



## Youth development or media innovation? The outcomes of youth media enterprise

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Is social benefit a likely outcome of youth media organisations? If so, what particular institutional circumstances and methods lead to social benefit? In this paper we will approach these questions by looking at two youth media organisations that we at the Swinburne Institute have been observing within the lifespan of CCI: SYN Media and Youthworx.

In doing so, we will make three observations. The first is that a single category of ‘youth media’ is not particularly helpful when seeking to understand the two types of social benefit most often associated with it: youth development and innovation. The second is that the project of youth development is perhaps, by its nature, unable to be truly innovative. Youth media organisations can be innovative, but they achieve innovation outcomes through attributes that are unlikely to be related to youth development. Our third point is that when youth development is seen as the primary reason for supporting youth media organisations, we risk overlooking types of innovation that may arise from structures and process that do not conform to development objectives.

Both of the organisations, SYN Media and Youthworx, have been a resounding success and the outcomes for young people have been impressive. A great many lives have been transformed; models for youth development and media innovation have been tried, tested and documented. Productive partnerships have been forged. Longevity, and perhaps sustainability – the most difficult aspiration for many social enterprise endeavours – seems to have been achieved. However, our aim here is not to measure these organisations against typical evaluation criteria. Instead, we consider some of the varied purposes of youth media in relation to the creative industries labour market and the structures that are required to make youth media work. We will first provide a

description of each organisation and the youth outcomes we identified through our research before comparing the two<sup>1</sup>. In the case of SYN, the outcome is that of employment through status signalling, whereby young people use SYN to differentiate themselves from others in a competitive creative labour market. In the case of SYN, this is achieved through a youth-run model. For Youthworx, the chief contribution is that of recognising and validating young people's own interests and potential as a basis for extending their social and workplace skills and facilitating transitions into formal education and employment. This developmental work is delivered by adult-led structures of supportive creative engagement and social service.

## **SYN Media**

SYN lives in an old terrace building owned by RMIT University in Melbourne, with radio studios in a separate building located deep within the CBD campus. SYN feels and looks like a student house, with stencil art on the walls and old couches that people are known to sleep on after a big night out. SYN was formed in the lead up to the 2001 community radio licence round when two radio groups operating on temporary community licences, SRA at RMIT and 3TD at Thornbury Darebin High, joined forces to apply. The principles that were put in place at that time were that SYN would be youth-run and ensure that access was maintained. As a community media organization, SYN developed a strikingly original model based on collaborative, open systems (for a fuller description of SYN see Rennie 2011). To this day, the station stays young by constantly refreshing its program schedule and producer teams and insisting on a retirement age of 26. As an 'open source organisation', SYN is constantly recreated by those involved, anyone (young) can get involved, and it excels through collaborative effort and ambition (for instance, SYN was the first Australian community radio station to fully embrace multiplatform content production). The model is not perfect; for instance, SYN cycles through a process of relearning lessons as new people move into volunteer management roles.

Although SYN uses the rhetoric of youth development, the goal of youth development is generally not what keeps 'the SYNners' (as they refer to themselves) involved. The attraction of SYN for participants is that it presents a new approach to media innovation, based on openness, access and risk.

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<sup>1</sup> Our research involved long-term qualitative research (a combination of observation and interviews), as well as data collected through surveys with past and present SYN and Youthworx participants. Research at SYN occurred predominantly in 2006-2008 with a follow-up survey in 2013. The Youthworx research occurred between 2009-2013.



Fig. 1. SYN outdoor broadcast. Picture by Alan Weedon, courtesy of SYN Media.

## SYN outcomes

In mid-2013, 352 SYN participants took part in an online survey that the Swinburne Institute designed at SYN's request (Rennie, Büttner & Kelleher 2013). Although the survey involved fairly routine evaluative questions, the results revealed some interesting insights into the role that this particular youth-run community media organisation plays in the creative industries labour market<sup>2</sup>. It is worth noting that, in contrast to Youthworx, the participant group were not marginalised: Current SYN participants that took part in the survey (half of all participants) averaged 22 years of age, with the largest number being 24 years of age. Two thirds of current SYN participants were studying and over three quarters were in some kind of employment (over half in part-time/casual employment) at the time of the survey. Those that were participating in SYN at the time were typically metropolitan-based, and were likely to be living with their parents. Roughly one quarter identified as culturally and linguistically diverse. Half had volunteered at another non-profit organisation at some time, suggesting a highly motivated cohort.

The benefit of youth media is usually discussed in terms of human capital and skills – education, or in this case non-school education, as a means to personal development. The

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<sup>2</sup> 11% response rate. As the survey was voluntary, the results are likely to be skewed through selection bias and cannot be seen as representative of the whole SYN population.

survey revealed that the majority of SYNners stated that their ability to network and train others was better than before SYN, as well as their public speaking and digital media skills. Those that were involved for more than three years were also likely to have improved in their team leadership and taking on responsibility, suggesting that SYN does produce personal development outcomes, particularly for those that commit to it for a significant length of time.



Fig. 2. SYN's digital radio studio. Picture by Evan Munro-Smith, courtesy of SYN Media.

The most interesting results, however, were in the area of employment pathways. SYN is not just a training organisation, but also an opportunity for young people to differentiate themselves from others, providing SYNners with a means to signal their capabilities and risk-taking. In economics this is called job market signalling (Spence 1973), meaning 'the endogenous market process whereby the employer requires (and the individual transmits) information about the potential employee, which ultimately determines the implicit lottery involved in hiring, the offered wages, and in the end the allocation of jobs to people and people to jobs in the market' (356). Participation in SYN is thought to shift the 'conditional probability distributions' (358) that define an employer's beliefs. In interviews conducted in 2006-2008 we heard many stories about former SYN participants transitioning to work: for instance, one kid had been 'picked off air' by a commercial radio producer; 4 out of 5 of ABC radio's Vic rural reporters were ex-SYNners at the time; media celebrities Hamish and Andy had come through SYN, and many more (see Rennie 2011). The survey revealed a stark contrast between the perceived usefulness of SYN for those that went on to work in the media industries versus those that went into other occupations. Table 1 shows that creative industries workers were far more likely to respond that SYN helped them to get paid work than those in any other sector. Interestingly, within that category, those that were employed in media (as opposed to other creative industries occupations) were more likely to respond 'yes' when asked if SYN helped them to find paid work, while those in other creative industries occupations

were likely to respond 'no' (not shown in table). Of those working in the media industries at the time of the survey, the highest proportion were working in journalist and producer roles, suggesting that SYN provides direct or accelerated entry into professional roles as opposed to administration. If SYN experience helped to gain work evenly across all sectors then this would suggest that SYN is providing generic skills that are important for work. However, although SYN *may* be providing generic skills, the survey results show something else. It seems that the value of SYN for work is that it provides a means to 'signal' to creative industries employers that the SYNner is a better bet than other applicants in the lottery of job searching.

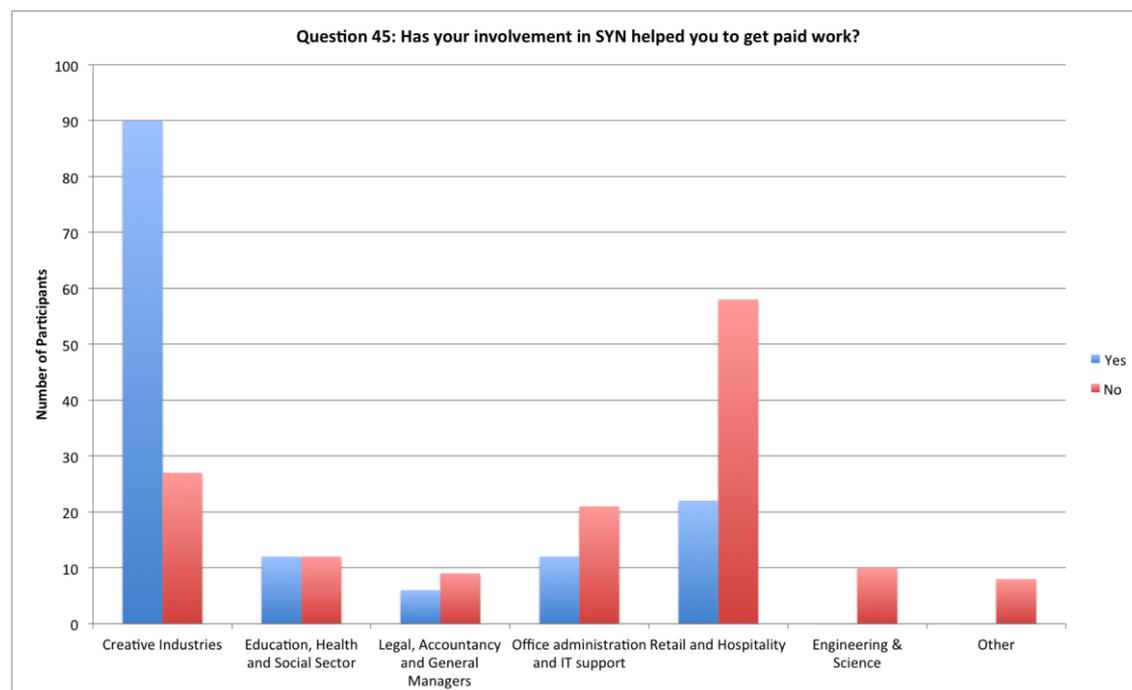


Table 1: SYN as a means to paid work

Of the 148 participants that stated that SYN helped them to get paid work, over 60% of participants attributed this to the relevant skills they gained while at SYN, with a similar number attributing it to their employer recognising SYN experience. Approximately 35% stated that SYN helped them to choose a career pathway. Although we can only know for sure if employers recognised SYN experience from employers themselves, the finding indicates that participants perceive SYN as helping them to stand out from the pack when following a desirable but uncertain career path. Youthworx, on the other hand, tells an entirely different story.

## Youthworx

Youthworx is a youth media organization run by a non-for-profit organization, Youth Development Australia, in collaboration with The Salvation Army, North Melbourne Institute of Technology TAFE (NMIT), SYN Media and researchers at Swinburne

University (for full description see Podkalicka et al. 2013). Located in a Melbourne's northern suburb of Brunswick, in what once was a warehouse, it occupies three rooms fitted with a purpose-built industry-standard recording studio, new Macintosh computers and high-tech video equipment. In this creative space, young people have access to media training opportunities (through open-access one-on-one, group training workshops and accredited courses in Creative Industries) and to support and counselling. Young people, from across Melbourne, aged between 15 and 22 who experience various forms of disadvantage (e.g. homelessness, alienation from education, health issues) are eligible to join, recruited through local social agencies such as Brunswick Youth Services (located across the road from *Youthworx* in Tinning St), Crossroads, DHS, MacKillop Family Services, Mission Australia, Juvenile Justice, Wesley Employment Services and NMIT. An hour-long interview is built into the recruitment process to ensure the suitability of the program to each student.



Fig. 3. Youthworx students on location making a short film. Image courtesy of Youthworx.

At Youthworx, working with media trainers, young people learn how to plan and make mini-documentaries, short films and original music. They practice planning and recording short radio sequences. Distribution outlets include *SYN Media* and *Channel 31* (Melbourne's free-to-air community television station). Once a week, Youthworx participants travel to the SYN Media radio studio and broadcast live. The media training is diverse and personalised; young people are encouraged to pursue their own interests, explore different genre formats and build media competence. Most advanced students can get involved in producing content commissioned by external clients through

Youthworx's social enterprise – Youthworx Productions – as casual assistants or regular paid trainees.

With its deliberately youth development agenda, Youthworx's media training is geared towards skill building through creative expression, team work and collaborative broadcasting arrangements (via SYN). However, despite the focus on creative education, facilitating youth transitions into creative industries education and employment is not necessarily the program's chief objective. Youthworx Manager, Jon Staley, views the role of the program comprehensively, as scaffolding for young people to develop their creativity, skills and fulfil their potential.. This means helping them to get back on track, in hope they can determine for themselves what education and work is most suitable for them beyond Youthworx. Creativity, in the Youthworx narrative, is considered an enabling force of transformation – and an alternative to the standard social welfare approaches focused on the provision of material resources and support.

The experience of creativity and community is a high priority, and something that Youthworx staff have been working hard to create through the emphasis on friendly, collaborative social relations between young and adult participants. One of the key findings from the research is that it has succeeded; social connections were found to be the most memorable and rewarding aspect of the project for young people and adults alike. For young participants, it was very important and validating, for example, to be taken seriously and mentored by adult practitioners who they looked up to as knowledgeable experts, shared interests with and considered 'cool'. Acknowledging the courage it takes for people to put ideas forward in front of audience, adult staff members considered Youthworx's 'open', 'inclusive' and supportive media production space rewarding and conducive to collaborative media work. The sense of a 'creative community' was opposed to bureaucratic, outcome-oriented, client-service provider relationships identified with mainstream schooling or social services (Podkalicka et al. 2013). The quality of communal, supportive media work that Youthworx provides to marginalized young people has most recently been recognized through conferring a prestigious award to a Youthworx trainee, Hayden Layton, as part of the Victorian Young Achiever Awards. In a media interview, following the award, Hayden was quoted saying: 'I'm lucky enough that Youthworx has been there the whole way (and) not kind of put me in a box because I'm so young, but (given) me more responsibilities and more of a voice' (In Savino, 2014).



Fig. 4. Working at the Youthworx studio. Image courtesy of Youthworx.

### **Youthworx outcomes**

The Swinburne Institute measured the outcomes for the Youthworx participants through a combination of ethnographic observation at the project site, and follow-up interviews with an intended group of 46 former students who enrolled in the project between 2009 and 2011 (one student was involved prior to Youthworx offering accredited courses). Between 2012 and 2013, we conducted 17 interviews, and were provided with further information about some of the remaining graduates' transitions through Youthworx and BYS youth workers. The long-term ethnographic research (2008-2013) allowed us to record and contextualize the moments and trajectories of institutional and individual transformations. A comprehensive analysis of the research material on youth transition is available in book chapter by Podkalicka (forthcoming) (see also Podkalicka et al. 2013); here we provide a brief snapshot.

Since 2008, the program has seen more than 400 marginalised youth come through the door to engage in supported media training. 35 students of the 45 officially enrolled graduated with Youthworx certifications. Many obtained multiple certifications during their involvement in the program. Of the whole group of 46, more than half (25 students) moved on to pursue some type of education and training post-Youthworx, including

apprenticeships, TAFE, VCAL and tertiary courses. Some examples include bakery, instrument making and repair, social work TAFE, hospitality, graphic design, music production, photography diploma, forklift course or mechanic apprenticeship.

Aside from the educational outcomes, Youthworx has achieved clear social development outcomes. Many young participants saw the value of the project as a liberating experience, helping them to leave the house. In many accounts 'home' was painted as a confining space, conveying the feelings of the lack of purpose and social exclusion:

*I was arsed if I was going to just sit at home and be stupid, do stupid things. [Doing something] has kept me sane, kept me from being at home and getting bored, getting into trouble with the cops and drugs, and all that sort of thing. I had to do something.*

Many confirmed higher levels of confidence, resulting in an improved capacity to interact and work with others, including peers, family and professional contacts. One participant, who engaged in further education and subsequently found a satisfying full-time work after Youthworx, noted:

*I got more confidence, I can actually say something. I want to go somewhere, I want to do this, etc. I will put my foot down and try to do it.*

In the follow up interviews, all 17 interviewed graduates admitted to having profited from the project, mentioning a range of social, personal and work-based skills as improved or acquired thanks to *Youthworx*, including in the area of communication, time-management, and technical media competence.

In terms of work outcomes, 17 of 46 found jobs across various industry sectors. 4 Youthworx graduates were in creative occupation employment at the time of follow-up interviews, including filming, editing, photography and guitar making. While it is not a high number, it is not insignificant given the generally small number of graduates. In 2010, Youthworx established a small-scale creative industry social enterprise, Youthworx Productions, which employs professional media practitioners alongside young trainees to produce externally commissioned media content. Youthworx Productions has offered a range of full-time and part-time paid traineeships to over 20 young people employed to assist with filming, editing and web-design on externally commissioned media projects.

The conclusion we draw from the research is a clear preference for further study. Some stated that although they would do creative industries work it is hard to come by and not reliable. Overall, participants opted for qualifications that would give them some work stability eventually. Ultimately, Youthworx is valuable. The supported, community-based media training and production equips young people with individual, social and vocational

skills, assisting them in building self-esteem and social networks (see also Walsh, Lemon et al. 2011). Importantly, these skills are accumulative and transferable to other personal and professional contexts (Slater et al. 2007), even if not necessarily directly utilised in media industries. For instance, the ability to receive and act on feedback from trainers and peers during media production may later be used in other vocational, social and personal contexts: job interviews, interacting with support organisations such as Centrelink, or building personal relations (Podkalicka et al. 2013).

Youthworx is carefully structured, even though it works hard to appear non-school. Jon Staley, Project Manager, is outspoken about a series of conscious decisions made to physically organize the space so it doesn't remind young people of a school with a white board and rows of desks. Similarly, with the launch of the Youthworx Productions, a new space, adjacent to Youthworx Media, was arranged to differentiate between the two in terms of the standards of media production and work ethics. The approaches to media pedagogy are flexible, tailored to individual students' interests and competences but the overall institutional framework (development directions, recruitment pathways, etc.) is set by Project Manager, teachers and youth workers, and overseen by the YDA Board. This is not to say that any institutional changes aren't possible. In fact, as the project matured, establishing stronger patterns of youth participation and commitment, the aspirations and indeed signs of more active youth involvement are recognisable, for example, through youth-led training and mentoring delivered by Youthworx paid trainees and graduates, or assistance with the managing of the social enterprise.

### **The differences between SYN and Youthworx**

The two case studies presented here demonstrate that different structures are required to produce youth development (when working with at-risk young people) to those that produce media talent and innovation. In the latter case, open systems that enable a high degree of innovation provide a means for individuals to signal their abilities to employers, whereas in the youth development model, pastoral care and accredited training enable education pathways and longer term stability.

Despite the fact that these organisations work according to different priorities, the partnership between the two demonstrates that these distinct spheres in 'youth media' can be mutually productive. SYN is a founding partner in Youthworx and sees the need for organisations that can provide social work support to young people in ways they themselves cannot. Moreover, some SYNners have become Youthworx trainers and mentors, gaining employment that is both a creative outlet and a means to promote positive social change within the community. As part of the creative economy, youth media organisations provide reasonably reliable, even if casual, jobs for creative practitioners who move between different sub-sectors (freelance, regular or voluntary work) and make an unknown portion of the creative workforce. Finally, Youthworx

participants who do choose to take the next step can progress along a clear path beyond Youthworx media production through SYN and experience the appeal and work ethic of 'real world' broadcast. SYN is an entry point for them as much as for anyone else.

However, while SYN and Youthworx form a productive partnership, they are clearly not the same thing. Why do we make the mistake of grouping these organisations into the single category of youth media? The most likely answer is that evaluations crafted to fulfil the external requirements of funding organisations are likely to require reporting on human capital outcomes. On these measures the benefits of both Youthworx and SYN appear to be similar, leading to the conclusion that because reportable benefits such as confidence and skills occur across both that we are talking about the same thing. Why does it matter? The differences are important as both of these models deserve investment, but for entirely different reasons.

SYN benefits the media ecosystem through new ideas, uncovering talent, achieved through non-profit governance that is not beholden to the free market. It can fail in the most spectacular and amusing ways, which only works to strengthen it. Youthworx cannot fail as it would be failing those that are most in need of help. We risk undervaluing and marginalising open access systems of media innovation by focusing only on human capital outcomes. SYN provides opportunities for those that take it, particularly as a means of status signalling. Participation in SYN will benefit those that are at a point in their lives when they need to stand out from the rest, to be exceptional. That works well when they have the ability to shape the organisation and produce new content ideas and technologies. SYN succeeds through networks, responsibility to an audience, and the experimental nature of the organisation itself.

Youthworx deserves investment because it is preventing a significant number of young people from falling through the cracks. Organisations such as Youthworx will not necessarily produce the same kind of media innovation or youth trajectories that SYN achieves. This is understandable, given the needs of the Youthworx demographic that include creative engagement but also a sense of social belonging and feeling of being cared for. Participation in Youthworx will benefit those that are at a point in their lives when they need support most: a mix of practical, social, educational assistance. Youthworx achieves human capital outcomes through intense support system and careful attention to pedagogies. The creative activities of Youthworx are worth pursuing because they attract young people into the organization. They may also produce benefits such as intangible skills that will benefit them in all their endeavours.

To put both of these organisations into a bucket called 'youth media' therefore does them both a disservice. Finally, it is also unhelpful in terms of understanding how to foster media innovation. New systems, including new patterns of organisation and expression, are developing via changes in media. Organisations such as SYN are part of that change.

Although we have only examined the outcomes in relation to youth (individual) outcomes in this paper, such organisations also have the capacity to provide structure, governance and ethical systems in a media environment characterized by abundance (see Rennie 2011).

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