

History of youth media production in Maine 1960-2010

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ABSTRACT

Research in media literacy seeks to understand multiple branches of inquiry, including the practice of media production. Youth in Maine have produced media independently and in organized venues for more than 50 years. This paper describes results from surveying primary source materials produced by youth in Maine between 1960 and the 2000s. Research started with media artifacts, looking to primary source materials to understand what, if anything, can be revealed from their content. A deep dive into the provenance of archival collections uncovered stories of a local history of youth media production, and expanded the inquiry to identify who was teaching it, how it was being supported, as well as what artifacts exist from those events. This local history of youth media production suggests a case where media literacy skills associated with creating media texts spread through practitioners as a result of funding, education standards, advocacy, and missionary style promotion.

Keywords: *media literacy, youth media, youth media production, history of education, history of youth media production.*



Film is the greatest teacher, because it teaches not only through the brain, but through the whole body.
(Vsevolod Pudovkin, as cited in Kracauer, 1960, p. 160)

INTRODUCTION

The current body of research related to media literacy education includes accounts and findings that reveal practitioners, techniques, curriculum and developments in this branch of educational research.¹ I discovered this field of interdisciplinary research and practice in 2012, when Dr. Renee Hobbs and Dr. David Cooper Moore presented their paper “CineKyd: Exploring the Origins of Youth Media Production” at a Summer Symposium at Northeast Historic Film (NHF), a regional moving image archive in Bucksport, Maine where I was working as a media archivist. Their paper made connections between educational research, media studies and library sciences, as I was seeking to do at that time, and inspired my own research, presented in this paper. Offered here is a local historical case study about a few of the practitioners producing media with youth in the state of Maine, and the contextual background (social, educational and technological) in which media production, a component of the media literacy movement, grew in the state of Maine from the 1960s to the 2000s.

The narrative of this history is built from information collected through oral histories conducted with James “Huey” Coleman and Brenda Jepson, donors of the two largest collections of youth produced media at NHF, which are the Maine Student Film and Video Festival (MSFVF) Collection, and the Viking Video Production (VVP) Collection. Looking at supporting evidence found in the artifacts of archival media and documentation supporting their creation, reveals a deeper understanding of the time, place, social, technological and aesthetic values which influenced their creators as youth increasingly gained access to create media and a critical understanding of media construction. The local history of youth media production in Maine reveals that media produced by youth increased in the state through efforts from independent filmmakers who crossed over to working with youth, and professional educators who experimented in teaching with filmmaking techniques. This finding, along with an evaluation of aesthetics and production techniques seen in the media, suggest that the

growth of media literacy resulting from youth media production in this state was influenced by the social, technological and economic climate of the public education system when they were created.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This research began in the archive at NHF, where I worked as a media archivist. As part of my job, I worked to process the donations and deposits of archival media, and support their conservation through various stages of inspection, assessment and documentation, to make them accessible for research and other uses. The logistical challenges of viewing aging video and film from under-funded, non-theatrical, archival moving image collections make evaluating the primary source media materials for item level description challenging. Rights issues of orphaned and amateur media are also complex, and from that position I worked with Huey, the donor of the MSFVF Collection, and Brenda Jepson one of the donors of the VVP Collection, to process the deposit and donation paperwork, and describe the scope and provenance of the collections. I felt a deeper calling to explore these collections, though, and returned to them as a graduate student in the College of Education at the University of Maine, two years after the initial work.

I conducted a survey of the archives’ holdings identified as youth media productions in the archives at NHF, and viewed materials that had access copies. I had hoped to conduct a more comprehensive survey of the VVP and MSFVF Collections, though, for previously mentioned reasons related to access, I made little progress without many access copies. Through some light processing, working directly with the archival materials, including browsing tape case labels and sorting through supporting paper and ephemera, I was able to cherry pick items to view. Alone, these items provide interesting examples of stories and audio/visual experiments created by young people at a particular time in history. In order to identify any potential trends in the data I collected when surveying the collections, I looked to other sources to develop a narrative that describes the context in which those examples of historic youth media productions were created.

I found supporting materials in the Fogler Library at the University of Maine, and conducted oral history

case studies related to media produced by youth, through the lens of media literacy.

¹ See Bordac’s (2014), which is a cornerstone for the body of work related to the history of media literacy, and includes other

interviews with Brenda Jepson and Huey, the pioneer media literacy educators in Maine who, respectively, supported the creation and donation of the VVP and MSFVF Collections. The data from supporting materials, combined with the first-person accounts, are synthesized in the narrative below. It is important to this process and the history I found that the archival materials exist on heritage media formats, including Super-8 film, 3/4" video tape, VHS, and MiniDV, as the mode of production affected many of the developments in this local history. This research seeks to understand the local history of youth media production in Maine, and understand the relationship between access to youth media production programming (e.g., classes, workshops, and festivals) and the social, technological and educational landscapes in which they evolved in the 20th century. To begin, an explanation of the essential ways in which the format and technology of media production has affected the development of youth media production is helpful. As amateur media production formats changed from film to video and later digital, the aesthetics and production value also changed.

BACKGROUND: MEDIA TECHNOLOGY, AESTHETICS AND EDUCATION

The ways in which young people gained access to filmmaking, and filmmaking became an accepted mode of learning, are tied to the history of amateur film, the progressive democratization of Western cultures, and the development of instructional design, all of which occurred synchronously over the 20th century (Hobbs & Moore, 2014). In the early years of the motion picture market there were attempts to produce commercially viable safety film formats for the amateur and educational market, most notably 22mm (1910) and 28mm films (1912). The 16mm non-flammable safety film format introduced in 1922 produced the most commercially successful product, providing wide access to movie making. 16mm film was expensive, though, and thus stayed mostly relegated to affluent, adult, amateur filmmakers. Commercial films were also produced on 16mm, including educational films which were deployed as teaching aids for youth (and adults) in a passive mode of consumption (Orgeron, Orgeron, & Streible, 2011). When Kodak released the smaller, more

affordable 8mm film format in 1932, and Super-8 film in 1965, marketing messages and imagery included children (and women) to suggest the ease of use and family values the amateur film formats offered. The French film company Pathé also introduced 9.5mm film in 1922, which was and remains more popular in Europe, and is not commonly found in Maine.

The amateur film aesthetic, which derives its origins in Pictorialism, influenced filmmakers to use the camera to capture natural objects (Zimmermann, 1995). This quickly led to the home movie genre. The Hollywood system was, and has remained until very recently, the most influential source on amateur aesthetics. The amateur or home movie maker is identified as making five types of film, which I would hypothesize are also consistent with later trends in the content of youth media productions in the 20th century: documentary, travel, drama, experimental, and family record – the last type, the family record, being unique to its creator. It's also worth noting that, as Alan Kattelle suggests, "[...] it is often problematical [sic] as to how to classify a specific film as it may have had characteristics of several types" (Kattelle, 2000, p. 275).

Use of small gauge educational films as teaching aids in schools were influenced by the government's use of film to promote patriotism, and teach army services (Orgeron, Orgeron, & Streible, 2011), which was also the preliminary inspiration for instructional design theory (Richey, 2000). The move toward efficiency in production of commercial and training films for teaching aids, and expansion of training opportunities in the use of motion picture equipment, as well as the re-codification of the hand-held camera style, resulted in the displacement of filmmaking from Hollywood (Zimmerman, 1995). In the post-World War II era photography became a part of family life, memorializing itself, and documenting its own social upheaval (Sontag, 1977). Amateur modes of production expanded, and increasingly opened up for youth filmmakers.

The influence and process in which amateur film and media producers advanced culture and technology in the 20th century is a vast subject for which there is much active research.²

While numerous books, pamphlets, and periodicals were written to educate amateur filmmakers, works authored for youth and educator audiences about

² Northeast Historic Film's Summer Symposium, The Orphan Film Symposium, the Association of Moving Image Archivist's Small Gauge Interest Group, the Center for Home Movies, and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies'

Nontheatrical Film Scholarly Interest Group are some active producers and outlets for innovative content on this topic.

filmmaking and the pedagogy of production did not become available until the 1960s (Compton, Trainor, Sheldon, Swanson, & O'Farrell, 2003). "By 1960, [however,] Jerome Bruner and others were promoting a new model of teaching and learning based on the idea of the student as actively involved in the construction of knowledge" (Hobbs & Moore, 2014, p. 23). Bruner's contemporary, Robert Gagne, an American educational psychologist, wrote extensively on the theory of learning and the pedagogy of using media as an educational tool (Richey, 2000). Gagne's theory on the Conditions of Learning offered a framework for harnessing the relationship between viewing film, instructional design and cognition. It also suggested the importance of learner engagement through performance, though the film medium limited access at that time to production as a mode for learners to *create* and communicate their response to an instructional intervention. Film production was prohibitively expensive, and no bridge existed, yet, to connect production techniques to the development of knowledge and literacy. In their paper, "The Core Concepts: Fundamental to Media Literacy Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", Tessa Jolls and Carolyn Wilson claim "it wasn't until Len Masterman, a UK-based professor, published his ground-breaking books, *Teaching About Television* (1980) and *Teaching the Media* (1985), that the foundation was laid for media literacy to be taught to elementary and secondary students in a systematic way that is consistent, replicable, measurable and scalable on a global basis" (Jolls & Wilson, 2014).

To understand where Masterman's foundation for media literacy came from, we must move through the history and aesthetics of amateur film production formats, used by individuals and families in the United States, and legitimized by the US government and scholars. The last of the amateur film formats, Super-8

film, became popular with artists and youth because it was a high quality, "low-cost" medium. This demographic also had more social and buying power by that time in the 1960s and 70s. A key shift occurs here, where the advances in video formats and the social climate in the late 1970s and 1980s drove a deeper subordination of amateur practices to the "hegemony of industrial television, avant-garde video and event video" (Moran, 1998, p. 29). Basically, video made some aspects of media production more accessible to amateur producers in the 1970s and 80s, and helped normalize the amateur aesthetic in audio/visual communication, but also brought greater expectations for higher production value, meaning a professional looking movie.

Video production was born after film, in the studio, as a method for mass communication, and employed commercial production techniques defined by similar standards. As video technology advanced into the consumer market in the late 1970s, however, the cost of production eased the formality of producing audio/visual works, including pre-production setup, number of takes, lighting, and processing and post-production time. The most affordable media production tools ever reached larger markets, including artists, youth and educators. More content was created by amateur and experimental creators, on lower quality magnetic media, and was distributed at increasingly more venues and networks. The aesthetics and cost of amateur media changed with the development of consumer video production technology, but the influence and process of the earliest filmmakers remained at the foundation. As Super-8 film and video production technology supported the growth of amateur and independent markets, a growing number of programs offering opportunities for film and video production education also rose.³

³ Some key research documenting and supporting this claim that video formats coincided with an increase in youth media production and programming opportunities can be found in: (a) *Highlights of Schools Using Educational Media* by Mickey Bloodworth, (1966). This research reported survey results commissioned by the Office of Education, U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, and conducted by the Department of Audio Visual Instruction (DAVI). Data identifies users and uses of media in public education in the US; (b) *A Closer Look: Case Studies from NAMAC's Youth Media Initiative* (2010). This comprehensive survey of youth media programs across the nation was conducted by the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC). It effectively defined and reported the scope, impact and character of the field of youth media production programs in the US in 2003; (c) "Five Trends in Youth Media" (2010), an

article in the *Youth Media Reporter* by Clark Bell and Janet Liao representing the McCormick Foundation. This article defines the investment the McCormick Foundation made in funding the development of youth journalism [media production] programs in Chicago and their intention to expand similar programs in Los Angeles and form partnerships with universities in other states to extend the assessment of youth journalism programs.

It's worth noting that these studies did not investigate the collection or existing location of holdings of media produced by youth, nor make any attempt to justify the value of those historical documents. Rather, the value was placed on the process, tools, educators and standards of its creation and delivery.

Programs did develop in many states in the US, though mostly led by independent film artists. These independents created their own classes and programs, sometimes working with students and teachers in formal school environments as artists-in-residence or conducting single sessions of professional development one-offs (Tyner, 2010). Rarely were filmmakers or educators employed full-time in public or private schools as dedicated media production educators, and in these circumstances it was often within the context of vocational programs. One other mode of youth media production that was facilitated by the maverick pioneer filmmakers and educators who promoted youth media production from the late 1970s through the 1990s was the film festival (Campbell, Hoey, & Perlman, 2001). Returning to my inquiry, to understand the local history of youth media production in Maine as it relates to the advancement of a local media literacy culture and practice, I turned to the primary source materials to evaluate their construction.

A SURVEY OF YOUTH MADE MEDIA AT NHF

A systematic survey of NHF's catalog reveals key items and collections in various states of processing that contain film and videos created by youth between the 1960s and the 2000s. The short Super-8 film titled *Mission Alpha Centauri* (1967) from the John Bannister Collection is the oldest identified student film at NHF. The largest collections in my survey were the Maine Student Film and Video Festival (MSFVF) Collection, and the Viking Video Production (VVP) Collection.

The John Bannister Collection

Mission Alpha Centauri (1967) is a Super-8 film with sound in the John Bannister Collection that was made by and stars a group of 8th grade students from the Blue Hill Consolidated School in Blue Hill, Maine. The film tells the story of a group of youth on a mission to space. It was first identified by NHF co-founder Karan Sheldon, who shared it with archivist Andrea McCarty in 2004. Later, at MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program, McCarty and co-researchers Karen Schrier and Brian Jacobson conducted research about the film, including screenings and interviews with the creators (then grown). Through their research, McCarty et al. revealed some of the pedagogical methods and implications of the project, including the long amount of time and creative development that it consumed (as cited in McCarty, 2005). They also observed the importance

of the newness of the experience of both filmmaking and experiential learning, concepts that correlate with Masterman's 18 Basic Principles for media awareness education published later in 1989 (Jolls & Wilson, 2014).

Northeast Historic Film preserved this film in 2006 on 35mm film. Digital copies and a summary online of McCarty et al.'s research provides easy access to view and understand the importance of this student film in their archive. Though the narrative of the film itself can be challenging to follow, as youth-produced films often are (Hobbs & Moore, 2014), it is observable that the students sought to collectively capture the space travel of their imagination, along with the influence of popular imagery from NASA control rooms and the first season of *Star Trek*. The sets, props, and production design appear low-budget and theatrical, and though the sound quality is low, some of the youths' voices carry words in ways that are characteristic of the local accent in Maine. These elements add a charming quality to *Mission Alpha Centauri*, and help convey the playful way in which it was made.

The MSFVF Collection

The Maine Student Film and Video Festival (MSFVF) Collection was deposited by James "Huey" Coleman, an independent filmmaker, media production educator, and early media literacy activist in Maine, who worked prolifically with youth across the state. The collection consists of approximately 85 videotapes of various formats (including 3/4" Umatic, SVHS, VHS and Hi 8), compiled by Huey, along with related paper files and ephemeral materials, such as festival programs and calls for submissions, contained in Huey's paper collection. The video tapes store short films and videos made by students under the age of 18 that were submitted as entries to the festival, and are generally organized by year, and by order of presentation at the festival. Access to this collection is currently limited due to the lack of access copies of content from heritage film and video formats, as well as unresolved rights issues with the collection's deposit status. Though limited access copies of the archival original materials exist, the archive allowed me to screen some of the original video compilations of youth-made films and videos, and sponsored the creation of some new digital access copies for further evaluation.

One of the earliest films in the collection is a short Super-8 film called *Untitled* (1977), by Black Star Productions (no further information about the creator

was available). It is an experimental narrative that depicts a rural Maine neighborhood, shots of the filmmaker's feet walking, and a journey on a school bus on its pickup route, and later drop-off. The soundtrack for the film is wild sound recorded from a radio, and includes portions from popular songs including Pete Seeger's "Night Moves" and Cat Stevens' "Morning Has Broken", and later sounds of birdcalls. This personal film describes a place (home, rural, community, transportation) and experience (the daily bus ride routine) from the point of view of a student in 1977. Through artistic camera and editing techniques, the effect of a repetitious routine is evoked, ending in images of the student turning his alarm clock down, and pulling bed covers over his head and missing the bus. This charming, simple film demonstrates best use of the medium to show a story visually, and evoke curiosity and emotion. It captures a dreamy atmosphere of a place in time (a snowy winter, 1977, the bus, the bus stop where a dozen kids are gathered to get on the bus), and frames the mood of the story artistically, as is aesthetically associated with the Super-8 film format. This example of an experimental, artistic and personal film created by a young person in 1977 is a unique expression of its creator, and consistent with the aesthetics of the medium and the playful production and storytelling techniques practiced by amateur filmmakers. The MSFVF Collection also contains a large thematic range of independently produced youth made media, including a variety of production techniques, values and aesthetics.

The Maine Student Film and Video festival started in the late 1970s, when funding for Artist in Residence programs widely brought animation and media production into Maine classrooms through a small pool of teaching filmmakers. A major turning point for youth media production in Maine occurred in the late 1970s when Denny Wilson of the Maine Arts Commission brought about a dozen filmmakers together in the capital, Augusta, to set up the non-profit Maine Film Alliance (later called the Maine Alliance of Media Arts or MAMA). The filmmakers involved included avant-garde filmmaker Abbott Meader, University of Maine professor Randy Hubor, and commercial filmmakers Everett Foster, Bruce Williams, James "Huey" Coleman, and others. The Maine Arts Commission came up with funding from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) for the Film Alliance to do something, and the idea of a festival was popular. Huey volunteered to organize the Maine Student Film Festival, and the project was off and running. MSFVF is

the second longest running youth festival in the US, now in its 42nd year.

MAMA, under Huey's direction, also organized large-scale filmmaking workshops for students around the state. According to Huey, youth literally showed up by the busload, bringing in up to 400 students a day. This provided a huge opportunity to reach large audiences of youth producers, but those workshops were problematic to sustain because of the amount of resources (money, space, logistics and time) they required. All of these programs both in and outside of schools generated submissions for the Maine Student Film and Video Festival, and also symbiotically promoted the festival and its mission, to foster and support young filmmakers, and a youth media culture in Maine.

Huey was also far-reaching in his 30+ year legacy as a media educator through an extensive list of Artist-in-Residencies in 150 schools across the state of Maine, hundreds of independent workshops and camps teaching media production to youth as well as educators in Maine and the region. Huey was the recipient of the first annual Center for Children's Media Award, and a founding member of the National Alliance for Media Education (Coleman, 2013). During the 1990s and 2000s, public funding shifted towards curriculum development, and Huey worked with youth English Language Learners in the Portland Public Schools whose families had immigrated from Vietnam and Somalia.

Huey also produced multiple artists' residencies in the school on Indian Island, a region of Native Lands in Penobscot County, populated by members of the Passamaquoddy Tribe. The films produced during those residencies include Passamaquoddy creation myths told through animation and live-action, including voice-over narration and other traditional and experimental filmmaking techniques. Most of those films were screened at the Maine Student Film and Video Festival, and some are accessible in the MSFVF Collection. The youth-led film productions that Huey created with Passamaquoddy students contain a unique tone in which the young filmmakers and their family collaborators' voices are represented authentically and with passion through the moving image medium, representing and showing pieces of their own culture.

The Wind Bird (2001) is an animated film adaptation of a traditional Passamaquoddy legend made by Tiana Vermette. It won the grand prize at the 2002 Maine Student Film and Video Festival, and went on to be screened at a film festival in New Mexico and multiple times on HBO. Vermette told me about how she produced this film, starting with the story she acquired

from Tribal Storyteller John Bear Mitchell. She filled in gaps that existed from the translation from Passamaquoddy in her screenplay, and cast her family as voices. Tiana employed her friends to help her animate through claymation. This was the fourth film Tiana submitted to the Maine Student Film and Video Festival, and demonstrates personal style as well as good artistic and technical quality.

During the 1990s and 2000s media production programs also opened in technical vocational high schools in Maine. Those programs influenced learners in more news-style production and documentary filmmaking. They focused on media production as a trade-skill, and often students were encouraged to submit to both the Maine Student Film and Video Festival as well as compete in the Skills USA competition, a local and national competition for students involved in learning technical trades. The first educators of the technical programs were either filmmakers-turned-teachers or teachers who knew how to work a camera.

The Viking Video Production Collection

The Viking Video Production (VVP) Collection contains hundreds of videotapes and DVDs created between 1995-2010 by students enrolled in a video production class at the Caribou Technical Center in Caribou, Maine, one of the northernmost towns in the state. The Viking Video Production class was named after the school mascot. The collection was donated along with large amounts of supporting documents, including paper and ephemeral materials. The class was taught by Brenda Jepson for all 15 years, and the formats in the collection include VHS, SVHS, MiniDV and DVD. Content ranges from pre-production materials, to raw footage and final master copies. Published titles include: *The Coming of the Swedes*, *A Bowdoin Expedition*, *Stan's: A Jewel in the Crown of Maine*, *Don't Fence Me in*, *Biathlon Comes to the County*, and *Aroostook State Park – Maine's First*. This large collection has a great deal of content and study to be revealed. Many of the creators are still accessible, including the instructor, Brenda Jepson.

Several of the completed works in the collection had access copies, including a video called *United We Stand* (2001), which documents and compiles interviews conducted by the class with a variety of members from their community in the days after 9/11. The footage of these interviews was also deposited at the Library of Congress as part of a national project called the

“September 11 Digital Archive.” The interviews are fascinating to watch, and the production value is very good. The technical quality of the camera and audio work is very high, as is the editing, voice-over, script and interview questions and technique. The artistic quality of this work leans toward the documentary style, and definitely points towards a high level of formal media production training for students.

The Viking Video Production Collection at Northeast Historic Film is an exceptional example of youth media produced in this context. Educator and filmmaker Brenda Jepson, who ran the Viking Video Production class, graduated from the University of Maine as a journalist before working as a producer for BBC in London for 14 years. After she returned to Maine in 1995, she was invited to start the program, which she ran vibrantly for about 15 years, despite many funding battles with the agriculture program. The Technical Center finally cut Viking Video Production in 2010.

CONCLUSIONS

Although media production is but one of a number of components considered in the media literacy skill set (Jolls & Wilson, 2014), the depth and breadth of content living within archival youth produced media assets that I surveyed offers great potential as primary source materials for understanding the history of the media literacy landscape in Maine. Assessing these assets on their own, however, is limited without understanding the provenance and larger social, technological and educational context of the collections. In the collections of archival media that I surveyed, trends in both the qualitative data (such as aesthetic quality and production value) on top of the quantitative data (such as number of videos, location produced and genre) fit well with the history of funding for arts and technical education in Maine. Furthermore, the larger picture suggests that the components of media literacy learned through media production have been provided for Maine youth as a result of key individuals who actively taught and created opportunities for a youth filmmaking culture. However, a more comprehensive media literacy curriculum has not yet bloomed in the state.

The precedent that the archival collections described in this paper, and the work that NHF has done to collect and conserve them, supports the case for an organized effort to designate repositories for this kind of media produced by youth. The media production teachers in technical schools that I have spoken with are saving

some materials on hard drives, and the Maine Student Film and Video Festival has been taking submissions via YouTube and Vimeo for the last couple of years. Despite the current production activity, however, there is little being done to collect and organize new media created by independent and student youth producers in the state.

In the survey of archival media and supporting materials from 1960-2010 that I reviewed, I observed the popularity of genres changed a little, but the themes of growing up and self-discovery largely remained the same. It's worth noting that horror themed films were frequent submissions to the MSFVF, and could be an interesting data set for future research. The greatest change in the media, besides the technology used to create the works, is the context in which they were created.

The cultural identity of Maine's rural landscape, and the history of the one-room community school, is embedded in its relationship with art and technology, and we can see in the primary source media that production programs simultaneously grew up from experimental filmmaking into technical vocational classrooms and ELL programs, always with a vibrant, and ever-present independent culture in the grass-roots surrounding it. It will be interesting to survey a collection of youth media produced from a classroom or independent program in Maine as more comprehensive media literacy concepts and the skills and tools for creating media continue to expand.

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