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## GENERATION Y AND VOCAL FRY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Theatre Pedagogy: Voice and Speech at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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## Abstract

### GEN Y AND VOCAL FRY

By Paul Michael Valley, MFA Candidate

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts Theatre Pedagogy: Voice and Speech at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Janet B. Rodgers, Professor, Head of Performance, Voice and Speech,  
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In this thesis, the author explores a vocal phenomenon called “vocal fry” and why this dysphonia has emerged as one of the primary means of communication for the population referred to as “Generation Y.” The first chapter defines what vocal fry is and why it is of modest value to the stage actor. The second chapter defines the physiological means by which the human body creates sound, what good sound is and how vocal fry is created. The third and fourth chapters define several generations as well as what defines Gen Y, and the communication physiologies associated with those generations. The last chapter discusses the rise of narcissism within Gen Y and how this may relate to the arrival of vocal fry as a default register for theatre students. The conclusion outlines several solutions that may alleviate the problems associated with this dysphonia.

## Introduction

### *Vocal Fry – What is it?*

Vocal fry can best be described by recalling various performances that have become iconic in our American television and film culture. For me and for perhaps others of my generation, my first memory of this sound comes from Lurch on a television sitcom called *The Addams Family*. For me, the rattling phrase “You rang, Sir?” coming from the actor’s mouth in barely perceptible vibrations of sound is unforgettable. Younger generations may recall the character of Jeff Spicoli as played by Sean Penn in the movie *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*. Keanu Reeves’ character in *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* is yet another example. Current followers of pop culture might have a greater understanding of what vocal fry is if they conjure Miley Cyrus in any of her non-singing scenes in *Hannah Montana*. The reality of this method of phonation within the entertainment community is undeniable. Obviously, my enjoyment of Lurch as well as the aforementioned Spicolli, Ted and Hannah would be minimized were they to use any other vocal choice. But herein lays the problem which forms the core of my thesis: for many people within Generation Y, this is not a choice but rather a default.



## Chapter 1

### *Vocal fry: Why Now?*

My decision to become a teacher is a long story that meanders through the waning twilight of my professional acting career and the dawn of my new vocation in pedagogy. However, one event in particular stands out among the many during this journey. In the fall of 2006, I was a teaching assistant in a course called “Film, Television, and Stage in America” at American University. The course was designed for the general student population – a one hundred level course that fulfilled basic liberal arts credits for the entire undergraduate community as well as a required course for the communication majors. The course was very popular among the students since they essentially got credit for doing what a lot of us spend most of our free time doing – talking about popular culture in the visual media. It was also my first opportunity to neither teach a course nor take a course but rather simply observe the entire process as well as the players in it. Up until this point, I had viewed this younger generation or “Gen Y” according to some cultural pundits, as a group of people with whom I would rarely interact and if I did, it would only be done on an individual basis. For the most part I found teenagers of the day to be dull and uninspired. In other words, I was like most any other adult looking at the younger generation throughout history – I didn’t understand them and more importantly, I didn’t care that I didn’t understand them.

However, as time went on I observed their behavior and began to notice odd consistencies. They were definitely paying attention. While it appeared as if they were asleep or

drifting away during the lectures, this was not the case. As class discussions became more informed by the material that had been presented by the professor, it became apparent that I was mistaken – elements that had been disseminated weeks or months prior to the class were being proffered in responses or group presentations. I became fascinated by the manner in which they responded as well. They sounded as if they couldn't have cared less. Their body language – slumped shoulders, collapsed chests, slack faces – was in conflict with the actual words they were choosing: “I loved that play,” “I f---ing hated that character, I wanted to punch him out,” or “She was the best thing in the movie, totally hot.” These impassioned responses were often communicated via a gravelly, hoarse, dark popping tone that I now understand to be “vocal fry.” Thus it was that I was introduced to this remarkable symptom of today's youth.

Let me begin by stating that I do not view vocal fry as a problem for anyone and everyone. There are several instances in which the vocal fry register is necessary for the creation of a specific quality of singing. There are also several instances where this sound is produced to communicate certain ideas or thoughts. In other words, that when the vocal fry register is used, it literally changes the meaning of several words or phrases. This occurs in several languages, Burmese and Vietnamese being two. Also, vocal fry is used as a means of reaching very low notes while singing. That it can be considered a register in and of itself is unequivocal. It is utilized in choral situations – where the bass lines are often written so low as to require it. It is also used if a true bass isn't present, a baritone might be able to use vocal fry to add that note to the chord which would otherwise be un-represented. The bass line of the Russian Anthem has notes that are arguably written in a range that is only capable of being sung in the fry register. There are some styles of folk songs, that when sung by females also use vocal fry. Solo performers use it as well. *I Ain't Got a Woman* comes to mind; interestingly, this song contains

two rarely used registers, falsetto and fry. In his song *I Got Friends in Low Places*, Garth Brooks uses the vocal register on his very first note. While this sound might be considered more of a croak than a fry, it remains within the vocal fry register.

In March, 2010, I interviewed Lester Thomas Shane, a prominent speech teacher who lives in New York City and teaches at several institutions there. We spoke at length about vocal fry which he describes in this manner:

To me it's that sound that lives here in the throat. It's as if somehow there's just nothing that makes it get past the throat and into the mask or head or even down into the chest to the belly – it's just something that sits right there. And so it has no real energy to it, and so when it gets energized, then it feels really awful in my throat because the two things are in conflict.

I will go into a deeper discussion of registers and modal voice ranges in a later chapter. Suffice to say that the vocal fry register, when viewed alone, is not injurious to the vocal mechanism. When this register is utilized by the average person, it is merely annoying. The damage that they may or may not be doing to their vocal folds, while worrisome, won't end or even limit their career. While I don't dismiss the problems associated with vocal fry and the population, I would like to focus on those individuals who are considering the stage as their life's work.

## Chapter 2

### *The Healthy Voice*

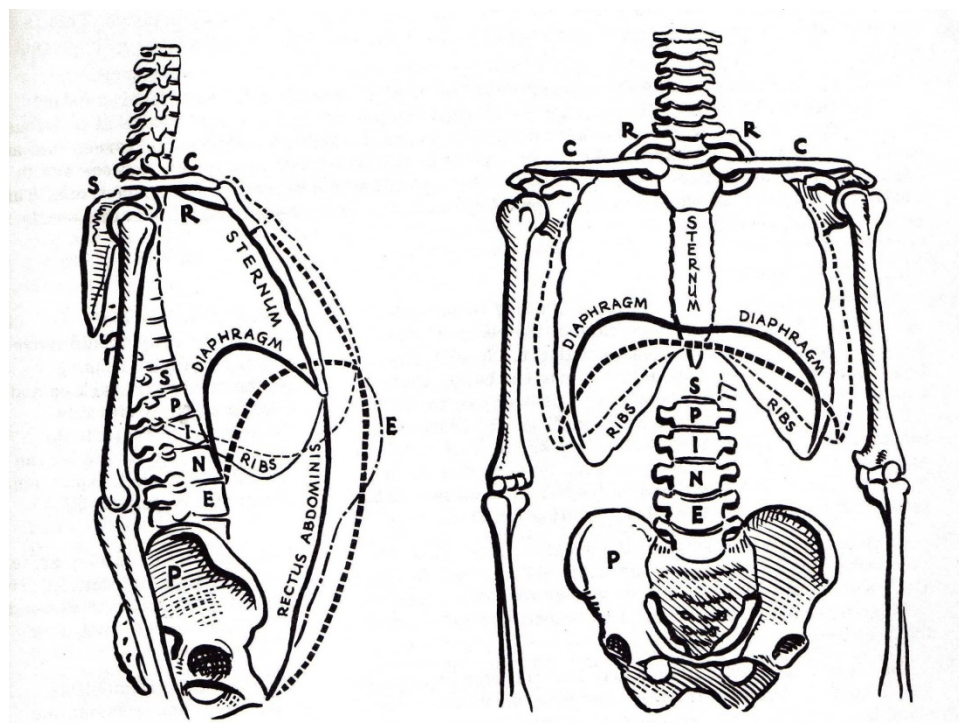
The physiological processes involved in verbal communication are highly complicated, containing innumerable biological events as well as countless processes based in physics. The following description should not be viewed as complete. Rather, it should be viewed as a foundation for this paper's interrogation of the vocal fry phenomenon. Therefore, I will not delve into involuntary communication - vocal communications such as grunts caused from pain or blows, unconscious ejaculations of warning or surprise, burps, hiccups, snores etc. It is only the conscious need to speak or sing that will be analyzed within this text.

### *Breath*

The process by which we speak begins when a person experiences an impulse that is communicated via several nerves to various parts of the body almost simultaneously. When these parts are operating in a coordinated manner, the ensuing order occurs somewhat like this. The diaphragm receives an impulse and a tendon that sits atop this structure contracts. The diaphragm plunges down and away from the thoracic cavity in a "double domed" shape. The viscera are pushed away and out from their resting place. The ribs, like handles on a bucket, swing out and are lifted by several sets of muscles. This creates a larger volume within the thoracic cavity which in turn creates an area of low pressure. Because the atmosphere outside of the thoracic cavity is higher, air rushes in to equalize the pressure. This inflates the lungs where

a complicated set of chemical interactions occur. Oxygen is absorbed by the lungs and carbon dioxide is released. The tension within the diaphragm is gradually released, and the ribs swing back to their resting position (see Fig. 1). Approximately 500 cubic centimeters of air is drawn into the lungs when a person is at rest. When a person is physically active, as when exercising, this increases to four or five times that amount.

This is a simplified description of respiration. Over time, humans have co-opted this process for another action – speaking.



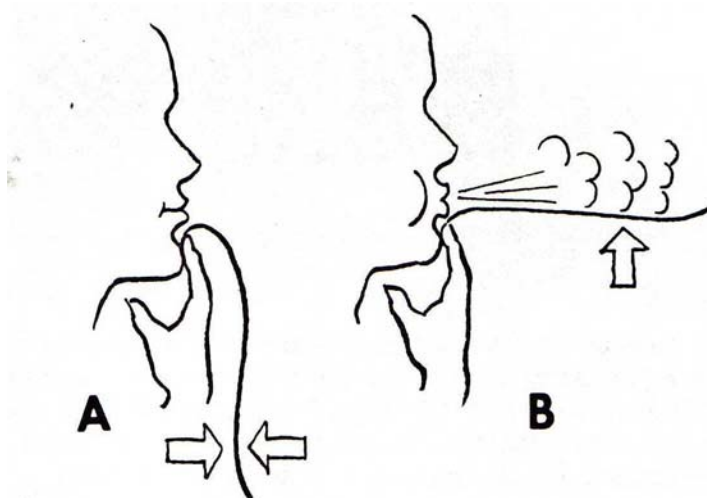
*Figure 1 Coordination of Rib and Belly Breathing*

### *Phonation*

When one chooses to speak, the same events occur with the addition of several new sets of muscles that control the outflow of air and direct the air into the body in such a manner that both creates phonation as well as shaping into recognizable phonemes the sounds created in that process.

As stated before, the ability to speak developed after breathing. Several of the muscles and muscular systems that are utilized in speaking are also co-opted from their primary purposes. The larynx is just such a system. Primarily, the larynx is a structure that stops food and other contaminants from entering a person's airways. The larynx also closes when the body seeks added support and stabilization, such as when lifting heavy objects; however, it serves a dual purpose in the creation of sound. Thus, the larynx can also be considered a valve of sorts. Within this valve are two folds which can be manipulated by the small muscles, bones and ligaments within larynx. Although all of these elements come into play throughout the phonation process, the main responsibility of shaping the vocal folds falls to the arytenoids.

In respiration, these folds are pulled back fully in a resting position and air rushes past them. When phonation is desired, the vocal folds are engaged by these structures taking on an infinite number of shapes. When the vocal folds come in contact with each other and air passes by them they lose their passive nature and begin to vibrate due to the "Bernoulli Effect" (see Fig. 2). These vibrations create pulses of energy which in turn become sound. This is phonation.



*Fig. 2 Demonstration of the Bernoulli Effect*

The sound travels up and out of the larynx and through the pharynx, or voice box. The pharynx is also capable of dramatically altering its shape due to its dual nature as a sphincter (muscles within it protect the lungs from contaminants as well as closing off the nasal passages). Within the pharynx a new process occurs – resonance.

#### *Resonance*

As the sound passes through the pharynx, the sound is modified in multiple ways, although it might be better to say the sound is enhanced. This type of enhancement occurs not merely within the pharynx, but also in several other air-filled chambers and cavities in the body. Because resonance is so significant to my discussion of vocal fry, it will be necessary to discuss resonance at further length.

As mentioned before, the vocal folds create sound. This most basic product of phonation then goes through a process called resonance which needs to be further elaborated. “In a technical sense resonance is a relationship that exists between two bodies vibrating at the same

frequency or a multiple thereof” (McKinney 120). These relationships can occur in two ways – *sympathetic* and *conductive*. Imagine a piano. A “C” note is struck and other “C” strings within the piano will begin to vibrate. They do not touch each other, yet the strings vibrate because they receive the vibrations through the air – sympathetically. This is also called “free resonance.”

Imagine the same piano, only now, place your hand upon it and play the same note. Your hand will begin to vibrate because it is in physical contact with the piano. This is called conductive or forced resonance.

Both of these forms of resonance are present within the human voice. Much of the vibration you feel when phonation occurs is due to conductive resonance. There are many muscles, ligaments and bones that are in direct contact with the vocal folds. Although these conductive vibrations are extremely useful to the speaker as they carry information directly from the vocal folds that describe the quality of the phonatory process, the sounds that a listener hears are the results of sympathetic resonance. These are the sounds that have traveled from the larynx and into the various air-filled areas of the neck, head and chest. There is still considerable debate regarding the efficacy of various resonators, whether they help enhance a sound that can be distinguished by the listener or whether they can only be felt by the phonator. What is clear, however, is the body vibrates with the vocal folds in a myriad of ways and these vibrations can hint at the over-all quality of the sound being created.

There are seven areas in the body that can be considered resonators and these can be divided into two groups themselves. The subglottic resonators are those that exist below the vocal folds. They are the tracheal and thoracic cavities. The ventricle and vestibule of the larynx, the pharynx, oral and nasal chambers comprise the supraglottic resonators, or those that



exist above the vocal folds. For the time being, I am going to avoid any debate regarding the subglottic resonators and focus primarily on the supraglottic resonators. Not only are these far more effective in the enhancement of sound, but they are also capable of profound changes in size and shape. Additionally, changes to the supraglottic resonators can be made voluntarily and result in no clear change in the phonatory quality, whereas if the thoracic cavity is manipulated in its size and shape, the quality of the sound created will of necessity become degraded.

Of all of the supraglottic resonators, the pharynx has the greatest influence on the sound being produced. There are several reasons for this. Most importantly, it is the space through which the sound passes first, thus any resonance that occurs in other cavities must rest upon the sound enhancements made by the pharynx. Next, the degree to which the pharynx can be manipulated is unmatched by any of the other resonators – its size can be adjusted, the walls can be given a greater or lesser degree of tension, and the openings through which the sound enters and exits can be made larger or smaller.

The oral cavity is next in importance. It is through this space that most of the sound people hear comes out of. The oral cavity is also astonishingly flexible when it comes to the shapes it can create. By utilizing the jaws, tongue, soft palate, lips as movable articulators, a person can achieve a wide array of dimensions which in turn alters resonance. Although these types of manipulations are critical, the importance of the oral cavity as a megaphone or funnel cannot be underestimated. The nasal cavity comes into play primarily during the creation of the consonants [m], [n] and [ng] as well as several vowels in languages such as French or Portuguese. There is some disagreement as to whether the sinuses play any part in resonance. For some theorists, the sinuses help in forward placement, while for others, the sinuses play

absolutely no role whatsoever. What is undeniable, however, is that conductive resonance occurs to a great degree within the sinuses, and physiological effects of this can be experienced when the sinus cavities drain during extensive phonation.

Let us now examine some of the physics that occur within these chambers. Essentially, what happens is that the sound created by the laryngeal folds enters these spaces. It must be remembered that it is the *air* within the space that is the resonator, not the space itself that augments the sound. Depending on the shape of the cavity that the sound passes through, the product of the vocal folds moves about the space, it excites the air within these spaces to the exact frequency that they were set to vibrating by the vocal folds. The air in turn begins to move and that in turn creates different frequencies. Thus, the pitch is either augmented with overtones or entirely new pitches are added. As William Vennard states, “Vocal pedagogs sometimes speak of ‘fundamental’ as being produced in the larynx and of ‘overtone’ as being produced in the resonators” (Vennard 82). Obviously, there are other considerations aside from the shape of the cavity and whether it exists above or below the glottis. If sound bounces around inside of these cavities, then it stands to reason that the walls themselves will alter the quality of the sound. Both the composition of the walls (thickness, density etc) as well as the surface itself (soft or hard) will either encourage or discourage different overtones.

At the end of this complicated process, the sound itself is produced and complete. It is a finished product that can now be shaped by other forces. Enter the articulators.

### *Articulation*

While vocal fry is primarily a problem related to production rather than pronunciation, I don't want to leave articulation entirely out of the discussion. Once again, articulation is a

secondary perhaps even tertiary action that co-opts muscles and ligaments that developed for other needs. The epiglottis, tongue, lips and jaw were all created for a variety of other tasks including rending flesh from a fruit or carcass, mastication swallowing or breathing. It would be difficult to argue that the secondary function of these muscles is to form facial expressions that communicate thought or feeling and that speech is merely the third function that they adapted to fulfill. Thus, this mode of interpersonal communication came prior to the creation of sound and the shaping of that sound into separate phonemes and finally into recognizable words.

One interesting facet of vocal fry is that poor articulation often accompanies this dysfunction. However, even if a profound attempt was made at excellent diction, clarity would still be difficult for good vocal sound and phonemic specificity are, for the most part, inextricably linked due to the fact that the muscles involved are inevitably multi-tasking.

### *Good Posture*

As stated earlier, the communication process is an extremely complicated one that involves many different physiological processes. These processes occur throughout the body and are essentially supported through the skeletal and muscular structures. Thus, good posture is of utmost importance. What exactly is good posture? Webster's New World Medical Dictionary defines "neutral posture" as the stance which is attained "when the joints are not bent and the spine is aligned and not twisted." In this position, a person is able to completely and optimally attain balance and proportion of his or her body mass and framework, based on his or her physical limitations. Good posture optimizes breathing and affects the circulation of bodily fluids.

Quite simply, “good posture” is merely allowing the body to stand, sit or lie in the manner it was designed to without intellectual interference. To be sure, if there is pathology involved, then the body must be allowed to accommodate for this dysfunction. However, the body has evolved over time to function with a certain amount of ease and grace. It is only when we interfere with this functionality that poor posture is created. What is ironic is that poor posture is often the result when people try to align themselves. We have all seen pictures of a young man “standing at attention” – his chest thrust forward, his shoulders pulled so far back that the shoulder blades are almost touching. Or the young woman fresh out of cheerleading practice with a sway back and distended belly. Most often, good posture can be achieved through concentrated exercises that are more akin to meditation.

Good posture begins at ground level with the feet. Weight should be evenly distributed across the whole of the foot. Imagine a set of three points or spikes that emanate from the foot and into the ground. One point would come out of the heel, another from a spot just behind the big toe and a third just behind the little toe. If too much weight is placed on the heel, you might feel yourself falling back and if weight is unevenly distributed to the front of the feet, you will either fall forward or begin to stand on tip toe.

Once the weight is evenly distributed across the feet, the ankles can be freed of any unnecessary tension. Likewise, the knees can flex slightly and remain unlocked with the knee caps moving ever so slightly over the big toe. This process of letting go of excess tension (IE tension that is not needed to maintain an erect and balanced body) can then move throughout the rest of the torso – pelvis, abdomen, ribcage, shoulders, neck, jaw and head. Once excess tension has been dispensed with, the head chest and pelvis can be supported by the spine so that they can

align themselves. In his book *The Voice Book*, Michael McCallion discusses this as “The head/neck/back relationship.”

To encapsulate all this let us say:

The neck must be free

So that the head can face forward and go up

So that the back can lengthen and widen (McCallion 17)

Vennard sums it up with even greater simplicity. “A student must practice before a mirror and keep asking himself, ‘Would I pay money to look at that?’” (Vennard 19). At the risk of completely oversimplifying, good posture is achieved with the skeleton acting like a framework upon which the musculature is supported, thus allowing each system the freedom to perform its necessary function free of physical inhibitions. Pulling the head back, pushing the head forward, slumping the shoulders forward and rounding the back, locking the knees, standing on one foot – all of these are manifestations of poor posture and each in its turn will affect the creation of sound in a different way. Inhalations may be limited, excess tension may overwhelm the laryngeal folds thus harming the delicate tissues, a lack of alignment may inhibit the sound from moving out of the pharynx freely, and poor posture can alter the surfaces upon which the resonators rely on to enhance the sound.

In *The Actor Speaks*, Patsy Rodenburg discusses posture as “The position I always teach actors to adopt when they stand on-stage is *centre* or ‘a state of readiness,’ a heightened sense of being that is responsive to all stimuli around them” (Rodenburg 19).

### *Good Sound*

What then is good sound? Is it, perhaps similar to Justice Potter Stewart who tried to define what is obscene with this oft quoted line, “I shall not attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced...[b]ut I know it when I see it”(Brainy). Will we know a good voice simply “when we hear it?” In his book *The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults: A Manual for teachers of singing and for Choir Directors* James C. McKinney lists several attributes that he hopes will come close to establishing a valid concept of what good voice is:

1. Freely produced
2. Pleasant to listen to
3. Loud enough to be heard easily
4. Rich, ringing, and resonant
5. Energy flows smoothly from note to note
6. Consistently produced
7. Vibrant, dynamic, and alive
8. Flexibly expressive ( 77)

It is understood that what defines good vocal quality is highly subjective. However, that being said, I believe the above list is fair and accurate. McKinney goes on to describe a series of characteristics which might prevent the creation of good vocal sound as well.

1. Constricted, forced or strained
2. Strident or rasping

3. Too loud, resembling shouting or yelling
4. Hoarse
5. Breathy
6. Weak, colorless, or devitalized
7. Inconsistently produced
8. Shaky or wobbly ( 77)

The above list contains many of the phrases that one might use for vocal fry. It is no coincidence that the other names that have been applied to this register such as creak, glottal fry, glottal rattle, and glottal scrape are equally pejorative in nature. “Pretty” is not a word that describes this sound.

#### *Vocal Fry: How is it created?*

Vocal fry is one of the four recognized registers that the human voice uses. The other three are modal, falsetto, and whistle. There is a large amount of confusion regarding what a register is. For our purposes, “register” will mean the following: “A register in the human voice is a particular series of tones, produced in the same manner (by the same vibratory pattern of the vocal folds), and having the same basic quality.” (McKinney 93)

The modal register is the one we most often use when we speak or sing. Well trained singers can sing two octaves within this register because the vocal folds reach their greatest level of flexibility as well as the most amount of contact. Falsetto rests just above the modal register in terms of pitch accessibility as well as overlapping the modal register (in other words, the lowest pitches available in the falsetto register are also available in the modal register). In this

register, the folds are drawn very thin by the cricothyroids while at the same time the arytenoids relax. This allows only the ligamentous edges of the folds to come in contact with each other (whereas in the modal register, the whole vocal fold comes in contact and creates a wave-like pattern). The last register is very rarely used and is called the whistle register. It resides just above the pitch ranges of the female falsetto and sounds similar to a whistle. Although it is possible to photograph the vocal folds during phonation, the whistle register is difficult to capture on film due to the extreme degree of closure that is achieved, however the shape created by the folds is often described as a pucker. The vocal fry register is achieved by allowing air to pass through glottis. The vocal folds are being held together by the arytenoid cartilages in such a way as to create a looser level of contact than in the modal register. The air bubbles through this slack mass with a popping or a rattling sound of extremely low frequency.

For ease of understanding, consider each of these registers a gear in a car engine during a long trip. Although each gear is used at some time because the circumstances demand it – going up a hill, hauling a heavy load, etc., for the most part, fifth gear is the one that is utilized for the longest period of time because it is the most fuel efficient and causes the least wear and tear on the engine. Using this metaphor, we can understand the modal register as the top gear, air as the fuel and the engine as the human body, and therefore the vocal fry register would be first gear. Vocal fry can be used sparingly at times for very specific jobs, but if you don't want to wreck your engine, you need to shift into a different gear to travel any distance. Simply put, too many members of Gen Y have chosen to drive cross country in first gear.



## Chapter 3

### *Gen Y and their predecessors*

As stated earlier, vocal fry is not a “choice” for many members of Gen Y but rather it is a habitual manner of speaking that has been inculcated by our current culture. To appreciate this statement more fully, I will describe Gen Y and where they stand in relation to the other generations in our culture, followed by an explanation of some of the main factors and events that have shaped these generations. To conclude this generational overview, I will outline some of the language that defines each generation. Although the guidelines where each generation begins and ends are fuzzy, for the purposes of this paper, I choose to distinguish four generations as they are referred to by cultural commentators across the globe: Traditionalists, or those born between 1924 and 1945; Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X or those born between 1965 and 1980; and Gen Y, those born between 1981 and 2000.

Once again, like the debate swirling about the efficacy of various resonators, I am not going to delve into whether generational distinctions are a valid aspect of our current culture or if they are, as some people suggest, a construct of Madison Avenue designed to sell goods to a jejune population. It is simpler to accept that the general public, to greater or lesser degrees, believes in these divisions.

Each of the designated generations lived through a specific time with different cultural mores as well as technological achievements. It would be difficult to argue against the idea that

time is a continuum that knows no limits. However, because of events that have occurred throughout time, society has been shaped in myriad ways which allows for a greater degree of classification. Birthrates soared or plummeted, wars began or ended, and political systems and priorities flourished or died away. While each generation has multiple factors that shape its collective psyche, these events are most influential during the formative years, generally defined as ten to twenty years after a person was born. For a greater understanding of the four generations, character sketches are provided. Throughout the following section, I am indebted to Anne Loehr's generational assessments which can be found on her blog "How To Speak So Each Generation Will Listen."(Loehr) The basic configurations as well as the "Key Words" portion of each section are taken directly from the blog.

***Traditionalists:***

*Born between 1924 – 1945*

*Formative years 1935 – 1955*

Also known as “The Greatest Generation,” these individuals followed those of the “Lost Generation” of the 1880’s who fought in WWI, and of the 1930’s “Silent Generation.” For traditionalists, the events that had the greatest effect on their psyches were WWII, the Great Depression, the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the creation of the atomic bomb. This was a generation that experienced many hardships and had learned to be thrifty as well as to be grateful for the little they had. Furthermore, this generation was provided for by the government during the Depression years and the famine associated with the Dust Bowl and they listened to FDR describe the events of Dec 7, 1941. More aware of hardship and the necessity of government assistance, they were far more patriotic than their predecessors, and, having experienced their fathers’ absences due to military service, they also learned to be prudent. In consideration of all of this, traditionalists as a group are inclined to be conservative, disciplined and loyal.

Loehr’s key words for Traditionalists:

- Reliable
- Responsibility/duty
- Patriotic
- Value
- Loyalty

***Baby Boomers:***

*Born between 1946 – 1964*

*Formative Years 1957 – 1974*

Shortly after WWII, US soldiers came home to a nation newly strengthened both economically as well as politically and the resulting surge in births created a “baby boom” from which this generation gets its name. Major events for this generation are the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. This was a generation that lived throughout the Vietnam War, watched a man land on the moon and engineered landmark civil rights legislation: it learned that it could accomplish much through common effort. Furthermore, this generation went to college in far greater numbers than any other generation and while in college, it was given the generational moniker of “Free Love.” as in “The Free Love Generation.” The Supreme Court’s decision in Roe versus Wade gave women control over their reproductive destinies for the first time. Later, this generation became more consumed by work than preceding generations and thereby created a new norm - the sixty hour work week. The generational psyche that developed from these events can be characterized as more idealistic, politically correct, consensus and cause-driven. The Boomers will break the rules in order to make the world a better place.

Loehr’s Key words for Boomers:

- Consensus/team
- Make a difference
- Experiment/Try new things
- “Imagine if...”
- Save time
- Features and benefits

## *Generation X*

*Born Between 1965 – 1980*

*Formative years between 1976 – 1990*

Generation X faced an extraordinary number of hurdles along its path to adulthood. Generation Xers lived through three recessions, stagflation, the echoes of Watergate as well as the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster and the first Gulf War. These seminal events may have caused some members of Generation X to lose faith in the concept of a government that would look after its citizens. During the Generation X years, divorce rates sky rocketed and latchkey kids entered the picture with the concomitant debates regarding the erosion of the family. Two income families became the norm and perhaps as a result of this, children began to feel as if they couldn't trust their families to take care of them either. The new normal also included a lack of job security because the manufacturing jobs that had sustained the bulk of the middle class during the preceding generations were beginning to evaporate and the Rust Belt began to emerge as one of the major cultural disaster of the times.

I myself am considered a Generation X'er. My Boomer father worked for IBM and his career was secure for thirty years and my mother got a job as soon as I could walk to the bus by myself (and I did indeed have a front door key strung on a ribbon and hung around my neck when I was ten.) My friends and I saw career stability disappear, and almost all of us went on to receive advanced degrees and MBA's in pursuit of job security. It was the time of mergers and acquisitions made so famous by Tom Wolfe's book, *Bonfire of the Vanities*. On the cultural front, we witnessed the birth of cable programming, ESPN, the 24 hour news cycle and MTV.

We were given an unprecedented amount of access to celebrity lifestyles, Michael Jackson was the king of pop and Madonna's *Material Girl* ruled the airwaves – both television and radio.

We learned early on that we couldn't trust much. The corporate world would throw us under a bus; our parents would leave us behind for the sake of a career and toss out twenty years of marriage because of a mid-life crisis. Men of power like Richard Nixon were pardoned by other men of power like Gerald Ford. We became distrustful of hierarchal models because of men like Wall Street Con Artist Michael Milken and we insisted on knowing what was in it for us personally before we engaged with an institution. We became far more individualistic, some might even say, more self-centered than our parents.

Loehr's key words for Generation X:

- Best, Finest, World-Class
- “You will benefit by...”
- “It's your time...”
- “As you like it...”

## *Gen Y*

*Born between 1975 – Present Day*

*Formative Years 1987 – Present Day*

Gen Y is also known by many other nicknames including the Millennial, Echo-Boomers and the Net Generation, among others. Although Gen Y individuals are children of the Baby Boomer generation (known for its large families), the size of the average Gen Y family was sharply decreased. Single and two child families became the norm. This generation saw the AIDS crisis ravage the population, experienced the horrors of 9/11 which saturated the culture and watched their parents navigate the dot com boom and bust. Most importantly, this is the first generation to be completely wired from day one because by the time the Gen Y generation was in first grade, the personal computer was ubiquitous. Whereas Generation X saw the birth of the twenty four hour news cycle on cable, Gen Y witnessed the birth of the instantaneous news event. If something was deemed newsworthy, it was disseminated to the world within seconds via the internet.

Most members of Gen Y are completely technically literate – they are considered to be “digital natives” while the rest of us are considered “digital immigrants.” While many were in the womb, their mothers (and thus themselves) were being bombarded with unprecedented amounts of information. To say that they were born with a mouse in their hand would not be an exaggeration as many Gen X parents “fast-tracked” their children with music lessons and foreign language flash cards within weeks of their seeing the light of day.

For many members of Gen Y instant access to the internet has created a sense that they are entitled to a degree of instant gratification. In a matter of seconds, they can get an answer to

a question; download a video or a song, and text a friend; perhaps such immediacy contributed to their expectation that they can engage in all things all the time and if they can't they will judge an item or an experience to be deficient in some way. However, what they have witnessed on line as well as on the myriad of TV channels has created a more globally aware youth than at any other time in history. Gen Y also watched as You Tube instantly catapulted everyday citizens to levels of fame previously reserved for stars of film and television celebrities or international political figures. Gen Y saw "Lonely Girl 15" leap into the public consciousness and become a star from the privacy (more or less) of her own bedroom. You Tube has taken Andy Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame" theory to new and dizzying heights. These heights are regularly climbed by Gen Y where they - to continue with the metaphor - look down upon other generations every day.

A key aspect to understanding Gen Y is to appreciate how much they value connectivity above all else. Texting is a stand-alone element that has separated this generation to a greater degree than any other and it is my belief that the effects on Gen Y have yet to be felt. Hand-held communications devices are as natural to this generation as the now quaint Sony Walkman was to Generation X. Gen Y thinks nothing of downloading entire movies to their phones; they instantly text to friends the coordinates of a new bar they intend to patronize, while constantly tracking those friends locations via their handheld GPS systems. Whereas Generation X considered overland mail to be too slow and thus gave it the moniker "snail mail", Gen Y considers email to be slow as molasses - one must turn on the computer and wait while several systems boot up before email can be read or witnessed. In their world of new media platforms, texts, pics and twitters arrive almost instantaneously.



In addition to seeing themselves as highly connected, Gen Y members consider themselves to be far more diverse than members of previous generations. Gen Y members allow themselves a greater number of choices when it comes to sexual orientation, politics, ethnicity, and religion. Because they saw their parents struggle during the Internet boom of the Nineties and then, after the bust, walk away with nothing, they have a tendency to distrust business structures and instead have a more entrepreneurial spirit. Being members of a vast global village, they see time on a continuum. Thus, work can be done at any hour of the day. They see that work and social lives can happen all at the same time and they want a community to support this vision.

Loehr's key words for Gen Y:

- "Text now for..."
- Balance
- Diversity
- Community/Connections

## Chapter 4

### *Communication Physiology of Gen Y*

One of the more intriguing aspects of Gen Y individuals is the modes of communication they have adopted due to the cultural influences they experienced during their formative years. That this generation has been witness to far more media both quantitatively as well as qualitatively can be proven empirically and will not be challenged in this paper. Suffice to say that if one were to merely *count* the different types of media from one generation to the next, there would be identifiable increases. Print, radio, movies, TV, cable/satellite (MTV, CNN, HBO et al), video games, (Arcade, Nintendo, X-Box), Internet (Face book, YouTube), cell phones (texting, Twitter) – the list could become even more detailed but it serves the point: Each generation has created more and more forms of communication by either enhancing forms already present in the culture, as in the case of TV, by morphing into dozens and then hundreds of cable/satellite stations or by creating entirely new platforms like the internet. Each one of these types of media inculcates the generation and has a greater influence on the younger generation than the generation preceding it. I would argue that Gen Y is the first generation where the majority of the instruction of how to behave has occurred not via live interaction with people, but rather from images and sounds presented to them via the media.

As a society, we have been relying ever more on the media to teach our children. Long gone are the days when all teaching was done via observation, one on one instruction, or small classrooms. That said the Traditionalists and Generation X have more in common with each

other as far as pedagogy is concerned than Generation X does with Gen Y. All of the generations prior to Gen Y have common platforms: schoolrooms and teachers carried the bulk of the teaching load, with books and print media being the main channels of information. All of these generations had films and radio as platforms for the dissemination of culture; television was simply a smaller version of a film. Many could quibble with this position, but for the sake of brevity I will simply state that the similarities far outweigh the differences. Compare the classroom of 1930, 1955 and 1980 and little to no substantial changes would be discerned - an overhead projector versus a black board, a few more television sets, an extra movie screen or two but essentially, a fellow who went off to war in 1941 would recognize the room that I sat in 1980.

However, compare the classroom of 1980 to 2005, and a monumental change would be evident. Each student now has a personal computer as well as an electronic handheld communications device. Texting has replaced writing letters and emoticons have replaced letters. Take for instance graffiti. A student of 1930 would recognize some of the slang written on the wall in my school in 1980. Indeed, creating new words and phrases to describe events and attitudes has always been the prerogative of the youngest generation. Gen Y's "crunk" for "crazy drunk" or "blazed" for "high" is no different than my generation calling it "shitfaced" or "stoned." Even words and phrases that Traditionalists created such as "soused" or "lit" are more understandable to the likes of us Generation Xer's. But I need a translator for such phrases as 26Y4U, %\, >U, :-d~ (translating these in order: "too sexy for you"; "hung-over"; "screw you"; "getting high"). Others include, BOHICA or Bend Over Here It Comes; GYPO or Get Your

Pants Off; and GNOC (my least favorite) Get Naked On Camera. Clearly, something more profound than changing “cool” for “rad” is occurring.

Surely something more than shifting generational tastes is happening, but where did all of these vast sweeping changes emanate from? The short answer is media. One might argue that we have been utilizing various media for decades as a means to teach our children. I would not disagree with this. I would state, however, that for the first time, a large portion of a generation looks to the media as one of their primary sources of truth – not their parents, their teachers, their spiritual leaders, coaches or even *each other*. Rather, it has been my experience that they perceive whatever they are watching on television or their computers as having more validity than a real person. Throughout my admittedly short teaching career, I have heard students claim that what is stated in person is looked upon with suspicion, while the same statement made via a phone’s text is looked upon as having more truth.

Additionally, it is not only the means by which the message is sent that is judged by Generation Y but also the messenger. When I was growing up, my television watching schedule was comprised of *Sesame Street*, *The Electric Company*, and *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*. There were many evenings where no television at all was watched on the three channels that were offered (sometimes PBS would come in, but the signal couldn’t be counted on even in the best of weather). I remember to this day racing to my brothers and sisters who were upstairs doing homework and screaming at the top of my lungs “*The Peanuts Christmas Special* is on!!!” TV was an event. And the lessons learned from the programs we watched were rarely in conflict with the lessons we learned from our parents, teachers, coaches, priests, rabbis and others. We listened to them. Literally. We sat down amongst adults, watched them, heard them and then

compared what they said to what we watched and heard on the television. Now, the reverse is true – children watch TV, listen to what message the messenger gives them and then compares that to what they see and hear their parents do and say. And the messenger is no longer Ernie and Bert, Big Bird, or Charlie Brown. It's Hannah Montana and the World Wide Wrestling Federation.

Hannah Montana now draws over 164 *million* viewers around the world, more than any other show on cable, and although the show is primarily made for “tweens” (those aged between 9 and 12), the largest percentage of the show's audience is comprised of elementary and pre-school children (Twenge 101). Thus, children age four and up are now changing the channel from Sesame Street and Dora the Explorer to Hannah singing, “You get the limo out front” and “Yeah, when you're famous it can be kinda fun.” For boys aged 2-12 the most watched show is a stunner to say the least. In August 2007, the winner was World Wrestling Entertainment's *Smackdown*. To round out the list, in order of popularity – two episodes of *Family Guy*, three episodes of Mexican telenovelas and four reality TV shows (Twenge 101). Yes, the messenger has changed.

When children are watching “adult” television, the numbers represent a clear picture of where our focus lies. Jake Halpern, in his book *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction*, Halpern states “...that in 2004, the nightly news shows on the three major networks spent a total of just 26 minutes covering the bloody conflict in Darfur and 130 minutes on the Martha Stewart scandal” (194). Were you to ask producers of news about this they would say they need to maintain this percentage in order to stay relevant, if not profitable. It is not a secret that old fashioned media are struggling. Newspapers and magazines

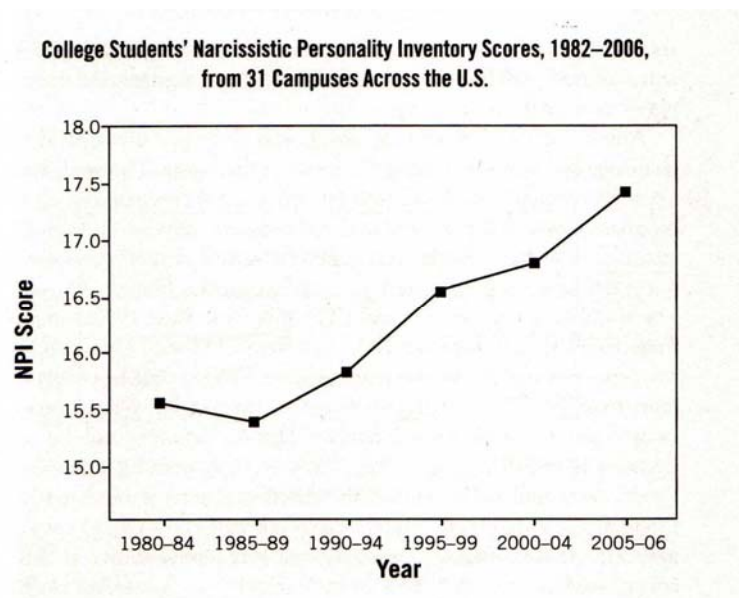
as well are failing in their attempt to maintain readership. Where has there been a spike in circulation? You guessed it. Celebrity magazines – *Us Weekly* increased its readership 10% in 2007 (to 1.9 million) and its competitor in the tabloid press, *OK! Weekly* was up a whopping 23% (to 935,000) (Twenge 92).

But the picture of this trend would be incomplete if a discussion of the new media isn't included. According to a study published by the Kaiser Family Foundation, vast, sweeping changes are occurring on the newly created internet and texting platforms as well:

With technology allowing nearly 24-hour media access as children and teens go about their daily lives, the amount of time young people spend with entertainment media has risen dramatically, especially among minority youth, according to a study released today by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Today, 8-18 year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes (7:38) to using entertainment media across a typical day (more than 53 hours a week). And because they spend so much of that time 'media multitasking' (using more than one medium at a time), they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes (10:45) worth of media content into those 7½ hours. (Kaiser)

The picture of Gen Y becomes clearer as more information becomes available. Given the remarkable variety of new media platforms that are being offered to the average teenager, many teenagers are spending more and more time online, texting, downloading and playing music, and essentially living almost all of his or her free time focused on media. And one of the primary messages that the media articulates is: "YOU ARE SPECIAL."

In their groundbreaking book *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, authors Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D and W. Keith Campbell have forged a formidable argument that posits that Gen Y is in the midst of an overwhelming epidemic of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). NPD is more than merely thinking well of oneself, it is a dangerous disorder which limits the mental health of those who are afflicted with it. Those suffering with NPD have difficulty forming close personal relationships; have a tendency to take greater risks than others; and have an inflated image of self worth. The team took 85 samples of 16,275 college students from 31 campuses across the U.S. who took the Narcissistic Personality Inventory over a period between 1979 and 2006. In Table 1 the graph tells a harrowing tale – college students of the 2000's scored markedly higher than students from the 70's, 80's or 90's.



*Figure 3*

Twenge, J.M., Konrath, S., Foster, J.D. Campbell, W.K., and Bushman, B.J. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross temporal meta-analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality*, 76, 875-901.

The internet neatly mirrors this trend. Domain names on the internet that start with “my” were up almost three-fold from 2005 and 2008 and trademark names that contained the word “my” were up five-fold over a ten year period lasting from 1998 and 2008 (Twenge 108). This increase in narcissism correlates directly to the rise in Gen Y’s use of vocal fry.



## Chapter 5

### *Gen Y, Narcissism, and Vocal Fry*

At the outset of this paper, I stated that I would explore the possible psychological reasons as to why the habitual use of vocal fry has emerged as a primary means of communication for the portion of the population referred to as “Gen Y”. I point out also that for the vast majority of the population, vocal fry is nothing more than an annoying affectation akin to the “Valley Girl” speech pattern of the Eighties and Nineties at its best or slightly abusive to the vocal folds at its worst. However, for actors, I believe that vocal fry represents a threat not only to the quality of their performances but also to the overall health of their instruments. As a voice and speech teacher, I see a growing number of students in my classes with this vocal habit and I want to gain a deeper understanding of what has caused this phenomenon to occur more frequently. It is my belief that the growth of narcissism in Gen Y is responsible for a large percentage of the surge in vocal fry.

The narrative that describes the journey from healthy baby to narcissistic adolescent to a behaviorally challenged theatre major grappling with vocal fry is a complicated one to say the least. However, the root of the matter begins with poor parenting. No parent enters into the relationship with his or her child with the goal of creating a personality complex based on expanded self-worth, but that is exactly what is happening. However, for various reasons

including cultural pressure, too many parents are idealizing and idolizing their children from the very beginning, dressing them in t-shirts with “Princess” or “Rock Star” emblazoned across their chests. Other T-shirts tell a similar story; “I’m in Charge,” “Sorry girls, I only date models” and the ever-present “Juicy.” Overindulging children begins at an early age. This is not to say that we should return to the age of blind obedience and children should be seen and not heard, but giving your child a “Bling” pacifier veers too far in the other direction.

Parents are faced today with an ever growing battle against the tides of the media. I truly believe that most parents want to be engaged in all aspects of their children’s lives for the good of the child. But of late, a more invasive mass media make this a difficult task. However, it is not merely a child’s immersion in an ocean of media that presents a problem. It is the multiplicity of forms that creates an obstacle to good parenting as well. My sister, Suzanne Flinchbaugh, is a mother of two Gen Y children. In a recent email regarding this issue she states:

Too much choice makes many parents just throw up their hands and give up. It seems inevitable that they will make a bad choice, so why try? Instead of trying to direct and make choices (which is hard and usually repetitive work), a parent thinks, “I know, I’ll be a friend to my kid because friends are helpful. Plus it’s easier and has an immediate payoff because it feels good.” Not to mention some parents are afraid to make their kids mad. But I think it’s safe to say that this is a parent’s number one job—to not be their kids’ friend—to make the choices clear to your kid and if that pisses them off, it’s a bummer but it’s for their long-term good—something our culture also doesn’t value anymore—the long perspective.

Many parents, in an attempt to create self-esteem in their children have overemphasized a sense of self-worth in lieu of balance and discipline. Indeed, students have been taught to sing a new tune, literally; in many pre-school classes across the nation, the lyrics of “I am special. I am special. Look at me. Look at me.” are being sung to the melody previously reserved for “Frère Jacques.” This leads to an incomplete understanding of their identity. Not only are they “special,” but they also begin to perceive themselves as superior to their fellows; therefore they believe they are governed by a different set of rules and no longer subject to social constraints. Soon, that young person takes it to a literal extreme, posting pictures of her half-naked body on her MySpace page or posting a video of him engaged in a brutal beating of a “loser” who “deserved it.”

Next, we can look at what happens when the primary model for which children develop their concept of appropriate behavior comes not from their parents, their teachers, or any other adult, but rather through a series of imaginary constructs—the aforementioned *Hannah Montana*, the kids in *High School Musical*, lonely girl15, Lady Gaga, Ke\$sha or any of the tens of thousands of people accessible on YouPorn. Consider for the moment the lyrics of Lady Gaga’s *Poker Face*:

I won't tell you that I love you

Kiss or hug you

Cause I'm bluffin' with my muffin

I'm not lying I'm just stunnin' with my love-glue-gunning

Just like a chick in the casino

Take your bank before I pay you out

I promise this, promise this

Check this hand cause I'm marvelous

Can't read my,

Can't read my

No he can't read my poker face (astraweb.com)

Not only does the singer revel in her “marvelous” self, but she also equates the reason for this quality with her behavior being unreadable. Currently, according to astraweb, these are the most sought after lyrics on the web. The lyrics for “BlaBlaBla,” sung by Ke\$ha, have a similar theme:

You be delaying, you're always saying some shit

You say I'm playing, I'm never laying the dick

Saying blah blah blah

Cause I don't care who you are in this party

It only matter who I am (songlyrics.com)

This is not to say that examples of characters displaying exemplary mores aren't out there in the oceans of media. The Harry Potter series (both the books as well as the movies) and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have altruistic, generous characters that rarely if ever show self-centered narcissistic traits. Indeed, both of the villains within these fictional works display symptoms that would be viewed as advanced NPD verging on the psychotic. It is not so much that good triumphs over evil, but that selflessness can overcome the self-indulgent. There are dozens of other programs that offer counter programming to the endless stream of self interest seen and heard on the myriad channels of cable, Nintendo, X-box, World of Warcraft or other MMORPG's (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games).

My sister's comment on all of this was clear:

This multiplicity of choices exists in so many other aspects of our culture today and of course one can find any choice you want on the web. People want immediate payoff for healthcare, for politics, for government programs, even for losing weight. There are so many diets out there that it almost makes people give up and say there is no way to lose weight so I'll just eat anything I want. This situation has implications for vocal fry's genesis, in my opinion, in that kids have so many choices, they are lost—their voices aren't generous or make a clear statement because that would mean they knew what they were talking about and felt confident in their beliefs—they made a choice. Instead, they think “Since I'm afraid to make a choice, or since I don't know if I'll be right or wrong in making that choice, I won't make a commitment to how I sound!” (Flinchbaugh)

So how does one get Gen Y to make a commitment? In essence, this is exactly what the Armed Services requires. The Army, no slouch in the marketing department, changed their slogan to reflect this sea change in our newest generation. “Be all that you can be” quickly changed to “An army of one.”

### *Perception Versus Reality*

How does this reflect in Gen Y's perception of the world? Well for one, almost all of the sound that they hear has been manufactured or produced. Rarely is today's teenager hearing live sound. The sounds they hear are most often reproduced. I do not wish to enter into the debate of digital sound versus analog sound; however, there is a difference between the qualities created

by these two dramatically different systems. In an interview with Jeremy Rainer, an expert sound engineer who works in digital audio production, he stated:

I've had a lot of opportunities to compare the sounds created by a vinyl [record] versus a CD of an album of the same music. Vinyl sounds warmer. It has more perceived depth. It would be difficult to explain, but it has to do with the needle [of a phonograph] and its vibration. There is some body to it. Remember, a CD is read by a laser. It creates a sound that could be described as 'edgy'; yet it has more fidelity to it [than vinyl.]

In conversations I have had with members of Gen Y, one thing that I constantly hear is that the voices of their colleagues in their speech classes don't sound "real." It is my contention that "real" for the Traditionalists, Baby Boomers and Generation Xers truly is different than it is for those of Gen Y. With dozens of new media to choose from, it's possible the average Gen Y will watch tens of thousands of commercials, thousands of episodes of TV, and hundreds of movies before their sixteenth birthday but will watch or listen to far fewer live performances of theatre or concerts. They model the sound they make on the sound they hear, and to greater or lesser degrees, that sound often emanates from electronically enhanced pop stars and actresses that utilize vocal fry as their primary register.

Additionally, Gen Y is not observing real physical behavior. As stated in the excerpt from the Kaiser Foundation, every day Gen Y spends an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes involved with some form of media or another (not taking into account multi-tasking which increases this to a whopping 10 hours and 45 minutes). Even when they are spending time together they are often interacting via avatars while playing video games. In essence, they *don't behave*. I mean

this not in the sense of adhering to rules or accepted modes of conduct, but rather in the strictest sense of the word—actions and physical manifestations of interior life. They wait to be told how someone is feeling. In movies, the cellos come wafting in the background and this implies that the character is now feeling sad. The main character is feeling noble because the French horns have started to play. Gen Y is losing the ability to communicate with behavior.

One of the main modes that people utilize to communicate is speaking, and this is being practiced with less frequency by Gen Y, to the point whereby it might soon be considered secondary. Let us analyze one of the primary methods by which Gen Y communicates—text messaging. To be fair, this is also a means by which many other generations now communicate. On a recent trip to Russia, my fiancée was made aware of how the world has embraced texting as a means of communication. In several European countries, cell phones are no longer even sold with minutes for voice communication. They are only sold with text minutes.

As for text messaging, the behavior is clear. Essentially, we type out an idea. How we *feel* about this idea might be expressed with an emoticon. For those not of Gen Y an emoticon is a series of keyboard characters arranged in such a way as to show a picture. :) is the symbol for a smiley face and thus communicates happiness. ;) represents someone winking and thus might communicate flirtatiousness or even a sense of sarcasm or irony. When the typing process is complete, you press “send.” A message then comes up on your phone that states “Your message has been sent.” This is followed quickly with “Message Received.” The receiver’s phone now will ring, vibrate or flash, depending upon what setting they have it on. The screen might read “You have a text message.” That person might have one or two buttons to push and then they read the text that has been sent. They can save it for future access (for clarity or proof or what

they will), they can reply, or they can delete it immediately. Gen Y does this thousands of times a *week*. As stated earlier, to be fair, the whole world is doing this more, not just Gen Y. We are all texting, tweeting, IM-ing and generally climbing on the text bandwagon. However, Generation Xers, Baby Boomers, and Traditionalists all grew up with speaking as their primary mode of communication prior to using texting as a main means of communicating. These generations started communicating in several ways; not only speaking, but with all of the concomitant behavior that goes into a conversation - body language, pitch, rate, etc. But Gen Y grew up with one hand on the mouse and the other holding a phone while texting a message to a BFF.

Furthermore, I would point out that traditionally a conversation is an oral experience as well as an aural one. Not only do we hear what the other person is saying empirically (the actual words they are using) but we are also hearing what they *think* is important by what words they are emphasizing. People do this with pitch, with tempo (taking longer to say the words by lengthening the vowels or continuant consonants) as well as utilizing volume or changes in registers. Indeed, people use a whole array of vocal tactics when they speak and it is these tactics that inform others of what they are thinking. People can whisper, yell, trail off, glottalize and pause. Along with this is a whole host of other, more difficult to describe non-verbal, unconscious behaviors that can be utilized to communicate what we feel.<sup>1</sup> But Gen Y has little or no experience with these modalities of communication. They have little practice listening let alone speaking. Most of their behavior has been taught to them via some form of media. These representations of human existence are problematic because they are constructs—manipulations

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent review of this, read *Emotions Revealed* by Paul Ekman



of images and sounds for the secondary purpose which is that of entertaining and grabbing the attention of our minds. Worse yet, the primary purpose of these media is to sell a product.

Either it *is* the product as in the case of X-box or computer games; a service, as in the case of text messaging or twittering; or as a platform for commercials like television or radio. Essentially, Gen Y has received the vast majority of its understanding of human relationships via boxes: big boxes in the form of movies, small boxes as in television or computers, and really small boxes in the form of hand held communication devices.

In this way, Gen Y has learned that they don't really have to work at figuring out what someone is feeling or thinking. Most members of Gen Y believe will be told what a character is feeling, thinking, doing or saying via text, emoticon, musical score or even another character. If that is the case, then the converse must also be true – members of Gen Y don't have to work very hard to make themselves understood either. "If you can't understand me, it's your fault." Not to mention the fact that with so many forms of media, one can choose at any time to ignore the text, call, twitter or IM. Were the person sitting within sight, this would not be an option, and any number of the above listed behaviors would kick in. Here's a scenario: two people are sitting next to each other. One wants to talk to the other and does so, "Hey, how's it going?" The other person ignores them. Tactics ensue: the person doing the talking slows down perhaps, adds a little volume and glottalizes several of the pronouns. "I said I want to talk to you!" But there is still no answer. "I SAID I want to TALK you!" A few operative words are thrown into the mix; perhaps "said" is stated with upward inflection reminiscent of a mother or father scolding a child. "Talk" might have slightly more volume. However, there is still no response. New behaviors will continue to replace old behaviors as the person becomes more and more enraged. Yelling,

kicking; who knows, but a highly entertaining scenario has developed and I, for one, am riveted. But to be assured of that scenario, the person asking to talk would most likely have to have been born prior to 1981. Gen Y has been taught a new way to communicate. Enter Vocal fry – the selfish register.

### *The Selfish Register*

I do not believe that Gen Y's swing into the overutilization of the vocal fry register has been a conscious response to the culture as a whole. Rather, a series of circumstances has dictated the growth of this phenomenon. First, many children were born into smaller families with two working parents. Neither parent wants to give up a fulfilling career or the extra money and security that a two income family obtains. Perhaps neither can afford to walk away from the added income. Either way, the result is the same – many children spend more time with media than with their parents. Family sizes are smaller and if the parents aren't careful, an unhealthy amount of attention is paid to the children. From a very early age, the children of some families are taught that they are "special," "deserve" more than their peers, and inevitably develop a confusing relationship with their parents. They become the princess or the prince and have the run of the household. As a result, the previously discussed devastating condition called Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) takes hold. Many theorists consider it to be one of the dominant dysfunctions of late, with one out of four college students identified as Gen Y answering the majority of questions in a narcissistic direction. (Twenge 108) It might be said that NPD has overwhelmed this generation to such a degree that it is considered the "new normal."

These children are also born into a time where the level of media saturation forms a massive feedback loop—the more new media is created, the more media is used, which in turn drives a market for new media. It is the media and not live teachers in a classroom that is the education source for children and therefore the media's voice is most readily recognized as an authority. Thus it is the digitally produced, scripted sound designed to sell products that is teaching children how to speak and behave. As noted before, often times this is the voice that is considered by many in Gen Y to be more truthful. It is this sound which is imitated, learned and regurgitated by Gen Y. Furthermore when the voice is utilized to communicate, it is often used with the aid of a microphone where it is digitally re-mastered and sent through the airwaves. The sounds judged to have more fidelity are thus not live, but rather digital representations of voice. This creates a small sound. Gen Y doesn't need large sounds. They have electronic enhancements in the form of their cell phones. That is, if they are even using their phones to talk since most Gen Y members have adopted texting or twittering as their primary means of "staying in touch." They rarely have to interpret the behavior of their peers. Just like in the movies, they will inevitably be told what someone is feeling, whether by means of an emoticon or a French horn—someone or something will specifically state the mood a person is in.

Thus, Gen Y doesn't need to speak clearly (TV celebrities don't), or even behave in a manner that lets others know how they feel, (it is someone else's job to understand them). Because of the ever-present possibility that someone will record their response (the omnipresent cell phone is now capable of recording *video*), Gen Y needs to be able to "take back" what was said. Vocal fry becomes the means through which plausible deniability is achieved. If they are suffering from NPD-like symptoms, then they certainly won't be generous with the voice

because a lack of generosity is endemic to the condition. Lester Thomas Shane discussed it rather eloquently in our conversation:

My sense – and I intuit this from two ways: Watching and hearing what I get, and the other: so when I do it myself, how does it make me feel? And if I do *this* [Lester goes into the Vocal fry register], I can immediately feel that my weight sinks down and goes back...I feel like I'm drowning; if I take that and let it sit there, then I just kind of want to sink into myself. So it's kind of cool – cool both in the sense of hip, and in the sense of distancing – you wanna talk to me? you got to come to me, I'm really not going to share everything. So there's a coolness to it. There's also a selfishness to it. It's your responsibility to come to me, not mine to you. Whether I want to communicate to you or not, you have to make much more of the effort than I do.

Thus, not only does vocal fry communicate a level of self-interest that is pre-existent within the individual using it, but vocal fry also *creates* that sensation within the body as well.

Patsy Rodenberg echoes these ideas with her book *Second Circle*. In a section titled *First Circle: The Circle of Self and Withdrawal* she states:

Here your whole focus is inward. The energy falls back into you. First circle absorbs other people's energy and draws all outward stimulus inward. When in first circle you are not very observant or perceptive of people or objects outside yourself. They interest you only as a means to clarify yourself, not the world around you (16).

Once this self-focused energy has been created within an individual, it results in several negative responses from those experiencing it. And where stage actors are concerned, not only is this received poorly by a scene partner, but it keeps the audience from a distance in terms of performance, and distance is rarely a desirable result.<sup>2</sup>

*When Vocal Fry Emerged*

In my conversation with Lester, I asked him when he started to see vocal fry show up more often. I assumed he would have a general understanding of time and percentages, but he offered me something even better – empirical evidence. Lester had been using a student assessment sheet for over a decade and he reviewed some with me.

It would be really hard for me to make that guess [when he had started to see Vocal fry show up]– at some point I just suddenly thought “God, I’m writing that a lot” and I can’t honestly tell you when that was, 5 years ago, 10 years ago – I know it was NOTHING 20 years ago. I mean, not at all. And I don’t ever remember any one in my class being told – ‘Ohh fry, watch that.’ I don’t remember a single person – lot of talk about down gliding, but nothing about fry.

(Shane)

While I was not offered a chance to view all of the assessment sheets in Lester’s office, I can imagine that the sheets tell a similar story – Gen Y is afflicted with bad case of vocal fry.

The first time I began to see an issue was not necessarily with vocal fry, but rather with behavior in general. During the spring of 2006, it was my special privilege to occupy a Professional Observership under Ralph Zito at the Juilliard School. I noticed that there were

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<sup>2</sup> Even Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the distancing effect, is a balancing act performed by a company or actor which leads the audience to become even more critically involved albeit less emotionally attached.

distinct differences between the students that I was watching in 2006 versus the student I remember being in 1986 when I attended the Juilliard School. I ascribed the differences to age. I was sure that there was some bias on my part. However as time went on, I became more and more aware that there was a distinct difference between the way I had gone through my training and the manner in which this group of young acting students was training. I was fascinated because to my eyes, it appeared that very little had changed in twenty years. The order of classes was almost exactly the same. Juilliard's acting program still employed many of the principles under which the program had begun several decades ago. Primarily, the design of the program was based on the teachings of Michel Saint Denis, the brilliant French theatre practitioner of the 1940s and 1950s. There were several professors who were still teaching – in the same hallways, and in the same city as well as the same subjects. I was confused. What was I seeing or hearing in the students?

One day I pulled aside Robert Neff Williams. Mr. Williams had been my voice teacher in 1988 and was now graciously allowing me to observe his classes. I stated how I had sensed a difference between his current students and those who had been in my class. I allowed that it might simply be my own bias or perhaps a lack of context. I had, after all, only been observing students for a few years while he had been teaching speech since 1956 as well as being on the faculty at Juilliard almost since its inception. Given the fact that he had been teaching for over fifty years, I felt that he might represent an informed opinion. “They aren't willing to put in the hours necessary to achieve real change in their vocal processes,” he stated. “They want to become proficient right away.” “So they are different?” I asked. “Oh, yes, very much so!” he said, in his deeply resonant perfectly placed voice. When I told Ralph Zito about this

conversation, he held that it wasn't their work ethic that was so exceedingly different. Ralph said that, yes, they were perhaps a bit more impatient when it came to "getting it" than other classes. But mainly, it was his considered opinion that they simply didn't know how to behave, IE perform actions that give us a sense of their inner lives. We can see that vocal fry is merely one of the more recognizable aspects of this overall tendency by Gen Y to limit their modes of behavior. The next question is: what are we, as teachers, capable of doing about it?

## Solutions and Conclusions

### *Physical Strength*

Acting for the stage requires enormous amounts of physical strength. Many of the traits inherent to vocal fry are not merely the result of a flawed set of instructions regarding how humans interact and communicate with each other. Vocal fry can occur even when clear communication is desired simply because the vocal apparatus is exhausted and lacks the core stamina to continue. This begins with an overall attention to the aerobic health of the actor. Breath stamina needs to be developed along with muscular stamina. In my experience here at Virginia Commonwealth University, I have been introduced to Professor Janet Rodgers' *Oxyrhythms*. The exercises contained within this system, developed with today's young actor in mind, address both elements (breath and body) and can be used as a foundation upon which further work can be accomplished. Along with *Oxyrhythms*, Pilates, Yoga, or any other strenuous exercise that incorporates flexibility with strengthening would be useful

### *Posture*

One of the more fatal elements of Vocal fry is that often it is accompanied by a degree of slouching or a complete collapse of the upper thorax. It is near impossible to create healthy sound when this position is employed. One of the more remarkable solutions that I have experienced has been the utilization of the Alexander Technique. I quote from their website:



It is a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support and coordination. The technique teaches the use of the appropriate amount of effort for a particular activity, giving you more energy for all your activities. It is not a series of treatments or exercises, but rather a reeducation of the mind and body. (Alexander)

However, a trained practitioner and teacher of the Alexander Technique is often beyond the means of most BFA/BA programs not mention beyond the means of the average actor when she has left her program of study. I would like to suggest ballroom dancing. On one occasion at Juilliard I was waiting for a class of students to arrive with my mentor Wendy Waterman. When they walked into the room, it was as if an entirely new group of students had stepped through the door. Their chests were lifted, their shoulders were broad and necks swiveled beautifully upon their spines. Their energy was nothing short of remarkable. When my colleague asked in stunned joy what class they had just come from, they responded with flushed excitement “Ballroom Dancing!” Taught well, this form of dance can be a panacea for poor posture and wouldn’t have to break the bank.

#### *Vocal fry – The Register Itself*

As stated earlier in this paper, the vocal fry is a one of four recognized registers capable of being created by the human being (the others being whistle, falsetto and modal). The use of this register is not a problem for most of the public, merely an annoyance (similar to the use of an over-nasalized voice). However, for the professional voice user – particularly the stage actor – this register can spell doom for the vocal folds. I quote from my interview with Lester:

And so it has no real energy to it, and so when it gets energized, then it feels really awful in my throat because the two things are in conflict. It's a sound that can't be energized and so when you do, my feeling internally is that it just doesn't know how to handle that kind of stress on it, it's not like when you learn to scream and you learn to keep relaxing and opening and opening and opening and grounding and deepening and clutching the floor and using your balls to get that huge Lear on the Heath sound, and then it can as big a scream as the universe can handle. If you try to do that with this [vocal fry] I would guess that one shot of that is going to just kill you. (Shane)

In order to avoid living in the vocal fry register, a student needs to be made aware of the possibility that other registers exist. This can be done simply by asking the student to move up in pitch until they hit their break. By asking the student to "live in the break," the student becomes more comfortable with this phonatory placement. A slight humming can be added soon after, as I have found it difficult to continue in the fry register when humming. By asking the student to concentrate on the buzzing sensation in their mask, vocal fry is dissipated if not eradicated altogether in that moment.

Another manner to avoid vocal fry is to employ an acting technique developed by Seth Barrish at the Barrow Group in New York City. In an exercise called "Are you Talking Funny" in his book *101 Bits of Craft*, Barrish asks his students to begin speaking in their normal conversational tone as they answer questions that are being asked by their scene partner. When the scene partner senses that the actor performing the exercise is speaking in a normal tone, they begin the scene. If a shift from one vocal quality to another is recognized by either of them, the

two actors return to the exercise until a seamless flow from one to the other states of being is achieved. I have used this to introduce students to recognize many forms of dysfunction in their rehearsal process. When done regularly, vocal fry leaps out in their ears as a recognizable default. Something that is recognizable is also correctable.

### *Landing the Sound: I*

Often, one of the first stages a student may experience as they climb out of completely relying on vocal fry will be starting with healthy phonation in the modal register but ending on a fry. An exercise suggested to me by Lester handles this quite well. With every phrase, he asks the students to add the phrase "...and then some!" Subsequent stages involve thinking the phrase "...and then some!" but not actually saying it and finally, simply saying the line with the newly added scope of breath and support. This exercise accomplishes many things at the same time: A) It forces the student to take in more air than they think they need but in the end is just enough. B) It ensures that the last few words of the original phrase (sans ...and them some!) will have enough air to be fully expressed. C) And lastly it makes sure that the student is committing fully to communicating the entire thought held within the line.

### *Landing the Sound: II*

I have utilized a breath/body/sound coordination exercise for the purposes of mitigating the effects of vocal fry. *Tossing the Ball* – where the students send a ball across to their partner while maintaining a coordinated breath and release helps with vocal fry as well. I believe it works because the students follow the ball through the air and literally "land" the sound. Also,

the freedom obtained in the intercostals while coordinating the breath/body swing is helpful as well. Air dumps are easier to diagnose as are gasps and all manner of vocal dysfunctions. Vocal fry abhors good breath obtained with a body relieved of excess tension, thus, this exercise works wonders to relieve it.

### *Encouraging Behavior of Any Kind*

Whenever students behave in any way that is outside their commonly practiced behavior, vocal fry dissipates immediately. If you are truly in desperate straits, ask the student to play cards, peel an orange, stack chairs or anything at all. The scene or monologue might lose its clarity, but the fry will be greatly lessened.

### *Conclusion*

In the subsequent months since I embarked on this path towards greater understanding of the phenomena of vocal fry, I have been struck by the greater level of attention it has received by the media as well as by the public at large. When friends and relatives have asked me what I am currently researching and I reply “vocal fry and how it relates to Gen Y” I receive little or no interest. However, if they ask that I expand upon the subject and I discuss how I believe that vocal fry is a symptom of Narcissism Personality Disorder; I receive an entirely different response. Often, that response is dictated by what Generation you hail from, whether or not you currently have children and whether or not those children are part of Gen Y. One element remains constant however, and that is the passion it provokes.

People sense a difference between the ways each generation communicates. Some view the adoption of personal communication devices as beneficial to society as a whole and some view the shift away from interpersonal communication as a further sign of society’s dissolution. I am neither an expert in social structures or psychology. But I can say without reservation that this topic has generated more attention than any other area of interest that I have shared. People outside of my specialty have railed against my facts and argued in favor of my assumptions. I have touched a nerve.

Let me reiterate however, that this paper is really about vocal fry and how it is of little or no use for the students of the theatrical arts. This paper represents a call to arms, in a sense, to all voice and speech teachers that a profound shift in the way Gen Y communicates is occurring

and that for better or worse, we must deal with this shift in our classrooms as well as on the stage. On the twenty-sixth of April, *The New York Times* published an article titled “Encouraging the Text Generation to Rediscover Its Voice.” I could not agree more. But I would expand that request to include *all* generations. We all need to give voice and engage with each other more. We need to stop taking our cues from the big and little boxes of our lives; step out of the box, think outside the box and take a risk at allowing our voices to be heard.

Talk to me; I promise I will listen.

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## Vita

Paul Michael Valley was born in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin on September 24, 1965. He attended the American University for two years before matriculating to The Juilliard School. He left the conservatory after three years to pursue a professional acting career. Paul received his Bachelor of Arts in Theatre from American University in 2006.

Paul has trained both as an actor and teacher with such illustrious mentors as Janet Rodgers, Ralph Zito, Wendy Waterman, Michael Kahn, Olympia Dukakis, Dianne Wiest, Slava Dolgachev, and Seth Barrish. In 2008, Paul maintained a Professional Observership at The Juilliard School under Ralph Zito.

Paul has appeared both On and Off-Broadway most notably in the 1998 revival of *1776* in which he performed the role of Thomas Jefferson. Paul performed in the New York premiere of *Hurrah at Last*, by Richard Greenberg as well as *Arms and the Man*, directed by Roger Reese. Paul worked extensively with John Kander, Fred Ebb and Peter Stone during several workshops of the Broadway musical *Curtains* directed by Scott Ellis. Paul has extensive regional theatre credits as well, including shows at The Shakespeare Theatre of Washington D.C., The Old Globe in San Diego, The Denver Center and the Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger.

His television and film credits include *Grownups*, *On Music Row*, *Third Watch*, *Law and Order: SVU*, *Ed*, *Guiding Light* and *One Life to Live*. However, Paul is perhaps best known for his six-year portrayal of Ryan Harrison on NBC's daytime drama *Another World*.

As a teacher, Paul has worked as an Adjunct Professor of Voice, Speech and Acting at Queens College in Queens, New York, as well as an Adjunct Professor of Voice and Speech while a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Virginia Commonwealth University. Along with several Off-Broadway coaching credits, Paul's vocal coaching experience ranges from for The Juilliard Drama's Second Year Project of *Romeo and Juliet* to Virginia Commonwealth University's production of *Tommy*.