

# **CHAPTER 15**

## **CHANGING CITIZEN IDENTITY AND THE RISE OF A PARTICIPATORY MEDIA CULTURE**

*W. LANCE BENNETT, DEEN FREELON, AND CHRIS WELLS  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SEATTLE USA*

The Internet and the networked communication technologies based upon it represent new frontiers for the study of youth civic engagement in the twenty-first century. Unlike print, radio, and television, which are overwhelmingly managed by elites in a top-down fashion, these technologies allow for multidirectional pathways of user-driven production, consumption, appropriation, and pastiche. Moreover, the barriers to entry have in the past few years descended to the point that blogging, social networking (via sites like Facebook and Myspace), and watching videos on YouTube have become integrated into the daily routines of many young people. Despite some persistent socioeconomic divides in access and skills, the growing uses of social technologies have inspired a cautious optimism in some youth civic engagement scholars, who see hope for reversing the decades-long trend of declining civic engagement among younger demographic groups. In this chapter, we examine some of the evidence for and against this optimism, with the aim of identifying policy implications for developing more learning rich online civic youth communities. We begin by reviewing theory and research suggesting that today's youth are by and large adopting a qualitatively different style of citizenship from their parents, and that the form and content of their media choices reflect this generational split. Next, we explore three distinct avenues of digital citizenship—video production and sharing, social networking web sites, and civic gaming—that attract young people in disproportionately large numbers. Finally, we present results from an original study which evaluated 90 youth civic engagement web sites in terms of the kinds of learning opportunities they offered their users.

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## An Overview of Contemporary Media Engagement Trends

An obvious place to start thinking about the role of media in youth engagement is with consumption of news and related public information. Demographic trends in news consumption make the youth civic engagement outlook seem bleak. Where roughly half of American adults over 30 claim to read the news pages of papers at least several times a week, barely half that number of teenagers make that claim (Patterson, 2007). The television picture is not much better. Hamilton (2004, pp. 85–90) reports that less than 10% of men and women aged 18 to 34 regularly view a nightly network news program, compared to 23% of men and 32% of women over age 50. The ratings for police reality TV programs beat National Public Radio in every demographic category except men over age 50. Conventional wisdom often points to the Internet as the place where young people encounter public issues. It is true that many teens (43%) say they regularly encounter news online (compared with 33 percent of those over 30), but

closer inspection reveals that most of them (65%) say they just happen upon it, compared to 55% of Internet news users over 30 who say they seek out the news (Patterson, 2007).

Despite marketing efforts to salt the news with topics of interest to younger demographics (whom advertisers pay more to reach), the lack of interest in so-called hard or policy related news has proved an insurmountable obstacle (Hamilton, 2004, pp. 83–85). Pew (2007) surveys indicate that these trends are long-term and likely irreversible. In 1998 and 2008 Pew asked a survey sample whether they had encountered any news the day before. Overall, there was a rise of from 14 to 19% who reported going without news, but the sharpest rise was among those aged 18 to 24, where “newslessness” rose from 25 to 34%.

Not surprisingly, young citizens fare poorly on general political knowledge tests (identifying figures and issues in the news). For example, only 15% of American 18- to 29-year-olds fit into the high knowledge group in a Pew (2007) survey, compared to 35% of those aged 30 to 49, and 47% of 50- to 64-year-olds. These media trends have become a familiar litany among scholars who pronounce young citizens chronically disengaged. Wattenberg’s (2008) careful look at comparable generations of news consumers going back as far as data permit (nearly a century in the case of newspapers) shows that each generation of young people over the past 40 years has dropped substantially in news consumption. For example, 70% of Americans born in the 1930s read newspapers on a daily basis by the time they turned 20, compared to just 20% of those born in the early 1980s. Equally steep declines mark parallel age groups with respect to television news consumption in later decades. In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, for example, citizens under 30 were about as well informed as older age groups. After the 1970s, each decade saw younger generations become increasingly less informed and less likely to follow political issues and events (with a few notable exceptions such as 9/11). These trends are also true for many other democracies. Wattenberg (2008, p. 5) concludes, “Today’s young adults are the least politically knowledgeable generation ever in the history of survey research.”

Many scholars have associated these and other patterns in youth disconnection from civic media with declines in voting and other forms of political participation. Yet closer examination of the youth civic landscape indicates a far more complicated picture. For example, survey data analyzed by Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Della Carpini (2006) show that, with the exception of election-related activities, young Americans participate in other areas of public life such as protests and consumer politics at rates comparable to or higher than older age brackets. Moreover, the steady rise of young voter turnout in the 2004 and 2008 elections suggests that the electoral participation gap may be closing.

Nonetheless, the media habits and information trends noted above still cause pessimism about the civic health of our youth. However, if we think

differently about how information travels and how it is connected to civic action via social networks enabled by digital technologies, we may also think differently about how young people receive and apply information in their everyday political encounters. Among the early signs of a changing media and information environment was the rise of political comedy as a source of perspective on the news and political elites. Despite concerns expressed by many adults that young people were substituting shallow comedy for in-depth information, it turns out that political comedy audiences are remarkably well informed. Audiences of the Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the Colbert Report not only skew young, but they are the most knowledgeable of all media audiences (including regular news viewers). Fully 54% of Stewart and Colbert viewers fall into the highest information group in a Pew (2007) survey, compared to just 38% of network evening news viewers who do not watch the comedy programs. Moreover, 21% of the 18 to 29 demographic say they became more engaged in elections through political comedy (Young and Tisinger, 2006; Young and Esralew, 2007). Reflecting the complexity of the contemporary media system, engagement with these programs is not just a television experience; it also occurs online, via video streaming on computers and handheld devices, and by sharing links, clips and mashups in e-mails and on social networking sites. The contemporary media landscape clearly engages young citizens differently than the legacy media did, in terms of what constitutes information, how it is linked to action options, and how it may be shared over peer networks.

One clear implication of these changes is that the notion of a citizen who receives abstract information through the news as a thing in itself, and then waits for some opportunity such as voting in order to apply it, may fit an older model of citizenship that emerged in a different social era with a different media system than exists today. There is evidence that sweeping social changes in the lived experiences of youth have combined with new information and communication technologies to change the ways in which young citizens tune in, engage, organize, and take action.

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## Changing Citizen Identity and the New Media Environment

It is clear that citizenship is not static. What defines the *good citizen* changes with the political, social, and communication systems of the times (Schudson, 1998). The current *late modern* era, dating from the globalization of societies in the late 1970s onward, is a period of important change in the expression of civic identities. Beginning in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, many observers began to detect important changes in the social and political

orientations of recent generations in the post-industrial democracies. For example, in his survey of 43 nations, Inglehart (1997) noted a shift toward a “postmaterial” politics marked by a diminished sense of the personal relevance of government and growing dissatisfaction with the working of democratic processes. At the same time, younger citizens displayed increased interest in certain political issues including environmental quality, human rights, and consumer politics (Inglehart, 1997; Zukin et al., 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002).

Bennett (1998) has argued that, as a result of these changes, many younger citizens are less inclined to feel a sense of duty to participate politically, while displaying a greater inclination to embrace issues that connect to lifestyle values that can be shared across social networks with peers. By contrast, older generations described by Putnam (2000) and others experience citizenship more in terms of duty to participate in elections, parties, service organizations, and other government-centered activities. Young citizens entering their teens in the early years of the twenty-first century have experienced both generational and developmental changes, coming of age socially and politically in an era of global change that has affected social organization and identity formation in fundamental ways. In particular, the generation sometimes called Generation Y (following the so-called Generation X that came of age in the mid-to-late 1980s) has encountered development challenges associated with having fewer common group membership and social position cues to rely on for personal identification, resulting in greater personal responsibility (and associated stress) in identity expression and management (Giddens, 1991). Among the resources available for expression and experimentation in the development process are social media that enable broad networking through self-oriented content production and sharing via photos, videos, blogs, and ubiquitous texting.

In addition to self-expression and social relationship building through more loosely tied social media networks, young citizens have also adjusted the ways in which they think about credibility and authority. Despite the concern of many adults, young social media users are increasingly comfortable with replacing old gatekeepers such as journalists, teachers, and officials with crowd-sourced information flows developed through information aggregation technologies (e.g., Google news), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), trusted friend networks (e.g., Facebook, Linked-in, Moveon), and recommendation engines (e.g., Amazon, iTunes).

These social identity and relationship shifts may help explain why many young people see an older civic regime based on membership organizations, public institutions, and officials as hierarchical and artificial. Young media consumers have developed a keen eye for authenticity, and often experience the staged public relations of government as distant and inauthentic (Coleman, 2008; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). They tend to favor more personally expressive or self-actualizing politics, communicated in peer-to-peer networking environments (Bennett, 2007, 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

In short, it seems clear that the dominant model of citizenship for the past century, dating from the progressive era, is changing (Bennett, 1998, 2007, 2008; Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009). We have termed this legacy model *Dutiful Citizenship* (DC) in light of its core precept that civic engagement is a matter of duty or obligation. It holds that becoming informed consists of consuming information from authoritative sources such as officials, admitted into public discourse through media gatekeepers such as newspapers and television newscasts. By contrast, increasing numbers of (predominantly younger) citizens are motivated by the potential of personally expressive politics animated by social networks where information and action tend to be integrated and authenticated in trusted peer-to-peer relationships that promote engagement. This *Actualizing Citizenship* (AC) style may not lead to learning abstract or factual information, but it can produce knowledge sharing on specific issues around which social action networks emerge. The general outlines of these two models of citizenship are contained in Table 15.1.

**Table 15.1 Dutiful and Actualizing Styles of Civic Action and Communication [Ch15T01]**

The important caveat here is that neither model is superior to the other. Nor are particular individuals (or demographic groups) likely to subscribe exclusively to one model over the other. We are talking about ideal types that highlight general tendencies and trends. Since the DC model has a considerable cultural legacy, most people understand the ideals of connecting with government and being informed, but many AC citizens may see government as less central, and assemble information from non-news sources in the process of networking with others in personally expressive ways.

While these ideal types are not mutually exclusive, there seem to be broad differences in their related engagement and media use habits across social generations. This does not mean that all members of demographics born after 1980 are AC citizens or that all born before then display only DC qualities. Many young people who grow up today in families that emphasize politics as traditionally practiced continue to acquire DC identifications. Likewise, many senior citizens who participated in the protest and liberation politics of the 1960s and 1970s embrace the more fluid styles of AC politics, tempered by a sense of obligation to follow issues in the news and vote. However, we think that these different civic styles can help account for the often puzzling generational differences in political orientations or socialization found in recent survey research (e.g., Lopez et al., 2006).

The generational shift in civic styles does not mean that young citizens should be given an automatic pass for not knowing who government leaders are or what is going on with key issues in Washington. However, it does suggest that the

picture of disengaged and uninformed youth that has haunted the literature for decades may not be as accurate as previously thought. It has long been clear, for example, that young audiences view news with (perhaps appropriate) skepticism, and sample their information more broadly as media genres blur and information channels proliferate (Bennett, 2008). Indeed, the proliferation of media channels and consumer platforms makes the old idea of distributing news or political advertising to large-scale audiences something of a throwback to the mass media era. If we ask about media experiences, we discover that large numbers of youth have all but abandoned television for games, social media, and online video. In fact, young males have become so scarce in television audiences that the Obama campaign in 2008 put ads in video games.

It is challenging to sort out whether changes in the social experiences of youth have spurred the social media revolution, or whether the development of social media has stimulated different patterns of self-expression and social organization. However, it is worth noting that there is nothing inherent in the design of digital media that require flattened network organizations or interactivity. Indeed the differences in digital media applications between the Obama and McCain campaigns in the 2008 election suggests that media use more reflects social orientation than causes it.

## **The Changing Media Experience in the 2008 American Presidential Election**

The 2008 American presidential election put the spotlight on media and participation trends that have been developing for more than a decade: Youth prefer participatory digital media that emphasize content users may help to produce, consume, and share with others. This means that young citizens are not just the targets of content, but active participants in the creation and targeting of content through their social networks. These shifts hold important keys to understanding the nature of youth engagement and the future roles of media in the engagement process.

Surveys by Pew show that digital media came into their own as means of engagement during the 2008 election. Not only did increasing numbers of voters find information online, they also reported sharing that information with others. In comparison to previous elections, staggering numbers gave money (primarily to the Democrats) through small contributions online. Moreover, 50% of young voters 18 to 29 went online for information about campaigns or politics during the primary season, up from 36% in 2004. By contrast, the online news experience of 50- to 64-year-olds was limited to 31 and 36% in 2004 and 2008, respectively (Smith & Rainie, 2008, p. 4). Youth are also far more prolific content creators than older citizens—those 18 to 29 years old are more likely to post original political

commentary online than the next three demographic groups combined, and over 50% more likely to use social networking web sites for political purposes (Smith & Rainie, 2008, pp. 10–11). (We discuss the socio-technological mechanisms underpinning these patterns of content sharing and creation in greater detail in the following section.)

The volume and forms of digital media use suggest an important change in the relationship of young citizens to communication processes, and the possibility of redefining their engagement experiences. The Obama campaign of 2008 offers many examples of the ways in which more conventional (mass) media and newer digital or participatory media experiences can combine to produce a range of different engagement experiences in an electoral context. Going well beyond the Dean campaign of 2004, the War Room command model of campaign communication was integrated in the Obama organization (Silberman, 2009). On the conventional side, the Obama campaign spent record amounts on television advertising. At the same time, the campaign developed and deployed an astonishing array of social media, including blogging communities, twitter feeds, and regular e-mailings of action alerts with embedded video clips featuring the candidate and other campaign leaders exhorting people to organize their own campaign events, donate money, and recruit friends.

An even more telling aspect of this participatory media trend was the large number of digital media artifacts produced and distributed by campaign followers. (Jenkins, 2006). Indeed, in both campaigns, the most viewed videos online were not official candidate-endorsed productions, but independent productions by supporters. These viral videos on the Obama side ranged from the highly polished *Yes We Can* music video produced by singers will.i.am and Jakob Dylan (with some 24 million views), to the whimsical *Obama Girl* (with nearly 14 million YouTube views), and many more humble DIY mashups. The most-viewed McCain video was *Dear Mr. Obama* (nearly 14 million YouTube views), made by a returning war veteran challenging Obama's war position. And in the blogosphere, Obama received an average of 11,826 daily blog mentions between the launch of his campaign in 2007 through election day, compared to 7,370 average daily blog mentions for McCain over the course of his campaign (TechPresident, 2008).

For many younger voters these experiences with digital media seem to have changed their relationship to the election process itself (not just their sense of identification with the candidate) (Waggener-Edstrom, 2008). Young voters—more than any demographic group with the possible exception of Latinos—were instrumental in helping Barack Obama achieve his Electoral College landslide in 2008. Turnout among eligible voters was up to 53% in the 18 to 29 age bracket, representing a 5% gain over 2004, and 11 percent over 2000 (CIRCLE, 2009). More importantly, those young voters cast roughly two-thirds of their votes for Obama—a 13-point swing to Obama compared to Kerry in 2004. This meant that



states not ordinarily in play for the Democrats were importantly involved in the 2008 election. In fact, majorities of voters under 30 sided with the Democrats in all but nine states, with Obama gaining 72% of the youth vote in North Carolina, and unprecedented levels in a number of other states (Jacobson, 2008). Overall, exit polls revealed the Obama majority among voters under 30 at 70%, the largest youth vote swing in the history of exit polling (Fraser & Dutta, 2008).

These trends suggest a possible reversal of decades of youth disconnection from the most important foundation of the democratic process. However, they also suggest something important about the involvement of younger voters in the election, and other aspects of civic life, through their use of social media. To fully understand changes in the youth civic experience, it is necessary to explore the types of participatory civic media operating in the contemporary mediascape. In the following section we examine the dynamics of three distinct forms of digitally mediated engagement: online video sharing, social public networking, and civic gaming.

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## The Participatory Media Shift in Youth Civic Engagement

The rise of participatory practices centered around social media seems to make a special contribution to a reversing low civic engagement among young people. Our position on the reciprocal dynamic between digital networks and civic and political affairs thus diverges from scholars who claim that digital media will necessarily lead to ideological polarization (Galston, 2003; Sunstein, 2007) or benefit only the already politically engaged (Agre, 2002; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). In this section we describe what is new about digitally mediated civic activity and contrast several prominent forms with their waning 20th-century counterparts. Key cases and research findings drawn from the domains of both electoral and non-electoral politics evidence a broad increase in the capacity of average citizens to seek out, remix, reframe, and create civic and political content—becoming actualizing citizens. Moreover, globe-spanning social networks supported by interactive technologies (and disproportionately adopted by youth) have radically transformed older forms of civic action including protests, journalism, and political campaign mobilization efforts. Although the civic applications of participatory media are numerous, there are inherent limiting factors—including inequities of skill, attention, and opportunity—that significantly skew participation.

Jenkins defines *participatory cultures* as networks of technologically linked individuals that display the following properties:

- Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
- Strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
- Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
- Members believe that their contributions matter
- Members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created) (2006, p. 7)

Participatory cultures coalesce around digital media forms whose properties contrast sharply with traditional or *old* media, which were designed to distribute prepackaged content to mass audiences via one-way transmission channels (Bennett, 2008; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Miel & Faris, 2008). While many of the participatory cases cited in the literature are decidedly non-civic in nature, such as networks of reality-TV fans and pop-culture pastiche artists (Jenkins, 2008), numerous civic participatory cultures have emerged as well. They reflect a distinctly different media and information culture captured in such scholarly concepts as networked individualism (Wellman et al., 2003), the networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006), and actualizing citizenship (Bennett, 2008). All of these perspectives focus on ways in which digital technologies are empowering motivated individuals to engage with others in public affairs. These scholars emphasize that civic participatory cultures are not completely encapsulated within the technological structures that support them. They are best conceptualized as hybrid strategies that combine on- and offline tactics in the service of the civic goal at hand. Three prominent variants of participatory media engagement in which youth are disproportionately represented—online video, social networking, and civic gaming—are discussed below.

## Online Video

Streaming on-demand video is a rapidly expanding medium, especially among young people. Unlike traditional information outlets, which function as unidirectional content conveyor belts for passive consumers, each online video view represents an individual's conscious choice to actively access the messages found there. By the end of 2007, 70% of U.S. Internet users aged 18 to 29 had visited a video-sharing web site such as Youtube (Rainie, 2008), and 42% of Americans aged 18 to 34 reported watching video online at least weekly (Leichtman Research Group, 2008). Much of this video content is undoubtedly entertainment-oriented, but available evidence indicates that youth (aged 18–29) are more likely to watch online political video clips (such as commercials, speeches, and interviews) than their elders (Smith & Rainie, 2008). This is

particularly striking in light of the aforementioned fact that increasing numbers of youth claim to consume no *news* at all (Pew, 2008).

Several key election events of the recent past provide evidence supporting the viability of online video as a vehicle for youth-oriented political messages. Perhaps the most memorable video of the American 2006 midterm elections was the clip of George Allen, Republican senatorial candidate for Virginia, publicly using a racial slur against a man of Indian descent who was video-recording him at a campaign stop. This single incident has been cited as decisive in Allen's loss at the polls (Kerbel, 2009; Panagopolous, 2007). The fact that his target was college-aged probably did little to endear him to the first-time voter demographic, and the video became one of YouTube's most viewed. Less dramatic but similar clips occasionally materialized on the American national news agenda throughout 2007, among them John McCain singing "Bomb, bomb, Iran" to the tune of the Beach Boys' song "Barbara Ann" and a portrayal of Hillary Clinton as Big Brother in a parody/homage to a classic Apple Computer television advertisement. Many of these clips originate from politically interested citizens armed with inexpensive digital video editing software and digital video recorders for capturing live TV. It has been argued that the "YouTube effect"—co-produced by political outsiders and fueled by youth viewership—has lessened the ability of campaigns to manage their messages (Gueorguieva, 2008; Steinhauer, 2007).

Digital media also appear to be reconfiguring the dynamics of political contention in countries that lack freedom of expression. For example, many young Iranians protesting the results of their 2009 election organized and communicated using text-messaging, Facebook, Twitter, photos, and video. The power to communicate a raw, emotional, and politically potent message by-passing official attempts at censorship was illustrated by the famous video documenting the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman shot near one of the protests. According to *The New York Times*, the man who recorded the footage was aware of the danger involved in distributing his video. He sent it by e-mail to a friend in Iran, who in turn passed it to Western news outlets and friends in Europe, one of whom posted the video on Facebook, "weeping as he did so" (Stelter & Stone, 2009). Within hours, the wrenching video was being shown on CNN and other news outlets, discussed via Twitter, and accumulating views on YouTube and Facebook (CNN, 2009). Within days it had become a striking symbol (Stelter & Stone, 2009), conveying the youth, idealism, and innocence of the protesters—both within Iran and to a global audience.

As suggested earlier, the potential for large-scale youth engagement via participatory media was demonstrated by the volume of media sharing surrounding Barack Obama during the 2008 American presidential election. During the month prior to the election, the official "BarackObamadotcom" YouTube channel accrued 20 million views for its hosted videos, making it the most viewed YouTube channel, surpassing those of Britney Spears and Beyoncé

Knowles. This does not include the copies of Obama videos hosted by users unaffiliated with the campaign. Further, while campaign speeches and political advertisements accounted for a substantial proportion of Obama video views, many of the most popular Obama videos did not resemble traditional hard-news fare. Perhaps the most well-known of these freewheeling election-themed clips featured the aforementioned Obama Girl, a suggestively clothed actress who lip-synched an ode to the Democratic presidential nominee in a 2007 MTV-style video. Dozens of clips released in 2007 to 2008 followed this basic quasi-political formula, providing enterprising remix artists with plenty of opportunities to express their own opinions. It is difficult to measure the mechanisms for secondary engagement with these videos through e-mail forwarding, blogging, and comments on the video sites. However, it is clear that the transmission and modification of content across social networks is responsible for creating viral audiences in the absence of conventional mass media broadcast and scheduled viewing arrangements.

## Social Networking

The shift in the scope of online social networking technologies from small niche populations to the American mainstream was driven primarily by teenagers (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). For this reason, the most popular social network sites (SNSs) in the United States, Myspace and Facebook, remain havens of youth culture even as older demographics have begun to gravitate toward them (Boyd, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Though they are used primarily as spaces to establish new interpersonal ties and reinforce existing ones, SNSs have recently proven effective for disseminating political messages and calls to action independently of traditional, membership-based civic institutions. Civic applications of social networking are especially pronounced among young adults: nearly a third of the 18-29 age group reports using SNSs for political purposes (Smith & Rainie, 2008). These civic uses include identifying friends' political interests, receiving candidate information, joining political groups, and organizing offline political events.

In 2008, it is not surprising that political SNS uses associated with the election drew considerable popular and scholarly attention. Obama's comparative mastery of online networking was in full evidence throughout the campaign. By election day in November, 2008, over two million Americans had signed up for Facebook groups supporting Obama, while only 600,000 had done so for McCain (Fraser & Dutta, 2008). Obama's home-grown social network platform, MyBarackObama, starkly outperformed its counterpart McCainSpace in terms of both audience size and range of available user affordances (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008). Obama raised far more money than McCain through social-network-based outreach to small donors (Weisel, 2008), and used his larger

supporter database to mobilize canvassing, phone-banking, and in-person networking efforts.

In addition to their efficacy in helping presidential candidates get elected, SNSs are also widely used by other political actors who operate largely in opposition to formal governmental and corporate structures. Social networking technologies are critical tools in the modern antiwar and anti-globalization movements (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Breunig, & Givens, 2008), which rely on them to recruit and engage interested individuals. Facebook in particular has been used to organize offline protests against powerful interests around the world, including governments in the United States, Myanmar, Colombia, Egypt, South Africa, and Iran.

In much the same fashion, less overtly political protests have deployed the instrumentalities of social networks to attempt to convince political and economic elites to address their concerns. The user communities of Facebook, World of Warcraft, and Second Life have organized online protests and petitions against the parent companies of these services in response to unpopular changes in functionality (Earl & Schussman, 2008; Ondrejka, 2005; Rogers, 2008). While this network activity may resemble traditional consumer pressure movements more than street-storming political activism, the participatory logics that power are similar. Consistent with this, Earl and Schussman (2008) argue that network-based attempts by fans to petition media corporations may help young people develop *repertoires of contention* that inform future attitudes toward civic engagement.

## Civic Gaming

One of the frontiers in online youth engagement research evaluates the potential of virtual environments to help young people learn and practice civic skills. The burgeoning literature in this area addresses the civic potential of both commercial games and more topic-specific *civic games*. The available data on young people's gaming reveals the breadth of the potential audience for these approaches. A recent survey found youth gaming a nearly universal phenomenon, with 97% of respondents aged 12 to 17 reporting playing some form of video game (Lenhart et al., 2008). Most promisingly, this study empirically identifies a set of *civic gaming experiences*—incorporating Jenkins' (2006) participatory skills of play, performance, and simulation—that predict youth civic engagement in the offline world. These experiences include helping other players, interacting with a social issue within the context of the game, making decisions about how a community or society should be run, and organizing groups of players in multiplayer games (Lenhart et al., 2008).

*The Sims Online* and *Second Life* are two examples of for-profit multiplayer gaming environments that were not constructed with civic intentions in mind, but

which present players with meaningful civic opportunities (Gordon & Koo, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; Joseph, 2008; Ondrejka, 2008). Jenkins (2008) shows how residents of Alphaville, a virtual city within *The Sims Online*, addressed their virtual social problems (including prostitution, organized crime, and fraud) through democratic processes closely modeled after their offline equivalents. Ondrejka (2008) takes this argument a step further, contending that *Second Life* should not be considered a game at all, but a "virtual world" distinguished principally by "the ability of residents to generate creations of value within a shared, simulated, 3D space" (p. 231). Thus far, these collaborations have included virtual summer camps for discussing global issues (Joseph, 2008), peer-to-peer teaching of the scripting skills necessary to create *Second Life* objects (Ondrejka, 2008), and simulacra of real-world spaces in which citizens deliberate about the use of the actual spaces (Gordon & Koo, 2008).

The finding that electronic gameplay can yield substantial civic dividends has inspired some civic practitioners and educators to partner with game designers to produce specialized civic games with explicitly pedagogical purposes. They are intended to apply young people's gaming instincts to learn about and brainstorm solutions to specific social and political issues including poverty (Ayiti; see Joseph, 2008), immigration law (ICED: I Can End Deportation), peak oil (World Without Oil), and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Hurricane Katrina: Tempest in Crescent City). Future research can profitably focus on identifying the skills and/or knowledge gains resulting from playing civic games and who is most likely to benefit.

## **The Limits of Participatory Civic Media Cultures**

The foregoing profiles of three relatively new forms of youth-oriented mediated civic engagement do not exhaust the universe of possible civic participatory cultures. Rather, they illustrate some of the most common patterns of civic action built upon networks of loose, Interest-based ties. The rise in online video as a political information source reflects an increasing willingness on the part of youth to actively seek out, attend to, and share civic content they perceive as personally relevant or interesting. The use of social networking web sites as distribution channels for traditional and peer-to-peer political messages, ideology-broadcasting, and action alerts illustrates how profit-driven networks can be repurposed to civic ends. Civic gaming is an even more dramatic instance of this process, given the ostensibly frivolous character of video games; it is precisely their lack of explicit connection to the "real" world that makes them attractive environments for the performance and simulation of civic behavior.

Despite the dramatic rise in use of these new forms of media, the potential of mediated civic participatory culture is neither fully realized nor evenly distributed. Two key limiting factors bear mentioning. First, despite the

conventional wisdom that young people are *digital natives* with a seemingly inborn understanding of participatory media (Bauerlein, 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2009), not all of them possess the skills necessary to utilize the vast array of digital tools available to them (Hargittai, 2005; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Thus, the need for formal training in participatory media skills has recently emerged on the scholarly agenda (Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2008). Second, participatory skills are too often the exclusive province of an empowered and self-selected elite. This problem is exacerbated by one of the fundamental characteristics of user-generated content—namely that it tends to follow power-law distributions; a minority of participants produce the vast majority of contributions and receive correspondingly disproportionate attention (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Fisher, Smith, & Welser, 2006; Shirky, 2003).

An important implication is that young citizens need training and opportunities to experiment with online civic participation. Solving the problem of unequal attention means creating online civic experiences that both make sense to a broad range of first-time users and provide motivating feedback (Levine, 2008). In recognition of the need to broaden the civic experience online, there has been rapid growth in sites aimed at engaging young citizens in formal political activities (Montgomery et al., 2004). However, it appears that relatively few offer clear opportunities to learn general civic participation skills beyond joining a particular online community (Bachen et al., 2008). Indeed, there is little in the way of clear conceptualization of what kinds of civic skills various online media sites can offer to young users, and how those skills are best presented.

To begin addressing these problems, researchers at the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement (CCCE) recently completed a study of 90 of North America's most-trafficked youth civic engagement web sites. The aims of this study were: first, to develop definitions and distinct measures of civic learning opportunities that may be learned in online communities; second, to associate civic skills learning with Actualizing and Dutiful citizenship types; and third, to map the distribution of those civic learning opportunities across different kinds of sites in the existing youth civic web sphere.

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## Civic Learning and Citizenship Styles in the Youth Civic Web

Young people have in fact begun to take advantage of many online civic opportunities, but these opportunities are not equally prevalent, comprehensible, or interesting to various elements of their target audiences. As the foregoing discussion has shown, civic action can manifest in a wide variety of contexts, from

online games, such as World of Warcraft, to SNSs like Facebook, to web sites created with the express aim of fostering youth engagement such as Youth Noise and TakingITGlobal. Youth Noise is a lively U.S. site with over 100,000 users who discuss various issues and share videos that range from personal life stories to global problems. TakingIT Global is a large online community with users around the world who receive alerts about issues, create profiles, and post actions that they have taken to address problems. Assessing the range of civic learning opportunities online is simplified by focusing on the more explicitly civic sites, which represent a wide array of opportunities for youth to become involved and express themselves on topics such as voting, environmental protection, community service, climate change, and gay rights. Although SNSs like Facebook and MySpace do engage youth in occasional episodes of civic participation, the critical design choices underlying those sites do not communicate clear conceptions of citizenship, nor are they concerned with developing the civic skills of users. By contrast, sites that embrace explicitly civic missions are more likely to offer clearer conceptions of citizenship and civic skills. The question is: What sorts of civic skills are available to members of online communities, and how do they compare to the more formal skills found in civic education programs in schools?

## **Developing a Typology of Civic Learning Online**

Our approach to developing measures of civic learning that might be identified in different online civic youth environments began with a review of the literature on civic learning in schools. From this we derived four general categories considered essential to civic education: *knowledge*, which citizens need to inform their civic decisions; *expression*, skills needed to make one's voice heard; skills for *joining publics* to amplify one's own voice and pursue collective action around issues of common concern; and skills to *take action* (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Pasek et al., 2008; Syvertsen et al., 2007). A more detailed discussion of this typology and its origins can be found in Bennett et al. (2009) and further explication of some of these issues in Haste and in Torney-Purta, et al. (this volume).

It is clear that each of these broad categories of civic learning may contain some skills more likely to appeal to Dutiful Citizens, while other aspects of learning in the same category may better engage Actualizing Citizens (Bennett, 2007; 2008). For example, knowledge may be delivered through one-way authoritative channels such as teachers, textbooks, or news reports, consistent with a DC citizen style oriented to external authorities and hierarchical relationships. Alternately, knowledge may be derived through shared peer accounts and original experiences more compatible with a personally expressive and socially networked AC style. Of course, both approaches to acquiring knowledge may be combined with salutary results. For example, research in civic education suggests that



learning outcomes are enhanced when students have the opportunity to define and lead class activities, discussion, and decision-making (Campbell, 2005; Pasek et al., 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002). When no such participatory activities are available, student interest in civic participation is often reduced (Syvertsen et al., 2007). We suggest that this is because more traditional, top-down education methods focus almost exclusively on DC skills and orientations that are less likely to provide for the peer knowledge sharing and networking preferences of AC citizens.

Drawing on this background framework, we developed measures to assess the forms of civic learning available to users of different web sites in our sample of the youth civic web. Specifically, each general category of learning (knowledge, expression, joining, and acting) could manifest in both Dutiful and Actualizing forms. Thus, sites that tell their users what they should know about an issue are offering a DC learning opportunity to acquire knowledge, whereas sites that enable users to cite their own sources of information or share their own experiences are offering an AC opportunity to acquire information. Just as effective classrooms may combine both AC (participatory) and DC (top-down) learning, so many youth engagement sites combine both types of learning. This analytical framework, with the definitions of all eight forms of learning, is displayed in Table 15.2.

**Table 15.2 Dutiful and Actualizing Forms of the Four Learning Goals [Ch15T02]**

The leftmost column of Table 15.2 lists the four general categories of learning, as derived from the literature on civic education. We have not included here a fifth general category found in the literature: political orientations such as trust, legitimacy, confidence in institutions, and efficacy, among others. The reason is that these cannot be identified as direct learning opportunities on web sites, but are more likely to be the result of the quality of learning and resulting civic practice (see Beaumont, this volume). To the right of each of our four learning categories is a general definition. In the third and fourth columns, each category of learning is divided into its two forms: Dutiful and Actualizing. For example, within the Knowledge category, we defined information that was provided by the site or other authorities and represented as something visitors should learn as appealing to the Dutiful citizen, while information that was generated and shared among peers is more appealing to the Actualizing type. Similarly, within Take Action, actions specified and recommended by the site or authorities were defined as Dutiful, while those suggested or reported by site users are classified as Actualizing.

## Sampling the Youth Civic Web Sphere

We applied this civic learning framework to a broad range of youth sites that could be regarded as having an explicitly civic mission, whether recruiting new members to interest organizations or providing spaces for sharing videos and blog posts on matters of concern to adolescents. The sphere of explicitly youth oriented civic engagement sites includes a wide variety of sites that vary by their owners' affiliations (e.g., party, NGO, government, foundation, independent youth activists) and their related conceptions of citizenship, engagement, and democracy (Coleman, 2008). To build our sample, we reviewed literature containing inventories of youth civic sites (Montgomery et al., 2004; Bennett & Xenos, 2004, 2005) and supplemented it with targeted searches, resulting in the identification of 264 primarily U.S. youth civic web sites that were active in May 2008. In order to assess whether different types of organizations differed in models of citizenship and civic learning opportunities they offered users, we sorted the sites into four categories: Online Only sites, which lack offline civic infrastructures (e.g., TakingITGlobal, Idealist.org, Youthnoise); the web sites of government agencies and the major 2008 presidential candidates (e.g., Peace Corps, EPA's youth page, Barack Obama's election site); Community/Service organizations, which emphasize youth leadership and character development (e.g., YMCA, Key Club, and 4H); and Interest/Activist sites, which espouse politically issue oriented movements or causes (e.g., the youth outreach pages of the NRA, Sierra Club, and ACLU). A complete list of sites in our sample is available in our full project report (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2009).

Using compete.com, a popular Internet traffic-measuring tool, we ranked the sites in each category by the amount of traffic they received in the spring of 2008. We adjusted the final sample slightly by replacing the web sites of national-level organizations with randomly selected local affiliates (e.g., we used a North Carolina chapter of 4H rather than the national organization). We also weighted the sample to include 35 Online Only, 15 Government/Candidate, 20 Community/Service, and 20 Interest/Activist sites. The over-sample of online only sites enabled us to include a broader spectrum of this rapidly expanding and diverse sector of the web sphere. The slightly smaller government/candidate subsample reflected the relatively smaller offering of youth sites in this sector. All statistical comparisons were corrected for differences in subsample sizes. These sites were then coded for the types of civic learning described in the last section.

## Measuring Civic Learning in the Youth Engagement Web Sphere

To apply this framework to the web sphere sample, we developed a two-step coding process to avoid confounding the coding decisions for type of civic

learning opportunity (knowledge, expression, joining publics, taking action) with decisions about the citizenship style (AC/DC) expressed by each of those opportunities. In the first step, three coders identified the specific pages on each web site that offered one or more of the four categories of learning. Navigating from the homepage, they investigated each page linked from the site's main menu bars, and searched for any pages containing a general learning opportunity (knowledge, etc.) on each site. This team of coders did not judge whether the opportunity was AC or DC or both. Their catalog of pages that contained some version of each category of learning was then turned over to a different group of coders. These coders applied content analysis codes to each page selected in step one to determine whether a page represented a Dutiful or Actualizing version of the selected learning goal, or whether both forms of the learning goal were present. Each site could be coded as embodying zero or one Dutiful learning opportunity and zero or one Actualizing opportunity for each of the four learning goals. Intercoder reliability for step one was 84.4% overall, and ranged from 82% for Joining Publics to 90% for Take Action; for step two, overall reliability was 91%, and ranged from 78% for the Actualizing knowledge acquisition opportunities to 100% for Dutiful knowledge learning opportunities.

From all 90 sites, our study identified 213 pages on which one or more of the four categories of learning were present, yielding 255 total learning opportunities. The larger number of learning opportunities than pages was due to multiple coding for presence of an AC opportunity, and a DC opportunity. Of the 255 civic learning opportunities in the sample, 194 (76%) were classified as DC, and 61 (24%) were coded as AC, indicating a strong overall trend toward the former.

Figure 15.1 depicts the distribution of DC and AC forms of the four civic learning opportunities across the four site types. The cumulative height of each bar represents the percentage of sites of a given type that was coded as manifesting any form (only AC, only DC, or both) of the learning opportunity in question. The gray segments represent the fraction of this percentage in which the DC opportunity appeared without its AC counterpart. The predominance of DC across all site types and nearly all learning opportunities is evident here, with the sole exception being the Online Only category, which accounts for the vast majority of AC opportunities in the sample—42 out of 61 total AC learning opportunities (and all but one of the 19 web pages in which only Actualizing opportunities occurred). This means that roughly two-thirds of the learning opportunities appealing to actualizing civic styles were concentrated in online only site types that comprised just over one third of our sample. When viewed in terms of averages, Online Only sites averaged many more Actualizing opportunities overall (1.2 per site, compared to 0.5 for Government, 0.2 for Community/Service, and 0.4 for Interest/Activist sites).

### **Figure 15.1 Distribution of Civic Learning Opportunities in Four Different Types of Youth Online Communities [Ch15F01]**

Despite containing relatively more Actualizing features than the other site categories, Online Only sites are by no means dominated by the AC orientation. As Figure 15.1 also shows, except for the Expression learning goal, Actualizing learning opportunities are most likely to occur alongside Dutiful ones (hence the large *both* bands in most bars) rather than by themselves. And we found relatively few Actualizing opportunities to join publics and take action at all: only 23% of Online Only sites offered Actualizing Joining Publics opportunities, and only 9% offered Actualizing Take Action experiences.

Figure 15.2 offers a closer look at the kinds of learning opportunities offered by Online Only sites, which are far and away the most balanced in terms of matching the learning opportunities to citizen identity styles. The number of Dutiful learning opportunities per site is displayed along the horizontal axis and the number of Actualizing opportunities appears on the vertical axis. This chart reveals considerable diversity in the number of total learning opportunities offered by these sites (roughly, the spread from lower left to upper right), and the number of Dutiful opportunities (left to right spread). Actualizing opportunities, however, are rather concentrated around one and two per site, and 21 of the 35 sites offer more Dutiful learning opportunities than Actualizing (only six offer more of the latter than of the former).

### **Figure 15.2 Balance of Civic Learning in Online Only Youth Communities Arrayed by Number of Actualizing and Dutiful Opportunities (May 2008)[Ch15F02]**

The Online Only group of sites included several exemplary sites that offered very rich arrays of both Dutiful and Actualizing learning opportunities. The five sites at the top right of the chart, Do Something, Campus Activism, Razoo, Youth Noise, and Idealist, were particularly rich, with each one offering three or four Actualizing learning opportunities and two or three Dutiful ones. What set these sites apart? First, it is worth noting the participatory latitude that all five grant to users: Except for Campus Activism, which was a sort of clearinghouse for young activists to post information on campaigns, organizations, and contact information, all of the sites were built on a social networking model. They offered users ways of connecting with social issues on individually defined terms and ample opportunity for individual identity expression, for example, through customizable profiles for themselves and personal friend networks. At the same time, through structure, tone, and content, each of the sites also offered more conventional, Dutiful learning, often in the form of pages with information about specific social issues and suggestions about actions to take to get involved. (For a

more thorough exploration of the theory, methods, and implications of this research, see Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2009.)

## The Current State of the Youth Civic Web

Our results indicate that the youth civic web in 2008 hosted an impressive collection of civic learning opportunities. However, the inescapable conclusion is that the online world we observed tended to mirror the school environment in the overall dominance of the Dutiful citizenship model. This likely reflected the generational differences of those who develop school curricula and sponsor online youth sites. Only an exemplary subset of the five Online Only sites noted above appeared to have struck a critical balance between AC and DC, offering young visitors government- and issue-centered civic content alongside interactive opportunities to publicly develop their own understandings of what *civic* means. However, the sites outside the Online Only category tended to resemble K–12 civic curricula content-wise, focusing heavily on DC at the expense of AC. In particular, it seemed likely that many of the major youth civic, service, and interest-based organizations were straightforwardly transferring their offline work and organizational models onto their web sites without taking advantage of the participatory qualities of digitally networked media. We saw this reflected in the ways our four learning categories were presented on their sites: Knowledge was typically presented in terms of information users should absorb rather than create; training to help users Express themselves was rare; where there were opportunities for Joining Publics, they tended to be chances to join the sponsoring organization or predefined chapters, not define and start new groups; and ways of Taking Action were almost always prescribed by the site (and often were simply invitations to contribute financially).

Our findings are similar to those from a survey of the youth civic web sites of seven European countries. The CIVICWEB project analyzed a European sample of youth web sites very comparable to our (mainly) American one, and included sites with diverse organizational backgrounds and approaches. When it came to the use of interactivity as a tool for fostering youth engagement, the researchers found both that overall rates of interactivity were quite low and that “those groups without offline organizational presences are more likely both to promote online participation of some kind and to use bottom-up interactive modes of communication” (Bognar & Aydemir, 2007, p. 136). The authors describe the sites with offline presences as often little more than “leaflet[s] and brochure[s]” for their organizations—a comment reminiscent of our own observations of the American cases. And they similarly conclude that those organizations are to some degree failing to comprehend both their audiences and the possibilities of the new medium, choosing instead to use the Web in a way that “does not differ essentially from the way mass communication functions” (Bognar & Aydemir, 2007, p. 136).

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# Policy Implications for Developing Online Youth Communities

That similarly limited civic learning opportunities appear in youth sites in both North America and Europe—across countries with very different political and civic structures and cultures—speaks to an apparently powerful inertia preventing many sponsoring civic organizations from productively deploying social networking and participatory media affordances for youth. Further investigation into this pattern would be valuable, and might help to pinpoint the role of factors such as organizational unwillingness and inability to invest financially in interactive tools; fears of losing physical participants to online activities; fears about the content that unsupervised young people might produce; and, possibly, an age gap reflecting different (AC and DC) citizenship styles between the directors (and funders) of offline organizations and their younger constituents in the online-only world.

Whatever the causes of the underutilization of digital media technologies in most online youth communities, organizations around the world would benefit from expanding their visions of what youth can do and learn. As explained above, adolescents' identities are now less defined by membership in conventional parties, community and interest organizations, and more oriented toward expression and information gathering in personal networks. Considerable evidence from the field of civic education suggests that there is resistance from students to learning modes that define civic information and activities exclusively in DC terms. All of this might encourage educational policy makers, along with the managers of community groups and designers of online environments, to think about ways in which their missions might be better translated for an expressive and heavily networked generation.

However, policy-makers and developers should not conclude from this essay that the ideal approach to online civic learning is simply to turn young people loose in unmoderated environments. Whether the learning environment is the classroom or the online community, civic skills must be actively cultivated to some degree in order to flourish. Some balance between Dutiful and Actualizing modes is desirable, as exemplified on sites such as YouthNoise and Idealist, where Dutiful learning opportunities seem to add structure and context to more Actualizing ones. The question is how to design online civic environments that foster the conditions (and offer the skill-building) necessary for participatory civic learning, while creating spaces to let young people freely and publicly exercise newfound skills. It is clear from examining the development of online communities guided by broader frameworks of civic learning that young people see few boundaries between the personal and the political. Further, resulting

forms of expression easily cross boundaries between personal and public issues. The well-meaning aims of many older policy makers and online developers may miss the importance that young citizens place on self-expression in rich media environments. It is worth noting, for example, that none of the videos produced by either of the presidential campaigns in 2008 came close to the levels of spontaneous viewing and viral sharing gained by a number of independently produced videos.

The availability of autonomous, unmanaged experience is the quality most important for achieving authenticity in the view of young visitors to online environments (Coleman, 2008). The key challenge for those designing such environments is to find ways to build in learning opportunities (from information search functions to digital storytelling guides) without overly managing the ways in which site visitors can use them. Coleman (2008) offers a rich set of policy guidelines encouraging governments, foundations, and nonprofits to create partnerships with younger citizens online that do not involve overly managing the content and activities that may characterize the resulting youth communities.

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## Conclusion

Adolescents and young adults' media orientations are clearly changing. Above all, conventional news and passive mass media consumption are on the wane. At the same time, other participatory forms of direct information sharing and production are on the rise. The use of online sources to get and share information directly seems well established in research on media use in the American election of 2008. The implications of this shift in media engagement will require reflection on and adjustment of our frameworks for understanding the nature of engagement. For example, young people seem inclined to share information that is directly related to action opportunities. This is an important departure from more conventional practices dating from the progressive era of the twentieth century—practices that include receiving independent information from authoritative gatekeepers such as the press, perhaps filtering the information through cues received from civic groups and political organizations, and then connecting the results to individual action at some later point. In the crowd-sourced and socially networked information-action scheme that fits the preferences of Actualizing citizens, information may be shaped by consumers as it is passed along networks. In the process, conventional lines between hard news, soft news, and entertainment genres are blurring as the gate-keeping process itself moves along more fluid networks of trusting relationships among peers. These changing media experiences may produce higher levels of engagement across a broader variety of issues and arenas of action. However, they may not boost scores on classic political information tests, which are based in models of Dutiful

citizenship anchored in assumptions about the role of news media in the dissemination of public information.

As mediated public communication is changing, it is important to rethink some of the civic skills that young citizens need in order to participate effectively in this new media environment. Our work on expanding the definitions of basic civic learning to match changing civic styles and media systems suggests that every category of conventional civic learning can be expanded. For example, there may be no substitute for some level of expert *knowledge* about issues and political processes, but this information is likely to be assimilated more effectively if circulated in a context where it can be assembled and organized along with accounts of personal experiences and using a range of sources. Similarly, some standard means of *public expression* such as writing letters or petitions or debating issues may gain credibility if supplemented by digital public voice skills such as blogging, multi-media storytelling, and the uses of wikis and other networked and crowd-sourced forms of public expression. When it comes to *joining groups*, many young people prefer more loosely tied affiliation to formal memberships. This is a clear point of friction for many of the organizations that have attempted to join the online world by simply reproducing their conventional organizations in web sites. By contrast, the sites that exist only in online forms offer more opportunities for young people to create their own associational networks with fewer constraints imposed by memberships and hierarchical relationships. Likewise in the areas of acquiring the skills necessary to *take effective action*, online environments can offer young people chances to plan and execute their own political activities. Yet, few online youth communities seem able to break free from the inclination to manage and program the activities of young citizens, suggesting the lingering influence of the dutiful citizen paradigm on the part of those adults who fund and manage most sites.

Perhaps it is not surprising that when the civic world moves online, many of the trappings of dutiful citizenship move with it, often pushing the rich possibilities of participatory media and social networking technologies to the margins. At the same time, it is clear that those communities that exist only in online forms come closest to utilizing the digital media experiences that young people find appealing in personal and entertainment environments. Participatory civic learning experiences occur predominantly in the online only youth communities. These public networking sites offer examples of where the youth civic media sphere might continue to develop with greater appeal to younger people. While it seems that few of these sites are likely to outpace Facebook in popularity, they might profit from introducing more civic activities that combine the appeal of personalization with the power of social networking.

This online civic world also offers places for teachers and civics curricula to explore in expanding the reach of classroom learning. Many schools are firewalled out of fears of Internet predators or students spending time on their



social networking sites when not being monitored. Yet, as the lines between the personal and the political become less meaningful for young people, perhaps our conceptions of what is civic may need to change as well.

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