

# Invisible Youth Reappear! A Review of Two Youth Produced Videos

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## Introduction

**R**ARELY VISIBLE IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA, THE PERCEPTIONS AND WORLDVIEW OF children are vividly expressed in the hundreds of “youth-produced” videos that are created in classrooms and community-based workshops every year. *Kolaps* and *Youth on Racism* are just two examples of competent and compelling videos produced by children participating in youth media programs.

Youth-produced videos are, most often, a collaboration between the children and “media educators” or “media artists.” The latter tend to be teachers with traditional academic backgrounds who have learned video production skills, or professional videographers committed to sharing their knowledge with children or youth with several years of experience in media production programs. Media educators teach the fundamental skills necessary for self-expression using the medium of video. Ideally, they act as mentors who facilitate the production process as unobtrusively as possible, allowing the children to express their own authentic voices.

Although the structure and details of each program are unique, they share similarities. Among them are access to experienced mentors, a safe, focused, and creative working environment, an opportunity to learn technical skills, and access to cameras and editing equipment.

Video production workshops enable children to express their unique perspectives while they acquire the skills and self-esteem necessary to make their voices heard in the public sphere. Schools, public health projects, leadership training, and arts programs have used video production to engage children in identifying and representing problems that affect them, and working toward viable solutions.

Pervasive exposure to mass media has created a generation of children and youth with a sophisticated understanding of the media’s power and influence. When provided with the skills and equipment necessary to create *their own* media, children respond enthusiastically, producing insightful investigations of topics important to them, such as racism, politics, ecological concerns, sexuality, and homelessness.

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Once completed, youth-produced videos are showcased in community settings, schools, and video festivals. A few are picked up by distributors and become available to the educational video market. Youth-produced videos are sometimes broadcast on community access television and occasionally on public television stations.

### **In a Refugee Camp**

In the youth-produced video entitled *Kolaps*, teens living in a Croatian refugee camp tell their stories, share their observations about the world, and express their hopes for the future. This video exemplifies how collaboration between young people creating media for the first time and educator/media artists with years of production experience can result in an artistic and technically competent representation of the subjective experience of the youth.

*Kolaps* was facilitated by Global Action Project (GAP), an exchange program that trains young people around the world to produce “videoletters” on issues that concern them. GAP, a New York-based program of Global Kids, aspires to encourage young people to become “positive role models and contribute to community development and international understanding.” Although such “adult” ideals might drive the organizations sponsoring youth media projects, videos such as *Kolaps* ultimately express the concerns and interests of the youth who create them. Once completed, the “videoletters” are used for peer education and community action and are distributed to schools, universities, museums, film festivals, conferences, and television broadcasters.

*Kolaps* exemplifies how *the process* inherent in youth-produced media programs is as important as the final creation. In such programs and in their resultant videos, media educators use conflict resolution and team-building techniques to create an environment where self-expression is valued and where the children feel safe enough to share their thoughts and begin the dialogue to be realized in their video. *Kolaps* is a model of how such productions can be facilitated so that the kids can tell stories in their own way. As the opening narration explains:

I've been living in this camp for nine months together with the others who share my fate.... We are here because of the war.... On behalf of the teenagers, I will tell you our story...we will tell you of our experiences....

We see the world through the eyes of the young videographers. They select the images and the music. These kids are survivors; they are unafraid to ask tough questions of themselves and of those they interview. They ask people on the street what they think of the war, as well as those who have lost their homes because of it. They often exhibit a depth of concern and understanding that adults are too preoccupied, or afraid, to explore.

The teens share intimate glimpses of their lives in the camp: they express how it feels to be confined by gates, to be displaced, homeless, and cut off from the

mainstream of society. They also share their delight and pride when the new teen center they have built is complete and ready to be christened with its first rowdy party. Despite the hardships they have experienced, they appear resilient, remarkably good natured, and optimistic. Their self-depiction strongly suggests that they feel a strong appreciation for family, friends, music, romance, dancing, and playing pranks or acting silly, just for the fun of it.

Production occurred over an eight-week period: two weeks of preproduction, three weeks of principle photography, and two and one-half weeks of editing (by the youth and a professional editor). During this demanding schedule, lighting, camera, ease in front of the camera, interviewing, and other skills were taught simultaneously. The teens decided what stories they wanted to tell, what to shoot, and how to shoot it. They determined the basic structure of the final product and also selected the music. Artfully crafted sequences were created by teens and professionals alike.

### **Production of Mass Media Stereotypes**

The voices of children and youth, and positive images — especially of teens — are lacking in the mainstream media and in the public/political discourse so closely associated with it. Youth often express concern that the mainstream (i.e., corporate) media portray them either as negative stereotypes or, worse yet, render them invisible. As an article in the *Los Angeles Times* reports, “most children who watch television news or read newspapers believe the media portray a negative image of young people....”

Media programs such as Community TV Network (CTVN) in Chicago offer teens an opportunity to counteract negative or nonexistent media images by producing and disseminating their own media in the form of the public access television series, “Hard Cover.” The program is produced, written, and directed solely by the teens, who are mostly low-income, minority, drop-outs or kids who don’t do well in a traditional academic setting. Over the past 20 years, 1,700 of these once “invisible” teens have participated in the program.

CTVN has a social agenda as well. On a personal level, the program attempts to use video as a tool to build the critical thinking skills and self-esteem of teens. On a social level, video is seen as a solution-oriented tool for change. The youth are encouraged to pinpoint a problem and then take the all-important step of finding solutions.

*Youth on Racism* is one of hundreds of shows produced from the perspective of the teen producers of “Hard Cover.” The program is an exploration by four teens from diverse social, economic, and ethnic groups of how racism affects their communities. Part 1, *What’s It Like Where You Live?*, takes us on a tour through each neighborhood from an insider’s perspective. In Part 2, *I Dare You to Cross This Line*, the kids visit each other’s neighborhoods and openly discuss the differences. Tamika Crout, 20, one of “Hard Cover’s” youth producers, comments:

Through working with “Hard Cover” I have learned so much that cannot be taught in school. The show gives me a chance to voice my opinions and get my views across. It also gives me the chance to dispel many of the stereotypes created by mainstream media.... Since I started video I’ve learned how to understand the media and its power....

The highly commercial nature of mainstream television limits the viewing of youth-produced videos like *Youth on Racism* to cable access television, film festivals, schools, and community gatherings. There is, however, an intrinsic value to the videos, whether they are widely seen by the general public or not: they have great meaning to the youth who made them, and to their families, friends, and communities.

Hands-on experience in creating film and video encourages the demystification and deconstruction of commercial mass media. Youth who understand the language and techniques of media are potentially formidable agents for social change and democracy. The insights and creativity expressed in *Kolaps* and *Youth on Racism* indicate that children have much to say, say it well, and are well worth listening to.

## RESOURCES

*For Kolaps and other “videonewsletters”:*

Global Action Project  
561 Broadway, 6th floor  
New York, NY 10012  
phone: (212) 226–0130

*For Youth on Racism and other episodes of “Hard Cover”:*

Community TV Network  
2035 W. Wabansia  
Chicago, IL 60647  
phone: (773) 278–8500

*For The National Media Education Directory:*

The National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture  
The Ninth Street Media Complex  
356 Ninth Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
phone: (415) 431–1391

*For media festivals that highlight youth-produced media:*

Wired Youth

Visions of the Future Video/Film Festival

L.A. Freewaves

National Educational Video Network