From Differentiated Use to Differentiating Practices: Negotiating Legitimate Participation and the Production of Privileged Identities

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Abstract

Prevailing approaches for studying relations between digital media and social inequalities focus on 'differentiated uses' of digital media. Since differences in access do not fully account for differences in use, many scholars have proposed that differences in digital skills, or related concepts such as literacies, help explain the discrepancies. By implication, interventions aimed at equalizing digital access and skills should help ameliorate gaps in use and hence lessen social inequalities. The contention of this article is that these well-intentioned efforts oversimplify and distort relations between digital media and social inequalities. My argument is based on an in-depth ethnographic study of the launch of a well-resourced public middle school in New York City that attempted to reform public schooling in inclusive ways in light of the rise of digital media. I argue that while the intervention helped mitigate differences in access and skills, it did not ameliorate differences in purportedly beneficial uses. Moreover, and paradoxically, the intervention helped remake some of the very social divisions that concern digital inequality scholars. To overcome this seeming paradox, I propose an alternative approach for studying relations between digital media and social inequalities, one focused on 'differentiating practices'. Such an approach directs attention toward the role of digital media in negotiations over legitimate participation in the social practices that make and mark social difference in situ. Doing so offers scholars a way to situate their accounts of differentiated use while gaining clarity about when and how digital media contributes to the production of privilege.

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century numerous scholars argued that the popular 'digital divide' metaphor simplified and distorted relations between new digital media technologies and social inequalities (e.g. DiMaggio and Hargittai 2001; Hargittai 2002; Mossberger et al. 2003; Selwyn 2004; van Dijk 2005; Warschauer 2003). These works criticized the notion of the digital divide for focusing too narrowly on access to personal computers and the internet and for oversimplifying digital inequalities into two categories: the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.' Critics rightly attacked the metaphor for its technologically deterministic conceptualization of new technologies.

To address these limitations, scholars recommended a new 'digital inequality' research agenda that focused on differences in how people used new and emerging information and communication technologies, what DiMaggio et al. (2004) referred to as 'differentiated use.' In subsequent years, researchers attempted to identify which factors, in addition to access, account for differentiated use of different media technologies and infrastructures, including personal computers, the internet, mobile phones, social network sites, video games, and tools for media production. While numerous factors were proposed, a consensus emerged that skills (Brandtweiner et al. 2010; Hargittai 2002; Livingstone and Helsper 2010; Mossberger et al. 2003; van Deursen and van Dijk 2011), or related concepts such as literacies (Jenkins et. al. 2006; Warschauer 2003), or cultural or technical capital (Brock et al. 2010; Gilbert 2010; Halford and Savage 2010; Tondeur

et al. 2011; Zhang 2010) are key factors in the production of differentiated use and hence digital inequality. By implication, interventions aimed at equalizing digital access and skills should help narrow gaps in certain uses – those thought to be particularly beneficial – and hence help ameliorate social inequalities.

In the following pages I draw on an in-depth ethnographic case study of one such intervention in order to examine the merits and limitations of the 'differentiated use' approach to theorizing and addressing the contributions of digital media to social inequalities. My case centers on an ambitious and well-resourced new public middle school in New York City that hoped to allow students, regardless of their backgrounds, to use digital media in ways that digital media scholars have deemed especially beneficial. In particular, the school provided students with access to state-of-the-art digital media production equipment such as video and audio recorders, digital cameras, and powerful laptops equipped with software for animation, video editing, 3-d modeling, sound production, computer programming, and game design. The school also provided extensive training in how to use these tools, in the hope that students would learn to be 'makers,' 'tinkerers,' and 'designers' of media technology. Drawing on ethnographic documentation of students' daily lives in and out of school, I argue that there are serious limitations to the differentiated use approach to theorizing relations between digital media and social inequalities. While the school's intervention helped equalize access and skills it did not ameliorate differences in purportedly beneficial uses, especially in situations where students had more control over their participation. Moreover, the school's focus on digital media production paradoxically helped remake some of the

social divisions that the school's planners, as well as digital inequality scholars, hope to mend.

To help make sense of this seeming paradox and to offer a way forward, I propose an alternative approach for studying and theorizing relations between digital media and social inequalities, one that centers on the concept of 'differentiating practices.' The notion of differentiating practices is like the concept of differentiated use in that both attempt to account for differences in how people orient towards digital media. But unlike the notion of differentiated use, the concept of differentiating practices conceptualizes digital media use as entailed in social practices, collective cultural-material activities that involve much more than can be accounted for in the decontextualized notion of 'use.' I propose the term 'differentiating' so as to emphasize that negotiations over legitimate participation in social practices often help make and mark salient social differences and identities for those involved. By focusing on negotiations over legitimate participation, I hope to draw attention to the role of digital media in the processes by which social divisions are made and remade in a historically constituted everyday world.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. I first introduce the empirical case and analyze the students' media production activities through the lens of the differentiated use framework. After showing that such a framework does not sufficiently account for the evidence, I introduce an alternative approach that starts with the notion of differentiating practices. I then reexamine my case through the lens of this alternative framework. I end with a discussion of the contributions and limitations of the

differentiated use approach to digital inequality and propose that theories of practice offer

one promising way to preserve its contributions while overcoming its limitations.

Educating Students to be 'Makers' of Media Technology

The empirical portions of this article are drawn from an in-depth ethnographic study of

the launch of the Downtown School for Design, Media, and Technology (henceforth, "the

Downtown School").[i] Located in lower Manhattan, the Downtown School is a public

middle school that opened in 2009 with a single sixth grade class. The study ran between

2009 and 2012, with the bulk of fieldwork taking place during 2009 and 2010.

By taking an ethnographic approach, I worked to understand how digital media was

meaningful to people, and especially students, in the context of their everyday lives.

Ethnographic approaches have the potential to offer a rich account of *how* inequalities are

made and often remade (Willis 1977). They also allow researchers to discover salient

factors that were not anticipated prior to data collection. Such an approach differs from

survey-based studies of digital inequality, which rely on decontextualized notions of 'use'

and which prejudge which variables can be used to account for observed differences. As

such, ethnographic studies offer opportunities to examine the validity of existing theories

of digital inequality and to provide grounds for revised theorizing.

The ethnographic study reported in this article centered on the daily lives of the school's

first class of 75 students as they participated in activities organized around schooling,

peer cultures, after-school activities, family life, and online settings. Documentation

consisted of extensive field notes from regular participant observation, interview

transcripts, and collected digital artifacts, such as Facebook profiles, email listservs, and

media projects produced by students in and out of school. Field notes from participant

observation were the primary method of documentation. Over 400,000 words of field

notes were produced through regular participant observation at school, PTA meetings,

public assemblies, field trips, commutes, and home-visits. Semi-formal interviews were

used to document accounts of students' weekly routines that were not observable through

participant observation. Interviews were also used to elicit participants' reflections on

their uses of and orientations towards different digital media, how they came to choose

the Downtown School, and the organization of the school's peer culture. Semi-formal

interviews were conducted with whichever students, families, and educators were willing

to participate. Most of the parent and caregiver interviews took place in their homes and

included a tour of media technology in their domestic space.[ii] Media artifacts were

collected throughout the study, both in person and online.

The Downtown School was a particularly pertinent site for studying relations between

digital media and social inequalities. For one, the school was one of the most ambitious

contemporary attempts to reform public schooling in inclusive ways in light of the rise of

digital media. Supported generously by major foundations, the school was designed by

leading experts from the fields of media and technology design, on the one hand, and

progressive school reform, on the other. Dovetailing with the digital inequality

scholarship mentioned above, the Downtown School's founders aimed to cultivate certain

uses of digital media by coupling access to state-of-the-art digital media equipment –

laptops, tablets, mobile devices, software for creative production, a three-dimensional "embodied learning environment" that made use of motion capture technologies, etc. – with pedagogic activities aimed at cultivating complementary skills and competencies. Given space constraints, I will only focus on one such clustering of educator-sanctioned digital media 'uses,' those centered on being a 'designer,' 'maker,' 'remixer,' or 'tinkerer' of media technology. In their planning and promotional materials, the school's founders argued that learning to use digital media in these ways had general benefits for students, democratic societies, and a vibrant economy in the twenty-first century. These materials echoed, and in some cases cited, arguments made by scholars and popular commentators (e.g. Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2006; Lessig 2004, 2008; Shirky 2010), and they resonated with digital inequality scholars who have drawn attention to an emerging 'participation gap' (Jenkins et al. 2006), 'participation divide' (Hargittai and Walejko 2008), or 'production gap' (Schradie 2011). In practice, the school's founders attempted to realize these goals in several ways: they wove activities focused on the design and production of digital media – blogging, digital comics, digital photography, digital videos, video game design, information visualization, etc. – throughout the curriculum; they required all students to take a media arts course focused on game design; and, they offered a collection of after-school programs focused on creative production with digital media. The school charged a fee for its after-school programs, but the fee was waived or significantly reduced based on a family's ability to pay.

In addition to promoting creative production with digital media, the Downtown School had uncommon social class and ethnic diversity for a New York City public school.[iii] When the school opened, around half the students came from households where at least one parent held a graduate degree and worked in a professional field; many of these parents held high-status positions in cultural fields such as academia, design, art, television, film, new media, publishing, and advertising. As shorthand, I will refer to these students and their families as 'privileged' in this article. Contrasting sharply with these families, were families who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, about forty percent of the student body. Many of these students had parents or caregivers with some or no college education, and who were employed in comparatively low-paying service work or were unemployed. For this article, I will refer to these families and students as 'less-privileged.' This bimodal distribution of social class mostly corresponded to the Department of Education's institutional categories of 'race and ethnic origin,' which classified the vast majority of privileged students as 'White' and 'Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander' and the vast majority of less-privileged students as 'Black or African American' and 'Hispanic or Latino.'[iv] Finally, the school attracted boys at approximately a three-to-two ratio – an early indicator that the school's intervention cloaked inherited cultural biases.

At first glance, my documentation appears to validate some differentiated use scholarship, which, as mentioned earlier, often prioritizes the importance of 'skills' in producing differentiated use. The school's required media production activities largely succeeded in cultivating new skills amongst both boy and girl students from different

socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. While not all students embraced these activities, a significant proportion of students from both privileged and less-privileged socioeconomic backgrounds became more skillful using digital media for creative production over the course of the school's first year. For example, none of the students had much prior experience with digital game design, and yet most students learned how to build digital games using software and computers provided by the school. Moreover, a collection of students, including several from less-privileged backgrounds, learned to build complex and intricate games with multiple levels and imaginative designs. Finally, girl students produced some of the most complicated and sophisticated games in the required game design course.

Yet when students' digital lives were considered more holistically, differentiated use models no longer matched the data. The relative leveling of access and skills exhibited in the classroom did not mitigate differentiate use in situations where students had more control over how they spent their time. In students' more voluntary or 'interest-driven' activities (Ito et al. 2010), many historical structures of privilege returned to the fore. For example, despite the skillfulness exhibited by many girl students in the required game design course, only one girl student regularly attended the school's optional after-school programs that were focused exclusively on creative production with digital media (comics, animation, 'hacking' toys, digital video, video game testing, etc.). All of the rest of the regular participants were boys, and most were boys from privileged families. Moreover, the vast majority of students who engaged in non-required digital media production projects outside of school were boys from privileged families. Many of these

boys used the skills and software introduced at school to work on unassigned games and media projects from home, sometimes with friends that they also hung out with at lunch, recess, and during voluntary after-school programs, a point I will return to shortly.

How should we account for these differences in digital media use between situations where media use was required and situations where students had more say over their participation? For one, it is clear that providing access and skills does not, in and of itself, lead to the media production activities that many digital inequality scholars endorse. As just noted, all but one of the girl students who demonstrated impressive skills with digital media production for assigned projects did not use those skills regularly outside of activities assigned by teachers. Further, most students did not attend the school's after-school programs, even though the programs were subsidized for less-privileged families.

Digital inequality scholars have proposed additional factors, such as differences in the quality of access (DiMaggio et al. 2004), which can help account for some of these discrepancies, especially for students who had limited access to quality digital media equipment in the home but who nevertheless demonstrated an interest in digital media production at school. For example, several less privileged boys regularly attended the school's after-school programs and routinely demonstrated an interest in media production, yet they also suggested that they lacked the equipment for engaging in many media production activities at home. Several lamented to me that they 'wished they had iMovie' at home, and one less-privileged boy even adorned his PlayStation3 with Apple stickers, even though his family owned an outdated Dell. However, differences in the

quality of home access do not account for why most students did not take advantage of the school's after-school programming, nor does it account for why privileged girl students did not regularly participate in non-required media production projects, even though they had quality access at home.

Digital inequality scholars have also proposed that 'autonomy of use' (DiMaggio et al. 2004) – which is affected by sharing computers of having computer use overseen by bosses, teachers, or parents (cf. Tripp 2011) – contributes to differentiated use. While parental attitudes about appropriate computer shaped all students' computer use, I did not find widespread evidence that autonomy of use sufficiently accounted for why many students did not participate in media production projects that were not assigned. On the contrary, I found that many less-privileged girls had more autonomy of use in the home than most of their peers, not because they had more lenient parents, but because they were not as involved as their peers in organized after-school programs – stemming from a lack of attractive options as well as an expectation to help out with chores and child care for siblings and cousins while parents and guardians were at work during the afternoon hours. As I will discuss shortly, this relative autonomy of use in the afternoon hours provided conditions for many of these less-privileged girls to become some of the most skillful users of social media, but educators did not recognize such uses as particularly beneficial. Finally, privileged girl students' lack of participation in voluntary media production activities– even though many of these students had quality home access, parents who saw value in media production, and the skills needed to carry out such projects – suggests that the combination of quality access, skills, and opportunities for

using computers with relative autonomy do not fully capture the factors that produce

differentiated use. Moreover, as I discuss later in the article, the school's intervention

paradoxically contributed to the remaking of several of the social divisions that both

educators and digital inequality scholars hoped to mend.

To help make sense of my documentation of the students technology use I propose an

alternative approach for investigating relations between digital media and social

inequalities, one centered on the notion of 'differentiating practices.' I will first sketch

the theoretical inspiration for this alternative approach before applying it to the empirical

case of the Downtown School.

Digital Inequality as Differentiating Practices

By proposing a theoretical and empirical shift from 'differentiated use' to 'differentiating

practices' I am drawing inspiration from the revival of interest in theories of practice

within the human sciences, as well as recent interest in works of Pierre Bourdieu among

some digital inequality scholars (e.g. Gilbert 2010; Halford and Savage 2010; North et. al

2008; Robinson 2009; Tondeur et al. 2011). A thorough review of theories of practice is

far beyond the scope of this article, but it is possible to offer a quick sketch of central

concerns and assumptions before defining the notion of differentiating practices and then

bringing it to the empirical case of the Downtown School.[v]

Theories of practice have attracted renewed interest amongst scholars since late 1970s

and early 1980s in part thanks to influential works by Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1979),

and Ortner (1984). By theorizing practice (or "structuration" in Giddens' case), scholars tried to overcome the long-held antagonisms and limitations between two apparently antithetical theoretical stances in the human sciences – objectivism (or structuralist), on the one hand, and subjectivism (or constructivist) on the other – without abandoning the valuable contributions of either. Against objectivism, these scholars insisted that persons play an active role interpreting and making the socio-historical world. However, against subjectivism, theories of practice argue that persons do not do not interpret and make the social world exactly as they please. Rather, to borrow from Marx (1978 [1852]), they do so 'under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.' Agency and structure come together in social practices, which can be thought of as collective, and often taken-for-granted, cultural-material ways of doing things that vary across time, place, and distributions of power (Wacquant 2005). Practices are inherently social and thus cannot be reduced to individual behavior, and yet they depend on ongoing participation on behalf of persons in order to be sustained and changed. Since the practices that persons participate in have been historically structured, participation is simultaneously structured and structuring, partially determined and partially determining, but never closed off to change. From such a perspective, participation is not necessarily fully voluntary or amicable, as colloquial uses of the word can imply. Instead, participation often involves conflicts, power-relations, and contradictions as co-participants struggle over and negotiate legitimacy in different situations, a phenomenon that Holland and Lave (2001) referred to as 'local contentious practice.'

My use of the term 'differentiating' is meant to draw attention to how participation in social practices often positions selves in relation to others. From such a perspective, social positions and identities are not natural, fixed, or essential in character. Rather they are always multiple, relational, and in states of ongoing construction. Through negotiations over participation, persons are identified and make their identities in part to say who they are, and in part to say who they are not (cf. Holland et al. 1998). Persons cannot fashion any identities they like since legitimate participation depends on acceptance by, and coordination with, others who co-participate in the collective activity. All of this takes place through negotiations over legitimate participation in collective activities that have particular sociocultural histories.

An empirical and theoretical approach that foregrounds differentiating practices has important implications for how scholars document and understand differences in technology 'use.' Instead of conceptualizing digital media use as a disaggregated product of an individual (with their skills, dispositions, tastes, etc.) and a technology, a social practice approach sees technology use as embedded in collective cultural activity. Uses of digital media are just some among numerous interwoven facets that co-participants interpret, rework, and struggle over in their negotiations over legitimate participation. Further, a practice-based approach offers digital inequality scholars a robust way to theorize how persons come to acquire technical skills (or literacies, technical capital, etc.), a process that is often implied, but not theorized, in digital inequality scholarship. From a practice-perspective, persons acquire skills as part of a larger process that Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to as 'legitimate peripheral participation.' From this

perspective, it is by coming to participate legitimately in different 'communities of practice' that someone learns to use digital media in different ways, just as they learn to talk in certain ways, dress in certain ways, have specialized knowledge, and so forth. Once viewed from such a perspective, the factors that contribute to different uses of digital media are greatly expanded, often in ways that vary across space, time, and distributions of power. I will now illustrate how such an approach can be used to study relations between digital media and social inequalities by returning to the case of the Downtown School.

Differentiating Practices in Middle School

For the students in my study, many of their day-to-day differentiating practices consisted of making bids for participation in informal peer groups, or 'cliques,' as they navigated the adult-centered educator spaces of school and after-school programs. While these negotiations occurred throughout the day, they were especially active when students had more control over their activity, such as during lunch, recess, and before and after school. Participation in optional clubs and after-school programs, as well as hanging out with friends outside of school, also helped produce and maintain clique formations and divisions. Participation in out-of-school practices bled into differentiating practices at school and vice versa. For example, at school students routinely expressed tastes for, and knowledge about, various out-of-school cultural forms and practices that were familiar to, and valued by, other members of a clique – from music, to film, to TV, to food, to fashion, to travel, to after-school activities, to out-of-school adventures, to various uses of, and orientations towards, digital media. Similarly, students pursued new out-of-school

practices that were valued by other students with whom they hung out at school. For example, ice-skating became one of the favored after-school activities among a clique of girls that had several high-status members who were experienced figure skaters. Digital media practices offered students additional means for making and managing these peer relations, but, as I will show, these practices tended to reinforce the divisions formed at school.

Participation in clique life also helped account for differences in students' orientations towards media production activities. For example, nearly all of the girl students who excelled at the school's required digital media projects participated in the same clique. They routinely hung out together at lunch and recess, and many hung out with each other after-school and online. The majority of these girls were from privileged households, but both the privileged and the less-privileged girls who participated in this clique excelled at the school's required media production assignments. In interviews, these students labeled themselves, and were labeled by other students, primarily as 'good students.' Participants in the clique valued being a good student, and they often figured their friend group in contradistinction to other students whom they perceived as 'bad' or 'troublemakers.' Here, for example, is how Rosie, a privileged girl who regularly participated in this clique, described her friend and herself during an interview, 'Yee is a good example of someone who stays out of trouble… she's an example of a high kid...We just stay out of trouble and stuff.' Similarly, Rosie and her friend Elinore described the school's other main clique of girls, a group whose participants were predominantly from less-privileged homes, as 'the bad kids' who were 'low.' Outsiders, and especially less-privileged

students, tended to label the girls who hung out with this clique more pejoratively, using terms such as 'the goody two shoes.'

Just as the clique's valorization of being a good student appears to have shaped the ways participants in this clique orientated towards the school's required media production projects, clique participation appears to have shaped many of these students' after-school involvements. As noted above, none of the students who participated in this clique regularly participated in the schools' voluntary after-school programs focused on media production, nor did they regularly take part in non-required media production projects with their friends. Instead, most of the privileged members of the clique spent their after-school hours attending private, and often expensive, programs and classes for ice-skating, dance, tennis, music, foreign language, swimming, and so forth. The few less-privileged girls who hung out with this clique did not participate in these after-school activities; instead they typically went to a library and waited for a parent to pick them up after work. Not only did most of the girls in this clique participate in the same or similar out-of-school activities, but the activities of the clique's high-status members spread amongst members of the clique whose families could afford them, such as in the case of the ice-skating programs mentioned above.

Clique participation also helps account for which students enrolled in the school's after-school programs focused on creative production with digital media. As noted above, only one girl, a less-privileged student named Nita, regularly participated in the school's after school programs. All of the rest of the regular participants were boys, most of whom

were from privileged homes. Like the participants in other main cliques, this group of boys regularly hung out with each other during lunch and recess, and some participants hung out with each other outside of school, both in-person and online. Nita also tended to hang out occasionally with this group during lunch and recess, and she eventually got involved in a non-required movie production project that several of the boys who regularly hung out with this clique had organized at one of their homes.

Other students primarily recognized this clique for their distinctively enthusiastic orientation towards a clustering of specific media, notably video games, but increasingly media production activities as well. As Christopher, a less-privileged boy who regularly hung out with the other main clique of boys, noted about this group, 'I think a large part of the… school body is the kids who are into game design and stuff like that—kids who are really into that.' Likely due to the school's unique focus, this group of boys was the largest clique at the school. Many participants in the clique referred to themselves as 'gamers' or even 'hardcore gamers.' Regular participants frequently discussed and debated the merit of various video games, game consoles, mobile phones, computers, and other digital media gadgets at lunch, recess, and online via Facebook and the school's internal social network site. One table in the lunchroom even came to be known as the 'Modern Warfare II Table' because the game was so frequently discussed. While many other students played video games and made extensive use of digital media, only this clique routinely differentiated themselves as distinctively enthusiastic for, and expert at, gaming, and increasingly digital technology more broadly. Several of the participants used images of characters from their favorite video games as their profile photos on

social network sites, and regular members often foregrounded a technical-identity in interviews. Often, these bids for technical differentiation referenced familial practices that were not available to all. Here, for example, is how Raka, one of the more privileged members of this clique, responded when I asked him how he used digital media at home:

> I use everything. I'm at the cutting edge of technology. My dad has three plasma screen TVs for his computer, and this computer that has not even come out yet. And since me and my brother are really good gamers we have Alien computers. Whenever a game comes out we get it. We beat it in two days. We're done.

Clearly Raka's identification with being at the 'cutting edge of technology' entailed much more than functional notions of 'use'; it included an intimate relation to material culture, knowledge, and skills (Alien computers, a computer that has not yet been made available to the public, seeing oneself as a really good gamer, etc.), which, together, distinguished him from many of his peers.

As noted above, the 'goody two shoes' and the 'gamer' or 'geeky' boys were partially constituted in relation to the other main cliques that formed school. Outsiders frequently referred to these other cliques as the 'cool' and 'popular' kids, although these labels did not mean that participants in these cliques were widely liked. Like the cliques discussed above, participants in the 'cool kids' routinely separated along gender lines, and outsiders often referred to them as the 'cool girls' and the 'cool boys' respectively. The majority of the participants in these cliques were from less-privileged families, although two

privileged white girls routinely hung out with the 'cool girls.' Some of the 'cool kids'

were high-achieving students, and some produced complex media productions as part of

required coursework, but students did not see them as overly obedient to educators.

Additionally, most of the participants in 'cool kids' cliques made extensive use of digital

media in their out-of-school lives, just not in the ways that were valued by educators at

school. As noted earlier, some of the participants in the 'cool girls' clique were more

experienced and sophisticated than any of their peers at using social and communications

media such as Facebook, a video chat program called ooVoo, mobile phones, various

instant messenger programs, and so forth. Yet such uses of digital media were not the

uses that educators considered educational, and if anything educators stigmatized these

uses in lessons about online safety and civility. Further, none of the 'cool kids' routinely

foreground their experience and expertise with digital media as a distinguishing feature of

their school-based identities. None participated in the school's after-school program

focused on digital media production, and only one regularly pursued media production

projects outside of school.

Instead, the 'cool kids' were widely recognized, and differentiated themselves, for their

precociousness, which included early dabbling in dating, access to more 'adult'

knowledge, and a willingness to resist the authority of adult educators. Many of the 'cool

boys' also foregrounded their interest for and involvement in sports, particularly

basketball and football. Just as some of the boys who differentiated themselves as

'hardcore gamers' used images from video games as their profile photos on social

network sites, so some of the 'cool boys' used images of their favorite professional

basketball players. Many of the 'cool boys' had participated in neighborhood-based sports leagues for years, some played in highly competitive leagues throughout the city, and several had family members who had once played competitively. As with participants in the other cliques, the 'cool boys' often foregrounded these aspects about their out-of-school lives in contradistinction with the cultural forms and practices that other students were foregrounding. Here, for example, is how Troy, one of the higher status participants in the 'cool boys,' responded when I asked him if he did media production projects outside of school:

> I don't really do stuff like that outside of school, because, really, my family, like on my mom's side and on my dad's side, our talent is in sports. So usually I'm playing sports, or I'm playing sports games.

Given its newness, small size, and focus on digital media production, the Downtown School had no sports teams, no dance classes, and no performing arts programs, even though these activities were of interest to many students and their families. Further, as indicated above, only certain uses of digital media were considered educationally legitimate. These processes of supporting and legitimating some of students' out-of-school interests and practices while overlooking and stigmatizing others helps account for the paradox mentioned at the outset, namely that well-intentioned interventions can help remake the very divisions they hope to mend. By the end of the first year, all of the high-status participants in the 'cool boys' clique transferred to other, less-resourced, schools that had sports teams, more of a dating scene, and much smaller proportions of children

from professional families. By the end of the second year, several of the most influential

participants in the 'cool girls' clique also left. While their reasons for leaving were

complex – for a lengthier account, see [author (TK)] – many departing students and

parents suggested that the Downtown School was not a 'good fit' for their children, a

sentiment that was echoed by educators and the families that stayed. By contrast, nearly

all of the privileged students remained enrolled through eighth grade, and they and their

families often expressed enthusiasm for the school.

Conclusion

 The differentiated use approach to digital inequality scholarship has commendably

shown that people with access to similar digital media do not use those technologies in

the same ways. It has also expanded our understanding of some of the conditions that

enable different uses of digital media, drawing attention, for example, to the importance

of factors such as skills and quality of access in supporting certain uses. While these

contributions have been important and well-intentioned, the contention of this article is

that the differentiated use approach has serious limitations. It has not adequately

theorized how digital media contributes to the production of social inequalities, nor has it

provided sufficient guidance to those who wish to intervene in an attempt to ameliorate

privilege. Prevailing theories of digital inequality do not account for the differences in

use documented in this study. More troubling, the school's attempts to ameliorate

differentiated use appears to have paradoxically helped (re)make some of the very

structures of privilege that scholars and educators hope to break down.

These paradoxical findings suggest that prevailing beliefs about digital inequality need to be significantly rethought. For one, differentiated use discourse often conflates digital inequalities with social inequalities, rather than showing how the former contributes to the latter. Once conflated, 'fixing' education and ameliorating social inequities becomes a matter of fixing some people's relationships with digital media. Producing such a change in persons may be difficult, but it is within the realm of what educators can reasonably be expected to accomplish without significantly changing inherited institutional arrangements. The problem with such a view is that interventions aimed at digital inequality may well treat symptoms rather than causes. Without a better understanding of *how* different digital media uses contribute to the production of privilege in different situations, misdiagnoses are likely to prevail, and root causes are likely to be overlooked and to go unchallenged.

Second, digital inequality scholarship has a tendency to slip between descriptive and normative accounts. On the one hand, the scholarship is often presented as merely informative, showing, for example, that persons from different socioeconomic backgrounds tend to use the internet differently, or that persons with more online skills tend to use the internet differently than those with less online skills. On the other hand, the scholarship inevitably figures some uses of digital media as appropriate, normal, generally beneficial, culturally neutral, and so forth, as it implicitly or explicitly ignores or stigmatizes other uses of digital media as well as other cultural practices that may be valuable to their participants but which do not center on digital media. For example, discourse on 'participatory culture' does not just describe what some people do on the

internet, it also implicitly figures those 'uses' as something that everyone should be doing

if they do not want to be on the wrong side of the 'participation gap.' Such framing

produces a deficit model of difference, which then legitimates well-intentioned efforts

such as the Downtown School that attempt to make those on the wrong side of the gap

more like those on the right side.

There is an often unstated cultural politics to such an approach. Namely, it overlooks the

resources and practices that exist amongst less-privileged persons and collectivities –

many of which might not focus on digital media – and risks turning interventions aimed

at ameliorating privilege into endeavors that attempt to discipline, control, or exclude

difference (for a similar criticism, see Selwyn [2006] and Boonaert and Vettenbrug

[2011], and Halford and Savage [2010]). In the case discussed in this article, students

who did not orient towards digital media in the ways sanctioned by educators and experts

were explicitly and implicitly selected out of the well-resourced Downtown School.

Educators and families alike agreed that they did not 'fit.' By not paying adequate

attention to the cultural biases inherent in selecting which 'uses' of digital media

belonged in school, and by not looking to the 'repertoires of practice' (Gutierrez and

Rogoff 2003) and 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992) that existed amongst those

they wished to aid, educators paradoxically helped remake some of the very social

divisions their intervention hoped to bridge.

To address these limitations, I have recommended a considerable shift in how scholars

and educational practitioners theorize relations between digital media and the production

of privilege. Instead of trying to explain 'gaps' in decontextualized uses, I have argued that scholars should attempt to understand if and how different digital media contribute to the production of privileged social differences *in situ*. One way to do so is to conceptualize digital media use as entailed in negotiations over legitimate participation in social practices: collective cultural-material activities with particular histories. I have referred to these practices as 'differentiating practices' so as to draw attention to how negotiations over participation often position selves in relation to others. Once framed in this way, I hope researchers, policy-makers, and educators can better understand if, when, and how digital media do, and do not, contribute to the (re)production of privilege in this, the oft-professed era of 'new media.'

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[i] To protect the privacy of study participants, the names of all persons and organizations have been changed.

[ii] In total, I interviewed forty-three students, parents/guardians of twenty-five students, and five educators. I also conducted thirteen 'media tour' interviews with students who were especially involved in media production activities.

[iii] For an account of how the school came to be as diverse as it was, see [author (TK)].

[iv] These are the ethnic and racial labels ascribed by the Department of Education, not the identifications routinely expressed by students and families.

[v] For a more detailed review of theories of practice, see Holland and Lave (2001, 2009), Reckwitz (2002), and Schatzki et al. (2001). For studying and theorizing practice in relation to media technology and consumption see Couldry (2004) and Postill (2010).