Digital youth cultures in small town and rural Gujarat, India

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Abstract
This paper examines youth digital cultures in rural/small town Gujarat, India and brings forth a perspective from the Global South in understanding the net generation. We examine how the location and dominant discourses intersect with digital technologies and re-configure aspects of daily lives, such as study, leisure, and friendship; how youth negotiate their interactions with digital media as one aspect of their larger lifeworlds; and how these negotiations influence cultural practices within structural environments. Youth in this study treat new media and technologies as one limited component of otherwise rich lives and social experiences. While new technologies promote individualistic mobility, Indian youth of small towns and rural places still live in collective social structures that shape their orientations. New media are at the periphery of their lives, as these youth have strong interpersonal connections that are rooted in geographic proximity and active school experiences.

Keywords
Digital culture, digital generation, identity and new media, India, new media, rural media use, youth culture, youth media use

Introduction
The rapid spread globally of digital media has been credited with many world-wide social, political, cultural, and economic changes. The scholarly tendency has been to treat young people born in and after 1990 as the digital generation with an orientation toward digital content and lifestyles (Katz, 1996; Prensky, 2006; Tapscott, 2008), and that is one of the reasons for the surging interest in youth digital cultures. Globalization
and the spread of new media technologies have had an accelerating impact on each other. Young people today grow up at the intersections of these two large forces. Individuals in different geo-political and socio-economic locations, however, experience the intersections in vastly different ways. There is much literature on the digital presence and activities of youth from the Global West (Bennett, 2008; Boyd, 2008; Buckingham, 2008; Dahlgren, 2007; Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Kotilainen and Rantala, 2009; Livingstone, 2009; Sefton-Green, 1998; Thomas, 2007; Watkins, 2009; among others). There is meager research, however, studying whether the claims about participation, empowerment and identity are realized in the new media experiences of young people from the Global South (exceptions include Arora, 2008; McMillin, 2009; Mazzarella, 2010; Rangaswamy, 2007). Furthermore, as Andersson and Jansson (2010) have pointed out, the discourse and theory on both globalization and new information technology valorize the city or urban spaces. The western and urban contexts of digital youth cultures mostly ignore how youth in rural locations and small towns in the Global South experience the intersection of new media technologies and globalization. Ignoring their experience would be a serious omission from our understanding of youth and new media.

This study seeks to further our understanding of youth from the Global South, specifically India, and their experiences with new media technologies. If we broadly define digital culture as the multiple ways in which young people engage with digital media and technologies in their daily lives, non-urban areas of a developing country would generate a distinct set of experiences. Additionally, in a country such as India, its diversity and sharp divides in economic, educational, and infrastructural levels also would produce different levels and types of digital inequalities. A qualitative approach to research can help bring forth the nuances embedded in such a complex context. This research draws from focus group discussions conducted in 2010 and 2011 in four different, non-urban locations in the Indian state of Gujarat. There are certainly state-specific patterns in youth media participation and new media penetration, but the broader issues raised in the paper apply to the country as a whole. Gujarat is one of the most industrialized states of India, and yet it reflects the overall structural and cultural inequalities that one observes across India.

The state of Gujarat is in the western part of India. Gujarat is ranked among the first five states in India when looking at investment, per capita income, and level of industrial development. Gujarat is the 10th largest state in terms of population in India. It has a total population of 60,383,628 with 57.42% of its population rural (compared to 72% rural population for India). The high economic achievement of Gujarat is marred by unequal distribution of wealth and mediocre performance on some of the quality of life indices. For example, Gujarat’s rank slides down to 15th in education because of the high dropout rate in schools (Joshi, 2004).

Apart from the focus group discussions we have also drawn observations from a three-year project within the state that also included youth in urban areas. Our findings suggest that Indian families in rural areas and small towns experience a clash of expectations between how digital media technologies are promoted and how they are experienced. While corporations and the government set high technological expectations, in practice kids and parents in rural areas face cultural and infrastructural limitations. Yet even with normative expectations, the youth in this study treat new media and
technologies as one limited component of otherwise rich lives and social experiences. While new technologies promote individualistic mobility, Indian youth of small towns and rural places still live in collective social structures that shape their orientations. New media are at the periphery of their lives, as these youth have strong interpersonal connections that are rooted in geographic proximity and active school experiences.

India: its rural youth, media landscape and information technology aspirations

In this section we describe the context in which the young participants in our study are situated. India has the largest youth population in the world with approximately 600 million people under the age of 25 (Takaki, 2010). This group of Indian citizens alone accounts for almost 10% of the world’s population.

It is important to note the immense diversity in the Indian youth population. India is a country with deep and huge structural divides. These divides heavily influence the life experiences of young people. Class, caste, gender, geographical location, parental education and values, schools and infrastructure, and language proficiency are only some of the factors that intersect in shaping a young person’s engagement with media. Differences along each of these axes are profound in India. This is precisely the reason why the media experience of urban, educated middle-class students in India cannot be generalized to fit the youth population of the country.

Sengupta (2012) divides Indian youth into three categories – the Bharatiyas, the Indians and the Inglodians.

The Bharatiyas estimating 67% of the young population lives in the rural areas with least influence of globalization, high traditional values. They are least economically privileged, most family oriented Bollywood influenced generation. The Indians constitute 31.5% and have moderate global influence. They are well aware of the global trends but rooted to the Indian family values, customs and ethos. The Inglodians are basically the creamy layers and marginal (1.5% or roughly three million) in number though they are strongly growing (70% growth rate). Inglodians are affluent and consume most of the trendy & luxury items. They are Internet savvy & the believers of global-village (a place where there is no difference between east & west, developing & developed countries etc.), highly influenced by the western music, food, fashion & culture yet Indian at heart (Sengupta, 2012).

These divisions, even when oversimplified, show how India’s youth have quite different lives. Our study focuses on the Bharatiyas. Even though they have high traditional values, this does not mean that these youth are totally untouched by the forces of liberalization and globalization that emerged in the 1980s and strongly swept the country in the 1990s. The sample of the study, even though from rural and small town locations, represents a comparatively privileged group of young people because there is a large number of children and youth in Indian villages and small towns who do not get the benefit of formal education. The hand-to-mouth existence for such children denies them media access except a film now and then or some television at a neighbor’s place or work place.
Since India gained independence from British rule in 1947, modernization and industrialization have been at the forefront of its development agenda. The leaders of the newly independent but resource-starved country early on recognized the importance of mass media and diffusion of technology in development to provide educational messages to their citizens, and they invested heavily in both. This explains the impressive reach of newspapers, television, and radio across India. The government owned Doordarshan has the potential to reach 90.7% of the population and the All India Radio 99.14%. India is the world’s fastest growing newspaper market today, with 74,000 newspapers (Myers, 2011). Table 1 illustrates media access for Indian households according to the 2011 Indian census.

It was in the 90s, however, that India chose the path of deregulation and privatization and openly expressed its desire to be a global economic player. As a result, while the diffusion of television and radio were more government driven, diffusion of new/digital media have coincided with India’s new economic policies of inviting global private players and investment. India’s government has also made key investments in the telecommunications industry and infrastructure around the country in hopes of securing its place in the global technological future and grooming a labor force that can contribute to the country’s economic potential. The country has made information and technology one of its top five priorities. Electronics and

Table 1. Household media access in India.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Percentage of households</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television (total)</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>33.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio (total)</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landline-only telephone (total)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile-only telephone (total)</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>64.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both landline and mobile phone (total)</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer with internet access (total)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer without internet access (total)</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the specified</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>35.7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2011.
Information technology is the fastest growing segment of the Indian industry. It is also attractive as a potential production base for international companies.

Internet on a commercial basis was introduced in India in 1995, and cell phones started to catch popular interest only in 2000. During this short period, both technologies, especially cell phones, have received enthusiastic public response. While these technologies were initially urban and elite phenomena, they have seen a tremendous increase in use in rural India. The rich–poor as well as urban–rural divides, however, are still far from bridged, and many Indians still struggle to meet the basic needs of adequate food, shelter, clean drinking water, and sanitation.

This brief background serves to place digital media in the overall socio-economic and media landscape of India. Nixon (1998) argue that “How new technologies are named, talked about, and promoted in the media and advertising are integral to the process of cultural negotiation and actual take-up and use” (Nixon, 1998, p.22). Youth digital cultures in rural and small town India are influenced by several local, regional, national, and global discourses through school, home, peers, neighborhoods, and official public messages, and also through a constantly circulating discourse about new media in several different conventional media. Television emerged as the most popular medium for participants in our study. Television programs on channels like Discovery and National Geographic, news-based programs, and advertisements were also their major source of information about new technologies and gadgets. Most of the participants read at least one newspaper daily, even if it meant only skimming through headlines. At least one of the three largest circulating Gujarati dailies reaches most of the participants, either at home or in the school library. Those studying in English medium schools also mentioned occasionally reading the English daily The Times of India. Hindi commercial cinema, popularly called Bollywood, reached all the participants in theaters, through television or on CDs and DVDs. Many popular Bollywood films that the youth consume show glitzy urban and foreign locations with high tech gadgets and chic urban/global lifestyles. A cell phone was the most used and mentioned digital technology in our study, while computers and the internet had limited reach and use. Recent census figures show fewer than 1% of rural households have both a computer and internet access (Census of India 2011, 2012).

Methodology

This paper is based on four focus group discussions with 35 boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 18 and conducted in four different rural/small town locations in Gujarat during 2010–2011.

The four chosen locations, briefly described below, were geographically, culturally and infrastructurally diverse from one another.

Location 1: a public school, District Himmatnagar, North Gujarat

This school was selected as a location because though the town slightly exceeds the population limit for a small town, many children in the school come from nearby villages. The school was started in 2006 with a special mission to provide high quality
education in an English medium to children who otherwise would not have access to it. Run by a charitable trust, the school has a very good infrastructure including a library, computers, and internet access. The students mostly come from upper-middle and middle income backgrounds with a small number of students from lower income groups.

Location 2: a village school run by a religious sect, District Jamnagar, Saurashtra

The school is situated in a village in the Saurashtra region. It is about 15 kilometers from the city of Jamnagar. Though it is not far from an urban center, the village has poor infrastructure. This Gujarati-medium school run by a well established religious sect receives good donations. As a result, the school has its own bus, a computer lab, and a library. The students, typically from middle to lower-middle class backgrounds, come from other nearby villages that either do not have schools or have very poor quality government run schools up to 7th grade.

Location 3: a village school, District Vadodara, Central Gujarat

The school is situated in a small village in the taluka Dabhoi of Vadodara district. The town of Dabhoi is located 25 kilometers away from the urban center Vadodara and the village is a further eight kilometers interior from Dabhoi. Students studying in this Gujarati-medium school belong to mostly low income families from several surrounding villages. It is a region without many transportation facilities, and it takes about 30 minutes to travel from the village to the main bus stand. The students have very limited access to new media technologies at home. Though the school has a library with books and a computer lab, only one or two computers have internet connection. In fact, it is the only school in the surrounding region to have computers as the other schools do not have any computer facility.

Location 4: a coaching class in a village of taluka Mota Minya Mangrol, District Surat, South Gujarat

The coaching class is situated in a village with a population of 5000. The village has a bus service to nearby larger villages and towns and also to the city of Surat, India’s eighth most populous city and a major business center. It is also connected through railway to a junction from which other rail connections are available. There is a state board Gujarati medium high school from grade 1 to 12 in the village, but students who want an English medium education according to the Central Board (CBSC, which has national standards) attend the school at an industrial complex 10 kilometers from the village. All the participants in the focus group study at this English medium school and attend the coaching class for extra tutoring.

Collection of data and analysis

The focus groups (with six to 10 participants in each) were formed using purposive sampling to ensure that the participants represented a range of ages, educational levels,
castes, language proficiencies, socio-economic strata, and parental education and occupations. Institutional Review Board guidelines for research on human subjects were followed for obtaining the consent and protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

Researchers analyzed data based on the grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Memos were used to record thoughts, analysis, questions, and directions as the researchers immersed themselves into data. Detailed transcripts of the focus groups were subjected to microanalysis and data were scrutinized to uncover new concepts, relationships, problems, and categories (Glaser with Holton, 2004). Open coding was an important step for deriving categories for analysis. As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008), data were broken into parts and closely examined and compared for similarities and differences. Through this process, researchers were able to consider the relationship between data and theories to develop conceptual codes (Holton, 2007). Observations from the focus group discussions were then examined against the socio-economic aspects of rural and small town Gujarat and the various dominant discourses that surround the digital cultures of young people.

The dominant discourses surrounding youth digital cultures

Youth digital cultures in rural and small town India are influenced by several local, regional, national, and global discourses. In existing literature, we identify four dominant discourses that are strongly connected to young people’s struggles around digital practices: discourses on globalization, new media and information technologies, youth, and urban/rural locations. Within each of these four categories there are several ambiguous, conflicting, and intersecting strands. Additionally, the four categories are not isolated from one another in the way they are talked about in the literature and in the actual lived experiences of youth. At the same time, there are material lifeworld situations and individual agencies that shape how different young people respond to these discourses.

How rural youth negotiate around digital culture

By inductively looking at the focus group transcripts and through grounded theory, researchers identified three areas of negotiations around digital cultures for the young people in this study. These are negotiations around play and work; power and control; and aspirations and structural/infrastructural limitations. In the following sections, we explore how rural youth in this study negotiate these areas of their lives.

Negotiations around play and work

Responses of participants suggest that they first and foremost associate new media (especially computers and internet) with work, primarily knowledge and information. This perception seems to come from the media and other external sources, rather than directly from personal experiences with new media technologies because when they talked about
their own practices, playing games on computers and cell phones was the most frequent response. Discourse around new media technologies suggest to these youth that knowledge and information are ultimately connected to upward mobility and being a member of a global workforce/network society (McMillin, 2009). Parents get drawn into these discourses too (Pathak-Shelat, 2010; Rangaswamy, 2007). Economic uncertainties and competition for limited lucrative jobs, unemployment, rising aspirations, next-door success stories of computer programmers and software engineers – all this “talk” in their immediate social networks and media push parents to think “we should not be left behind.” Several young people in the study indicated that the family bought a computer when an older sibling entered college or that the family had decided to buy a computer and a scooter once the child completed high school.

Schools are another important element in connecting the new information technologies and computer with education. Though there is no research-based evidence that computers are connected to higher academic achievement, computer education is rapidly becoming a part of school curricula all over India and many schools charge extra computer fees. Even many comparatively poor schools boast of at least one or two token computers. The English-medium public school from our study subscribes to Educomp software for academic subjects and pays hefty yearly fees for it.

Yet for all the “talk” that computers are important in influencing upward mobility, parents and youth also see computers as potential distractions from studies. Both parents and youth are aware of the potential that youth will “play” with new media technologies, and this generates interesting negotiations as parents and children try to find agreement and strike a balance between playtime and work time on digital media. Many children indicated their parents limit media use at home until after they had finished studying or as a short break from the work at hand. These limits apply to new media as well as television, as the following excerpts show.

Interviewer: Is there any rule to use these media? I mean, does anybody guide you?
Student A: Yes, my father says that you can use internet only for one and half hour.
Interviewer: For one and half hour daily?
Student A: No, I am using three or four days in a week.
Student B: I am using for all the days.
Interviewer: All days? So how long you are using in a day?
Student B: Two hours.
Student C: Half an hour.
Student D: One hour, only Sunday.
Interviewer: So once a week and that too one hour.
Student E: One hour in the whole week.
Student D: In the afternoon at the lunchtime, I watch TV. That is it. After that, I have to go to my room to do my homework. Then the whole day in my room, and then go to the tuition class. That’s it.
Student F: I only watch TV from 8 to 9 at night. Otherwise study. I’m at school from morning till 1:30 in the afternoon. Then I do homework for the tuition class. Then go for tuition and come back home in the evening, watch a serial, and then sleep.
In some situations, parents felt that their children could be so tempted to waste time on the computer engaging in games or entertainment that they chose not to have such technology in the house at all.

**Interviewer:** Why do you all have TV at home but not computer or internet?

**Student G:** Yes ma’am, it is expensive, that’s one reason. But also if kids use it too much then it has bad influence. That’s why our parents don’t buy it. We wouldn’t pay attention to studies.

**Student H:** If I had a computer at home, I wouldn’t do my homework. I’d only do games, paint.

Perception of youth as a period of preparation for adult life is entrenched in Indian society. Education (for those who can afford and especially for boys) is a central aspect of this preparation. Traditional Indian culture does not see youth as a time of rebellion and experimentation. The ceremony of *Upanayan sanskar* in some castes symbolizes a boy’s entry into the formal education system and is considered an important milestone in life. Young people in our sample are very aware of these expectations from them. Media also project youth as change agents, as responsible for the upholding of Indian culture and for the development of the nation. These rural youth have professional ambitions – doctor, pilot, police officer, teacher, politician and scientist were among their chosen future careers – and believe they need to study intensively, even if it means foregoing play, so they can live up to these expectations.

Across the board, we found that students were unquestioning in the idea that using computers would be a distraction from studies. Students in the 10th grade, who were getting ready to take board exams that would determine the type of school they could attend next, were particularly concerned that using computers would take away from their ability to focus on what was really important – textbook studying. It may be with good reason that students and their family members see computers as distractions from academic work. While the influence of discourses encourages students to think of computers as “work” things, in practice the rural youth that researchers spoke with who have access to the internet or cell phones often want to use computers and other new media technologies for play. Students talk about playing games, downloading music, voting for such polls as Indian Idol, sending messages, and getting information about their favorite hobbies, such as football, dance, and swimming.

**Interviewer:** Do you follow movies on the internet? Like say movie songs or movie stars? Who are your favorite stars?

**Student U:** ShahRukh Khan.

**Student V:** Katrina Kaif.

**Interviewer:** So have you gone to the internet and checked their site? Have you explored their site?

**Student X:** The stars are on Facebook so sometimes we have tried telling them to be our friends.

Yet these youth also show some signs they use new media technologies in ways that blend work and play for them. Some use the internet to seek information for school
projects or personal fulfillment, and they are familiar with such sites as Google, Pogo, Disney, and Yahoo!. A number of them talk about using video-conferencing or Facebook to communicate with relatives who live geographically far from them. Such uses can’t be categorized solely as “play” since the students speak of such practices as a type of work that is necessary to maintain or enhance relationships. Also the initiative and approval of this kind of media use lies with parents or other older relatives.

Interviewer: [Y], you are there on Facebook?
Student Y: Yes. I did not want to have an account. But all my relatives are there on it, and they forced me to make an account so that they can talk with me.

Nixon (1998, p 23) points out that, in an Australian context, “what is discursively produced within the global cultural economy as digital fun and games for young people, is simultaneously constructed as serious business for parents” (Italics original). This observation is relevant for India. Media, information technology companies and schools constantly call out to parents to be “smart” parents. This means that parents have to make sure that it is work and not play, study and not games that remain the chief functions of computer and internet at home. Children’s use of new media has to be supervised. This brings us to the second aspect of negotiations – power and control.

**Negotiations around power and control**

Digital technologies are marketed as youth-oriented technologies giving “power” to youth (youth agency), but we observed a web of school and parental controls surrounding their use. Traditionally, obedience to parents and teachers is highly valued in Indian society. West-inspired global youth culture, however, has influenced the current generations through media images, music and travel. Notions of youth as an age of adventure, identity experimentation and autonomy are slowly making inroads into Indian families.

Yet parents, schools, and media work to maintain control over the youth through various means, including spreading fear among youngsters about the dangers of new media use. Schwittay (2011, p.359) and Ravindran (2009, p.98) have noted how moral panic agents are using the (Tamil) vernacular press. As the authors point out, sensationalist headlines read, “Cell Phone Revolution: Satan in Palm,” “Tragedy Caused by Cell Phone: College Student Arrested for Killing Co-Student,” and “Seller of Cell Phone Memory Cards with Obscene Pictures Arrested.” As these headlines show, the social changes brought about by the use of cell phones are presented as scandalous and dangerous. Ravindran (2009) argues that this is part of the emergence of an Indian surveillance society that seeks to monitor and control transformations brought about by the use of new media technologies. These narratives that permeate Indian culture at large have seeped into the accounts given by Gujarati youth of their media experiences. “Panic” stories about the westernization of digital media and the risk and misuse of digital media by youth was prevalent in focus group discussions. What our data show corresponds with
the ambiguities of the discourse prevalent in the media and shows that youth internalize the risk discourse. Students talked about their fears of developing cancer from such media technologies as cell phones. They also expressed concerns about interacting with strangers through new media technologies.

Interviewer: On internet or cell phone, do you only talk with the people you know or have you ever talked to a stranger?
Student V: Wrong number!
Student U: We are not doing it. But our friends are doing it. Making friends with friends of friends!
Interviewer: Have you ever got a friend request from a stranger on Facebook?
Student Y: Yes I do, but I do not accept them.
Interviewer: So your only internet exchange is with people whom you know. You have never talked to people who are strangers.
Group: Yes.
Interviewer: Why is it so?
Student V: It is unsafe.

Our study, however, shows that the youth are neither wholly obedient to their parents, nor are they openly defiant. As mentioned earlier, they rarely question rules that parents or elders have established regarding how much time one may spend using media. In fact, they have internalized the idea that media use is a distraction, perhaps as a way of feeling some control over parental decisions to restrict use.

It’s not just parents but also older siblings who restrict students’ media use. It was common among many of the families to share cell phones among family members, and the youngest children often had the least access to this technology. While a number of them know how to engage in such activities as casting votes or downloading music using cell phones, many of them aren’t able to do so at will.

Interviewer: Do you give a list of songs for downloading?
Student I: No. Whatever my dad wants he downloads, and I listen to those.

Still, students are developing ways to work around the controls that adults have established. When faced with the thought of losing all access to media in the home, they first announce that they would obey the orders but then gradually come up with a number of ideas in which they would find ways to use new and traditional media. They may “go out and play quietly, and then go to a friend’s or a relative’s house” or “leave the village.” Another student would get his parents “so absorbed in talking, then I’d quietly start the TV and watch it.” Although families and adults create rules and these youth generally comply with them, they are negotiating ways of asserting control over their lives and media technologies. However, they prefer to work around rules rather than openly challenge them.

Even in school they do not always accept the top-down approach to computer use. The students from Location 4 discussed their resentment towards a newspaper blog that they had made as part of their comprehensive evaluation.
Student P: My whole class together made a newsgroup blog. My friends and all.
Student Q: Just now only started based on CC (Comprehensive Evaluation). We are protesting against it. We do not want it.
Interviewer: I do not know anything about it so please tell me as I am really interested.
Student P: It is like we have to participate in every activity and it becomes a burden on us.
Interviewer: So you are evaluated for everything?
Student U: Yes, for how we behave in class and all.
Student P: That is not the problem but then we have to do everything. The result of one exam has come and the portion of the other has started.
Interviewer: So a lot of burden.
Student P: So the whole class has made the blog. We do not open that blog now, and I do not know what the condition of that blog will be in sometime.

Rural youth who have access to new media technologies are making choices that may conflict with established discourses, even if they aren’t all doing it all the time. They are beginning to challenge ideas that the rules laid out for them may not always apply. They friend people they are unfamiliar with, they try friending popular Indian film and television stars on Facebook, and they choose not to friend people – such as distant relatives – whom traditional and popular discourses tell them they should. Some of them have tried participating in commercially sponsored schemes and been frustrated with the experience. Still others in these focus groups had little to no knowledge of networking sites or any websites. The following section considers how rural youth negotiate their aspirations with limitations.

**Negotiating aspirations and structural and infrastructural limitations**

The discourse in media about digital technologies creates aspirations in young people to be part of the global network society, but these aspirations are severely constrained by structural and infrastructural limitations. There is also another set of aspirations fueled by urbanization and transnational migration. In popular media discourse a “village” is represented ambiguously. On one hand, a village is the space where the soul and heart of the nation reside in its pristine innocence, unadulterated by corrupt urban influences. At the same time it is a space that is backward, doomed, and made unattractive because of the lack of amenities and glitter that a city boasts of. On one hand, the digital media are seen as potential equalizers because geographical spaces are not important any more when you can connect with the world in virtual space. In reality, however, issues of access and availability of new media have widened the urban–rural gap. Participants’ responses show that the gap between aspirations and on-the-ground realities is another area of negotiation.

The global multinationals interpellate Indian youth in two ways: as a trained and inexpensive workforce and as an attractive market (McMillin, 2009). These interpellations are very visible in the advertisements that young people are exposed to. Without an in-depth analysis of historical factors and geo-political imbalance and inequities,
these look like win–win situations for the corporations as well as youth. According to
the dominant discourse, digital media are the media of the future, the media of success
and mobility and global connectivity. Indian youth is constantly reminded that India’s
resurgence potential as a world power rests on the Indian youth. Many current role
models (apart from Bollywood and cricket) for Indian youth, like Narayan Murthy,
Ajeez Premji, Sabeer Bhatia, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates, are associated with informa-
tion technology. Their success stories circulate across media. India’s success as a soft-
ware giant, successful Indian entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, and the exciting work
opportunities in information technologies are the themes oft repeated in media that
resonate with the efforts of the Indian state and market to position India as a viable and
competitive IT hub in the global market. The Gujarati newspapers that many young
people in the study read – Gujarat Samachar, Sandesh and Divya Bhaskar – all fre-
quently carry stories about digital media. Each Monday, Gujarat Samachar publishes a
science and technology supplement that is called science@knowledge.com. The special
weekly supplement of Sandesh, iTech, is full of new media content. Many of the stu-
dents in these focus groups read at least one newspaper, watch television, and follow
popular culture and cultural expectations. They see people engaging with the internet
and new media tools when they watch television but have little or no first-hand experi-
ence with much of what they see.

Interviewer: Do you know about chatting?
Student H: My dad was saying something like that is likely to happen.
Student I: You can do it on a computer.
Interviewer: Have you seen someone chatting?
Group: On TV, not in real.
Student J: We can call people on computer and if we want to see someone, we
can have a camera on it.
Interviewer: Have you tried it?
Student J: No, but I have seen it on TV.

Consider the following headline from Sandesh under the section of “career”: “Computer Program banao, paisa kamao” (make computer programs and earn money). Another iTech edition covers stories about mind control gadgets by IBM, wireless cam-
eras for home security, President Obama and his MacBook, and adding photos in
Facebook chat. Visits of relatives and friends who have migrated to North America, the
Middle East, and Australia fuel the aspirations of young people to own the coveted mate-
rial goods, as well as new media gadgets that expats possess and the aspiration to “con-
quering the world” as a global Indian.

Juluri (2003) asserts that the preferred meaning of globalization in Indian music
television reverses the widespread assumption of globalization as a process of foreign
(and particularly western) incursion. According to him, although the “invasion” meta-
phor, and the phrase “cultural imperialism” had some public currency in the 1990s (prior
to the Indianization phase of satellite television), these ideas have since declined, if not
altogether disappeared, in mainstream media discourses. In Juluri’s study of audiences of
Indian music television, most middle-class participants characterized globalization as
“India – Indian people, Indian culture, Indian media, Indian products, Indian services –
going out into the world, and the world-stage, as it were” (Juluri, 2003: 94). Take, for
example, a text that has gone viral on email and Facebook (My Dreamland India, 2012).

Incredible India…10 Amazing Facts about India
1.) Vinod Dham invented Pentium chip (90% of today’s computers run on it).
2.) Sabeer Bhatia created Hotmail (Hotmail is world’s No.1 web based email program).
3.) 38% of doctors in USA are Indians.
4.) 12% of scientists in USA are Indians.
5.) 36% of NASA scientists are Indians.
6.) 34% of Microsoft employees are Indians.
7.) 28% of IBM employees are Indians.
8.) 17% of Intel scientists are Indians.
9.) 13% of Xerox employees are Indians.
10.) The famous board game, called chess, was invented in India.

The numbers in the text may very well be exaggerated but its pathos cannot be
missed. Infrastructural (and other) limitations, however, quickly deflate many of these
young dreams. Youth in these focus groups note a number of ways in which their inter-
ests in connecting to a global network are limited, from the costs of internet service, to
access to computers, to time limitations with new media due to sharing of devices, to
the struggle to download information. Not all students had access to computers at
school. Those schools that do provide computers and internet access restrict usage by
time and/or by age. As reported by students in Location 2, the formal computer class
time in school was half an hour every week in which they learned Word, Paint,
PowerPoint and Excel etc.

Group: Ninth, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades are allowed to use the internet. We
are not allowed to use… We have to use the computer only for the
project that we are given.

Many of the students expressed that they value news and information and know that
the internet provides them opportunities to learn and experience. Several students said
that the internet can make them “aware of what is happening in the world.” But the lim-
ited computer instruction they receive and limited access to the internet make them
immature users likely to struggle with negotiating their way through the flood of infor-
mation available.

Interviewer: And when you go on the internet, I mean, when you are online, how do
you get the information? Do you know the names of certain
websites?
Student Y: No, on Google I write www.a or b or c. Any letter I type. For example,
if I type a, I will find axis bank, aero plane, etc. So in that list, if I like
something, I click on it and go for it.
Interviewer: OK, so you do a random search?
Student Y: Yes.
While some students in three of the four villages had internet access at home or at friends’ homes, youth at a fourth village (Location 3) had no access at all. This particular group of youngsters uses Bluetooth mobile technology to transfer music between cell phones but don’t download songs directly. When making choices about what media to use and consume, they say their choices are “based on availability of media.” Because their choices are extremely limited, what they know about new media technologies often is limited to what they are told.

Interviewer: Have you ever approached anybody to get information about what the internet is and what all can be done with the internet?

Group: Yes, we asked our computer teacher in school.

Interviewer: So what did he teach you?

Student S: He showed us what the internet is and what uses it has.

Interviewer: But you are not allowed to access the internet in school? Group: No, we are not allowed and we have never used it.

Interviewer: Do you have facilities of internet in your villages? Like cafes or anything?

Student L: No, we do not have that facility in our village. Sometimes, even the newspaper does not reach our faliya [village lane]. How can we imagine of the internet?

Interviewer: Since you all are not much aware of the internet, who told you that you can send emails from internet?

Group: Our computer teacher.

Interviewer: So are you keen that you make your own email account and send emails to each other?

Group: Yes.

But not everyone feels the need for more new media in their lives.

Interviewer: Wouldn’t you like information about cricket from internet?

Student R: I think the information I have is enough.

Student Z: I really don’t know much about using internet. Otherwise I would get information. But my brother gets information for me.

About one-third of the youth indicated they have home access to the internet, and they use broadband or USB sticks to connect online. Well over half use cell phones, and a small number say they can connect to the internet with these. Yet their desire to surf the web from their mobiles often is not matched by the infrastructural capabilities.

Student B: Sir, I like computer besides mobile because in mobile we view internet. So something we can see, but when we use videos and internet in mobile, it shows that your mobile has insufficient memory. So we can’t operate any video from mobile to internet.

Having access to computers and wireless technologies has costs that can put strains on these families. Three boys told the stories of how they had ruined or lost their first cell
phones and after that were not allowed to buy another cell phone. Youth say cybercafés are too expensive to use regularly; only a handful mention having visited them at all, and none do so regularly. Students and their families have devised ways to work around some expenses. Youth may call parents, hang up before answering, and then have their parents call them back to save money. They say they use various “schemes” to save on instant messaging.

**Discussion**

Our analysis reinforces Livingstone’s (2009) observation that the emergence of a so-called digital generation can only be adequately understood in the context of the realities of their everyday social environments and other changes – for example, in the political economy of youth culture and policies and practices that regulate and shape young people’s lives. We have shown how social-cultural discourse and socio-economic conditions in the villages and small towns of Gujarat create a context in which digital youth cultures play out in very different patterns from those suggested by researchers in industrialized western countries and also by some research on urban elite Indian youth.

The picture that emerges through our analysis is one of youth who enjoy conventional media like television and Bollywood films, read newspapers as a daily habit, have strong bonds with immediate and extended family, respect parental authority even if not wholly accepting it, and have rich and active social and civic lives. Their neighborhood ties are informal and their peer group with whom they share school-related and fun activities is in geographic proximity. They participate in creative and civic activities mostly through school and sometimes through religious organizations. Digital media are at the periphery of their lives. These media, however, have “immense symbolic value—separate from its functional value—that is tied to social and economic ascendancy” as also observed by Pal et al. (2007, p.1) in their interviews of rural parents in Karnataka, India. Boyd (2008) has argued how online spaces are becoming the new hangout spaces for American youth because traditional spaces are disappearing. This is not the case with rural and small town locations in India. With an abundance of safe physical spaces and social ties, we did not see youth in our study as lonely. They did not express the need to be constantly connected to friends, with or without media. Mediated social connections with family abroad or in other cities of India were a once-in-a-while affair. Like other young people around the world who have had the taste of digital media, the young people in our study love playing games, mostly on cell phones and sometimes on computers. However, cell phones are still mostly shared and are not an extension of their bodies.

At the same time, these youth, along with their parents and teachers, are facing mounting pressures to join the network society, participate in a global competitive labor market, and be consumers of new media technologies. The global corporate players (through new gadgets, schemes, and advertisement), as well as the government, through rhetoric and development schemes, are raising normative expectations to be part of global markets that are impossible to meet in their rural location with infrastructural limitations. Paradoxically, there are also normative expectations to remain a part of the collective local social networks that do not always resonate with the global youth cultures that these youth will increasingly get exposed to. Thus, the youth in our study face a clash of
expectations between how media are promoted and how they are experienced. We cannot deny the possibility that these youth lose more than they gain if forced to join the global network society with inadequate resources and skills at their disposal.

When the opportunities for “geeking out and messing around” (Ito et al., 2010) were available many young people showed the confidence for figuring things out themselves and learning new media skills through trial and error or peer support. Jenkins (2006) has argued for the importance of soft skills, like play, performance, simulation, appropriation, collective intelligence, negotiation, and networking. Jenkins and Ito et al. argue how important these soft skills or new literacies are for young people to effectively participate in the network society. However, unless schools and parents in rural and small town locations of India consider these skills as important as the formal training in Microsoft Power Point, Word or Excel, the youth would have few opportunities for successfully developing the soft skills that will ultimately influence their success. Additionally, Walsham (2010) shows that beneficiaries of many ICT-based initiatives are almost always not the poorest or most disadvantaged groups, and it is challenging to scale-up initiatives to have widespread effects throughout India. Until the government and corporate players invest more fully in the infrastructure and equipment for underserved communities, such as rural populations, these youth will continue to face challenges when it comes to opportunities for “messing around.” Besides, providing technology without critical media and information literacy will have a limited positive impact for these youth. It would be a tragic outcome of public policy if these youth lose their socially rich lives, activities outside media and physical spaces for hanging out and also remain at the peripheries of network society.

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