THE LEGITIMATIZATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL MEDIA PRACTICES WITHIN NEOLIBERAL CONTEXTS AND ECOLOGIES

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Introductory statement

This panel focuses on different ways that practices of children, youth, and families are legitimatized (and deligitimatized) in market places, schools, and homes in the context of national and global events and politics of the late 2010s and early 2020s. Paper 1 by Natalie Coulter focuses on children's online creative labor and examines the constructions of the child in the neoliberal economy of digital capitalism. Paper 2 by Daniela K. DiGiacomo focuses on civic actions of youth by asking how *young people themselves* think about what it means to be civically engaged and/or media literate with implications for ways educators might reconsider how best to support students. Paper 3 by Briana L. Ellerbe explores the act of "dreaming" among Black millennial parents, examining ways dreams are ideologically, interpersonally, and culturally cultivated, as well as the ways in which mediated content can influence dreams and play a role in working toward dreams. Paper 4 by Rebekah Willett examines ways parents accept, resist, or negotiate popular discourses around parenting and screen media before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing parents' constant effort to maintain family stability as they make decisions and guide their children's screen media practices. Together, the four papers reveal ways that children, youth, and families are positioned in polarized and sometimes conflicting ways, and ways that particular practices are recognized and condoned, while others are subject to intense scrutiny.

Paper 1 - Digital Entanglements in Digital Ecologies: Rethinking Children's Creative Labour through a Child Studies Lens

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There are radical shifts taking place in the production ecologies of children's media as young people's creative digital labour is becoming increasingly entangled with the promotional activities of the children's media and entertainment industry. Children's media and entertainment companies increasingly see children as "product evangelizers" and "pint-sized marketers" for their intellectual properties. The experiences of young people in the neoliberal economy of digital capitalism are fast changing as influencers, microcelebrities, and fan communities are all engaged in the narratives, circulations, and promotions of intellectual properties

Despite these major shifts, there has been very little attention given by academics to the creative work of young people in the marketing and promotion of the intellectual properties of children's media. And further, there is little research that integrates the marketing and merchandising of these media products (or IPs) in the neoliberal economies of digital capitalism, the visibility economy and the surveillance economy. Building on Crystal Abidin's (2016) work on social media influencers as entangled in the of commerce, I explore how young people are "entangled" in the production ecologies of digital and promotional spaces. Using the theoretical lens of child studies, I suggest that we that we need to rethink how both the labour and play of young people is "entangled in the ecologies of commerce" of the children's media industry.

The starting point of this paper is to explore the ontological question of what is a child in this space where the categories of labour and play for children are shifting dramatically. I turn to Jenks (2005) foundational question, "how is the child possible as such?" to frame the basis of my work. In the context of these new digital entanglements of young people and the promotional spaces of the digital, I ask the ontological questions - what is a child and what does this framing of a child reveal about digital culture. I am interested in how the child is "made possible as such" in the promotional entanglements of digital capitalism that extract value from the childs' creative labour. Arguably, the discursive divisions between childhood, play and labour is shifting ground in digital culture.

This paper draws upon Zelizer's foundational work *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1994) which traces the framing of a child in the 19th century as worker/labourer to the 20th century as sacred/consumer, concluding that cultural definitions of the child are shaped by the economic logics and demands of capitalism. Cook draws similar conclusions and illustrates that the child is defined by the commercial epistemologies in which the industries (i.e., market research) that attempt to "know" children define and construct cultural categories of childhood according to the logics of the marketplace (2019). Yet, there is no current research that addresses the child as labourer/consumer in the contemporary digital marketplace.

While Zelizer and Cook outline the institutional structures and practices that shape the definitions of the child and children's lives, other scholars in the field remind us that children are not passive subjects merely influenced or affected by social institutions. They are agentive social actors who engage in meaning-making practices (Jenks 2005). Nor is digital media separate from children's lives; it is embedded within the practices and experiences of life as a 21st century child. Children are social actors and are part of culture, not a precursor to culture. Children are actively engaged with digital media as they consume, use, resist, negotiate, produce, respond to, and are influenced by media as part of their daily lived experiences.

Returning to Jenks question "how is the child possible as such" and by using Cook and Zelizer's argument that the child that is possible is shaped by the political economic forces of the workings of capitalism, I explore how the child is possible in the context of the contemporary neoliberal marketplace and digital capitalism, as companies like Insight Kids entangle young people into the promotional ecologies of children's media.

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Paper 2 - Centering Youth Voices in Civic Engagement School-Change Efforts: A Case Study from Southern California

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Two decades into the 21st century, there is widespread dissatisfaction on both left and right with the state of our democracy (Foa & Mounk, 2017). To cite just two examples, in a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center, just 20 percent of Americans said they trust the government to do what is right for them always or most of the time, and only about one-third of younger adults said they are optimistic about the nation's future. When a government that aims and claims to be of the people, by the people, and for the people is only trusted by 20 percent of the people, something significant is wrong.

These problems extend beyond formal government. Many, for example, worry about the deep divisions and isolation that often characterizes those who hold differing views on contentious issues and about the incivility that often arises in the discussions across difference that do occur. Divides and sizable inequities tied to race, class, and multiple forms of diversity reflect our distance from many core ideals and from an overarching sense of common purpose. Coupled with this, the challenge of becoming an informed participant, of determining, for example, the accuracy of claims about political issues on

the Internet and more broadly has also become apparent-- for adults, youth, and children alike. Undoubtedly, these and related problems have multiple roots and will require a range of responses, but school-based civic learning opportunities can still make a fundamentally important contribution. Studies have found that a variety of civic learning opportunities, delivered both in and out of school, can foster greater and more informed civic and political engagement (e.g. Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

However, how do our *young people themselves* think about what it means to be civically engaged and/or media literate in 2019? In this particular political moment, when the institution of democracy itself has been called into question both domestically and at the global scale, how do American public school students in an ideologically diverse district think about how to participate in our democracy? And for our young people, what does 'democracy' even mean? And what, if any, digital media do they use to participate as civic actors? Informed by a commitment to including students as key stakeholders in decisions that impact their lives, this study examined how students conceptualize civic learning in today's digital age.

The analysis that drives this study draws from a multi-year research-practice partnership effort (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) that aimed to construct and assess an evidence-based district-wide strategy for promoting the democratic purposes of education. Data for this particular analysis includes a large scale civic engagement and media literacy survey of middle school youth over two years (N= ~3,000 middle school students each year from 7 middle schools) and focus groups with middle and high school students (N=5). Thematic analysis of student survey and focus group data suggest a number of key challenges/tensions:

- students articulate wanting *more frequent* and *deeper* classroom based opportunities to talk about current and controversial issues;
- students conduct most of their research online, but report very infrequent opportunities to learn about how to discern credible information from false information, as well as infrequent opportunity to learn how to discuss issues online;
- (if and when) students encounter news, they predominantly get their news from social media even though they recognize that their sources may not always be credible;
- students articulate a community-based orientation toward civic engagement-- that is, they often associated "civics" with knowing how their own community works or knowing about issues that affect them and their community;
- students' experiences of civic learning largely depends on their teacher, as well as particular classroom peer-to-peer dynamics.

Attention to these lived realities and expressed tensions is essential, if educators are to successfully support students in becoming the type of civic actors they wish to be.

It takes only a glance at the news to know these are challenging times for our country, as well as for the world at large. Partisan divides as well as divides related to race and class often make the ideal of *E pluribus unum* harder and harder to pursue. Moreover, those who hold differing views on issues don't just disagree about policies, they frequently disagree when it comes to basic facts. Due to these and a host of related

concerns, trust in public institutions (i.e. government, the press, the police, etc.) and in the country's ability to productively address its challenges has been greatly diminished.

If these are challenging times for our democracy in general, they are even more challenging times for youth and particularly youth with few economic resources. If, as a society, we are ever to realize the promise of our democratic institutions, it is vitally important that all youth are prepared for active and informed engagement in civic and political life-- both on and offline-- at the national, state, and community levels. And although many young people are actively engaged civically and politically, still many are not. We can do better and amplifying the voices of youth themselves can help. The analysis put forth by this study will contribute to contemporary school-change conversations on how and through what lens(es) we should be thinking about civic engagement and media literacy learning opportunities for our young people.

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Paper 3 - Constructing dreams: Narrative "dreaming" ecologies of Black Millennial parents

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In American culture and discourse, we are often prompted to dream, to hope, and to construct particular visions of our futures and what they could or should contain. The tension lies, however, in whether dreaming is a collective act, individual act, or something in between. For example, in the United States neoliberal context, the pursuit of dreams is often linked with individualized success, and in turn, high educational achievement. However, this narrative is also met with a dominant narrative of low-income children, often in urban areas, struggling with perpetual low achievement in school (Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003). As argued by Critical Race scholars, post-racial ideology and meritocratic thinking exacerbate negative perceptions of the populations who do not achieve high academic, economic, and social "success," as well as stereotypical and often racist rationales about why this occurs (i.e., laziness, low intelligence, or dysfunctional family structures). Black populations, however, have also historically looked at education as a key to achievement from a different epistemological standpoint (Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003). While educational success often means the achievement of a dream, such as career success, Perry, Steele, and Hillard (2003) give several examples of black populations viewing education as a tool for collective liberation, humanity, and uplift. Learning was the way that "you asserted yourself as a

free person, how you claimed your humanity. You pursued learning so you could work for the racial uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people" (Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003, p. 11). Here, in opposition to the hyper-competitive narratives often tied to the American education system, education is viewed not as an individual act, but as a collective act of resistance. Education was not only seen as a stepping stone toward a career, but as a subversive act toward liberation.

Another tension of dreaming lies within its imaginative and place-based existence. Though dreams are illustrated as ideas bound only by the limits of one's cerebral imaginations, they are both influenced by and have implications for geographic places. Place can majorly influence the identity formation and the daily lives of those living there. Place also has the potential to influence place-based pride, civic engagement, and a sense of whether or not residents would like to have a long-term future there. However, geographical places have embedded socio-historical characteristics which are often plagued with inequity. Soja (2010) posits that "the spatiality of (in)justice...affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography of (in)justice" (Soja, 2010, p. 5).

For physical places challenged with embedded injustice, it is possible that residents' dreams are influenced by and negotiated through place narratives, family narratives, and even narratives within mass media. Positive perspectives of modern children's media flaunt it as potential tools for both entertainment and education. In addition to educational potential, the tropes of dreams, belief, and imagination are quite common in children's media content with the intent of being motivational and promoting resilience. However, Thomas (2019), in reminiscing about the *Cinderella* lyrics that assured her that her dreams could come true simply through persistent believing, writes that her mother cautioned her that in the context of her Detroit, working-class, black female body, magic could not exist for her. She claims that Cinderella's "promise...was obscured by the real conditions of [her] existence as a young Black woman in early twenty-first century America" (Thomas, 2019, p. 2). LeSeur also (1995) posits that in the German bildungsroman literary tradition, dreams are often tied to physical places, and that these dreams are typically realized in a place different from the dreamer's origin, calling into question the ways in which dreams might involve long-term investment in a place, or eventual migration away from it.

Given the intertwining, often competing narratives and realities tied to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and place that can potentially influence what people's dreams consist of, this research explores the act of "dreaming" among Black millennial parents of children between the ages of 1-13. Through thematically analyzed, in-depth interviews with 15 Black millennial parents in various parts of the United States, this project delves into reflections on their childhood dreams as they intertwined with their lived realities, as well as dreams that they have for their own children. This research builds theoretically on Communication Infrastructure Theory's concept of the *storytelling neighborhood*, which suggests that active and dynamic storytelling systems (which include nodes such as residents, community organizations, and media) within geographic neighborhoods can influence the sense of belonging in the neighborhood, in turn influence factors such as civic engagement, collaboration, and community

investment there (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001). It also builds upon research in the field of the learning sciences that take into account the situated contexts in which children and families view media, bringing children's media research into the sociological factors of society that shape the home. This work contributes an interdisciplinary perspective on the ways in which dreams are ideologically, interpersonally, and culturally cultivated, as well as the ways in which mediated content can influence dreams and play a role in working toward dreams. This research delves into questions on parent perceptions of the utility and purpose of media and education, explores tensions between individualism and collectivism, and finally between place-based civic engagement or dreams of migration. Finally, this work encourages consideration for the ways in which not only sociology, place, and media interact with one another, but considerations for the creation of content for children and families.

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Paper 4 - "I feel like I'm way stricter when it comes to screen time and television": Parents' negotiation of discursive fields surrounding children and screen media

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Domestic settings have been the site of tensions around screen media practices since at least the 1950s, when rapid social changes coincided with nearly two-thirds of families in the US acquiring televisions. As television solidified its role as a dominant medium in the US and UK, the struggle to maintain control over the amount of time children spent in front of the screen intensified. From 1949 onwards numerous groups in the US aimed to influence government policy whilst providing parents with advice about why and how to regulate children's television viewing. In contrast with commercial television programs, educational shows such as *Sesame Street* (1969 – present) and the BBC's *Look and Read* (1967 – 2004) were constructed as high quality alternatives, keeping with perceptions of 'good parenting' as limiting commercial content and attending to children's education within the home. As television choices proliferated, families in the US and UK increasingly invested in computers, and later in internet access and mobile technologies. Similar to television and computers, the internet is positioned in popular discourse as both offering opportunities and risks to children; and perceptions of good parenting, therefore, align with strict monitoring and regulation of children's internet practices. Significantly, however, parents' regulation of children's

television viewing worked hand-in-hand with government and industry regulations. The same cannot be said of children's internet practices.

With widespread access to the internet in domestic settings came government attempts to produce regulations to protect children online. Fraught with limitations by government regulations coupled with changes in children's media landscapes, more responsibility has been put on parents to be the primary regulators of children's internet practices rather than government or industry (Montgomery et al 2017). Parents are told they must set rules, install controls, play with their children online, have conversations so as to mediate their children's understanding of online environments, and so on. These devolved regulatory structures put pressure on parents, create hierarchies in terms of 'good' and 'bad' parenting, fly in the face of everyday realities of family life, and undermine children's freedom and privacy. In essence, parents have to choose between empowering and protecting their children through restrictive measures (Blum-Ross & Livingstone 2018).

In this complex landscape, parents are making decisions about family media practices in relation to individual family values, children's needs and desires, and domestic routines. This paper highlights the complexities of these decision-making processes by analyzing interviews with parents in different geographical areas of the US, including rural, urban, and suburban areas, about their domestic screen media practices, focusing specifically on families with children aged 5 to 11. The paper summarizes findings from two studies: one completed before the COVID-19 pandemic and one completed during the pandemic. Using thematic analysis informed by grounded theory, the analyses identified emerging themes across 51 parent interviews before COVID-19 and 18 parent interviews during the pandemic. The analyses draw on Giddens' (1991) notion of 'ontological security' to reveal ways that households create narratives to sustain a sense of their own stability within the microcultures of their domestic space. Simultaneously, households are being positioned by broader cultural discourses. As outlined above, neoliberal discourses define 'good parenting' and legitimatize particular practices related to children and screen media.

The analyses reveal ways that parents accept, resist, or negotiate popular discourses around parenting and screen media. Parents are keenly aware of discourses which position children as at risk of various ills connected with screen media without heavy parent intervention. This discourse is evident in the oft-cited '2 by 2 rule' created by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1999 (no screentime for children under age two, limit to two hours per day for older children), and many parents express anxiety when reconciling this discourse with the realities of their family practices. However, for the most part, parents in interviews whose practices do not align with popular discourse felt able to defend decisions they made for their families. Parents turn to their values to explain their family media practices, and in doing so they indicate resistance to those discourses that are legitimatizing particular practices. This process of defining individual family values and aligning them with their screen media practices are part of parents' efforts to maintain ontological security.

In interviews, parents placed value on understanding their individual children's needs in relation to screen media, and they indicated ways their children's needs varied; for

example, according to age, gender, interests, (dis)abilities, and temperament. Parents described different factors and contexts related to their family's unique practices; for example, the family's ethnicity, parents' work schedules, children spending time with ex-husbands, isolated rural location, home schooling, and ties to a church. In essence, parents described the microcultures of their households and ways that these impact on their negotiations within the discursive field surrounding parenting and screen media. Importantly, parents' efforts to maintain family stability by turning to their values gave them confidence in their ability to make decisions and guide their children's screen media practices, even when those practices did not align with ones that are legitimatized in popular discourse. However, it is clear that some parents are not in a position to openly resist these discourses, and others have to do more 'work' to create routines that are legitimate for their families.

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