Youth, Identity, and Digital Media

edited by David Buckingham

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The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning

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Youth, Identity, and Digital Media, edited by David Buckingham

Foreword

In recent years, digital media and networks have become embedded in our everyday lives, and are part of broad-based changes to how we engage in knowledge production, communication, and creative expression. Unlike the early years in the development of computers and computer-based media, digital media are now *commonplace* and *pervasive*, having been taken up by a wide range of individuals and institutions in all walks of life. Digital media have escaped the boundaries of professional and formal practice, and the academic, governmental, and industry homes that initially fostered their development. Now they have been taken up by diverse populations and non-institutionalized practices, including the peer activities of youth. Although specific forms of technology uptake are highly diverse, a generation is growing up in an era where digital media are part of the taken-for-granted social and cultural fabric of learning, play, and social communication.

In 2005, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation began a new grant-making initiative in the area of digital media and learning. An initial set of exploratory grants in the study of youth practices and the development of digital literacy programs has expanded into a major initiative spanning research, educational reform, and technology development. One component of this effort is the support of this book series. As part of the broader MacArthur Foundation initiative, this series is aimed at timely dissemination of new scholarship, fostering an interdisciplinary conversation, and archiving the best research in this emerging field. Through the course of producing the six initial volumes, the foundation convened a set of meetings to discuss the framing issues for this book series. As a result of these discussions we identified a set of shared commitments and areas of focus. Although we recognize that the terrain is being reshaped even as we seek to identify it, we see these as initial frames for the ongoing work to be put forward by this series.

This book series is founded upon the working hypothesis that those immersed in new digital tools and networks are engaged in an unprecedented exploration of language, games, social interaction, problem solving, and self-directed activity that leads to diverse forms of learning. These diverse forms of learning are reflected in expressions of identity, how individuals express independence and creativity, and in their ability to learn, exercise judgment, and think systematically.

The defining frame for this series is not a particular theoretical or disciplinary approach, nor is it a fixed set of topics. Rather, the series revolves around a constellation of topics investigated from multiple disciplinary and practical frames. The series as a whole looks at the relation between youth, learning, and digital media, but each book or essay might deal with only a subset of this constellation. Erecting strict topical boundaries can exclude

some of the most important work in the field. For example, restricting the content of the series only to people of a certain age means artificially reifying an age boundary when the phenomenon demands otherwise. This becomes particularly problematic with new forms of online participation where one important outcome is the mixing of participants of different ages. The same goes for digital media, which are increasingly inseparable from analog and earlier media forms.

In the case of learning, digital media are part of the redefinition and broadening of existing boundaries of practice and our understanding of what learning means. The term *learning* was chosen rather than *education* in order to flag an interest in settings both within and outside the classroom. Many of the more radical challenges to existing learning agendas are happening in domains such as gaming, online networks, and amateur production that usually occur in informal and non-institutional settings. This does not mean we are prejudiced against learning as it happens in the classroom or other formal educational settings. Rather, we hope to initiate a dialog about learning as it spans settings that are more explicitly educational and those that are not.

The series and the MacArthur Foundation initiative respond to certain changes in our media ecology that have important implications for learning. Specifically, these are new forms of media *literacy* and changes in the modes of media *participation*. Digital media are part of a convergence between interactive media (most notably gaming), online networks, and existing media forms. Navigating this media ecology involves a palette of literacies that are being defined through practice but require more scholarly scrutiny before they can be fully incorporated pervasively into educational initiatives. Media literacy involves not only ways of understanding, interpreting, and critiquing media, but also the means for creative and social expression, online search and navigation, and a host of new technical skills. The potential gap in literacies and participation skills creates new challenges for educators who struggle to bridge media engagement inside and outside the classroom.

The shift toward interactive media, peer-to-peer forms of media communication, and many-to-many forms of distribution relate to types of participation that are more bottom-up and driven by the "user" or "consumer" of media. Audiences have always had the opportunity to "talk back" to corporate media or to create their own local media forms. However, the growing dominance of gaming as a media format, the advent of low-cost digital production tools, and online distribution means a much more dynamic range in who participates and how they participate in the production and distribution of media. Gamers expect that media are subject to player control. Add to this the fact that all forms of media are increasingly being contextualized in an online communication ecology where creative production and expression is inseparable from social communication. Finally, new low-cost digital production tools mean that amateur and casual media creators can author, edit, and distribute video and other rich media forms that were once prohibitively expensive to produce and share with others.

We value the term *participation* for the ways in which it draws attention to situated learning theory, social media literacies, and mobilized forms of media engagement. Digital media networks support existing forms of mass media distribution as well as smaller publics and collectivities that might center on peer groups or specialized niche interests. The presence of social communication, professional media, and amateur niche media in shared online spaces introduces a kind of leveling effect, where small media players gain new visibility and the position of previously authoritative media is challenged. The clash between more socially driven or niche publics and the publics defined by professional forms of media is

playing out in high-profile battles in domains such as intellectual property law, journalism, entertainment, and government. For our purposes, the questions surrounding knowledge and credibility and young people's use of digital media to circumvent adult authority are particularly salient.

The emerging power shift, where smaller and edge players are gaining more visibility and voice, is particularly important to children and youth. If we look at children and youth through the lens of digital media, we have a population that has been historically subject to a high degree of systematic and institutional control in the kinds of information and social communication to which they have access. This is one reason why the alchemy between youth and digital media has been distinctive; it disrupts the existing set of power relations between adult authority and youth voice. While many studies of children, youth, and media have for decades stressed the status of young people as competent and full social subjects, digital media increasingly insist that we acknowledge this viewpoint. Not only must we see youth as legitimate social and political actors, but we must also recognize them as potential innovators and drivers of new media change.

This does not mean that we are uncritical of youth practices or that we believe that digital media necessarily hold the key to empowerment. Rather, we argue against technological determinism, stressing the need for balanced scholarship that recognizes the importance of our current moment within the context of existing structures and unfolding histories. This means placing contemporary changes within a historical context as well as working to highlight the diversity in the landscape of media and media uptake. Neither youth nor digital media are monolithic categories; documenting how specific youth take up particular forms of media with diverse learning outcomes is critical to this series as a whole. Digital media take the form they do because they are created by existing social and cultural contexts, contexts that are diverse and stratified.

As with earlier shifts in media environments, this current turn toward digital media and networks has been accompanied by fear and panic as well as elevated hopes. This is particularly true of adult perception of children and youth who are at the forefront of experimentation with new media forms, and who mobilize digital media to push back at existing structures of power and authority. While some see "digital kids" as our best hope for the future, others worry that new media are part of a generational rift and a dangerous turn away from existing standards for knowledge, literacy, and civic engagement. Careful, socially engaged, and accessible scholarship is crucial to informing this public debate and related policy decisions. Our need to understand the relation between digital media and learning is urgent because of the scale and the speed of the changes that are afoot. The shape and uses of digital media are still very much in flux, and this book series seeks to be part of the definition of our sociotechnical future.

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Introducing Identity

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Identity is an ambiguous and slippery term. It has been used—and perhaps overused—in many different contexts and for many different purposes, particularly in recent years. As we shall see, there are some diverse assumptions about what identity is, and about its relevance to our understanding of young people's engagements with digital media.

The fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. From the Latin root *idem*, meaning "the same," the term nevertheless implies both similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. For instance, as I write, there is an intense debate in the U.K. about the government's proposed introduction of identity cards and their potential for addressing the problem of "identity theft." In these formulations, our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. Here, identity is about *identification* with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways.

Much of the debate around identity derives from the tensions between these two aspects. I may struggle to "be myself" or to "find my true self," and there are many would-be experts and authorities who claim to be able to help me to do this. Yet I also seek multiple identifications with others, on the basis of social, cultural, and biological characteristics, as well as shared values, personal histories, and interests. On one level, I am the product of my unique personal biography. Yet who I am (or who I think I am) varies according to who I am with, the social situations in which I find myself, and the motivations I may have at the time, although I am by no means entirely free to choose how I am defined.

An explicit concern with questions of identity is not a novel development, although it has undoubtedly taken on a new urgency in the contemporary world.[1] Identity is not merely a matter of playful experimentation or "personal growth": it is also about the life-or-death struggles for self-determination that are currently being waged in so many parts of the world. According to the social theorist Zygmunt Bauman, the new prominence that is accorded to identity is a reflection of the fact that it is becoming ever more problematic.[2] Globalization, the decline of the welfare state, increasing social mobility, greater flexibility in employment, insecurity in personal relationships—all these developments are contributing to a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty, in which the traditional resources for identity formation are no longer so straightforward or so easily available. Like many contemporary authors,

Bauman emphasizes the fluidity of identity, seeing it as almost infinitely negotiable, and in the process perhaps underestimates the continuing importance of routine and stability. Nevertheless, his general point is well taken: "identity" only becomes an issue when it is threatened or contested in some way and needs to be explicitly asserted.

Accounting for Identities

Within the human sciences, several disciplinary specialisms have laid claim to identity. The most obvious distinction here is between psychological and sociological approaches, but a whole range of subdisciplines and intellectual paradigms—developmental psychology, social theory, symbolic interactionism, cultural studies, and many others—have also sought to generate definitive accounts. In the first part of this chapter, I discuss five key approaches to thinking about identity and briefly identify some of their implications for understanding young people, digital media, and learning. These latter issues are then dealt with more explicitly in the second main part of the chapter.

Identity Formation: The Psychology of Adolescence

The first two approaches I discuss here are explicitly concerned with *youth* identities. The modern psychological account of youth can arguably be traced back to G. Stanley Hall's classic accounts of adolescence, published in the early years of the last century.[3] Hall is often credited with introducing the popular notion of adolescence as a period of "storm and stress," characterized by intergenerational conflicts, mood swings and an enthusiasm for risky behavior. From this perspective, the discussion of adolescence often leads inexorably to the discussion of drugs, delinquency, depression, and sexual deviance. Hall's approach is perhaps best termed "psycho-biological": his symptomatically titled book *Youth: Its Education, Regimen and Hygiene* (1906) includes extensive proposals for education and moral and religious training, incorporating practical advice on gymnastics and muscular development (not to mention quaint discussions of "sex dangers" and the virtues of cold baths).

Another classic psychological account of adolescence can be found in the work of Erik Erikson, most notably in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, published in 1968.[4] Erikson's developmental theory extends Piaget's account of "ages and stages" into adulthood and old age. Each of his eight stages is characterized by a fundamental psychological conflict, whose successful resolution allows progression to the next stage. In the case of adolescence, the conflict is between identity and "role confusion." Resolving this conflict involves finding a more or less settled role in life, and it results in the formation of a "virtue" (a form of psychological strength)—in this case, loyalty or fidelity—that enables the young person to progress to early adulthood and to form the intimate attachments that are the key tasks of that stage. Unsuccessful resolution results in a "maladaptation," for instance in the form of fanaticism or a repudiation of adult responsibility.

Erikson therefore sees adolescence as a critical period of identity formation, in which individuals overcome uncertainty, become more self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and become more confident in their own unique qualities. In order to move on, adolescents must undergo a "crisis" in which they address key questions about their values and ideals, their future occupation or career, and their sexual identity. Through this process of self-reflection and self-definition, adolescents arrive at an integrated, coherent sense of their identity as something that persists over time. While this is partly a psychological

process—and indeed a function of general cognitive development—it also occurs through interaction with peers and care givers. Identity is developed by the individual, but it has to be recognized and confirmed by others. Adolescence is thus also a period in which young people negotiate their separation from their family, and develop independent social competence (for example, through participation in "cliques" and larger "crowds" of peers, who exert different types of influence).

James Marcia builds on Erikson's account, focusing particularly on the notion of adolescence as a period of "identity crisis."[5] Through this period, the young person has to consider potential life choices and eventually make a commitment or psychological investment in particular decisions. Marcia identifies four "identity statuses," which represent different positions in this process. In the case of "foreclosure," the individual has effectively avoided the crisis by following others' expectations; in "diffusion," the person has given up on the attempt to make the necessary commitment; in "moratorium," the individual is still actively in the period of crisis, testing out various alternative commitments, while "achievement" only arrives when the person has been through the crisis and made clear choices about who he or she wants to become.

Of course, it is possible to debate the validity of such stage-based theories: is adolescence in fact a distinctive stage with a beginning and an end, or is human development more appropriately seen as a matter of gradual progression? Erikson and his followers claim that the stages they identify are universal, although it could be argued that "adolescence" as such does not exist in earlier historical periods, or in other cultures.[6] Others, like the psychologist Carol Gilligan, have argued that moral development takes a different path for males and females, which again implies that such generalized models may not take a sufficient account of social differences.[7] Furthermore, like most developmental theories, this approach is ultimately very normative. The healthy, mature individual is one who has attained a stable, integrated identity. Continuing "confusion" about one's identity is a mark of incomplete development, and may result in deviant or antisocial behavior. From this perspective, adolescence is seen primarily as a state of transition, a matter of "becoming" rather than "being."[8] Adolescents' key dilemmas are to do with what they will become, particularly in terms of their future occupation and their relationships: their current experiences are only significant insofar as they help them resolve their crisis and hence move on.

Despite the criticisms that can be made here, psychological accounts of adolescence do provide some useful concepts with which to interpret young people's relations with digital media. Erikson's notion of adolescence as a "psychosocial moratorium," a period of "time out" in which young people can experiment with different potential identities—and indeed engage with risks of various kinds—seems particularly appropriate in this respect. These kinds of approaches are exemplified (and indeed contested) by several of the contributors to this volume. For example, Susannah Stern's discussion of young people's online authorship of blogs and home pages suggests that this activity can provide important opportunities for self-reflection and self-realization, and for expressing some of the conflicts and crises that characterize this period. Some of the young people whom she discusses explicitly see adolescence as an "in-between stage," in which they are consciously seeking future directions in their lives. In a different vein, danah boyd's chapter also implies that social networking sites like MySpace provide opportunities for social interaction and affiliation that are crucial developmental tasks for this age group—opportunities that are all the more important now, as their access to "offline" public spaces has become increasingly restricted.

Youth Culture and the Sociology of Youth

Sociologists generally take a very different perspective on youth compared with the psychological accounts I have just outlined. Of course, there are some similarities between psychological studies of *development* and sociological analyses of *socialization*, despite the differences in terminology: both are essentially concerned with the ways in which young people are gradually prepared, or prepare themselves, to take up their allotted roles in adult life. A traditional, functionalist account of socialization would see this in equally normative terms: the young person is a passive recipient of adult influences, a "becoming" rather than a "being" in their own right.

Mainstream sociologists have also been particularly concerned with issues of youthful deviance and delinquency, in ways that often entail a pathological view of young people. Youth—particularly youth in marginalized or subordinated social groups—are frequently constructed as a "social problem" or "at risk." This then serves to legitimate various forms of treatment—the work of social, educational, and clinical agencies that seeks to discipline or rehabilitate troublesome youth, or to define and correct their apparent deficiencies. Nevertheless, sociologists generally understand these phenomena in terms of social factors such as poverty and inequality rather than as a matter of "raging hormones": their interest is not so much in internal personality conflicts, but more in the social uncertainties that young people face, for example as they make the transition from the parental home to the labor market.[9]

Furthermore, sociologists acknowledge that the nature of youth varies significantly according to the social context, and particularly in relation to factors such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. Indeed, social historians have argued that "youth" is a relatively modern invention, which has resulted from the extension of the period of transition that lasts from the end of compulsory schooling to the entry into waged labor; and this is clearly something that varies significantly between different social groups and between different cultural settings (in parts of the world where children leave school at the age of eleven, for example, "youth" is unlikely to be seen as a distinct category).[10] More recently, one could argue that youth is increasingly defined through the operations of the commercial market. The category of the "teenager," for example, was effectively brought into being in the 1950s through market research; and in contemporary marketing discourse, we can see the emergence of a whole series of newly invented categories such as "tweens," "middle youth," "kidults," and "adultescents"—categories that crucially blur the distinctions between children, youth and adults.[11] The invention and use of a category like "Generation X" (and its subsequent mutations) reflects both the importance and the complexity of age-based distinctions in contemporary consumer culture.[12] As this implies, "youth" is essentially a social and historical construct, rather than a universal state of being.

More radical youth research within Cultural Studies has contested the view of youthful expression as simply a function of adult attempts at socialization. There is a long tradition here of empirical research on youth culture, dating back to the early 1970s, and it is mostly concerned with the ways in which young people appropriate cultural commodities and use them for their own devices. Much of this work has focused on specific youth "subcultures"—groups such as hippies, skinheads, punks, goths, ravers, and others—who are seen to be resisting or opposing the imperatives of the parent culture, for example, through fashion, dance, music, and other cultural forms. Subcultures are seen here not just as a subordinate, but also as subversive: they arise from contradictions and tensions in the dominant social order and represent a threat to established social norms.[13]

Initially, much of this research focused on male, working class "street culture," although there is now a growing body of research on the youth cultures of girls and young women, and (to a lesser extent) on specific ethnic subcultures.[14] The emphasis here—as in some work on the anthropology of childhood and youth[15]—has been on attempting to understand youth cultures in their own terms, "from the bottom up," rather than judging them in terms of adult-oriented notions such as socialization. However, more recent research has pointed to the dangers of romanticizing youthful resistance and the tendency to overstate the political dimensions of youth culture. It has also challenged the rather simplistic opposition between "subversive" and "mainstream" culture, arguing that youth cultures can be just as hierarchical and exclusive as any other social groupings.[16] Some recent research has suggested that contemporary youth cultures are increasingly diverse and fragmented, and that they are best seen, not as a matter of self-contained "subcultures" but in a more fluid way, as "scenes" or "lifestyles" to which young people may be only temporarily attached.[17] Even so, there has been relatively little research on the more mundane, even conformist, cultures of young people who are not members of such "spectacular" or oppositional groupings (or indeed on affluent middle-class youth).

Despite its limitations, this kind of research focuses attention on the social and cultural dimensions of young people's identities, in ways which are particularly relevant to their interactions with digital media. On the one hand, we clearly need to acknowledge how commercial forces both create opportunities and set limits on young people's digital cultures; and we should also not forget that access to these media—and the ways in which they are used—is partly dependent upon differences to do with factors such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. Yet, on the other hand, we also need to consider how these media provide young people with symbolic resources for constructing or expressing their own identities, and, in some instances, for evading or directly resisting adult authority.

These points are taken up in different ways in several of the contributions that follow. Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell, for example, provide a series of case studies taken from very different cultural contexts that illustrate some of the diverse ways in which young people use digital media to reflect particular subcultural allegiances, or indeed to claim "spaces" that escape adult control. Likewise, Shelley Goldman, Meghan McDermott, and Angela Booker provide an example of how young people can use media production to address social issues that are of particular concern for them, and to make their voices heard by a wider audience. On the other hand, Susan Herring's chapter offers an important challenge to the assumptions that are often made about young people and their relations with technology—assumptions that frequently seem to veer between moral panics about the dangers of new media and an exaggerated romanticism about their liberating potential.

Social Identity: The Individual and the Group

Both the approaches outlined so far are directly concerned with *youth* identities, and the contrast between them amply illustrates some of the broader differences between psychological and sociological perspectives. Yet the discussion of identity obviously extends much more widely than this. The remaining three perspectives I discuss here are concerned with broader questions about the changing nature of identities, and the means of identify formation, in modern societies.

There is a large and diverse body of work within sociology, social psychology, and anthropology concerned with the relations between individual and group identities.[18] Researchers have studied how people categorize or label themselves and others, how they identify as

members of particular groups; how a sense of group belonging or "community" is developed and maintained, and how groups discriminate against outsiders; how the boundaries between groups operate, and how groups relate to each other; and how institutions define and organize identities. These processes operate at both social and individual levels: individuals may make claims about their identity (for example, by asserting affiliation with other members of a group), but those claims need to be recognized by others. In seeking to define their identity, people attempt to assert their individuality, but also to join with others, and they work to sustain their sense of status or self-esteem in doing so. As a result, the formation of identity often involves a process of stereotyping or "cognitive simplification" that allows people to distinguish easily between self and other, and to define themselves and their group in positive ways.

Drawing on this approach, Richard Jenkins argues that social identity should be seen not so much as a fixed possession, but as a social process, in which the individual and the social are inextricably related.[19] Individual selfhood is a social phenomenon, but the social world is constituted through the actions of individuals. As such, identity is a fluid, contingent matter—it is something we accomplish practically through our ongoing interactions and negotiations with other people. In this respect, it might be more appropriate to talk about *identification* rather than *identity*.

One classic example of this approach is Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first published in the late 1950s.[20] Goffman provides what he calls a "dramaturgical" account of social interaction as a kind of theatrical performance. Individuals seek to create impressions on others that will enable them to achieve their goals ("impression management"), and they may join or collude with others to create collaborative performances in doing so. Goffman distinguishes here between "front-stage" and "back-stage" behavior. When "on stage," for example in a workplace or in a social gathering, individuals tend to conform to standardized definitions of the situation and of their individual role within it, playing out a kind of ritual. Back stage, they have the opportunity to be more honest: the impressions created while on stage may be directly contradicted, and the team of performers may disagree with each other.

Critics have argued that Goffman tends to overstate the importance of rules and to neglect the aspects of improvisation, or indeed sheer habit, that characterize everyday social interaction. More significantly, he suggests that back-stage behavior is somehow more authentic, or closer to the truth of the individual's real identity, which appears to imply that front-stage behavior is somehow less sincere or less honest. This could be seen to neglect the extent to which *all* social interaction is a kind of performance. Like some other researchers in this tradition, Goffman sometimes appears to make a problematic distinction between *personal* identity and *social* identity, as though collective identifications or performances were somehow separate from individual ones, which are necessarily more "truthful."[21]

Nevertheless, this approach has several implications for our understanding of young people's uses of digital media. It is most obviously appropriate for understanding online interactions, for example, in the case of instant messaging, chat or social networking, and for mobile communication, where questions of rules and etiquette are clearly crucial—not least because of the absence of many of the other cues (such as visual ones) we conventionally use to make identity claims in everyday life. The issue of performance is also very relevant to the ways in which young people construct identities, for example, via the use of avatars, e-mail signatures, IM nicknames, and (in a more elaborate way) in personal homepages and blogs. The question of whether online identities are more or less honest or truthful

than offline ones has of course been a recurrent concern in studies of computer-mediated communication.[22]

These kinds of issues are explored in various ways in the subsequent chapters. For example, Gitte Stald's discussion of young people's uses of mobile phones points to several ways in which mobile technologies may be changing—or at least intensifying—the forms of social connectedness that characterize their interactions both with friends and family. The use of mobiles requires young people to develop new social and communicative skills and new social norms that enable them to regulate these relationships. Similarly, danah boyd's analysis of how friendships are conducted in MySpace draws attention to the complex ways in which hierarchies are formed, impressions are managed and social roles are played out; and while these processes have much in common with those that apply in traditional "offline" relationships, they have nevertheless generated significant anxiety for many adults.

Reclaiming Identities: Identity Politics

Questions of social power are implicit in social identity theory, but they come to the fore in what is often termed "identity politics." Clearly, different groups of individuals will lay claim to positive identities in quite different ways, and these claims may be recognized as more or less legitimate by those who hold power in society. As such, questions of identity are inevitably tied up with the issue of social status. The term "identity politics" refers primarily to activist social movements that have explicitly sought to challenge this process: they have struggled to resist oppressive accounts of their identities constructed by others who hold power over them, and claimed the right to self-determination. The most obvious aspects of this relate to "race," ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability; although the term "identity politics" is also often used in relation to forms of indigenous nationalism, religious groupings (and indeed forms of "fundamentalism"), and so on.

Identity politics thus entails a call for the recognition of aspects of identity that have previously been denied, marginalized, or stigmatized. Yet this call is not in the name of some generalized "humanity": it is a claim for identity not *in spite of* difference, but *because of* it. As this implies, identity politics is very much about transformation at the level of the group, rather than merely the individual: it is about identification and solidarity. Issues of representation—about who has the right to represent, or to speak, and for whom—are therefore also crucial here.[23]

Identity politics has been popularly criticized, both from the political right (as a kind of special pleading) and from the political left (as a diversion from the imperatives of the class struggle). But even in its own terms, identity politics has raised some significant problems that do not seem capable of easy resolutions. Perhaps the most fundamental issue here is that of essentialism, that is, the tendency to generalize about the members of a particular group and assimilate them to a singular identity. This approach runs the risk of fixing identity, for example in terms of people's biological characteristics or their historical origins, and ignoring their diversity. It neglects the fact that people have multiple dimensions to their identities, and may well resist having to select one that will override all the others.

Exponents of identity politics have argued that a kind of strategic essentialism may be necessary for particular purposes, and that different coalitions may be formed at different times. But such alliances can founder on the almost infinite factions and subdivisions that can emerge: does "race" override gender, for example, and who has the right to say that it does? Furthermore, different forms of power can operate within groups as well as between them: for example, women may unite to resist male oppression, but middle-class women will have

access to other ways of exercising social power that are not available to their working-class counterparts. There is often a tension within such social movements between two contrasting aims—on the one hand, a claim for separatism (which can result in marginalization), and on the other, a move towards integration with the mainstream (which can result in the erasure of identity).

In some respects, therefore, the difficulties of identity politics follow from the fundamental paradox of identity with which we began. It could be argued that this kind of identity categorization is inevitably reductive; and yet all sorts of well-established social practices— and indeed laws—are based on such categories, for example, in the case of racial profiling, citizenship laws, immigration priorities, as well as the various "isms" of racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. Of course, emphasizing aspects of identity that are shared inevitably means playing down aspects that differ. Yet claiming authenticity for a given identity is problematic when that identity is defined in opposition to another. To assert what is uniquely female (or feminine), for example, is to run the risk of reinforcing the binary opposition (male/female) that one is seeking to challenge. To assert "racial" authenticity with reference to unique historical origins or roots is to reassert the differences (and indeed the socially constructed category of "race") that one is seeking to undermine.[24] Yet to do the opposite— to celebrate gender fluidity or ethnic "hybridity"—is to run the risk of dissolving the very identities on which political claims can be made.

Queer theory offers a radical challenge to identity politics on precisely these grounds. It challenges established identity categories—including "gay" and "lesbian"—on the grounds that they inevitably lead to essentialism, to normative conceptions of identity, and to exclusion.[25] Judith Butler, for example, argues that attempts to articulate the interests of "women" as a specific, unified group merely reinforce binary views of gender and close down possibilities for other, more fluid or subversive, formations of gender and sexuality.[26] Interestingly, there are several similarities between Butler's notion of identity and Goffman's apparently more traditional one: she too argues that identity is performed, although (unlike Goffman) she does not seem to imply that there is a "back-stage," personal identity that is more authentic than the "masquerade" of everyday social life. Likewise—although queer theorists might well resist such comparisons—they have much in common with the social identity theories outlined above, not least in the idea of identity as a fluid, ongoing process, something that is permanently "under construction." From both perspectives, identity is something we *do*, rather than simply something we *are*.

Of course, there are some significant criticisms that can be made of such an approach. It can be seen to imply that identity is just a matter of free choice—that individuals can simply assume a particular identity at will. Furthermore, it emphasizes the potential for diversity and resistance to dominant identities, while neglecting the pressure to conform, and the comparative predictability of everyday behavior. Ultimately, it can be seen to result in a kind of relativism that undermines any attempt to speak of, or on behalf of, a particular identity—although that, of course, is precisely the point.

These debates around identity politics suggest some quite different ways of understanding young people's relationships with digital media. For example, on the one hand, it could be argued that the Internet provides significant opportunities for exploring facets of identity that might previously have been denied or stigmatized, or indeed simply for the sharing of information on such matters. Such arguments presume that media can be used as a means of expressing or even discovering aspects of one's "true self," for example, in relation to sexuality.[27] Yet on the other hand, these media can also be seen to provide powerful