects and youth development programs, both in and outside of public media. Interviewees described a range of functions of their youth advisory boards, ranging from providing a consistent cohort for testing content to engaging in co-production.

One station that has experimented with many iterations of this kind of advisory board noted that some of the greatest youth content it created was in deep partnership with its youth advisors, but that model was ultimately deemed unsustaunabe. That station has shifted its approach to that youth advisors are available to producers of any shows needing their insight or expertise. Additionally, there are opportunities for youth advisors to embed within a team to produce particular pieces.

MENTORSHIP

Common in many station education programs that teach media making to youth—particularly in advanced programs that aim for distribution—is some form of peer or "near-peer" (i.e., young, relatable professional) support or formal mentorship. In some instances, these are paid employment or internship roles filled by recent program graduates. Mentorship programs provide emerging professionals with additional experience, make programs more sustainable by reducing costs associated with full-time staff, and strengthen the professional pipeline. Youth alumni we spoke with shared how meaningful and inspiring it was to receive support from people they could relate to.

At the same time, peer mentorship can introduce challenges and requires thoughtful support and scaffolding. After all, as one project lead noted, the fact that a young person has achieved a level of digital media competency doesn't automatically translate into knowing how to teach others. Peer mentors may also not yet have a full grasp of journalistic standards needed to oversee sensitive topics.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

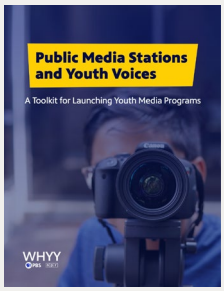
Partnerships, particularly with schools and teachers, are common among the projects we researched. Stations that are engaged in youth development education programs reported the critical importance of cultivating relationships with schools and individual teachers in order to recruit young people. Partnerships in the community are particularly key when a station seeks to connect with underrepresented young people:

> *Teachers [are] our partners for reaching our target audience, which for us in education, [is] historically excluded young people within the public school system. It's really hard to reach that particular audience without partnering really closely with teachers and being on the platforms where they look for content.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Stations noted that deep partnership in the community, whether with schools or community-based organizations, takes time to develop. Interviewees described challenges in working with schools, given turnover of staff and limited capacity, particularly in under-resourced communities. These considerations influenced stations' approaches to creating programs and educational assets with instructional aims.

Looking to models and resources from across the system

Some of the longest-standing approaches to youth collaboration in public media are media education programs that offer a full spectrum of training to young people, from foundational media literacy through to advanced production. These kinds of youth projects exist in both television and radio stations, providing a pathway for interested young media makers and aspiring journalists to progress from basic to pre-professional levels. The model depends on robust partnerships in the community and, often, the recruitment of large numbers of youth into introductory programs.



For stations interested in direct service education work with young people, looking to well-established programs is useful. For example, as detailed on page eight of Public Media Stations and Youth Voices, WHYY offers six types of youth programs that build upon each other. These different approaches can provide inspiration for getting started. At the same time, our research reinforces a recommendation of WHYY's toolkit: start small. Narrowing the program scope to offer either introductory or advanced level youth programs is one sensible way to narrow the scope.

Additionally, to leverage capacity, smaller stations often chose to use and adapt curricula created by others. Student Reporting Labs (SRL), which can provide a full media pathway, can also be used and adapted. Project leads reported success, for example, with using SRL in partnership with teachers to provide foundational media training to students. Interviewees from smaller stations noted that this approach allows for flexibility in staffing:

> *I'm an education staff person. I have limited production skills myself. But that being said, Student Reporting Labs, it can live with that person. It's about good communication. It's about convening and connecting all the pieces. And so, if a station was interested in either tiptoeing toward youth media work or prioritizing it, it's okay to think outside the box....It doesn't have to live with a media arts teacher, or it doesn't have to live in TV or with a digital staff person. Like, there are different ways to approach this type of work.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, SMALLER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Relationships enable responsive facilitation of youth work

Starting small—in terms of youth served, program scope, and expectations for content creation—is essential for youth development education projects because quality work with young people is both relational and responsive. Building relationships with and among young people takes time and intention, in order to develop a culture of comfort in soliciting and sharing feedback:

> *[The adults] made themselves very welcoming to us, with icebreakers and check-in questions that get everyone to bond. So that, if there was a problem, you could go to them and be like, 'Hey, I don't know how to address these questions.' That helped me.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Having flexibility in one's approach, to serve more as a coach than an instructor, also takes time and capacity. One project lead reflected the way that approaching working responsively, centering young people's learning, and focusing on process more than product led to strong learning outcomes:

> *You can go in with a big idea or a guiding question, an assignment. But from there…it's always interesting to see [where the students take it]…. We always listen to the students and kind of meet them where they're at, where their interest lies, and then build from there. If you structure it in such a way that there's peer to peer sharing, they're learning about [many] processes. Maybe someone didn't learn how to use the Adobe editing software that semester. That's okay. They were over here in this integral role. But then they all understand the bits and pieces that go into making media.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, SMALLER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Co-producing content with youth is powerful yet time-intensive

Many of the advanced-level media programs offered by stations offer the opportunity for young people to collaborate closely with station professionals. Advanced programs often share decision-making about story ideation and content creation with youth. Stations considering this high-touch approach should be mindful of constraints to shared decision-making, particularly when the goal of a published piece is wide distribution.

One significant constraint for some stations is the presence of union rules related to editing and post-production. At least one station we interviewed works through this constraint with its advanced program by partnering young people with a producer throughout the story development, production, and post-production process. Their intensive work together leads to a true sharing of decision-making, with the producer guiding the young creator through considerations related to journalistic standards, audience, and content quality.

Another constraint is the alignment of schedules and timelines for story development and production. While project leads frequently noted the time-intensive nature of youth projects, those that use a co-production approach face the additional hurdle of synchronizing professional and student schedules:

> *So much of what is misunderstood about aligning youth to media programming and production is that the timeline that the news world functions on, or the timeline that a production team functions on, is not the timeline that a young person functions on. And so it really is about figuring out clever and easy ways to bridge the gap between two totally different functioning timelines.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Stations that offer opportunities for youth to co-produce content often have to spend significant energy and time building cross-departmental collaboration, particularly if youth project work is housed in either education or community engagement. Project leads reflected on the efforts needed to break down silos that exist within the station in order to serve the needs of youth in the program while also producing content that will be ready to be shared widely:

> *You really have to invest in the relationships within the station. [Our station is a] pretty large public radio station. And it can be pretty siloed within the different departments. So that's ongoing work, to build those relationships, and it contributes to the success of our youth and our program.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER RADIO STATION

Learning from Youth Participants

At the core of this research project and the Next Gen Public Media initiative more broadly is a deep belief that young people have critical insight to share about how organizations think about their work and envision change. For this reason, interviews with youth project alumni were a key focus. This chapter highlights core themes related to project approaches and insights from Gen Z about engagement with media.

Young people value projects that give them voice and choice

One theme that came through in interviews with project leads and youth alumni was the importance of giving youth voice and choice, both in educational programs and in projects involving youth. Youth alumni articulated the empowering experience of being taken seriously:

> *I think something that was definitely meaningful to me was having my perspective taken seriously, and…being given a platform. It was kind of my first experience with that, genuinely, and I found it to be really valuable and, like, taking myself seriously as a media creator moving forward.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Youth alumni also described appreciation for the ways that their programs built community and encouraged them to engage with ideas and peers in ways that felt distinct from their experiences at school.

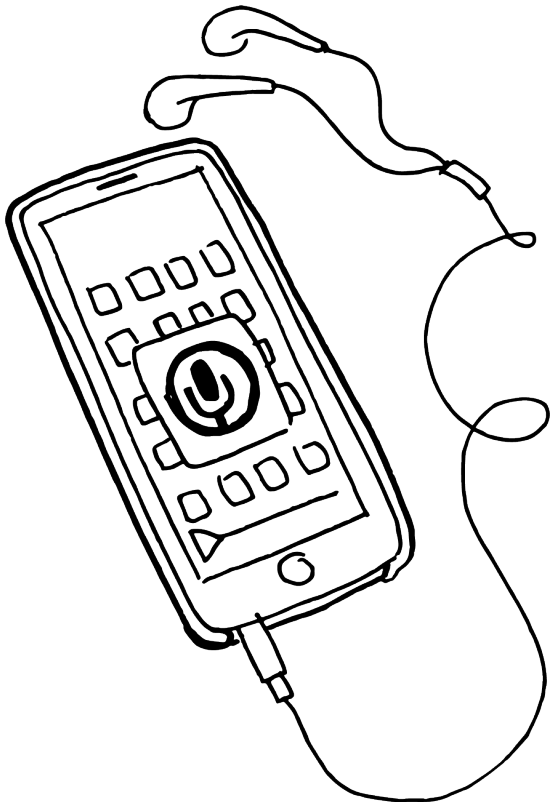
> *My involvement in [station project] was super meaningful because it allowed me to learn about topics and collaborate with people in a way that I wasn't [able to] in school. I was having really interesting conversations about political issues and things going on at school and also, like, pop culture issues. [Having those discussions] is a super cool aspect of public media and media in general.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Project leads described learning how to integrate youth decision-making and input into their collaboration, especially given constraints related to both time and young people's skills. One strategy used in multiple advanced co-production programs is to invite youth to pitch story ideas that are meaningful or interesting to them as part of their application process.

Youth alumni noted that these dynamics could also be quite complex. Adult professionals select applicants and story ideas, in line with what they expect will be of interest to adult general audiences. Young people noted that this process narrows what they feel capable of offering and may limit the creative potential of their involvement.

> *Since we had to present our stories before, like in our application…it sort of becomes…a cycle, where they're seeing stories that they want to see, which informs them to keep producing those stories, which has caused them to seek out those stories again and again.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Our research indicates that transparency between young people and station professionals is critical to managing these complexities. Youth should understand what decisions are theirs to make and what responsibilities need to be held by producers, editors, or other professionals in the station.



Youth look to public media to cover serious issues in challenging times

Youth alumni shared a wide range of advice for stations who are seeking to better engage Gen Z viewers and listeners. Many of these reflections focused on what features distinguish public media and where stations can build on the strength of their brand in a sea of alternatives. Others noted the gravity of what it means to be one of the few trustworthy sources of news in an age of misinformation. Youth participants' interest in issues related to social justice, mental health, and the environment was apparent:

> *Gen Z has a very strong sense of social justice. This is pretty well written on and commented on…. Stations could focus on stories that are hitting close to home and also focusing on…undoing the mistakes of [past generations]. For instance, at my university, there was a big scandal with the fraternities and their affiliations. That type of stuff would definitely attract a sizable subset, because a lot of people care and have been affected by that.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *There's a lot of social justice topics that my generation is very interested in. We often would pitch ideas about typically overlooked topics of social justice. I remember, I pitched a story about period poverty. I think that's not something that I really heard talked about that much, or ever heard talked about by older creators.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Others spoke more generally about the uncertainty of this moment in history, and the need for content that helps support young people in navigating the challenges associated with growing up during this time. One youth alum spoke about the way public media could play a "reassuring" role during this unstable time:

> *I guess the biggest theme I could latch on to would be uncertainty. It's a very uncertain time in our future, politically, economically, environmentally. The content that I could see really sticking with Gen Z is something that addresses that. Something that helps this generation through all of its uncertainty....I think just appealing to Gen Z's uncertainty about the future and reassuring them using the status of public broadcasting might be a way to retain interest.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Of particular note was the sense that core journalistic standards of neutrality have been upheld by public media in ways that distinguishes it from other media platforms. And while that is seen as an asset, it also presents complications when reporting on issues that Gen Z reporters are passionate about.

> *[With] public media and NPR, one of the biggest things I've learned is that you have to be neutral, right? You can't have a stance. Our generation has a stance on everything. And it's boring to not have a stance on something, it's like, make up your mind. Most of what NPR does is to provide both sides so that people can make their own decisions and provide the right information. I totally agree with that. When I've talked to NPR reporters who are on the younger side, a lot of them quit, because they couldn't just have a neutral stance on something like human rights or housing or whatever.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

According to youth interviewees, one of the most powerful characteristics of public media is that it is a trusted information source in a world that increasingly lacks reliability:

> *I think public media is a more trustworthy source. It's a more comforting source in the current media climate that we live in. And it's free; it's really nice that it's free. And the thought of that going away is terrifying. It's a really good way to get news that you can trust....It's just good that it's journalism that's being funded and anyone can access it, so that we don't have more misinformation and more, you know, BS in the world than we already do.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Youth see a generational disconnect in media engagement

Youth project alumni, with their particular perspectives on both the value of public media and the challenges associated with appealing to fast-moving and fickle younger audiences, offered deeply nuanced insights about format, genre, and the return on investment in platforming youth. The participants we interviewed had many important insights related to the production and distribution of public media content in the digital age. As young people who have worked extensively with public media stations, they have experienced firsthand the frustrations and challenges of creating content that does not achieve wide distribution. Many have gone on to study or work in journalism, film, or other forms of media making. They have a key perspective, as digitally native Gen Zs who value and understand public media.

For instance, one alum who noted that they still appreciate reading print stories even though they know that's not the norm for their generation, suggested that a core challenge lies in balancing simplicity with nuance:

> *I like reading the news—like printed versions of the news—but I know that probably a lot of young people don't prefer that format. And that's a challenge, because that's a super important way to convey information. I don't think everything needs to be done on videos or through visuals. So that's a challenge, like engaging younger readers with longer written articles. And also, how to simplify information for our short attention spans without making it too oversimplified or basic or not nuanced.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

For Gen Z, the lines between media content, the internet, and social media are blurred. Older generations' perception of social media as a marketing tool, and not as a space for original content creation with its own value, is challenged by younger generations. The youth project alumni we spoke with were unlikely to seek news through traditional channels. Instead, they often described a social-media-first strategy when asked about how they and their peers get their information:

> *When you look at more news stations, they're moving towards that short-form content. It's a lot more Reels on Instagram, you see their TikTok videos, you see them trying to adhere to the audience. It's 60 seconds, but packed with information and in a timely manner. That's really what Gen Z is looking for. Not just on TikTok, but on Instagram, YouTube Shorts: so many platforms are marketing towards that short-form content to get more viewers in. So I feel like if more news stations played that to their advantage, you would see so many more Gen Z viewers.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *The big way that a lot of Gen Z get the news is on Instagram, through the infographics that they post on the story.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *If you take a journalism course, you'll get codes to access the New York Times. But even when the access is given, I feel like a lot of my peers still don't access it. Like they'll have the app on their phone, but they'll just dismiss the notifications or never open it. Like I've never, I have never had any of my peers text me a news article. That's never happened. And if that happened, I'd be like, someone got their phone. Like that's not something that is done. Ever. I think that the most salient way to access Gen Z, I mean, I've gotten sent Instagram posts by the Washington Post about something important that's happening, but never the news article.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Youth project alumni offered a range of nuanced insights relating to the need for tailored strategies to meet specific audiences through social media and short-form video content. The interviewees noted that social media use between middle school-, high school-, and college-aged kids looks different. While younger teens might look to TikTok for both creation and sharing, older teens were more likely to look to Instagram and Instagram Reels.

> *I even think there's a divide between me and my younger siblings that are in high school, because their friends all make TikToks. And none of my friends make TikToks. Even if they have TikTok. They're not creating and posting on it every day in the same way that kids even just a few years younger than me are.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Facebook was only mentioned by one project alum, who said that she had moved to the West from the South, where she still saw young people using Facebook to interact with family and friends. She compared that to her peer group in a large coastal city that found Facebook largely irrelevant.

At the same time, interviewees spoke enthusiastically about social media and the challenge of creating content that was both high-quality and also well-suited to the format. Short-form video, such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels, were cited as important, and one project alum reflected on this genre as a worthwhile creative challenge aligned with Gen Z preferences for viewing and responding:

> *Right now, you definitely see a trend of short-form media. And short-form media is really genius, when you look at it. You're getting the information in a trendy way, as fast as possible. And you could steadily rack up views on short-form content. And people don't really realize how much effort goes into that 15-second, 60-second, three-minute video. It takes a lot of editing, it takes a lot of condensing, it takes a really refined script, it takes a lot of hard work. And when you apply that to news, you definitely see a lot more teens flocking in, because they want to get the information. And they want to get the when, where, why and how as fast as possible so that they can go act on it.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *The algorithm really rewards production over quality, and diverse production over quality. So you tend to put the same video out, like, 17 times. So that's, like, a massive dilemma. I think one thing that's true is some people on YouTube know how to hack it, where there are some creators that have an audience built that publish, like, every two months. And they're able to put two months into a video. And everybody's like, have you seen the new X? And it gets tons of attention. And I think the question is, like, how did they build that audience? And I think a lot of it does come down to...perception of authenticity, not even authenticity, but perception of authenticity.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Authenticity and genuine engagement are key to relevance for youth

For Gen Z, relevance often hinges on whether content is deemed authentic. This plays out in various ways, including how they perceive the hosts of shows, various styles of humor, and transparency in the creation process. The bar for adult media producers to achieve relevance for this audience is notoriously high and often results in disconnects when youth are not involved in the process. Several youth alumni described the ways they would be brought in to help adult station staff see what would and would not appeal to viewers and listeners in their age group.

> *Almost every single thing that they sent us, you could so tell that someone who's 35 was like, "This is what a 15-year-old likes today." You could so tell that it was not made by anyone young....Someone who knows nothing about Gen Z was trying really hard to make it seem like they knew about Gen Z. And so that was very evident in a lot of the stuff that they gave us. And I'm glad that we were there to be like, Hey, we can tell. Maybe tone it back on the "Hey, Cool Cat!" Like, we don't need that.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *I think putting young people at the forefront of the content that's created [makes it more relevant]. Like, for example, with [public media video series], they have a younger presenter, and that makes it more relatable to students that are watching. I think using interesting kind of artistic media whenever possible...I like it when I see YouTube videos that are creative, and that use art and images to express its message.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Similarly, youth alumni spoke about the ways that "behind the scenes" content was interesting and an area that was ripe for public media production Anything relating to how media is created helps demystify that content and convey authenticity to younger audiences.

> *People love to see the way you make things. That's a huge trend. They love to see behind the scenes, even with big artists, they love to see behind the scenes on music, videos, movies, things [that feature] input from people who worked on the project.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *I think also being really clear, like pulling back the curtain, because I think so much about our media is synthesized and packaged and ready. But something that my generation is really leaning towards is this idea of authenticity.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Relevance for youth audiences often starts with representative creators. Youth project alumni recommended hiring young content creators, with expertise with social media, if they want to appeal to younger audiences. Interviewees spoke repeatedly about the importance of young people's understanding of internet culture and the ways that they can instinctively "sniff out" the influence of an older producer or writer. In addition, some noted that content produced by older generations tends to misrepresent the Gen Z experience:

> *Young people just have more of an eye on the trends and topics that are popular at the moment, which come and go super fast. It's almost like our generation has its own set of inside jokes from the internet. Like things that we might say, like TikTok audios we would reference, or like memes we would talk about that adults wouldn't get. And I guess having young people creating media will naturally then draw other young people to that media because there's this…language or…references that we're interested in.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *You can just tell it's not another young person running the account. It's, like, little tiny details, like the font that they use in their Reels on Instagram. It's just these little clues, like my generation has its own language. And so it's not that people wouldn't watch that video, it just looks like it was made by someone older. It just isn't translating as well as it could be to young people.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

> *I think that a lot of the stuff that's pitched explicitly to Gen Z, and that is made by Gen Xers or, like, Boomers, is wildly inaccurate to our experience.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Youth feedback often centered on critiques of social media posts from accounts managed by older adults. However, NPR was cited multiple times for its effective use of social media, including the planetmoney TikTok, which multiple interviewees offered as a rare example of public media hitting the mark for a younger audience:

> *I think we've seen a lot of great educational creators who have managed to reach younger audiences. And I think that the biggest thing is just tapping into some of that homegrown-like video creator energy. I think a really good example was NPR [which] has been posting these new educational videos, which are edited in a really slick and entertaining way and capture that Gen Z energy. And those have always been really entertaining. And they learn these concepts, like inflation. Ultimately, that's how I view broadcast media breaking into social discussion, the social media space, by creating quirky, entertaining content that appeals to a very certain demographic.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

NPR's Tiny Desk Concerts was also referenced by a few youth alumni as an example of public media leveraging social media to reach Gen Z. Other examples of media that was seen as relevant to Gen Z audiences tended to come from commercial accounts:

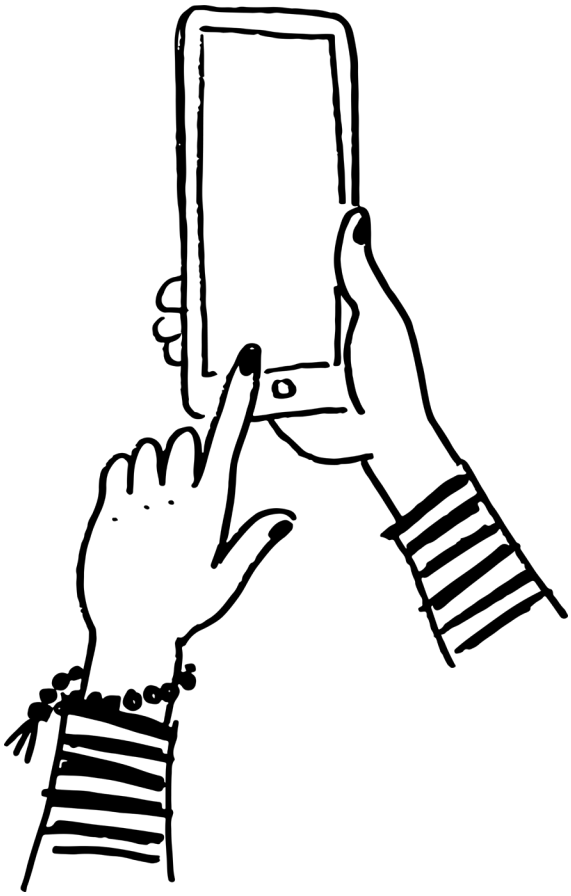
> *When I'm looking at [this station's] Instagram and [this teen-pitched show's] Instagram, I feel like it's a little bit...older, like it's not translating as well to younger users of social media. And I think that there are some companies that do that well. Not necessarily public media, but, for example, the Netflix Instagram account; you can tell that it's a young person running it. Like, they type in all lowercase, they don't use punctuation, they use words like bestie and...internet slang and stuff like that. And that works for trying to capture a young audience. But again, that's a tricky balance, because you also want to maintain the reputation and quality of these news organizations. It's not the same thing as Netflix.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Throughout the interviews, youth alumni emphasized the importance of authenticity and genuine engagement. A number reflected on the fact that Gen Z prefers content with a specific host or hosts. Following a person is more compelling than following a brand:

> *The host really matters for content. Having hosts that are actually reflective of diverse people. That's really important, like reaching communities, having someone tell us the news that looks like them....But I feel like that's important. Just in general, not just for young audiences....If you don't like the host, you won't pay attention or trust whatever they're saying.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Interviewees also discussed attempts to capture the Gen Z zeitgeist for the sake of marketing:

> *That's what a lot of these corporate TikToks are missing. A lot of them attempt to be genuine and are a little naive in their marketing attempts, as though they can just present the thing and have that be enough. But nowadays, in order to thrive on TikTok, you need to play into the format a little bit more....Corporate TikToks try to emulate an actual video that someone would make.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM



Navigating Challenges and Opportunities

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to public media engagement with youth. However, understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with this work will help stations approach their planning with clear-eyed expectations and motivation to overcome obstacles as they arise. This chapter highlights lessons learned from youth alumni and project leads, noting the ways they have dealt with constraints and found success in light of these challenges.

Tensions of featuring personal experiences of youth

When asked for recommendations on how public media could engage youth participants, some alumni pointed to the ways in which vulnerability could be a desirable feature in their storytelling. Personal reactions in response to news events are common on social media and were described as especially relatable by our youth participants:

> *I would...get them involved, not just behind the scenes, but on camera, and get them to really be vulnerable with a camera and share their experiences. Because that's also what people want. They want to see vulnerability, they want to see emotion. They don't just want to hear a person tell you the news. And with Roe v. Wade, or, you know, the killing of George Floyd, what a lot of content creators were doing, were showing their emotion, showing their disdain, their disgust, their anger, sadness, fear, and that drove in mass audiences, because that person is feeling the same way I am. I can relate to that person. I know what they're feeling. I know the pain they're in. So that really just drives in audiences.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Yet, there can be ethical tensions in how newsrooms balance journalistic standards with what young people deem authentic. Many stations doing co-production with youth want to uplift youth "expertise" by inviting stories based on their own experience. Personal stories, especially those that describe challenges and even trauma, may draw larger audiences. However, it can be problematic to showcase young people's stories or raw reactions to current events without reflecting on how those responses are connected to personal experiences that may have been upsetting. Some of the youth alumni

we spoke with were concerned that young people's difficult experiences shouldn't be used for media organizations' benefit. One alum reflected that it was difficult at a young age to have the perspective to speak authoritatively on issues beyond one's own personal experiences. This interviewee noted that youth media programs tend to amplify sensitive or even traumatic stories of young people, choosing those over more objective or detached stories:

> *Young people are oftentimes encouraged to make… stories about familial trauma, familial history, very personal things, and they're less interested in more traditional journalistic inquiry in the stories. I just definitely noticed that's a very strong trend in the stories that they accept and put out.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Another youth alum, noting the bias towards negative stories, said that giving youth from marginalized communities a platform for stories makes this dynamic important to avoid:

> *If you force the youth in your program to report only on their lived experience, and especially if you are targeting youth that are marginalized, or multipl[y] marginalized, you are forcing them to exhibit their trauma for the benefit of your audience. And that's just that. If you're asking somebody to report on being part of a community where they are systemically discriminated against, and that is what they are allowed to report about, whether behind several veils or not, then that is discrimination.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Stations need to do more work to examine how to elevate young people's expertise in ways that add depth, nuance, and unique perspectives without inadvertently capitalizing on harmful experiences youth participants have faced for the sake of a good story.

Unlocking funding through youth work

Nearly every project lead we interviewed spoke about the challenges and trade-offs related to securing funding or maintaining financial sustainability. Even for long-standing, well-established projects, funding was described as a frequent source of uncertainty and constraint. Developing diverse revenue streams presents a hurdle and requires repeated rebalancing of staff time and priorities. For stations who rely on operating funds from donors, there are also incentives in their business model to serve older audiences. Making the case to these donors that public media needs youth project work is uncharted territory for most stations.

Additionally, the monetization of products and services associated with youth initiatives is seen as elusive and sometimes counter to the goals of public media. As one project lead described, sometimes these trade-offs emerged when thinking about the scale of impact for educational projects and the need to keep those that bring in reliable revenue:

> *You hear a lot about sort of depth versus breadth of programming, and you know, we decided that we were going too wide and we didn't want to do that anymore. So we've had to focus on one school. And I think, you know, if money is limited, you have to make those choices….Our summer programs…we still charge for them. They're the only program that we charge for….I think there's trade-offs; that's an uncomfortable situation.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Lack of significant and sustained public investment was cited repeatedly as a significant barrier, not only for production of content for tween and teen audiences, but also for achieving ongoing support for programs that collaborate with youth. One project lead described a team wanting to double down on its work with tweens and teens, but gaining buy-in from station leadership required securing external funding. This interviewee speculated that, if there were a large pot of funding for tween or teen work, akin to something like Ready to Learn (RTL), that's where the station would focus:

> *If we had to choose between applying to CPB funding for RTL little kids stuff or for RTL teens and tweens stuff, we would go for the teens and tweens stuff because that's just where our thinking is….[The biggest challenge is] station buy-in from the top. If you have leadership that gets it, and wants it, the possibilities are endless. In our case…the value in doing this work is understood, especially when money comes in around it. But to really take it to the next level, there's no way we could do that right now. Because, you know, without the funding support, leadership just wouldn't sign off on it. Unless there's money tied to it. So that's the biggest challenge.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, SMALLER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Many also find the short-term incentives that drive the funding process to be frustrating. Financial support for projects, particularly sponsorship, typically depends on reach. Even stations that have found success with productions that involve youth can struggle to translate that momentum into further donor engagement or corporate or foundation interest in growing beyond these productions.

> *We've had [a longstanding commitment to a youth show], and it is one of our most successful (in terms of many, many metrics) local series that we've produced, because in part, we've been able to support it with local corporate underwriting. We've never been able to do that with another local show to this degree….I went to foundation development [to make a pitch for tween or teen content]….I'd say I'm gonna develop this new thing. And they were like, "Well, we don't really know that age group. We don't have any prospects. We don't know anyone that supports that age group. So unless it's a priority for the [organization], that's not really not our priority." So that was foundation development. Same thing with corporate underwriting; they just couldn't figure out the way to make the dollars work.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Sustained corporate funding for youth-centric projects is especially difficult to secure. Comparatively, stations have found more success with private foundations that have goals connected to education and youth development, technology and STEM, career readiness and workforce development, and/or support for underrepresented youth. Yet, relying on private foundations for funding support can present its own set of trade-offs. For instance, media education programs that work directly with youth and must prioritize clear educational outcomes do not generally have the capacity to expand to large audiences or reach self-sustainability within limited grant periods.

In light of these constraints, some stations have found that platforming youth for a general audience, as opposed to creating content for youth audiences, is more likely to lead to secured operating support, funded through general membership and underwriting. In other cases, project leads told us that *pursuing a diverse range of funding sources* and leveraging matching support can enhance sustainability:

> *We have had success securing local foundation grants for this type of work and matching funds for our media literacy work. This is very fundable, up to like the $20k–$25k [level] but it's not enough to have a full-time youth media coordinator. It's not enough to build the lab and do all the things. It's enough to keep one-off projects going, but not like a whole thing. The beauty of a larger pool of money coming in from CPB, like when the American Graduate money came in, local foundations were like, "Oh, we want to match that up to what we can match." So then the local money starts coming in, and then you have, like, real, $400 to $500k to work with.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, SMALLER JOINT LICENSE STATION

There is no one funding pathway or strategy that will work for every youth project. How stations position their work with youth—as content production for news departments or as an education-centered experience for youth—will also significantly affect the type of funding a station might pursue.

Moving forward, it will be important for stations to consider what conditions and for what reasons they might commit operating funds for their youth-centric work. This will look different for stations whose strategies involve production of content created by and with young people versus stations that are focusing on youth development work that's more agnostic to content quality and reach. Aligning youth projects with station strategic planning, so that the institution sees the work as core to its priorities, is an important preliminary step to sustainability.

Youth participants still see broadcast as a powerful way to share their work

For stations engaged in high-touch production of content with youth, "making it to broadcast" remains the primary goal. Given the fact that young people primarily get their content digitally, our research team was initially surprised to learn that youth media programs, including the young people participating in them, remain motivated to go to broadcast. Stories from youth media creators are often published online in some form, but the ultimate win remains a segment on broadcast:

> *It's always really exciting for them when their story goes out on the air....There is something so exciting about being able to just, like, turn on the radio and for them to hear it....It's absolutely reaching a wider audience. So for students to know that your story is going to be downloaded on the podcast a few hundred times versus heard by thousands of people during a prime broadcast spot, that's huge for them.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGE RADIO STATION

The interviews revealed a fundamental challenge facing public media as it transitions to digital: broadcast continues to hold sway because it enables reach that is difficult to consistently achieve through digital distribution.

> *The general attitude [in our program], at least among the students, was that broadcast was sort of like the big time and once we get there, it would be awesome. Whereas digital, for us, was [that] we got put up on a website somewhere, and no one would ever find us. If we were to have uploaded our stuff to a YouTube channel with, like, 100 million subscribers, I think we would all be a lot more excited for that than broadcast. So I think it really is an issue of distribution, and finding a platform with a lot of active audience members.*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Without a system-level investment in digital infrastructure, content produced with youth does not typically reach wide audiences online. One interviewee said:

> *[Our program] has struggled with getting people's ears on the stuff that doesn't go on air. We have a pretty strong audience when it comes to adults that listen for the youth perspective when that goes on air. But otherwise, when it comes to like, listens on our podcast app, or like Twitter, we don't get anything. And I feel like some of that is really the conundrum. How do we get our work in front of people?*
>
> —YOUTH PROJECT ALUM

Similarly, when digital content is produced with youth audiences in mind, the options for distribution remain mostly limited to commercial platforms. For educational content, PBS LearningMedia was noted as the primary vehicle for reaching middle school- and high school-aged students via teachers and schools. But there is currently no equivalent to PBS KIDS for older youth, and while PBS Digital Studios' target audience is younger than PBS's general audience, it does not specifically focus on serving tweens and teens. Digital audio platforms such as Apple Music and Spotify offer limited examples of public media productions for younger tweens, and teen audiences might find relevance in some audio journalism for adults, but no one digital distribution platform is specifically targeted to them or to an intergenerational audience that would include them.

Youth-centric work can help to advance goals related to digital transformation

Throughout many of our interviews, project leads noted that stations are not fully prepared for the changes in engagement that digital content demands. This evolution, and the accompanying engagement of Gen Z audiences, is recognized as critical to public media's future relevance. Yet, tensions exist between serving the existing audience members and donors and serving the future audience of digital natives. As one project lead put it, "people are too attached to the things that bring in the money and the things that keep the station going without realizing it's stunting how we evolve." Only a small handful of stations appear to be leveraging their youth-centric work to advance goals related to digital transformation. This is a powerful area of untapped opportunity.

One common refrain in the interviews, particularly among the handful of stations with significant digital strategies that have explored content production for tweens or teens, was the important role of experimentation. At the same time, several of these digital innovators remarked on the difficulty of developing a coherent digital strategy while also experimenting with emerging technologies and contending with the limits of existing infrastructure:

> *More recently, we've really focused on the possibilities for reaching younger audiences through YouTube. And you know, we've done some exploration in other places, like Facebook, that we've since sort of abandoned, and Instagram, and now TikTok. But we haven't had a really concerted long-term strategy or approach to the way that we're engaging younger audiences, beyond [project show] and beyond YouTube. We've played in lots of places where we're, like, oh, educators might be here. So there's just been a long list of places that we've placed some content, tried things out.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

> *Let's see if we can create other content, if we can build scale and see what happens. And so, I tried a number of different things. I tried a show, I tried a podcast, I tried two podcasts. And what was interesting, every time I started to create something, every time I created something...there was nowhere to put it. And also zero infrastructure.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Time was mentioned as another key challenge, particularly as stations work to build audiences on new platforms. One project lead pointed out that it takes three to five years to build a following on social media. And digital-first distribution represents a fundamental shift in engagement that demands ongoing cultivation and dialogue:

> *When you broadcast something...the broadcast is the ultimate thing. And then it's like, Okay, what are we going to [work on next]? With social media and YouTube, when you launch something, that's the beginning of the relationship with your audience. And there's an expectation that community is going to be supported and built, and it's going to be dialogue. It's not this passive "sit back, watch this show." It's a lean in. You just posted something I'm really interested in, and how can I communicate with you? So when you look at people's budgets, they often end when the thing launches, and that's actually when there needs to be a lot of money invested, or time. Because the expectation is very, very different.*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Even with these challenges, project leads spoke of successes and encouragement from leadership to continue pursuing digital-first content. Among the minority who have been experimenting with creating content for young people and distributing directly to them on the platforms they use most, some are beginning to be recognized in their stations for particular expertise. As one project lead reflected, work creating digital products for Gen Z and distributing them through social media benefits the station broadly:

> *It was only in the last year that a wider digital video strategy really started to form at [our station] that had a big priority of reaching Gen Z audiences as part of the strategic digital growth overall; and then all of a sudden, it was like, "The [youth initiative team] has been doing this. Maybe we can learn something from them." Now there's recognition that we've been doing that work, and it's really core to the overall digital growth strategy for [our station].*
>
> —PROJECT LEAD, LARGER JOINT LICENSE STATION

Recommendations for an Evolving Public Media System

Youth project goals should align with core station institutional needs, and station leadership should embrace and communicate the role of youth projects in advancing strategic direction to both internal and external stakeholders

Youth-focused projects should be included in station strategic planning and should be designed to support key institutional goals. Station leadership should envision and articulate how youth project work advances strategic direction and build commitment to youth contributions to public media, both within the station through cross-departmental collaboration and through donor engagement and community partnerships.

Stations should strengthen their capacity to recognize stories that need a youth angle and train staff to include young people's voices and experiences

Young people's voices can fundamentally change the dialogue that public media makes possible. While not all stories inherently have a youth angle, many of the most pressing issues of our time—climate change, human rights, sustaining democracy—are fundamental to Gen Z and may be understood by younger viewers and listeners differently than by their parents or grandparents. Additionally, youth perspective in productions is needed for public media to fully represent the community. Stations should strengthen their capacity to recognize stories that would benefit from including a youth angle and to collaborate with young people to ensure their perspectives are included.

The public media system should experiment and share light-touch, sustainable ways to involve youth and center their perspectives in station work.

Stations can build upon and look beyond traditional models of engaging young people through youth development projects, often housed in education departments. While these approaches can be impactful for the relatively small number of young people involved, they are challenging to expand, and capacity constraints mean that youth co-production for wide distribution is out of reach for most stations. In the coming years, the system should experiment and share lighter-touch ways of involving youth in station-led productions, community initiatives, and civic projects.

Stations should look to youth to help identify opportunities to make public media more relevant to younger audiences.

Youth perspective is critical to the ongoing digital transformation of the media industry. This is not only about the tactical questions of what platforms are used or how to predict algorithms to reach audiences, but also about the ways that the internet is fundamentally shaping youth culture and media habits. Any attempts to develop content for young people will require robust commitment and experimentation. Yet building connections to young people is a needed first step. Stations can use their work with youth to reveal opportunities for making public media more relevant to younger audiences.

Study Design + Methods

This report is based on qualitative research designed to better understand youth-centered public media initiatives that serve middle school- and high school-aged youth. The focus for this inquiry was gaining deeper insights from youth project leads and project alumni to identify lessons learned, common challenges, and opportunities for where public media might go next. As part of the Next Gen Public Media Project, this report is intended to provide strategic guidance to a wide range of stakeholders in the public media sector.

Stations were chosen, with input from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting because of its deep knowledge of the public media system, to reflect a range of types. In total, we spoke with 13 adult staff, representing nine stations and one production and distribution company, during hour-long video interviews conducted online. The people we interviewed represent a range of well-established programs within public media, including some of the largest urban stations and also smaller and rural stations within the system. Our sample includes some geographic diversity, but overrepresents stations serving larger coastal cities, because they have generally been engaged in youth-centered work for longer.

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION		SIZE		LICENSE TYPE	
Northeast	4	Larger	6	Joint Licensee	4
Southeast	1	Medium	1	Radio	3
Midwest	1	Smaller	2	Television	2
West	3				

Our sample skews towards youth development-focused programs, which generally have been around longer and are structured with long-term goals in mind. And while all of the programs we interviewed were founded prior to the pandemic, several of them have been around for decades and have evolved significantly during that time. Our reporting includes historical reflections as well as insights about the current version of the program and aspirations for the future.

Our research team also conducted hour-long video interviews with 17 young adults who are or have been part of one of these initiatives. In order to thank them for their time, each alumni participant was given a $50 gift card.

The 30 project lead and youth alumni interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis of the written transcriptions was conducted. Quotes from the interviews were edited lightly to clarify meaning for this report.

Findings from these interviews cannot be considered representative of all public media youth engagement work, but the trends, tensions and opportunities highlighted here are echoed in other aspects of our work.

SESAME WORKSHOP

Joan Ganz Cooney Center

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit research and innovation lab that focuses on the challenges of fostering smarter, stronger, and kinder children in a rapidly changing media landscape. We conduct original research on emerging learning technologies and collaborate with educators and media producers to put this research into action. We also aim to inform the national conversation on media and education by working with policymakers and investors. For more information, visit www.joanganzcooneycenter.org.

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