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GENERATION D: GLOBAL KIDS' DIGITAL MEDIA ESSAY CONTEST

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INTRODUCTION

Global Kids is a New York City-based educational organization that supports urban youth in becoming global citizens and community leaders. This report focuses on Global Kids' first Digital Media Essay Contest (DMEC), part of the organization's Digital Media Youth Initiative (DMI), a series of related programs designed to encourage and assist teenagers in thinking critically about the role of digital media in their lives and documenting their experiences with digital media. The DMI is funded by the John D. and Catharine T. MacArthur Foundation, supporting Global Kids' in gathering young people's views on the role of digital media in their lives.

The DMI includes:

- A Digital Media Youth Advisory, composed of Global Kids Youth Leaders.
- A digital media component within Newz Crew <www.NewzCrew.org>, Global Kids' online youth-led dialogue on current events developed in conjunction with PBS NewsHour's Extra.
- Global Kids Island within Teen Second Life, a youth-only virtual world in which teenagers create identities, objects and locations, interacting with them and with each other.
- A series of podcasts documenting the DMI in both audio and video <dmi.globalkids.org>.
- A digital media blog, collecting material both about and from the DMI in a convenient RSS feed <dmi.globalkids.org>.
- This Digital Media Essay Contest, run between January and March, 2006

This report is based on a review of essays submitted for the contest, DMEC materials prepared for participating educators and students, and compilations of information on entrants and their submissions provided by Global Kids' staff members.

THE DIGITAL MEDIA ESSAY CONTEST

The winter-spring 2006 DMEC was a pilot run for a larger-scale future essay contest. Global Kids' aim for this pilot run was to involve ten teachers in promoting the contest to their students, engaging students with critical contemporary debates about digital media and garnering up to 200 completed essay submissions. A smaller second tier of the contest worked directly with kids who take part in Teen Second Life; this entailed online workshops in which graphic avatars stood in for both the presenters from Global Kids and the participating young people.

For this pilot run, contest promotion was modest in keeping with the intended scale. Most participating educators responded to one of two emailings in January from Global Kids, using listservs developed through prior online projects. The contest officially began on 6 February with a submission deadline of 26 February. Three weeks is a brief run: Global Kids staff reported that interest grew as the contest proceeded; had late submissions been permitted, the number of essays would have been considerably larger.

In the event, ten teachers took part, some working with as many as 40 students submitting essays, others with only a few. In total, 133 essays were submitted for competition. Of the 122 writers who indicated their grade levels, seven were in junior high school, 25 in 9th grade, 24 in 10th grade, 34 in 11th grade and 32 in 12th grade. Although detailed demographic information was not collected, a review of participants' names indicates that slightly over half of the participants were male, and the universe of authors was ethnically diverse. Participating teachers (and their students) were based in

Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, New York, Ohio and Wyoming. The 17 Teen Second Life participants were mostly Americans, but one award winner came from the United Kingdom. For more information on entrants, including their involvement with various digital media and the complete text of their submissions, consult the MacArthur Foundation's interactive Web site on the project, located at <<http://home.learningtimes.net/macarthur?go=1176937>>.

Interested educators were supplied with detailed information on the contest, including student entry forms, student instructions and a guide for teachers, which included notes and materials for three digital media workshops that could be presented to participating students. A frequently updated Web site housed the material <www.GlobalKids.org/dmec>. For the second workshop, Global Kids provided articles from PBS NewsHour as background reading on key issues relating to digital media, including illegal music downloading, Internet privacy, identity theft, wireless Internet access, "serious" games and the accuracy of online sources. Three workshop lesson plans were made available. Eight of the participating teachers used the first, six used the second, and two used the third. Teachers were also offered the opportunity to take part in an early February conference call with Global Kids staff, and five of the ten either participated in the call or listened to a recording of it.

There were incentives for both teachers and students: teachers approved to participate received a \$75 honorarium if they submitted at least ten student essays by the initial contest deadline; each student properly submitting a completed essay received a \$10 gift certificate (or, for those participating through Teen Second Life, the equivalent in "Lindens," the currency of that virtual world).

Submissions were reviewed by Global Kids staff and by young people working with the GK Leaders program (these are students in New York-area high schools who take part in Global Kids' projects, such as its Newz Crew online dialogues), who ranked them for four factors: "Distinctiveness," "Eloquence," "Oomph-factor" (i.e., personality, enthusiasm, etc.) and "Relevance." Global Kids staff also correlated essay content to six themes concerning digital technologies of special interest to the MacArthur Foundation:

- Sixteen of the essays (12%) addressed *digital media credibility*: how students "understand credibility and truth across, within, and among the vast amounts of information that are now available through digital media."
- Forty-three essays (32%, nearly one-third) addressed *unintended negative consequences of digital media*, such as engaging in "a narrow set of experiences and relations with like-minded individuals" or internalizing "a limited understanding of privacy."
- Eleven essays (8%) spoke to questions of *civic engagement*, "how digital media is influencing young people's civic engagement and understanding of authority," shaping "their understanding of civic, national, or global engagement, values and goals."
- Thirty-three essays (25%) addressed *the art and science of games*, suggesting how "to understand the 'impact' of youth game play and what needs to be known to develop games that enable learning."
- Twelve writers (9%) spoke to questions of *race and ethnicity*, particularly how they "are represented and experienced on the Internet or through digital media."
- Finally, 21 entrants (16%) addressed the theme of *identity and digital media*, how "such new forms of interaction and engagement affect young people's development of a professional, personal or national identity."

Judging yielded 14 awards, listed below.

Five Grand Prize Winners (receiving honoraria of \$200 apiece):

- “Thanks, Uncle Ben” by Mike L., Belpre, Ohio
- “From Gutenberg to Gateway” by Mike H., Louisville, Kentucky
- “Digital Media and Me” by Stephanie M., Madison, Alabama
- “Digital Media in My Life” by Kyle M., Wheatland, Wyoming
- “From Legos to the Big Screen” by John P., Athens, Georgia

Six Essay Finalists (receiving honoraria of \$100 apiece):

- “Digital Media through the Monitor of a H4x0r” by Chris F., Louisville, Kentucky
- “Untitled Essay” by Dahye H., Brooklyn, New York
- “Digital Revolution” by Rebecca H., Belpre, Ohio
- “Megabyte of the Teen Scene” by Sylvia M., Madison, Alabama
- “Teenagers and Technology” by Kristen M., Madison, Alabama
- “Untitled Essay” by Emmanuel P., Kokomo, Indiana

Three Second Life Finalists (receiving honoraria of \$100 apiece):

- “Digital Media in Education (or Hey, I’m a Nerd!)” by Alister B., AKA Alister Harrington, United Kingdom
- “Inspiration” by Nick C., AKA nik385, Doesberg, New Hampshire
- “Why Games Affect My Life” by Stuart D., AKA Tocharaeh Wake, Idaho

Two Honorable Mentions (receiving honoraria of \$50 apiece):

- Jack H., AKA Jaz Impfondo, received a Second Life Honorable Mention for building a display for his essay submission, composed of his in-world photo and a switch to launch a surrounding light display.
- Rebecca H., Belpre, Ohio, received an Honorable Mention for Eloquence.

The quoted material below is drawn directly from DMEC entries. Significant errors of spelling, punctuation and syntax have been corrected for clarity; otherwise, quotations appear as submitted. Quotations from different writers are separated by this sign: >><<.

DMEC ENTRIES’ KEY THEMES AND CHARACTERISTICS

Overall, DMEC entries conveyed a mood of impassioned ambivalence: deep delight tempered with caution. In writing about digital media, most participating students reveled in the ease and power of digital media devices, extolling their capabilities and marveling at how impossible it has become to imagine living without them:

Who would ever have thought it possible for a kid to travel around the world and back with a simple click? Who would have even guessed it to even be fathomable for a person to play a game, listen to Motley Crue’s greatest hits, and yet still talk to friends all at once? It’s possible and done by millions of people every day sitting in front of a computer screen, and I’m proud to say I’m one of them.

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Teenagers own the present, will control the future, and have free access to the past. Digital Media has improved the possible and done the impossible. This technology has taken the best and made it even better. Digital Media has shaped “Generation Y” and has revolutionized me.

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I can't see how people in the past survived without digital media. Looking at how much I use the Internet for both my studies and my personal activities, I can't imagine life without it. For one thing, digital media saves a lot of time and effort. It is so easy to go to the school library, get on a computer, and surf the Internet for information for a research paper I need to write. It also provides a quick and efficient way to put pictures in a project. Instead of printing a picture out and pasting it down on a piece of poster board, all you have to do is copy a picture from a website and paste it directly into your project. From there, you can present the project on the computer or print it out as a hard copy. In my opinion, this is a lot easier than the old way of doing it. I can't imagine having to check out books and other hard materials like that and poring over them to find information every time I was asked to complete an assignment for school. This would take me ten times the amount of time it takes me now.

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America's youngest generation is not destined to become the useless unknowledgeable generation that many media types have predicted it will be. As a person of this generation, I know firsthand what the values of my generation are, and I know what is coming in the future. Despite the negative uses for the Internet, there is an equal upside to this communication that gives me great hope and confidence.

The changing ways that kids think have three main points. They have a greater acceptance for diversity, are becoming more curious, and have great self-reliance and assertiveness.

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Okay, so maybe a few years ago, I could've survived without my cell phone, but give me a break. ... I'd die without it now. A few decades ago, we didn't need or use technology like we do now. Nearly everyone has a cell phone, a computer, or a CD player. Many have an iPod, an Xbox, a Palm Pilot, etc. Things of that nature have come to be a necessity in the lives of teenagers today; one of them, ME! ... Digital media is something that has a huge impact on my life, and I thank goodness for it because without my cell phone, I simply wouldn't survive.

Participating teachers reported to Global Kids staff that by following the lines of inquiry posed in this contest, some students had come to consciousness for the first time of the extent to which digital media now pervade their lives, for example:

I sit down at my desk; wiggle my mouse to get the screen saver off my over-worked computer. My gaze falls down to the assignment in front of me. I pull up the Internet, Google to be exact; click on MySpace which is conveniently located under Favorites. No comments; maybe because it was checked only five minutes ago. I sigh, and stare back at my paper describing the digital essay project trying hard to avoid the pull to see if any of my friends have logged on. I can hear the murmur of the TV; my cell phone beeps, just another text, practice has been cancelled.

This is about when it hit me. The fact: teenagers really don't realize how much technology we use, the impact it holds in our lives, and how much we could use it to learn. This is when I started interviewing my friends to see how they use technology in their lives. Of course it was done through the quickest way, AIM [AOL Instant Messenger].

Whether they had gained awareness through prior exposure to debates on digital media or had awakened to these realities through Global Kids' readings and workshops,

most participants were clearly aware of risks attaching to the penetration of digital media, such as a loss of privacy, constraints on fullness of expression or a decline in free imaginative play:

Recently I have been using a web site known as Myspace.com frequently. On this site you can have online friends that you have known in the past, are friends with currently, or are meeting for the first time through the Internet. How much information should I give online? This question is a good one to ask because of identity theft and sexual predators. As a sixteen year old male I am probably at the lowest risk of falling victim to one of these two dangers as I haven't made enough money to even have a useful identity worth stealing and I am not a sexual predator's target of choice as a not so vulnerable teenage male. Even so the question must be asked and evaluated.

Online I do not give out my social security number, password, or any information dealing with my personal banking account. I only give information such as my full name to people I know well and only do so on responsible sites that make privacy a priority. By keeping this information private I am sure to never become a victim to online criminals.

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The problem with AIM and MySpace is that personality and expressions are limited. There are smiley faces, wallpaper, and icons, but those are two-dimensional. There are only so many designs you can choose from and people are so diverse that not everyone can find something that fits them. A real person has many facets. When I speak to someone face to face it is more enjoyable. I use hand gestures and facial expressions to get my point across. I like seeing other people's reactions. On AIM it's completely different. A person's tone of voice can't be heard and you don't know if someone's joking or not when they say something offensive until they say something like "LOL" or "J/K". AIM "convos" can't compare to everyday talk.

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Over the past few years there has been a trickle-down effect that has begun to affect the way that children play. We have already established that what kids play with has changed, but the how of it is when things get scary. When a child plays with blocks he or she is forced to create his or her own play experience. Toddlers can build a castle out of blocks and one of the blocks might be a knight. Some children can even go as far to imagine a bowling alley and one child might build a pyramid of blocks with something hidden in the middle. Whatever the case, the idea remains the same: The toys conform to the vision of the imaginative child.

Now fast forward to today. Parents are much more willing to buy technology for their children because of promises from the media that they sharpen cognitive skills. Look at the list of "Top Toys of 2005." The top-ranked toy is the VSmile TV Learning System, a videogame console that provides "educational" software for the youth of America. Also on the list is the Bella Dancerella Home Ballet Studio, which allows your child to become an electronic ballerina by simply stepping on different colored pads. In this world dominated by such advanced equipment, children are forced to conform to the world of the toys.

Entrants' views were varied and often nuanced, but they clustered around a group of key themes mentioned repeatedly. Each of these is explored below.

THE GENERATION GAP

It is a commonplace that in the industrialized world, the members of every generation feel remarkably advanced in comparison with their forebears. My grandmother grew up with horses and gaslights; my mother with radios and telephones and I with television and VCRs. But each generation was eventually able to assimilate the technologies of the next: Grandma learned to rely on electric light for illumination and my mother on television for news and entertainment. In contrast to previous generations, many DMEC entrants feel themselves to part of a qualitatively different phenomenon, a technological universe that often excludes their parents. To a significant extent, they perceive the generations as standing in two different relations to digital media. As one writer put it, "Some people think more about the bad points of the Internet than they do the good and often these people are parents."

Some authors mentioned that their parents use digital media at work or during leisure time. But more often, there was a pervasive sense of having crossed a generational divide, with students taking their places on the other side of a widening gap between those immersed in digital culture and members of older generations:

See, we are the first generation who has lived with all this digital media for the majority of our lives. I am not quite sure what digital devices our children will grow up with, but I am sure that we will most likely know how to operate it, unlike our parents and grandparents. The typical person age 10 to 25 understands more about electronics than our parents ever have or ever will. There are many more people who deal with digital media like I do. I am by no means socially inactive and I probably deal with more gizmos and gadgets than a nerd that grew up with my parent's generation.

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It isn't difficult to believe that adults aren't able to understand why and how digital media affects our lives because our generation more than any other has been influenced by the computer. It seems that today's teenagers were born at exactly the right time. As we grew up the computer did as well and by the time we were able to fully understand the opportunities presented by this amazing machine the computer had become one of the most amazing and useful technological devices in the history of the world.

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In my third period class, my friend Jenny sent me a text message saying. "yo d ms.v isn here wanna go out after 6." So, I was replying to her message, but my English teacher caught me. Thanks to my PDA phone, I turned on the dictionary and said I was looking for some word I don't know. Then my teacher started to talk about the new technology students carry and that they are ruining students.

My teacher is in her early forties, and she said when she was a high school student she didn't have a cellular phone, not even a beeper. When she had homework that required research, she had to go to library and check the entire card catalog to find the book she needed. She didn't have digital cable like we do with hundreds of channels. She had television with few channels. She didn't have Internet like we do now. The only media that were available in her days were television, radio, and newspaper. She said, "Why do you need all that stuff for? It's ruining teenagers."

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I think that adults should learn what kids are learning in school these days. My mom's boss doesn't know how to use Microsoft Power Point and if he could

learn, it would make things at his job a lot easier. When I have projects, like Power Points, due for school my mom always watches me do them. Afterwards she always wants me to teach her how to use them. If there's something wrong with the computer at home, I'm always called to see if I can fix it. The youth these days know so much more than they are given credit for, adults need to learn this stuff also.

IDENTITY THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

Essays varied widely in style and form, but certain patterns emerged. By far the commonest format was the “slice of life” essay, wherein the author narrated his or her day from awakening to bedtime through the lens of digital media. The students using this format painted a convincing picture of lives entirely mediated by technological devices. The first two excerpts below express unalloyed delight in digital media, describing myriad interactions with devices and systems; the third suggests there is a downside—and a cost—to placing media products at the center of one’s existence:

In a typical day I am exposed to digital media constantly. My cell phone calls me to wake me up just in time to catch the morning headlines on TV while news, sports scores, and stock reports are sent to my cell phone via text message. As I get ready for school, I either listen to music on my MP3 player or watch more news. Before I leave, I check my email accounts and add to my blog if anything particularly interesting happened that morning. I then hop in my car and turn on the radio while driving to school. At school, I go to my class, take notes from the PowerPoint presentation my teacher is showing, and write down my assignments that I'll type up on the computer later that night. At some point in the day, I check email again and maybe get online to get a jumpstart on homework. Before lunch I have Information Technology class where we work with all types of technology including movie making, sound editing, web page design and more. At the end of the day, I go to the library and get online for my online history class taught by someone 8 states away. After school, I go either to practice or to volunteer at the hospital. At the hospital, I go to the front desk, put on my headset and log into the national MediTech system, which has access to every patient in every hospital with an Internet connection in the country. After my shift at the front desk, I get my mobile workstation and go around the hospital on a wireless connection helping the nurses' stations locate everything from medicine to patients' families. After volunteering, I call home on my cell phone and check what time we're having dinner. If I have time, I'll call a friend and go hang out with them. Sometimes we get on the Internet and instant message people or we'll play video games; I'm partial to James Bond games. When I go home, I'll have a late dinner and get on my computer to do homework while watching TV and listening to music, and possibly talking on the phone. Before going to bed, I'll write a couple of emails and write about my day in my online journal.

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On school days I usually wake up at six o'clock. My morning starts with me turning on my computer and listening to my music while I take a shower and brush my teeth. After that I get dressed and watch TV with the volume off while still listening to my music from my computer. When my ride comes I turn off the music I had been listening to all morning, grab my cell phone, my iPod or my PSP and head out the door. When I get into my to school my first period is a Study Hall. My teacher, Mr. Johnson, is very lenient, so he lets the students in

Study Hall listen or play with any of their digital devices. During 6th period I have a class called SRP. This class is just like Study Hall, so I usually do the same thing I do in Study Hall. My last period is called TV Productions where the majority of the time in this class is spent using digital media. Either we are filming on a video camera or we are editing on a Power Mac G5 computer. When I leave school, I sometimes go to a friend's house and play a video game call Halo. This game is not your ordinary video game. A person can play this game over the Internet. So while we are playing in Kokomo, Indiana, we could be competing with people from St. Louis, Missouri or Tokyo, Japan. While we are playing Halo we are two steps away from his personal computer, which is hooked up to surround sound. So if you are to see me playing this video game at my friends house, that is not the only digital media I am using. I am most likely text messaging on my cell phone, instant messaging on my friend's computer and listening to music. Chances are I get home around four o'clock and get on my computer and make music on a computer program called Fruity Loop Studio. I might make up to 100 dollars a week just selling these "beats" that I do on my computer.

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Too many kids are influenced every day by digital media. Manufacturers are always telling teens to go out and buy this new digital media product because it's so much better and newer than something else that they may already have. So some kids will go out and waste all of their money on something that will just get topped again. There's always something new and better coming out in the digital media world. That can be a good thing since it means that the world is always going to be changing and advancing. But it's a bad thing because once you buy the newest product that usually costs a lot of money, newer and better ones come out and you feel like you have to go and buy that one, too.

Specific products and brand names were mentioned by most writers. These signifiers are often meant to convey the specific flavor of an individual's identity, just as advertising constructs an image by associating desirable qualities with the products being promoted. Fifty-eight of the 133 essays mentioned the iPod; 71 mentioned cell phones; 81 mentioned computers. Thirty-five cited specific game consoles, such as Xbox or Nintendo; there were 38 mentions of MySpace.com or other social networking Web sites and 45 mentions of instant messaging:

After school, I sometimes enjoy playing video games on the computer or on my GameCube, a game system made by Nintendo.

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Maybe it's an Xbox. Maybe it's an iPod. Maybe it's a Blackberry.

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I have a magenta Motorola Razr for T-mobile. It has an integrated VGA camera with 4x zoom, quick exposure controls, and MPEG-4 video recording and playback, Bluetooth Class 1 wireless technology for hands-free connectivity, 22kHz polyphonic speaker with MP3 ringer support, Speaker-independent voice recognition with full-duplex speakerphone, Messaging via Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS), IM Wireless Village and email (POP3, IMAP4, SMTP), Personal Information Management (PIM) features including Calendar, Calculator and Currency Converter, Date and Clock, and Alarm Clock 3D graphics engine for gaming J2ME MIDP 2.0 support for application, ringer, wallpaper, graphic and game downloads WAP 2.0 compliant browser with GPRS

Class 10 for high-speed data transmission. I have a ton of ringtones on it, most of which I got via Bluetooth wirelessly from my computer, along with my pictures.

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I also own a Nintendo GameCube. I enjoy playing games with my friends. We often get together and play games. Some of the games I have are Super Smash Brothers Melee, Legend of Zelda collectors edition, Legend of Zelda Wind Waker, Star Wars Rogue Leader, Star Wars The Clone Wars, Star Wars Rebel Strike, Animal Crossing, Nascar Thunder 2003, and Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles.

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I spend a lot of time with Video games made by SEGA, NINTENDO, SONY, EA GAMES, and MAXIS. Video games have more to them than you think!

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My family is all about technology, we have an iPod, Xbox, 8 TVs, the latest cell phones, digital cameras and so much more.

Overall, authors tended to equate consumer choices with freedom, possibility and agency, perhaps reflecting the strongly commercial character of the World Wide Web. Taken as a whole, the essays focus much more on acquiring and using consumer products than on other uses of digital media, such as online dialogue:

The way kids are going to function in the world is amazing, particularly as consumers. The Internet provides nearly unlimited options and choices. The vast "information superhighway" gives so many options that it will become necessary to offer customization for every product. The early signs of this trend are seen by the appearance of new sites for buying cars that allow surfers to pick a price range, color, make, model, and stereo system for their automobile. This customization brings along another desire of the consumer, the desire to bargain-shop. The Internet provides a powerful and easy tool for comparison shopping, at least comparatively easy to the past, and that ability will drive kids to buy things just their way at just their price. While the market is currently adjusting to this trend, it will only help the consumer in the future.

THE STRESS FACTOR

Our inherited notion of carefree childhood is enshrined in art. Consider William Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" of 1806:

The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest—
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:—

But even the casual asides by students represented in the DMEC suggest quite a different reality: many writers characterized themselves as suffering stress induced by pressure to achieve, and thus in need of a type of relief obtained from digital media, portrayed as an engrossing distraction from real life:

Out of all of the inventions that make up our world today, I can honestly say that TiVo is the one invention that I use the most. With the continually

increasing academic expectations for high school students, the only thing on my mind after school is to sit in front of the television and try to relieve all the stress. ... Sadly, my strict parents have condemned me to only one hour of television per weekday. That is why the TiVo is only second to the Bible for me.

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In my spare time, I like to play spades online and it allows me to relax and not think about the tumultuous lifestyle that affects students deeply immersed in their academic life. It provides an oasis and a panacea for all of the stress that accumulates from my hard work, in and out of school. It is nice to be able to relax and not think about the troubles of the world, and that is hard to do.

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Additionally, Second Life is a great stress reliever after a long 6 hours of school, which can be very strenuous.

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The Internet is the "new" way for teens to stay up to date with the world around them or even find a release from its stress.

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IPods, CD players, and other musical devices help release stress. This can really help teens because when you're a teenager the whole world is expecting you to achieve great things. Teenagers really need a way to take away the stress and music is a healthy way to do this.

COMMUNICATION STYLES AND STANDARDS

A close reading of the submitted essays yields disturbing observations about entrants' language, writing and rhetoric, suggesting that declining teen literacy may be one unintended consequence of digital media. While some essays are grammatically correct, articulate and expressive, more are peppered with technology-enabled errors. For example, reliance on spell-check utilities produced a large number of errors of a type that send the reader searching for cues: what word resembling this one was actually intended? In the first example below, it must have been "drivel"; in the second "resources"; in the third, "socialization"; in the fourth, "pinnacle"; and in the last, possibly the British "gaol":

...hours in front of a TV watching dribble.

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...a balance between recreation and responsible use of my recourses.

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Another negative is with students working so much with computers, they would loose an important socialism aspect that school brings.

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For me, it's almost the pentacle of my existence.

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Pirating, or the stealing of music, games, movies, books, and other media, is a rather serious offense that can land one in general.

Other common errors included a notable lack of punctuation and repeated inconsistencies in verb tenses. For example, each of the stream-of-consciousness sentences below appears to have been typed and sent without its author taking time to reread. (Some of them contain obvious spell-check-generated errors as well.) As all essays were submitted through teachers, the frequency of substandard writing suggests two possibilities: that overworked teachers submitted their students' essays unvetted; or that this quality of writing has become so commonplace, it raised no red flags:

Digital media included TV's cell phones pictures mp3 players I pods cameras computers Internet and Pictures Digital Media affects my everyday life.

The digital media that I use is computers Internet mp3 players camera and pictures so, I use about all the digital media that is out there.

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Digital media is all around use allot of us kids and teens like to play games like ps2, x box, PSP these are all good examples of some digital media that I use and all of my friends.

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But over all weather you play video games or you are trying to find information on the computer for a report or if you like to take pictures or talk to people on your cell phone digital media is very helping and no matter what gender religion and were you are from everybody need digital media to do daily tasks.

Some entrants thought digital technologies might be blamed for a decline in linguistic ability:

Computers and the Internet mostly affect the English language. For example, we use the Internet and we abbreviate most of the words. We seem too careless about the punctuation. This affects us when we are told to write something professional and since we are so used to disregarding the spelling and punctuation, it is difficult for us to write. We are creating a new language and seem to be forgetting our real language. We seem more illiterate. We use slang more than the actual language. This affects students and their education.

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One of the cons is the messing of the language in text messages or in chats. I think for many people the Internet is not fast enough, so now to write in a faster form they make shortcuts. Some of these popular shortcuts are "brb" meaning I be right back, "omg" Oh my God or "ilu" I love you.

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If you look at where the text-messaging can hurt the teenagers' writing, text messaging isn't a good thing. Say the teenager is writing a report, without knowing the teenager is shorting the words and not writing complete sentences. Like they do in text messaging.

While the essays chosen by Global Kids for recognition generally took clear positions on the issues, quite a few other essays were evenhanded to a fault. Many writers seemed reluctant to assert opinions. Although it is impossible to know whether their reluctance arose in response to a current climate of polarization in public debate (*i.e.*, whether, fatigued with conflict, they avoided making strong statements for fear of evoking passionate disagreement), it is suggestive of that possibility:

Teen Second Life can be many things to many different people. It can have positive aspects and negative. It just depends on how you look at it. Something good to one person could be bad for another. And vice versa. For myself, it seems to do good for me.

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In my opinion I see digital media as having advantages as well as disadvantages. I don't think that I would ever just lean to one side of digital media. All of the digital media is good to a certain point, the point being to where it is disrupting and disrespectful. I think that everyone needs to realize the advantages and disadvantages of digital media before saying that digital media is the greatest thing or that digital media is the worst thing.

Quite a few authors asserted that one's views on a controversial issue are strongly shaped by self-interest or status, for example:

One topic that I hear about a lot is whether or not people should have to pay for downloading music. This is a very touchy subject because it could lead any which way. I say that you shouldn't but if I was the artist that was trying to sell my songs I wouldn't want people to download my music for free. You should have to pay for it. But then again if you aren't the artist then you would say it should be free.

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Whether it's good or bad, it's been on society's minds for years. Many people have different opinions on the effects of digital media today. Generally, parents see digital media as a bad thing. They think it's a distraction for their kids and it contributes to their failure in school and sometimes in the decisions they make in life. On the other hand, teenagers tend to think the exact opposite.

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Another way to think about this is by whose perspective you are looking through. If you look through the adult's point of view and listen exclusively to their opinions and thought, then you are in a completely different atmosphere than if you were to talk to the person actually playing the game. Most of the time, parents look into things too much and go through it with a fine tooth comb, when if it were anyone else other than their child, they wouldn't care. If you talk to the grinning child playing the game, then you are subjecting yourself to a whole new environment. Any kid playing the game would tell you solely how much fun the game actually is. Parents think too much, and as a result, they like to blame items for their own irrational beliefs.

Again, this is open to interpretation: are these teens demonstrating mature empathy, understanding that experiences do indeed have multiple meanings which may be equally legitimate? Are they simply following a teacher's instruction to address multiple viewpoints or to compare and contrast? Or are they reluctant to think questions through to a point of potential disagreement, especially to a position that may put them in strong conflict with others? The preponderance of essays that avoided possibly polarizing views leads me to think they manifest a developing tendency, a youth culture that chooses evasion over disagreement.

THE ISSUES AND WHERE STUDENTS STAND ON THEM

In one of the workshop lesson plans provided for prospective DMEC entrants, students were offered four "barometer statements" and asked in each case whether they

agreed or disagreed. Students' views on these statements were embedded in many of the submitted essays:

1. Race Does Not Matter Online
3. Violent Games Cause Violent Behavior
3. Online Relationships are Just as Important as Offline ones
4. It's Safe to Share Information Online

Students also brought up other controversial issues touching on digital media, such as the threat of "addiction," and the risk of privileging time spent interacting with computers and other digital devices over flesh-and-blood connection and interaction in social settings. A range of common issues is discussed below.

RACE AND GENDER ONLINE

Most DMEC entrants welcomed the ease with which one can conceal or construct identity on the Internet, endowing online environments with what they perceived as a pleasing indifference to race and gender. They saw this as protecting young people who face discrimination in offline life, as making possible a purer relationship between individuals, one not overdetermined by social categories. Some saw the online world as more fair and equitable in ways that might carry over into the larger society, as in the second quotation below:

In Second Life, you can do just about anything or be anything. In Second Life there aren't very many bullies. There are a lot of gay and bi people, and unlike in real life, they aren't taunted by jerks and mean people very much. Me and a few friends hold little parties for everyone usually shunned by society, like nerds, gay/bi, disabled, and just about anyone else that feels bad about themselves.

Without Second Life, some people wouldn't have many friends.

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One aspect of the online world that makes it a perfect tool for socialization and work is the anonymity it promotes. People can meet people and share their ideas without their race, religion, or physical attractiveness becoming a factor. This optional facelessness allows true freedom and interaction without bias. A person searching for a job online may be of a race that the employer is opinionated against, but if he or she chooses not to disclose his or her race, they will be hired on pure job eligibility and nothing else.

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At school other teens are quick to judge other people as geeks, nerds, jocks, preps, and other common names. On the Internet none of those terms apply. Since no one truly knows my interests, on the Internet I won't be judged. And since I have different interests than some of my friends, I am free to meet new people with the same interests as me.

Speaking of being judged, gender and ethnicity on the Internet don't even matter. Offline it matters a lot, as much as people don't like to admit it. The Internet allows you to meet different people and takes away the ability for people to prejudge others by appearance or the friends around them. On the Internet people have a clean slate. I've met people on the Internet who probably would have never spoken to me if we ever met in person first, just because the groups of

people we hang around are different from one another. Also, the fact that I have friends on the Internet all around the world is amazing.

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Another idea I realized while playing Teen Second Life was that there are little racial barriers in digital worlds as there are many in real life. The online world doesn't seem to notice or care about other people's race, religion, ethnic group, etc. From what I have seen, there is little discrimination in the digital world. My theory is since no one person sees another; no one can really make judgments about them. All you can make judgments on is what they say. You might think that what they look like can effect your judgments, but it doesn't seem that way because anyone can change their skin color, the way they dress etc. There are some exceptions to this though, I have seen a few signs above shops in Teen Second Life that have discriminatory symbols and/or words, but you do not see that too often because the "Lindens" [i.e., the authorities and enforcers of rules] of Teen Second Life will delete these signs once they are seen or reported. This means that there are discriminatory thoughts going on in the teenagers' heads based on real world conceptions, but they do not regularly come out in Second Life because they don't have anyone to judge, or their opinionated remarks on signs get removed.

Although these were the predominant views, a few essay writers had contrary experience in online environments less protected than Teen Second Life, perceiving the injuries of discrimination in online just as in offline society:

Gender and ethnicity do matter on the Internet. People can be hurtful on the Internet to women, calling them names and saying they have no opinion on important topics. The racist people on the Internet may send mean messages calling black or foreign people names or sending pictures of racist events. People are hurtful because they will never see the others they are being racist or sexist against. A person can say a lot more on the Internet then on the phone or in person. The only positive thing about gender or ethnicity on the Internet is you can find a web page or chat room of people that are like you or who share the same interests as you.

VIOLENCE

It is complicated and risky to extrapolate from existing research correlating violent video games with real-life aggression and combativeness, because in studying human behavior, it is almost impossible to isolate cause and effect to a single factor such as violent video game consumption. As this field develops (and as video games persist, making longitudinal studies possible), research has become more nuanced, taking multiple risk factors into account.

In their 2006 essay, "Violent Video Games: The Effects on Youth, and Public Policy Implications," Douglas A. Gentile and Craig A. Anderson, psychologists specializing in media research, note that most controlled research now shows some relationship between violent video games and interpersonal aggression. By correlating multiple risk factors, they say:

[T]he group with the least predicted risk of physical fights would be (1) girls who have (2) a low hostile attribution bias, (3) have not been involved in fights previously, (4) who do not play violent video games, and (5) who have parents who are highly involved in their media habits. Children with the greatest predicted risk of physical fights would be (1) boys who have (2) a high hostile

attribution bias, (3) have been involved in fights previously, (4) who play a lot of violent video games, and (5) whose parents are not involved in their media habits.

Judging by these essays, students' views are more deeply split than those of scientists active in the field. A minority of the students participating in the DMEC perceive some aspect of digital media as stimulating or exacerbating violent tendencies. The first two writers are boys, the last two, girls:

Video games are not the reason teens are becoming more violent. It is a mixture of that and the movies we watch. Usually teens just get the "Mature" rated games because they think it makes them look cool in front of friends, to go against their parents' restrictions, or to make them think they are more grown up than others think. Another reason kids commit violent behavior from playing violent games is that they are more influenced by a game than by a book or a CD. Teens also blame them just so they don't get in as much trouble for committing a serious crime. I believe that games only affect a small percentage of teens in the world.

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Finally, the real reason behind violence in youth, and that is the use of iPods. With an iPod, a kid has access to a virtually unlimited supply of entertainment. This ranges from television shows to music and everything in between.

The reason that iPods provoke so much violence in people is with music. Music provides a kid with catchy tunes and lyrics that can be imprinted on someone's brain, because there is nothing else, such as pictures, to distract the child's mind from the violence portrayed in the music. iPods continuously pump lyrics with violent messages into people's heads, often giving them violent urges, accompanied with an adrenaline rush.

Most of the time that you see a kid listening to an iPod, he or she is not doing anything violent. Pretend that a young boy is listening to some rap music, and get an adrenaline rush. He will probably store up this energy until someone gets on his bad side, then he will unleash all of his fury on that person. The real problem with this is that he will probably start listening to music after this scene of rage, and start building up his emotions again.

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I know that there's a big debate on whether or not video games cause violent behavior and I have first hand experience that tells me that it does. My brother was playing a videogame that involved a lot of fighting and he lost. He has a very short temper so when his character died he banged his fists down on the keyboard and broke it. Then he gets frustrated and takes it out on the rest of the family and our furniture. He'll throw things of the coffee table or yell at me if I said something about the game. I remember when he was little and only wanted to play with his hot wheels. This behavior has expanded into his social life. He and his friends are so competitive about videogames that his friendships get torn up in the process of becoming the best at a certain game.

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I see teenagers who go crazy about pornography and games online. They see incredibly more violent stuff than back in the day. Little children growing up are so negatively affected by all the media showing violence that they think violence is cool. Children cannot protect themselves from the media. It's no surprise to see little children carrying cellular phones and portable game player. Lots of game

are about killing to move up a level. There's no such thing as helping weaker ones. It's all about killing and winning. One of the teenager's favorite games is stealing and killing people, especially cops. Children who are exposed to these things at early age wouldn't even think it's bad.

But a larger number of DMEC entrants expressed skepticism, extrapolating from their own experience and thus feeling certain that young people can distinguish between games or other digital interactions and real-life acts. Most expressed these views in terms very similar to the essay excerpts below:

A recurrent misconception among parents is that violent video games lead to violent behavior. In my opinion, these video games only affect children with already-violent tendencies by giving them new ideas. Kids who understand the difference between reality and an arcade game are not more likely to commit serious crimes. Only those who see nothing wrong with seriously injuring another person should not be allowed to play such games, as they give the rest of us a lot of grief from our parents.

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When turning on your computer or video game console people understand they are entering into a fantasy world. People are not actually dying and the gamer is using his controller or keyboard as opposed to a weapon. When we open up a book that contains violence we do not feel an inclination to bring violence onto others and video games are the same way. The best way I can justify my belief that violent games do not cause violent behavior is that I play violent games and I have not ever been in a fight or purposely brought serious physical harm onto anyone since I began playing these games.

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Ask anyone who has ever played...any violent video game, and he or she will tell you that the game is just a way to escape from the restrictions or reality and to be able to cope with anger and frustration. Besides, many video games are not violent at all, such as the Sonic the Hedgehog and Mario series, the best video games ever created! Some of the common assumptions are that violent video games teach children how to shoot guns and kill people, which is completely impossible! Pushing a button and watching cartooned characters kill each other does not give the knowledge or courage to pick up a gun or knife and kill people. Someone is not going to become a murderer just by killing cartoons; it takes much more than that, such as childhood trauma.

A large majority of essay authors felt that existing ratings systems for games could, if enforced, provide adequate guidelines and boundaries for parents to regulate their children's usage of potentially disturbing or destructive material:

All video games have ratings, according to which age group the game is intended for. These ratings run from EC (early childhood) all the way to AO (adults only), and everyone in between is included too. The games targeted usually fall into the M (mature) category, which can be given this rating for excessive violence and language. If parents think that a video game is not suitable for their child, then they should simply refuse to buy the game! In the end, parents have the jurisdiction over whether the children ever even play the game at home!

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Parents can also make positive contributions to their children's video experience. Parents should always carefully examine the content of the video

before allowing their children to play them. Parents should play the game first or have someone else demonstrate it for them. Parents can see firsthand the violence level. Also, restricting time children spend playing video games in general is another way parents can make a positive impact.

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Violence is something that should not be seen unless you're at least 10 in my opinion, and killing at least 13. Yes, movies put the idea in kids head that maybe it's ok to kill people and get away with it. In video games I am not so sure that it gives kids the idea to kill or hurt one another as much as if you saw a celebrity do it on a hit movie that everyone has seen. Even though video games are your command I don't believe that kids feel that it is fun to kill people in real life as to killing someone in a video game. The video game companies that release the video game have to get it approved for a rating either, E for everyone, T for teen, M for mature, and the newest addition for video games AO for adults only meaning you have to be 18 to purchase it. No sane parent would buy their 8 year old kid an adults only game because that would just be ridiculous.

ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

While DMEC entrants hold varied opinions on every subject, a general consensus on the validity of online relationships can be extrapolated from their essays: online relationships have great potential value (and risk), but unless they morph into face-to-face encounters, they can't attain the depth and meaning of in-person relationships.

Meeting people online is another big subject that I think people often see as stupid or as a desperate thing. However, I feel that, if used correctly, it might just be the next best way to meet someone. I have known a few people in my life that have met their boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse online, and I have yet to hear a bad thing about it. I think that is one of the main problems; people only hear the bad side of meeting people from the Internet and getting scammed or killed. They don't hear the story of the couple that met in a Christian chat room and have been married for almost 6 years. My first experience with a relationship was with a boy I met in online that lived in my town, and I feel that it was one of the most important relationships I have had in my life.

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Online relationships can never be that important if the two people never meet face to face, talk to each other in person, and spend a whole day with each other. Someone you meet on the Internet may be nice and charming, but in real life may be a real jerk and not who he seems. A person may even develop such a strong relationship on the Internet that he or she starts sending photographs of himself or herself, and the other person may send a picture of some really handsome man but may really be bald, short, and live with his parents.

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Online relationships are just as important. A good example of online relationships and their use is that I have some friends who are very shy. For them to make friends face to face with someone is extremely difficult. As a result, they have very few friends. With a web page, or a system like Hotmail or Yahoo, it gives them a chance to build the beginnings of a relationship with someone. It takes away the pressure of having to talk to someone face to face. Eventually, when they become more outgoing, they will be more capable of meeting people in person.

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I found a partner on Second Life, someone I really liked. I had just split up with a girlfriend from real life, as it wasn't working out. The girl I met was (I know this sounds stupid) was my dream girl. Unfortunately I live in England, and she lives in New York (near GK), so we can't actually meet up. Seeing how we only talked using digital media, we couldn't really communicate properly. That's what led to us splitting up. We had an argument, but afterwards we realized we completely misunderstood what each other were saying. If we had been talking in real life, instead of typing, it would of never happened. When we talked after the argument, we decided to just be friends, because it would be too different after what we had said. I believe online relationships are just as important as offline ones, but online ones are harder to manage. In real life, we're 'online' all the time, but our Second Lives depend on our firsts.

Students alluded to a new type of relationship enabled by online communication, at once close and protected, allowing intimacy while limiting vulnerability. For instance, essay writers frequently portrayed the Internet as a reservoir of help and support more accessible and accepting than some teens' immediate circle of friends or family:

Many teens, or kids of any age, don't exactly like to talk to their parents – or anyone but their friends – about their problems or what's going on in their lives. These sites are like online diaries. Many people get on them just to talk and vent about things that are much harder to talk about in person. Also, there is an option to "protect" your entry if you don't want the public to be able to view it. I know that these online journals have helped me in so many ways, so many times. I don't generally get along with my parents, so just getting on a site and writing about everything that's going on just brings me a kind of relief that I can't really explain. It just helps a lot!

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Sometimes, the Internet serves as a place that you can seek help. When you have some problems that you cannot solve on your own and your friends and parents can do nothing, you can get online and go to the forums. Go to the relevant section of the site and ask your questions there, you will probably get the answers. People discuss everything there. You may even make new friends there if you dare to do so. There is nothing wrong about making new friends online and chatting. You may know more about what the world and the society are doing by chatting with different kinds of people.

For some DMEC writers, especially those with friends and relatives overseas, the key relationship question was not about forming new friendships, but maintaining existing friendships and family relationships at a distance. Here, digital media were seen, without reservation, as a boon:

As I am a new American for just a few months, I do not have much close friends here that I can talk to. And I do not want to become not as close as before with my friends in Hong Kong, where I came from, so my PC with an Internet connection really help a lot. I can chat with them on MSN messenger. We can even talk and see each other if we got webcams, speakers and microphones. That is really cool! We write online diaries too! We write down what had happened everyday and our feelings so that we can know more about each other. We can leave comments to the diary too!

PRIVACY AND SECURITY OF INFORMATION

Students contributing essays to the DMEC were almost without exception well-acquainted with the risks of sharing personal information online. The majority of essays described them in similar terms, often grounding a general point in a highly specific personal story. No one dismissed the perils. Indeed, from these essays, my sense is that students have heard so much about the hazards of sharing personal information, they tend to exaggerate them (concluding, for instance, as the third writer does, that it is unsafe to make online purchases):

But one of the problems with these sites is that anybody can get on them and read them. Many people don't know how easy it is to get on there and read their information. It's extremely dangerous. A friend of mine got into some trouble with a situation like this. She was going through some problems and decided to get on Xanga and vent about it. She mentioned the fact that she felt so low that she wanted to kill herself. Apparently a few kids from school found her site, read it, and decided it would be funny to tease her about it. That made things even worse for her. Then they decided to leave her some really mean comments. So, you really do have to be careful about what you say on the Internet.

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I've made the mistake of putting personal information on the Internet to download music, and hackers destroyed my computer. People should never put personal information on the computer. Teens will often get lax as I did and put their address on certain websites thinking nothing will happen. But those teens are in major risk of their house being broken into or their social security number being taken. I believe a major problem is that teens don't understand the danger of the situation. For them to truly understand how bad it is to have their social security number taken, I think they should be educated. Teens need to know the effects of identity theft.

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People buy things on the Internet everyday. Most of them use their debit or credit card. When they purchase an item they have to punch in their credit card number, social security, and who knows what else. This information can be found, when it is found the "identity thief" will use your name, number, and other information and buy things with your money. If you're buying something online you're taking a big risk, I think we should just stick to the telephone and/or going to the store.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ISSUES

In the adult world, opinions on online intellectual property rights are divided. There are advocates of an entirely free Internet who hold the view that copyright is a thing of the past, and that the greatest gains for society will come from free sharing of all types of digital information. For instance, Stanford Law School professor Lawrence Lessig has made his books on free culture available for download without charge, even as they are available for a price between hard covers in bookstores. A growing number of independent musicians have advocated free sharing of music, and increasingly, popular activist-musicians make topical music available for free download to spread their message faster, as Neil Young has recently done with his new album, *Living with War*.

On the other side, there are tremendous revenues at stake. Media corporations are keen to protect their rights to material they own, and have succeeded in limiting music-sharing sites and promoting prosecutions of violators. Copying of digital media is

aggressively portrayed as theft in countless warnings and public service announcements.

Judging from DMEC essays, teens are well-acquainted with current controversy over sharing of music and other digital media products. Opinion seems strongly divided. Most often, views turn on whether the writer empathizes with artists and companies losing money through illegal downloads or copying, or feels that rich artists and companies can afford to share the wealth:

In a given day, I usually watch two or three Flash animations, a couple of Quicktime videos, and often download a song or two that may have been stuck in my head during school. Through my experience, I know better than to worry about the RIAA cracking down on music pirates. Why shell out fifty dollars on The Lord of the Rings Trilogy when I can leave my computer on for a week and obtain the very same for no cost? My parents should praise my frugality.

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Piracy is a very real problem that not only affects the digital world, but destroys careers of some very talented people. The unauthorized sharing of music and movies kills revenues and some companies go under because of it. Recently, Sony of America included a legal virus in their latest CDs that activated only if the music was attempted to be uploaded, it would shut down the computer, making it impossible to share the files online.

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I download music off the Internet, and I feel downloading music and movies off the Internet is okay, even with the owner not getting paid. Actors and actresses get paid more than they need for one motion picture. Actors and actresses also have posters, clothing lines, and body accessories sold for them. All musicians get paid for merchandise purchased by the same people who download their music off the Internet for free. Also, musicians get paid very well just for doing advertising and making albums. I believe it is acceptable to download movies and music off the Internet.

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The problem these days is that a vast number of teens are downloading music. Most teens don't see a problem with this. Since this is happening, a lot of musical artists are losing money. My opinion is that if a person is going to download a video or a song, he should pay a set price. It's almost like the artist of the music puts all this effort and time forth recording or taping a video or song and is losing money for it. Personally that would really make me mad if I worked hard and lost money because people were "stealing" my work.

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A large controversial matter in today's digital media is whether or not people should download music or videos without its owners getting paid. Many entertainers and labels are complaining that they are losing a lot of money from Internet downloading. In my opinion, I believe that they are making too much money. I always repay the artists I listen to by attending their shows and purchasing merchandise from them at their shows or from the Internet, which is where most of their money comes from anyways. When it comes to video downloading, the only problem would really be busy, and movies take up to much space on a computer to do much of it, so a small problem with that exists anyways.

The fear of prosecution has evidently been a disincentive for many writers, but often it is diluted by contrary experience, as described by this writer and others, suggesting that young people's pervasive ambivalence about what the industry calls piracy will persist:

Also, file sharing programs like Limewire or Bearshare allow users to share music, videos, and other files from across the world. These programs are going to change the way people shop for music. Though these programs are currently illegal because they essentially allow people to give away free music without paying the composer, they are being used by more people every day. Why would anyone pay for music they can easily get for free from other people? This is a very common question being asked in society today, and will eventually be answered by change. Very recently the newspaper began publishing articles about the music industry arresting kids for downloading music and suing them for large sums of money; because of this, most of the people I know, myself included, deleted the software off their computers because they were afraid of this happening to them. However, this fear eventually faded away and many of those people are using the software again. As long as programs like this are available, people will use them, and the music industry is either going to be forced to make this software unavailable, which would require a level of censorship of the Internet that could cause new problems I will address later, begin pressing lawsuits again, or undergo a dramatic change in which composers can almost only make money by performing live.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Quite a few DMEC entrants described direct experiences of involvement with digital media reducing social engagement, some with respect to others, some speaking of themselves. In general, authors were aware of the risk of becoming so deeply engrossed in online life that detrimental effects spill over into life offline:

Technology can be useful, and it can be destructive. Not just in a destroy-the-world atomic bomb and such kind of way, but in personal relationships and such. I'm a little sick and tired of looking around on my school bus and seeing everyone listening to music on CD-players or iPods. The girl directly beside me will be listening to music, and I'll sigh and close my eyes to rest a little, because I know I certainly won't be opening my mouth to hold a conversation. No one's interested in talking or meeting new people, why should they be? They can listen to music, much better than human interaction. Television does the same thing often, although it's also used as 'family-time' sometimes also, and people actually get together and talk about what they're watching, or it's just used as a 'background distraction device' of sorts. It's on, but it doesn't rule the entire house.

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Even though I say I'm addicted to MySpace and AIM, I'm nowhere near as obsessed as my nine year-old brother is with Internet games. The longest he was on the computer was eighteen hours and fifty-two minutes. The only way you could get him away from the computer was to tempt him with food. He is so enticed by Internet games that he wet himself because he didn't want to waste time going to the bathroom. I was shocked when I came home from school and asked why he was cleaning the computer chair with soap and water.

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When I was nine years old it was the game system era. Every kid in my fourth grade class either had their little Play Station, Nintendo sixty-four, or a really ancient one a Sega Dreamcast or was waiting for Christmas to get it from so called Santa. When we all got to the fifth grade, well most of us The Play Stations Two came out. Everyone wanted one of those and if you asked any of my friends why they didn't do their homework you would get the same excuse, "I lost track of time I was really into the game and then I fell asleep."

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I started playing Teen Second Life 11/19/05. It is an amazing game, and I was introduced to Second Life by my dad who plays on the main grid. After the first week of playing, I was hooked, and if I'm being honest, my grades started to slip at school. At parents evening my teachers talked to my dad and said how I wasn't getting coursework in on time etc. It was only then when I realized that I was spending too much time on Teen Second Life.

At the same time, several entrants reported that passionate interest in a particular digital technology had led them to new and exciting forms of active social engagement. Consider these two budding filmmakers:

I found the thing I enjoyed the most about computers was digital movies. I first got into digital movies when I received Lego Studios for a Christmas present a few of years ago. This was no ordinary Lego set. It was endorsed by Steven Spielberg. It came with a USB webcam better than most out today and a very slimmed down version of Pinnacle Video Editing Software. After installing the software and building the sets, my brother and I began making movies. ... [after screening one of his films] That night, the movie played and then something happened that changed me. Everyone clapped and cheered for the movie that we made. I loved that feeling and it caused me to want to make movies for the rest of my life. Not long after that, I began working on a website for PANIC! Productions with the knowledge I learned from my 4H Tech Team. I purchased the domain for the company, built the web pages, and uploaded them onto the Internet. I also started working on finding a team to be the core people behind PANIC! Productions.

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In eighth grade, I was in charge of assembling my tight-knit class's eighth-grade video, reflecting the past nine years of forty-six people's lives. I went through the pictures and picked out the best ones, putting them together in a slideshow of our prime years of childhood. It was during the presentation on graduation day, while my classmates laughed at each other and cried like beasts, that I realized how important a role I had earned in my school. I wasn't just the boy who wasted most of his time on the computer, but the person in charge of leaving a lasting impression of our favorite times in my best friends' minds. It was the highlight of my grade-school career.

As for larger civic engagement, this topic was notably absent from DMEC entries. There is virtually no evidence in these essays to support the Internet as a gateway to civic participation and activism.

FEARS

Every age has its bogeyman stories, its equivalent warnings against taking candy from strangers. Many DMEC entrants repeated the current version of this terrifying tale: stalking and abduction of young people facilitated by the Internet. Often, the way the

story was told revealed its roots in a fictional medium such as movies or television, but as the first writer indicates, this is not necessarily taken as a reason to question its veracity:

Privacy is a big issue for me. I watch all sorts of thrillers where a killer finds a beautiful young girl in her prime by looking at her online journals. He stalks her, finds her, and kills her. They have to base these movies on real events and it scares me. It makes me wonder about who all has seen my MySpace.

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The only negative thing I feel about the Internet community today is the amount of predators that are out there and the fact that teens don't believe anything bad can happen to them. I remember just a few years back how much I loved going into chat rooms and talking to people my own age who have the same interests as me. However, since then, I have seen the dramatic increase of adults in teen chat rooms and talk of sex in chat rooms. This is one of the main reasons I feel chat rooms should be done away with because it is becoming something utterly gross and pointless. I do think teens need to be more educated on the dangers of places like chat rooms and predators on the Internet because it is still a big issue and something that happens everyday.

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Most teenagers have computers for instant messaging and the Internet where they go to chat rooms. In these chat rooms there could sexual predators just waiting for the right person. How do parents know what their kids are getting into in these chat rooms? Teenagers will believe anything, they trust anyone. They don't even stop to think that they could be talking to one of these predators. They just assume it will never happen to them.

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Speaking of meeting your soul mate online now, sex predators love the Internet. They pretend to be younger than they really are and talk to children online. These sick people tell these children to meet them somewhere, alone, because they are "in love," and all they want to do is see their one true love in person. The sad part about it is that these kids actually fall for it and go and meet these strangers offline. The sex predators would rape the girls they meet and find pure pleasure out of it. Some children have even been killed after meeting someone offline. So think again when you meet someone offline and think that this person is your soul mate.

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... After 10 minutes of waiting, the man walks up to Joe and asks, "Would you be Joe?" Joe says, "Yes that's me, I am waiting for a friend for school." The man grabs Joe and shoves him into a car and drives away.

Joe was kidnapped and is still missing. His parents are miserable thinking he was such a great child. They never knew that all because of Joe's Myspace that the person sent a friend request and kidnapped Joe. Myspace is so huge and popular but lots and lots of predators are looking through people's Myspaces.

From the frequent appearance of such stories in submitted essays—and from the many Web sites and organizations repeating them in other arenas—one might conclude that Internet-facilitated abductions, rapes or murders are common. But here again, these essays suggest that young people have been so strongly warned of digital media-related risks that they greatly exaggerate them. The Department of Justice's Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children

(NISMART 2) estimated that there were 115 full-fledged stranger kidnappings in 2002, for instance; with 30 million children aged 14 and younger in the population, that suggests a 1-in-261,000 chance of being thus victimized. In short, judging from these essays, efforts to educate (or frighten) students have resulted in a level of prudence more than commensurate with the actual danger.

RULES AND BOUNDARIES

A few DMEC entrants called for stricter guidelines concerning video games or younger children's use of the World Wide Web, almost always based on their own families' or friends' experience:

In my opinion there should be stricter rules on the age of kids who have online journals. Either that or parents should keep a better watch on what their kids are doing online. I know what's right and wrong and what I should and shouldn't put up, but how does a 10 year-old know? When I turned thirteen I was thrilled that I'd finally be able to get on the Internet. I'm the oldest of four kids and I'm the experimental child. My parents deal with my experiences and base what I do to what my siblings do. So if I mess up on something they think my siblings are going to do the same thing. When I was on the Internet my younger sister was ten. My parents thought that if I could be on the Internet and not get into trouble at the age of thirteen, then my sister should be able to be on it at the age of ten. We tried this scenario and my sister played around. After a month my family started getting random letters from random companies. My parents thought it was just junk mail that was getting sent out. Then my mom gets her credit report and finds out that my ten year-old sister had been buying things from e-bay and music sites. She spent about two thousand dollars on merchandise and she put my mom's personal credit information online. It's been almost three years since that incident and we're still getting junk mail from websites that she visited.

But one digital technology in particular drew many writers' comments about the need for codes of conduct: cell phones, which were often described as intruding into every aspect of life, despite their obvious advantages. Some students complained of too-harsh policies against cell phone use in school; and some proposed new rules and policies to address the problem. There was no consensus, other than acknowledging a problem:

When students use their cell phone in class it takes away from their learning. Many schools have set rules that say cell phones are not allowed inside the schools at all. If they are seen they are taken away. Students have also been caught cheating with their cell phones. Students send the answers to their friends through text messages, or some even take pictures with their camera phones and send them to the other person. So I can't blame schools for having strict rules about cell phones.

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The disadvantages of the cell phone are that, I see kids everyday who have cell phones out in class, which is against school rules, it is a great distraction, people are always wanting to text message and talk to their friends or their boyfriend or girlfriend.

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In most schools there is a policy against cell phones. I think this is stupid. I think if people abused the rules they should be the only ones punished. Just cause

someone chose to text their answers to someone else in the class means they should have their phone taken away not everybody. Understanding that phones can be used inappropriately they can also be used appropriately such as to call your parents or be contacted about something important. So with that I think cell phones should be allowed in school and just have consequences for those who abuse the rules.

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I think that we should be able to have cell phones in school, but I also believe that the only rule system needs to be developed by both students and adults. I think that we might be able to come up with rules such as having them on vibrate and only answer them in case of an emergency. If students violate these rules then the classroom teacher should take care of it. Students and teachers should establish punishments appropriate for the violation such as taking the phone for the rest of the day. We should be able to keep them on if they are not interfering with the class. I think that students shouldn't be able to talk on them or text during class without the teacher's approval. I think that if both teachers and students could come up with a compromise then but students and teacher would be a lot happier.

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Usage of cell phones during classes is a bad idea. They provide a great chance for students to cheat off different students. They allow them take pictures of papers, tests, and also quizzes allowing students to send them to others for them to get to cheat and get answer or even start ahead of time. Another thing that can be done with phones now is texting which is kind of like emailing from one phone to another but is really fast. This is the most common use way of cheating with phone that I see. That is what bothers me the most when I am taking a test and I am working really hard and then a fellow student who is texting someone else to get answers. It drives me nuts because I study for the test and I am working hard and there is some else who doesn't have to worry about it because they cheated on it. If I ever did that I would never be able to get that out of my mind.

DIGITAL LEARNING

Many previous sections of this report include useful information about students' informal digital learning: some have become adept researchers; some have learned digital media production, specializing in music or moving-image media; and some have learned a great deal about computers, both hardware and programming.

The Second Life participants stand out as especially dedicated and self-directed learners, avid to increase their mastery of their virtual world:

I love scripting in Second Life. I program using C# ,C++, and many other languages. Scripting in Second Life can be hard. Most the time, people are bugging you and asking you for favors, so what you need to do is have a private area to learn when you learn scripting. I have spend most of the time learning these languages from web sites...

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Not long after I joined [Second Life] I met some people and made some friends. I would play games, chat and hang out. After not long my friends list started to grow and I soon found out that Teen Second Life was a fun and friendly place to play, build, chat or just hang out. I was happy with my building

skills but I wanted to be able to make better stuff that just a car or a sword with a pre-made freebie script dropped in it. So I started to learn to script I looked everywhere I could find for tutorials and after not long I was getting to the point I could understand simple and somewhat complex scripts. ... There have been several things I have been able to do only in Second Life that I couldn't have done in real life for a long time or ever. A few being owning land, having a house, having a shop, building creations and scripting them to do stuff, flying, tossing a cube weighting a simulated 1000 kilograms like a toy, fighting in battle areas, making my own guns, having fun with physics, causing objects to explode at random with the physics engine and lots more.

A minority of authors also mentioned what they perceived as informal educational impacts of primarily recreational digital media, such as games or online chat:

Digital media can be very helpful in education, though at times people may not believe it. If time is taken to think about it education can be found in many digital media forms. In video games, there are often times puzzles that need to be solved. Examples may be games such as Tomb Raider or Knights of the Old Republic. They make the player think and work out problems to find the required solution to move on in the game. Some games are specifically designed for education. One major upcoming purchase is the leap frog gaming system. It is made to help kids read and solve math problems.

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I communicate with people from across the globe, almost daily, via e-mail and the website francaisfacile.com. I write to native French speakers who want to either learn English or practice their written skills, and in return they help me to ameliorate my French skills. I correspond with people from France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Morocco.

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With the Internet, and with many programs and games, you can learn things you wouldn't in school or from any other place.

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Games that have the RPG [role-playing game] concept allow me to be a character or characters and help them through problems and sort of evolve throughout the game. This effect allows me to see the importance of making the right choices in life and the consequences of making the wrong ones. This kind of lesson is one I think everyone should have to learn.

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Gamers often group together in clans or guilds to play alongside each other on a regular basis. Clans and guilds are microcosms of the business world in that people must learn to work together to achieve goals systematically.

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My first, and favorite, video game console was the Nintendo. Although it would amuse me for hours, I never actually played it. Playing the games was too hard for me because I lacked the hand-eye coordination to do so. Instead, I simply became my dad's personal cheerleader. I would watch my dad play "Zelda" and "Super Mario Cart," the only two games I owned, and shriek along with sheer excitement. Whenever he played "Zelda," I would become the "back-seat driver" and command him to go left instead of right because I knew all the secrets of the game. When he played "Super Mario Cart," I would twist my body left and

right, mentally urging our car to do the same. Currently, my siblings' and my favorite game is "Dance Dance Revolution." ... Because I engaged myself in video games earlier on in life, my brain has become quicker in responding to various things. I now also have very good hand-eye coordination and play softball and tennis.

Digital technologies have enabled learning for students with special needs, including this visually impaired DMEC entrant:

I have to have the Zoom Text enlarger program on the computers that I use such as my school computer, home computer, and the laptop computer that I use. This program enlarges my work and I am able to type and read information on the computer screen. I am able to look up information and the Internet and use the Internet for entertainment purposes.

Quite a few students described digital innovations that had changed their formal, in-school learning experiences, including tools for teaching, communicating between teachers and students and accessing information relevant to their education. Virtually all mentions of these innovations were positive:

I usually use the aforementioned search engine [Google] to find information and websites that can help with my work. When I finish with my research and I want to check my grades, I go to Edline, the website my school uses to post grades, assignments, and test dates. Each student has a password and screen name so he can access his and only his grades; the student's parents have a password and screen name too, so they access his grades separately. Within the site, each teacher has a page, which he or she uses to post important information. Some teachers use the website more than others, but all in all it is very helpful. Teachers must update grades every three weeks; that way parents can check grades without waiting for report cards.

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[T]here is another positive aspect of education, which is the ability to take school courses online. You can be halfway across the country and be taking a course in your own home. It makes things simple, because you can take things at a slower pace. Also, it creates challenges of a new level, because the research must be done completely on your own. But there is also the ability to discuss the class with others in it.

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Teachers also have ever-improving ways to get information across to students. Aside from the Internet, teachers these days are able to use devices such as Smart Boards and other enhanced projectors to teach their pupils.

These kinds of technologies reduce the time and effort put out on the teacher's part by saving them from having to write lessons on the white board, as well as allowing them to concentrate more on the lesson and what is being presented than writing on the board. It is also easier for students to actually see things from the teacher's computer screen itself.

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Teachers these days are able to use things like smart boards and projectors to teach students. It is nice to be able to see what is on the teacher's computer screen and take notes that way. Teachers also use PowerPoint presentations full of information for students to copy down. I think that this process makes it easier to teach because the teacher can concentrate more on explaining what the subject is about instead of concentrating on writing notes on the board.



In the classroom there are many means by which educators are introducing new forms of digital media to their students and incorporating them into their curriculum and instruction. Two specific forms that have particularly influenced my educative experience are the flex camera and the IVDL (Interactive Video Distance Learning).

The flex camera has been particularly useful in my Mathematics class. Instead of writing the notes and material on the board he writes the lesson for the day on blank computer paper and projects it onto the computer by means of the flex cam. This provides easy accessibility to the notes and they are permanent. My English instructor has instituted the flex cam into her methodology by encouraging us to make presentations with the flex cam. As an aid in teaching and presenting the flex cam has benefited my education.

While in Health class the teacher utilized the IVDL lab in my high school by providing a presentation from the Cleveland Health Museum on different sexually transmitted diseases. This experience opened doors and now many different courses include connections through this specific form of Digital Media.

FOR THE FUTURE

Global Kids' pilot run of the DMEC provided ample material for study. The contest was designed effectively and run efficiently. At a larger scale, with proportionate outreach and a longer timeframe, it should yield a wealth of fascinating results. I recommend only one clarification and two innovations to improve their usefulness.

Clarification is needed in defining digital media as straightforwardly as possible. The definition employed for DMEC workshops needs work: "Digital media is information transmitted digitally whose results can be reproduced indefinitely without any loss of quality (computer games, the World Wide Web, pod-casts and text messaging)." Media can be a singular or plural noun; it refers to a means or vehicle of transmission, not the information transmitted. Here's a suggested substitute:

Digital media are technologies and devices that transmit information by breaking it down into signals that can be represented in numerical form and reproduced without loss of quality. Examples employing digital media are computers, the Internet and World Wide Web, computer games, cell phones enabled with text messaging, podcasting, digital video and audio.

Demographics: I suggest that Global Kids collect basic demographic information on all participants, using a registration form similar to that employed for the Newz Crew project. As I reviewed essays, I often wondered whether a more nuanced analysis of students' views would have been possible had I been certain of entrants' gender, age, residence and ethnicity. Were attitudes toward race and gender online the same for participants of color and those of European heritage? Did boys' views on violence and video games differ from girls' observations? Was access to digital media equally open to rural and urban teens? Such categories don't overdetermine meaning, but they can enhance it.

Questions: I suggest formulating questions that are more likely to elicit specific stories and observations, engaging entrants in exploring their meanings. In this pilot run, contest themes were quite general and open-ended. It appeared that a large proportion of essays were shaped by the workshop lesson plans provided by Global Kids to participating teachers: for instance, Global Kids' four "barometer questions"

appeared again and again as organizing devices for submitted essays. The “agree/disagree” presentation of these questions helped to shape many essays, with authors focusing primarily on whether they found particular digital media good or bad. It would be more interesting and revealing to learn not only how they use digital media and whether they are for or against a particular technology, but what they think it all means for themselves, their generation and the larger society.

Below are some suggested ways to frame future essay questions. With more specific questions like these, I suggest giving entrants several questions and offering each individual the option of writing to those he or she finds most appealing:

- 1) Select one or more from the [supplied] list of digital media and answer these questions:
 - How do you personally use the selected media? Describe some way that the selected media have an impact on your own life.
 - Describe how the selected media affect people around you: your friends, family, community and/or the larger society? Are the selected media altogether helpful? Or are there downsides?
 - Imagine how things would be different without the selected media. What would change, and how?
- 2) Look around at school or when you’re hanging out with friends. How many different digital media are people using? Explore these questions:
 - How do digital media affect your relationships: who your friends are, what you do together, how you talk to each other, how well you know each other?
 - What if all devices stopped working for a week? How would your relationships be different without digital media?
- 3) How have digital media affected citizenship and activism in the United States?
 - Consider your own community and the people you know: are they more involved in global or political issues than they might be without computers? Or less involved?
 - Can you see ways that digital media could improve society? What are your ideas?
- 4) From the [supplied] list of digital media, select one that matters most to you. Please share a story about how it affects your life:
 - Can you remember a time that this particular device or technology affected you strongly? What happened?
 - Reflect on why it was so important to you. Did it change you in some way?
 - Does this digital medium replace something else that once was part of your life? Is that a good thing, a bad thing, or mixed, and why?
 - Consider whether, judging from your own experience and what you have seen, the digital medium you are writing about means something to other people too: your immediate friends, classmates, family, community, or the whole world.

