



Life After Youth Media

Insights about Program Influence into Adulthood

April 2014

SOCIAL IMPACT
RESEARCH CENTER
A HEARTLAND ALLIANCE PROGRAM

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

Report Information

This IMPACT Report was written for The Robert R. McCormick Foundation, which supports the Social IMPACT Research Center's evaluation work with the Chicago Youth Voices Network.

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This executive summary and the full report are available online at <http://socialimpactresearchcenter.issuelab.org/>

Social IMPACT Research Center

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: YOUTH MEDIA'S INFLUENCE INTO ADULTHOOD

YOUTH MEDIA PROGRAMS: PROGRAMS FOCUSED ON TEACHING YOUTH HOW TO CONCEIVE, DEVELOP, PRODUCE, DISSEMINATE, AND CONSUME MULTI- MEDIA CONTENT AND PRODUCTS.

Methods Overview

Study time frame: October 2012 to
December 2013

Design: Cross-sectional, quasi-
experimental survey; focus
groups; interviews

Sample: Convenience and
respondent-driven for survey;
convenience and purposive for
focus groups and interviews

Respondents: 214 youth media
program alumni and 87 non-
alumni survey respondents; 32
alumni and non-alumni focus
group participants; 9 alumni
interviewees; 20 interviews with
youth media organizations,
including multiple leaders and
staff at each

*Do the skills, attitudes, and behaviors imparted in youth programs
“stick” into adulthood?*

If they do, how do they manifest in career, education, and life decisions?

*How do the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that youth programs try to
impart differ based on program intensity or levels of engagement?*

*Do these elements look different for people who went through youth
media programs versus people who went through other types of youth
programs?*

These are common questions that youth program providers, funders, public officials, and other leading thinkers regularly wrestle with. This report tells the story of a group in Chicago committed to providing quality youth media programming in the city and how, through a collective evaluation, they were able to begin to answer these critical questions.

Youth media is an approach for engaging youth in hands-on learning through media production and dissemination that imparts to youth what it means and what it takes to be productive, informed, and engaged members of society.¹ Nine youth media organizations are characters in this story—the participants in this evaluation—of Chicago youth media. These nine organizations represent part of a learning community called the Chicago Youth Voices Network (CYVN), which is backed by The Robert R. McCormick Foundation who commissioned the study.

This story of Chicago youth media is told in two parts: Part 1 is a pre-evaluation, context-setting look at what Chicago youth media organizations do and the promise that youth media programming holds for impacting youth in positive and lasting ways.* Part 2—this report—focuses on the learnings from a multi-method evaluation of the nine programs that illuminates the longer-term influence of youth media programs on the young people who participate.

The nine Chicago youth media organizations use an approach to working with youth that weaves together many different threads and as a result touches many areas of a youth's life—social, emotional, mental, and developmental. To varying degrees, the programs work along six different dimensions, which are the six areas of exploration for the evaluation:² journalism skills, news and

* To read Part 1, visit http://socialimpactresearchcenter.issuelab.org/resource/from_page_to_stage_to_screen_and_beyond

¹ Free Spirit Media's logic model language for long-term outcomes.

² Interviews, discussions, and literature on youth media informed and shaped each outcome area's description and definition here and on the following pages.

Six Dimensions of Youth Media

Journalism skills: programs teach basic journalistic skills, including researching, interviewing, and writing, and instill an appreciation for the function of media in a democracy.

News and media literacy: programs teach how to discern news from sensationalism and provide hands-on experience using technology to access information.

Civic engagement: programs encourage the use of different media platforms to express views on issues that matter to youth, share their personal experiences, become more aware of community and social justice issues, and engage in political discourse.

Youth development: programs provide a safe haven for self-discovery and encourage working in groups to develop the confidence to question their prejudices and beliefs and to experience a sense of belonging as a member of a group and an organization.

Career development: programs not only teach technical expertise but they also impart soft skills that transcend the fields of journalism and media arts production. Programs teach effective basic communication and critical thinking skills.

Youth expression: programs expose youth to the arts and about avenues for telling stories about the issues that affect youth, their peers, and their communities.

media literacy, civic engagement, youth development, career development, and youth expression.

This evaluation used a cross-sectional, quasi-experimental design and convenience and respondent-driven sampling with program **alumni**—adults who had attended one of the nine participating youth media programs in their middle and high school years—and with people who were not involved in youth media programs as youth—called **non-alumni**. The story of this evaluation's findings are based on analyses of interviews with leaders and staff from each of the nine participating organizations, interviews with alumni, focus groups with alumni and non-alumni, and a survey of alumni and non-alumni.

Findings Summary

Youth media programs operate within the six dimensions explored in this study, but none of those areas nor the programs' work in them can be so neatly categorized. As this story of nine youth media organizations winds to its close, there are several notable cross-cutting learnings to explore and to consider how to operationalize. The findings are an invitation to not only those involved in this study, but to all stakeholders in the youth media space to begin writing the next volume in the story of youth media with a burgeoning evidence base to support it.

The youth media programs impart transferable career skills that adult alumni point to as foundational. There may be opportunities to help funders, schools, and other community-based organizations see youth media programs in more of a career or workforce development light, which could potentially open doors for program expansion to reach more youth.

The nine youth media programs expose participants to education and career opportunities, primarily in the media industry. By providing hands-on experience and access to industry professionals and workplaces, youth media programs provide alumni with the knowledge and experience needed to make important decisions about what to study in post-secondary educational pursuits, and they better prepare alumni for their chosen profession. For many of the disadvantaged youth in the programs, this is a window of opportunity and connection they may never have had otherwise. This is evidenced by the aspirational nature of many alumni's current fields of study or career goals.

That is not to say that all former youth media participants pursue careers in media. In fact, many do not. For those who do enter journalism, media production, or arts-related fields, their youth media program experience and the skills they take away are directly applicable. Yet, for those in other professions, the value of the youth media program still holds. Employers value people with strong soft skills—creative and independent thinking, self-direction, teamwork, professionalism. Alumni are clear on this front: youth media programs taught them how to be good workers no matter the field.

FIELD OF STUDY

FIGURE ES1

Education	15.0%
Illustration/Graphic Design/Animation/Fashion Design	7.5%
Media/Journalism/Broadcasting/Radio/Television/Film	50.0%
Legal	7.5%
Nursing	7.5%
Communications	32.5%
Business/Management	22.5%
Finance	7.5%
Psychology	7.5%
Information Technology	10.0%

- Of alumni currently in school, almost two thirds credit youth media programs for influencing their decision to pursue a specific major or degree, and half of all in-school alumni are studying media, journalism, broadcasting, radio, television, or film (Figure ES1).
- Over three quarters of employed alumni credit youth media programs for preparing them for their jobs. Most working alumni are currently employed in the education industry or the retail, customer service, or food industries, which may be the case because 19 percent of alumni are still in school, and these types of industries may better accommodate school schedules than jobs in other industries.

The youth media programs impart important life skills that inform how people see and interact with the world around them as they become adults. The programs set participants up for lives characterized by being informed, engaged, confident, and collaborative. Youth media's hands-on, production-oriented, and youth-driven nature are important elements in this regard, and programs may want to place more emphasis on those aspects if not already doing so.

There is more to life than educational and career pursuits, and the youth media programs touch those important aspects too, which both support success in education and careers and extend beyond them into relationships and community.

Alumni from the nine youth media programs report that the programs helped them become more confident and collaborative individuals. The programs give participants new friends and a support system, and that support system helps them be encouraged and supported in decisions about their future. Alumni are more self-confident, have a better self-image, are more proactive, better understand themselves and their values, and better understand their strengths and limits as leaders because of their youth media programs. They report that the youth media programs gave them a place to find their voice and express their views and opinions—an opportunity many did not have prior to becoming involved in youth media.

- An overwhelming majority of alumni currently have a positive view of themselves as adults, and they trace the roots of their positive self-image today back to the environment provided by the youth media programs they were in as youth: Most notably, two thirds of alumni very much attribute their youth media program with giving them a place to find their voice and express themselves (Figure ES2).

The youth media programs teach people how to be informed about and engaged in the world around them. The programs produce news consumers who not only consume news and information from a diverse array of both traditional and new media sources, but who also look at both the media as a whole and at news stories with an appreciative, but discerning eye. Alumni report that the youth media programs equipped them with the tools they need

to be news and media literate, and they are still using these tools years after their program involvement.

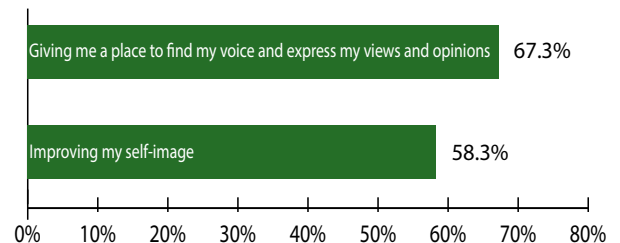
- *Youth media alumni are news consumers, with 80 percent consuming some form of news at least 4 days a week.*
- *Alumni of youth media programs exemplify American news consumption trends, heavily relying on online and social networking sites for information and news and less on more traditional news sources (Figure ES3).*
- *Youth media alumni display a cautious view of the media, recognizing its important role in a democracy but questioning its equitable treatment of issues and different voices.*

With their emphasis on telling important stories that matter to youth and to their communities, the youth media programs foster an appreciation for being involved in civic life and give participants the tools they need to engage. From ways that meet a more traditional definition of civic engagement, like voting, to newer and emerging modes of engagement, like participating in online social and political commentary, the youth media alumni exhibit a strong sense of intellectual, emotional, and action-oriented investment in the civic sphere in

IMPACT OF YOUTH PROGRAMS

PERCENT VERY MUCH BELIEVING

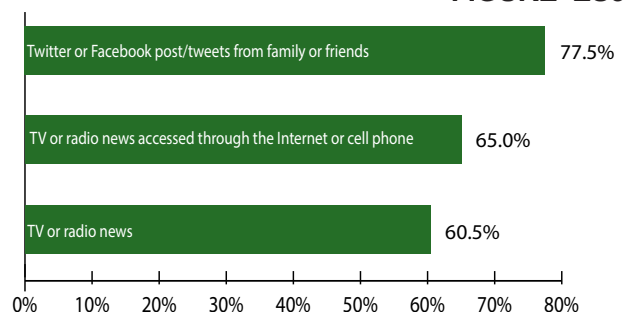
FIGURE ES2



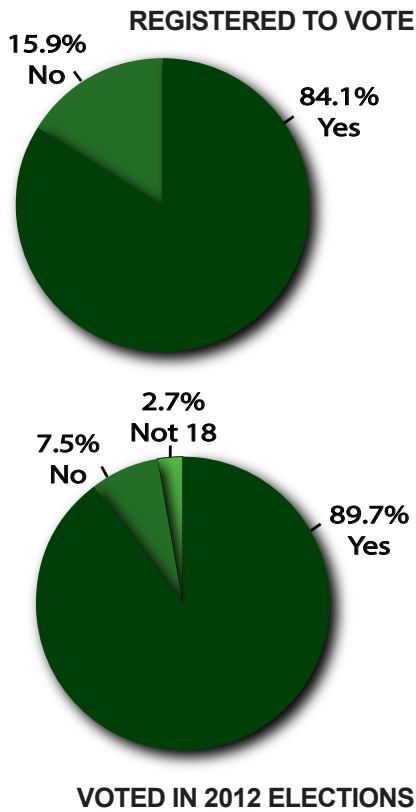
SOURCES FOR NEWS AND INFORMATION

PERCENT USING 4 TO 7 DAYS A WEEK

FIGURE ES3



VOTING FIGURE ES4

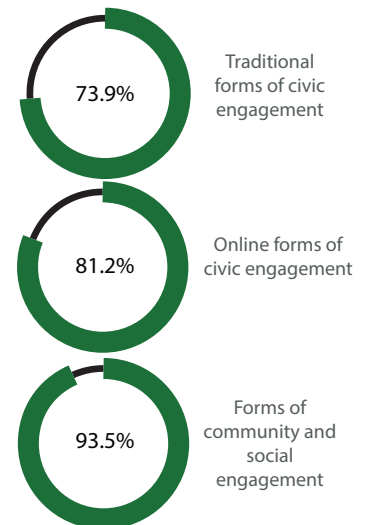


adulthood.

The youth media programs may be particularly well positioned to foster engagement in those new and emerging, often online, participatory activities since they make such use of digital and online platforms to both conduct media work and disseminate ideas and products. Yet, youth media alumni report engaging in traditional modes of civic engagement at comparable levels to these other forms of civic engagement, indicating that it's not an either/or proposition: participation in other modes of civic engagement does not seem to come at the expense of traditional modes of engagement, but rather they give people additional avenues to be civically engaged.

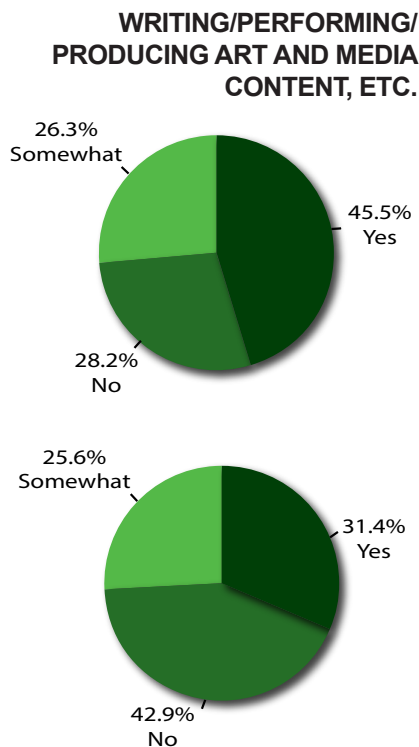
- Nearly 90 percent of registered youth media alumni voters report voting in the 2012 election, which is 45 percentage points higher than the national young adult voter turnout and is also well above the voting rate for adults over the age of 30 by 23 percentage points (Figure ES4).
- Three quarters of youth media alumni report engaging in at least one traditional form of civic engagement in the last year, but even more participated in emerging and growing forms—81 percent

FORMS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS FIGURE ES5



HAD PRIOR OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF-EXPRESSION

FIGURE ES6



EXPRESS OPINIONS AND SHARE IDEAS

in participatory/online activities—and with their communities and neighbors—94 percent in social and community activities (Figure ES5).

The youth media programs are filling in gaps left by schools, and they reinforce core academic skills that are important for school and career success. Youth media programs might make more inroads with the education community by clearly articulating how they can complement work in the classroom and enhance both current and future academic success for students.

Many Chicago youth attend schools that struggle to overcome the challenges brought on by poverty and by being under-resourced. Even in the face of the most well-meaning of intentions, it can be a steep uphill battle to provide the academic as well as the emotional and relational environment that helps youth thrive.

- Many youth media alumni did not have outlets to express themselves in their youth: Less than half were writing or producing art and media before becoming involved in youth media programs. Once they were in youth media programs, they learned the value of their own voice and developed a belief in their ability to bring about change (Figure ES6).
- These values and skills remain with alumni into adulthood. Alumni report a sense of agency, belonging, and competences, and an overwhelming majority of alumni believe in the value of their voice and in their ability to voice their concerns (Figure ES7).

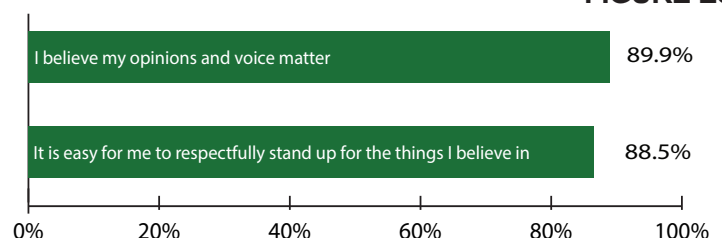
The nine youth media programs, free from many of the constraints schools and teachers face, provide a supportive environment with instructors and mentors who have more time to spend with each youth and more energy to invest in his or her development. The programs teach without it feeling like teaching, in hands on ways that build important academic skills such as proper writing, writing clearly and compellingly, expressing views orally, expressing points in visual ways, interviewing people, applying ethical principles to work, and researching and evaluating information and opinions.

These skills are taught in a journalism context but have tremendous

VIEW OF SELF

PERCENT AGREEING

FIGURE ES7



transferable value in education and career pursuits. By teaching and reinforcing what are essentially key academic skills, youth media programs are reinforcing the Common Core Standards, which establish learning goals for children so they can both succeed in middle and high school and then be prepared for college and the workforce. Overwhelmingly, alumni attribute the youth media programs they were in with influencing them in these areas even today.

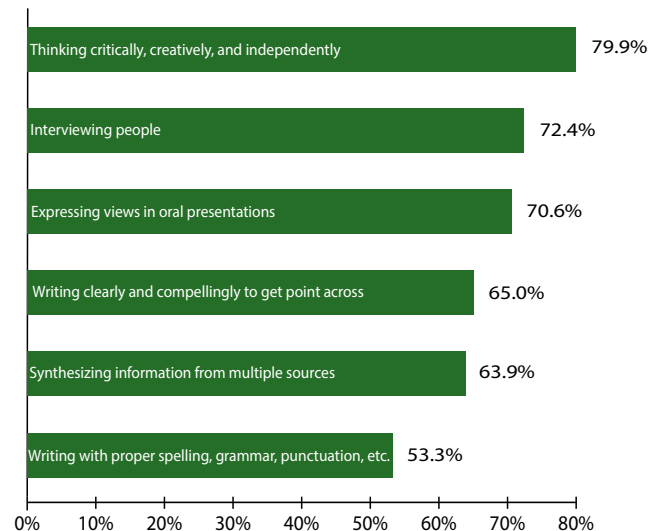
- *Youth media programs were very influential in fostering skills that have a high value in higher education and career pursuits: Alumni very much credit youth media programs with improving their ability to think critically, creatively, and independently (80 percent), to express their views in oral presentations (71 percent), and to write clearly and compellingly (65 percent) (Figure ES8).*

The influence of the youth media programs is amplified in nearly every area for individuals who were more highly engaged in programming. Often, either to satisfy internal or external expectations, youth media programs must calibrate for quantity rather than intensity. For programs wishing to go deeper with participants, this evidence that alumni take more with them into adulthood if they received more programming exposure may help them begin conversations about the right mix of program dosage.

The youth media programs have a great diversity of programming intensity

DEGREE YOUTH MEDIA PROGRAMS VERY MUCH INFLUENCE WRITING, CRITICAL THINKING, AND COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

FIGURE ES8



across the nine organizations and also within any one given organization. People who were involved in youth media programs at lower levels of engagement have certainly been influenced by the programs in their youth and in their adult lives.

However, those who were involved in more than one program or program cycle or who became mentors and instructors in a program are more likely than their less engaged counterparts to have experienced important takeaways. They are more news and media literate. They are more likely to report possessing fundamental journalism and critical thinking skills. They pay more attention to and are more engaged in civic affairs and community life. And they are more likely to report that the youth media programs helped them be more confident and collaborative individuals today.

- *Alumni who spent more time in youth media programs reaped the*

DEGREE YOUTH MEDIA PROGRAMS VERY MUCH INFLUENCE WRITING, CRITICAL THINKING, AND COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS BY LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

FIGURE ES9

	Very High	High	Medium or Low
Writing with proper spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.	70.8%	47.1%	21.7%
Writing clearly and compellingly to get point across	76.4%	62.4%	39.1%
Expressing views in oral presentations	79.2%	67.1%	56.5%
Presenting ideas and issues using images and graphics	68.1%	61.2%	47.8%
Thinking critically, creatively, and independently	84.7%	78.6%	69.6%
Critically analyzing the news and information to discern accuracy, objectivity, quality, and credibility	76.4%	61.9%	43.5%
Critically thinking about potential biases in the news and information consumed	74.6%	60.2%	39.1%
Understanding First Amendment principles	52.9%	41.7%	30.4%
Recognizing and applying ethical principles	68.1%	54.2%	34.8%
Researching and evaluating information and opinions	75.0%	61.9%	34.8%
Interviewing people	81.9%	71.8%	45.8%
Synthesizing information from multiple sources	77.8%	57.6%	43.5%

most benefit from youth media’s emphasis on journalism: On average, highly engaged alumni and very highly engaged alumni are 49 percent and 86 percent more likely, respectively, to report that youth media programs very much improved their writing, critical thinking, and communication skills than less engaged alumni (Figure ES9).

- Alumni who were more engaged in youth media programming display higher levels of news and media literacy on nearly every measure than their less engaged peers. For instance: On average, highly engaged alumni and very highly engaged alumni are 59 percent and 137 percent more likely, respectively, to use verification strategies all the time when consuming news and information.
- Alumni who were very highly engaged in youth media program report the highest levels of civic engagement now: 81 percent, 85 percent, and 95 percent engaged in at least one form of traditional, participatory, and community and social engagement, respectively, in the past year (Figure ES10).
- Youth media programs’ influence on alumni’s image of themselves is rather equally seen across the various program engagement levels, but more highly engaged alumni attribute their positive development to their youth media programs: On average, very highly engaged alumni and highly engaged alumni are 45 percent and 39 percent more likely, respectively, to report that the youth media program very much influenced their development than alumni who were engaged at medium or low levels.
- While level of engagement in youth media programs does not seem

FORMS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS BY LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

FIGURE ES10

	Very High	High	Medium or Low
Traditional forms of civic engagement	81.2%	69.3%	66.7%
Online forms of civic engagement	85.3%	76.3%	85.7%
Forms of community and social engagement	95.4%	89.9%	100.0%

to make as much a difference in how prepared alumni feel for their jobs, level of engagement does matter when it comes to field of study: Almost half of very highly engaged alumni were very much influenced by their involvement in youth media programs to pursue a specific major or degree compared to 40 percent of highly engaged alumni and only 15 percent of medium/low engaged alumni.

- *Alumni who were more engaged in youth media programs had fewer opportunities for self-expression than others. For the youth who lack other outlets for expression, the youth media program provides them with unprecedented opportunity to make their voice heard and may be a key factor in fostering their ongoing commitment to the program (Figure ES11).*

This study only begins to illuminate how youth media programs might have a different influence on participants than other youth programs have on their participants. Further research can delve deeper into the outcome differences that began to emerge in this exploration to further understand how youth media programs uniquely create change for youth.

Many of the core elements that characterize the nine youth media programs overlap with those of hosts of other programs targeted at youth. Furthermore, most youth are engaged in more than one type of youth program, and significant shares are involved in many programs throughout their adolescence. This makes it difficult to dissect the unique contribution of any one given program or type of program to a youth's trajectory.

This study provides some evidence that youth media alumni have stronger journalism and related academic and job skills as well as higher levels of news and media literacy and greater representation in media and arts related fields of study and careers than people who did not attend one of the nine youth media programs. But alumni and non-alumni are more similar when it

HAD PRIOR OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF-EXPRESSION BY LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

FIGURE ES11

	Very High	High	Medium or Low
I was writing/performing/producing art and media content, etc. before I became involved in youth programs.	43.3%	47.9%	43.5%
I had plenty of opportunities before becoming involved in youth programs to express my opinions and share my ideas.	24.6%	33.3%	43.5%

comes to reported civic behaviors and on elements related to positive youth development. And all of these things are based on self-reports.

This study was broad in its focus, exploring many outcome areas in order to get a fuller picture of how youth media alumni are faring into adulthood. Future research might choose one element and explore it deeply and with more controlled samples to more precisely understand how youth media programs create change for youth.

This study yields valuable methodological insights that can inform both future research as well as youth media programs, particularly around research design, using social media to recruit and stay in touch with participants, and respondent follow up.

This study aimed to understand more about the long-term influence of youth media programs on people who are now adults but had been in youth media programs in their high school or middle school days. As is the case with much social research, time and resource considerations necessitated a cross-sectional research design instead of a longitudinal one. Furthermore, since the participating nine programs did not have complete and up-to-date records on past participants, the entire universe of alumni was unknown rendering random sampling impossible.

There are obvious limitations to a cross-sectional, non-probability sampling design, notably around attributing outcomes to the youth program's influence. Having a comparison group in this study helped to understand attribution more, but future studies on youth media's influence into adulthood should try to incorporate more rigor, including random sampling and a longitudinal research design to truly be able to unpack youth media's unique contribution to people's lives.

Researchers faced two primary challenges related to engaging study participants: locating alumni of youth media programs (as well as a comparison group of non-alumni) and keeping all study participants engaged in intermittent research activities that occurred over the better part of a year. While we used a variety of methods to meet recruitment and participation goals, one key method was the use of Facebook.

On the whole, using Facebook to recruit study participants and keep them informed of study activities worked well. It allowed us to reach past participants we may never have been able to reach otherwise. Our vigilance around privacy and confidentiality (even though this particular study was on a non-sensitive topic) led us to use the Facebook study group with a large degree of caution, which likely created small, though not insignificant disincentives to joining the study and completing the survey. Our experience leads us to conclude that Facebook and other forms of social media hold promise for conducting research with young, mobile, and geographically dispersed groups, but that the research field needs to grapple far more with the human subject protections implications before fully adopting its use regularly and especially

for sensitive research topics.

Once engaged and having given informed consent, each potential survey respondent (there were 393) was contacted directly and individually an average of 6 times to take the survey. The tremendous investment of time and energy the research team put into recruitment and follow up with respondents gives rise to considerations around the most effective level of follow up. Where is the tipping point for participant follow through? And when does persistent follow up become ignorable noise?

Ultimately this study's experience suggests that future studies should consider a seamless consent and survey process with no time lag in between (there was as little as 1 day to as much as a few months lag time for participants in this study due to rolling recruitment). This can facilitate maximum participation with minimum follow up. Where follow up is needed, good old fashioned phone calls still seem to yield the best results by virtue of their personal nature.

These insights hold value for not just other researchers, but also for programs looking to stay connected to alumni and for programs looking to conduct their own internal studies.

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