

Title: Participation in the Youth Civic Web: Assessing User Activity Levels in Websites Presenting Two Civic Styles

Running head: Participation in the youth civic web

Abstract

Concerns over youth disengagement from conventional politics mixed with perceptions of youth aptitude for digital media have led scholars and practitioners to investigate civic websites as locations of potential youth learning and participation. Over the past few years, the scholarly literature on youth civic websites has developed a number of conceptual vocabularies for, and catalogued the nature of, the civic engagement opportunities offered by such sites. But the extant literature lacks documentation of a critically important step in this research logic: the extent to which young users actually take advantage of the opportunities offered them. This study addresses this gap by presenting a theoretically-driven investigation of specific participatory features in the youth civic web and the quantity of user contributions they attract. Drawing from untested assumptions found in recent work, we test hypotheses concerning the impact on user activity of (1) citizenship orientations communicated by sites; and (2) the organizational background of sites. We find that how sites communicate citizenship plays a significant role in determining the quantity of user participation, while the type of organization sponsoring a site makes little difference. We also document the existence of certain "superstar" sites that attract disproportionate amounts of user content. Directions for future research and methodological issues related to the coding of diverse activity on complex sites and challenges to causal inference are also discussed.

Introduction

Recent research on youth civic engagement has emphasized two developments that encourage optimism about youth engagement: the emergence of a distinctive civic orientation or citizenship style among recent generations of citizens that sets them apart from previous generations (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2009; Inglehart, 1997); and the fact that many young people have an affinity for digital communication tools and creative uses of digital media for civic participation (Xenos & Foot, 2008). In response, recent scholarly and practitioner activity has explored ways that digital media might be used to connect young people to politics (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans, 2009). We propose that a key to developing the theory and practice of how civic media engage youth is to recognize the distinct citizenship styles of many young people, and explore how civic cues embedded in participatory media interact with those styles.

Whether or not they are designed with explicit understanding of the range of civic styles emerging in society, youth civic websites are common across the English-speaking Web (Bennett et al., 2011; Bachen et al., 2008; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). These online environments differ in terms of both organizational provenance (e.g., radical activists, conventional interest groups, parties, campaigns and governments) and institutional support (ranging from simple low budget websites to social networking environments designed by full-time programmers and funded by major foundations). They also have attracted attention from a range of scholars interested in understanding their likely impacts on youth engagement (e.g., Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee & Philippi, 2008; Gerodimos, 2008; Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004).

However, somewhat surprisingly, few analyses have documented the extent to which young people actually make use of the civic affordances offered them online. Prior work has focused on inventories of extant sites and their features (Montgomery et al., 2004), the pedagogies they employ (Bachen et al., 2008), or the civic orientation they present (Bennett et al., 2011), and often make assumptions about what types of content will be most attractive to youth. But no extant studies have provided empirical evidence about whether and how these characteristics matter to actual user participation. In this article, we present data able to test some of the most prominent assumptions in the

contemporary literature. We begin by grounding our investigation of youth civic sites in a theory of changing civic styles that may be communicated by different engagement platforms, then turn to our study of 83 youth civic websites.

Contemporary youth civic engagement

The overarching theme of work on youth civic participation is *change*: both long term decline and signs of possible resurgence. Long term patterns of declining civic participation are often traced to the fragmentation of the civil society (political parties, labor unions and membership groups) that structured and defined civic participation through much of the 20th century. In this ‘high modern’ period, the ideal citizenship orientation involved a broadly shared sense of *duty* to consume civic information and participate in civic affairs (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Coleman, 2008; Dalton, 2009).

Over the last several decades, converging trends have undermined this dominant ethos of the modern era. These include: the restructuring of societies and economies on a networked, global basis (Castells, 1996; Rainie & Wellman, 2012); declining membership in civic institutions (Putnam, 2000); waning interest in government and traditional news (Wattenberg, 2008); and an ever-expanding media menu (Baym, 2010; Patterson, 2007; Prior, 2007). These changes have affected how younger citizens relate to the political world and to the information needed to participate, suggesting a moment of historic change. As Zukin and colleagues (2006) observe, different generations have experienced radically different formative periods with respect to politics and media, which has led to a generational divide in terms of how citizens understand their relationship to government and civic communication—a divide that is evident in debates over young people’s preparedness for democratic citizenship (Bennett et al., 2009; Zukin et al., 2006). To briefly summarize, young people are often cited for their relative lack of interest in government affairs, traditional news, and participation in brick and mortar organizations—with the exception of some kinds of volunteering (Bennett, 2008; Patterson, 2007; Pew, 2007; Wattenberg, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006).

But today’s youth are not completely disengaged from politics and civics. Broadly speaking, younger citizens have demonstrated an interest in a set of civic practices based on individual rather than collective priorities. Such activities often emphasize lifestyle

values and self-expression, and include political consumerism, boycotts, political comedy, self-organizing protests, and discussing politics online. This distinctive civic orientation has accrued a number of scholarly names: *life politics* (Giddens, 1991), the *politics of everyday life* (Gerodimos, 2008), *sub-politics* (Beck, 1997), *actualizing citizenship* (Bennett, 2008), and *postmaterialist politics* (Inglehart, 1997). These are forms of civic activity distinguished by their avoidance of major institutions, emphasis on individual identity construction and expression, and a less formalized, often networked, structure.

On top of these patterns in youth participation, which were solidly underway before the digital revolution, many scholars have found that digital communication platforms can facilitate vibrant forms of civic expression. Social networking sites are a prime example: in 2012, 44% of the 18-29 age group reported using such sites to promote or endorse political material (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). Video gaming, a nearly universal activity among young people (Kahne et al., 2009), has been studied as a site of both social capital (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) and civic engagement (Raphael, Bachen, Lynn, Baldwin-Philippi, & McKee, 2010). And many youth apply civic activities like petitions to decidedly non-civic ends such as music, television, and video games (Earl & Schussman, 2008). All of these phenomena represent different *participatory cultures* (Jenkins, 2006) that have emerged around various social technological platforms that youth have embraced.

Bennett (2008) offers a synthesis of these trends in changing civic orientations and affinities for digital media. Terming the civic-communication preferences of older citizens rooted in modernist conceptions of citizenship, media and society “dutiful,” he uses the term “actualizing” to refer to the emerging patterns observed among younger people, and notes that many of the patterns of communication and engagement available through the Internet and other digital media may offer opportunities uniquely attractive to young actualizing citizens. More than anything, these spaces offer a variety of ways for young citizens to *express* civic identities unconstrained by party or other labels. And the information sharing, commenting, remixing, and creation prevalent in digital media all represent actions potentially outside the conventional, dutiful, realm of civic activity that can be enacted by people more inclined to an actualizing approach to citizenship

(Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010).

The key idea here is that in our particular moment, two *civic styles* are operating simultaneously. As we have described, each style consists of a general orientation toward political life, and a corresponding set of preferences for interacting with it. The parallel existence of the two styles, and their generational characters, may help to explain the disaffection from politics many young people have demonstrated over the past several decades: young people with more actualizing preferences may fail to find fulfillment in a political and media world still largely communicating a dutiful model of public life. This observation, of course, invites the questions of the degree to which emerging forms of youth-directed civic communication—such as youth civic websites—embrace the actualizing style, and whether young people respond to those communications with deepening engagement.

Theorizing the engagement potential of youth civic websites

Experimental research on audience use of political and civic websites has consistently shown that they can influence individual opinions and intention to participate (Parkin, 2012; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Tedesco, 2007). This finding helps justify our interest in websites specifically aimed at offering civic engagement opportunities to young people, which have flourished in recent years (Tapia & Ortiz, 2010). Not far behind have been scholars wishing to understand what kinds of civic opportunities such sites offer youth, analyzing their successes and failures and, most of all, assessing what potential they hold for engaging the otherwise disengaged (e.g., Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson, & Kurpius, 2008). In an early and pathbreaking summary of youth civic sites, Montgomery et al. (2004) chronicled a diverse online youth civic sector populated by government agencies, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and businesses. The authors inductively identified ten categories of civic activity promoted by these sites.

One area of particular interest for subsequent scholars has been the types of communication and opportunities civic websites offer. Much of this work has centered on some version of *interactivity* or *participation*: the extent to which the opportunities on civic websites invite genuine youth participation, as opposed to offering instruction—

more along the lines of a school textbook. For instance, investigating the UK youth civic web sector, Gerodimos (2008) found most government-operated sites to be civically unfocused and relatively non-interactive, whereas NGO-sponsored sites offered clear engagement goals packaged in youth-focused formats. Considering a similar sample with a qualitative method, Coleman (2008) argued that government-organized sites appear stilted and excessively “managed” to young citizens seeking an interactive and “autonomous” experience. And Wells (2010) demonstrated a connection between Coleman’s (2008) notions of communication style and Bennett’s (2008) dutiful and actualizing civic styles by showing that sites that heavily controlled users’ experiences tended to emphasize traditional “dutiful” civic skills, while those that granted users more expressive latitude also promoted a more expansive view of the nature of citizenship that included more “actualizing” opportunities.

Bachen and colleagues (2008) added conceptual texture to this conversation with a feature analysis of 73 youth civic sites from the United States. In particular, those authors highlighted the importance of distinguishing *interactive features*, which are simply technical affordances such as blogs and message boards, and substantive *pedagogical strategies* intended to teach young people how to act in civic ways. They found that nonprofit sites tended to offer more of these “active pedagogies” than both for-profit and government sites, but for-profit sites were the richest of the three categories in interactive features (Bachen et al., 2008).

In a previous study, we worked to advance this conversation by adding a theoretically-grounded conceptualization of young people’s civic preferences, and organizations’ civic communications (Bennett et al., 2011). That study contrasted two modes in which engagement opportunities are presented to young people: a *dutiful* mode, in which the engagement opportunities are presented as authoritative information for dutiful young citizens to study and follow; and an *actualizing* mode, in which engagement opportunities are interactive and encourage actualizing young people to define and evaluate civic activities that hold meaning for them. The study did not seek to distinguish between dutiful and actualizing activities directly, but between how engagement activities were presented: as instructions from an authoritative source (the site), or as the product of interaction and sharing on the part of users. We hypothesized

that although younger citizens would be more attracted to the actualizing style, many civic organizations—because of long institutional memories and an older generational identity of organizational leaders—would remain rooted in a dutiful style of engagement. And we tested the latter proposition, confirming that online-only projects (generally not affiliated with preexisting organizations) indeed offered more opportunities for engagement in an actualizing mode than sites operated by established offline organizations in which engagement was communicated in overwhelmingly dutiful terms (Bennett et al., 2011). In the present research, we intend to test the former, crucial proposition that actualizing modes of presenting engagement opportunities are more likely to attract engagement among the users of youth sites.

Assumptions and hypotheses

Although each of the studies described above draws on an arsenal of literature demonstrating that young people *should* prefer civic opportunities offered in an autonomous/interactive/pedagogically-rich/actualizing style, no research has yet demonstrated that this is actually the case. Further, what sparse research there has been on youth reaction to online communications suggests the need for caution in assuming too much: Livingstone (2007) revealed a large interpretation gap between site producers and their audiences through interviews with young people as they browsed a youth civic web site showing perceptions of inspires young people online may vague and poorly implemented. Going further, Freelon (2011) showed that the engagement styles of online affordances can be highly consequential: even within a single website the nature of control inscribed in different sections can condition the kinds of conversations participants hold.

A more rigorous analysis of participants' actual engagements with online sites is an important next step in developing theory. We adapt the dutiful-actualizing framework to test the hypothesis that presenting engagement opportunities in an actualizing mode *will lead to greater participation rates among young users*. That is, we expect to see increased youth activity on sites offering engagement opportunities in an actualizing style, and relatively less activity on sites dominated by a dutiful style. This yields Hypothesis 1:

- H1: Sites that present an actualizing style of civic engagement will receive more user contributions than those that present only a dutiful style of engagement.

In addition to this crucial test of the engagement style presented by civic sites, the literature has consistently attributed differing communication approaches to sites of different kinds of organizations. In light of the somewhat scattered findings about how organizational type impacts online offerings, we offer Hypotheses 2 and 3. Specifically, while we earlier found that it was an organization's newness and online-only presence that made sites likely to offer appealing interactive opportunities (Bennett et al., 2011), others have found that the real difference lies between nonprofit sites and commercial or government-oriented sites (Bachen et al., 2008; Coleman, 2008; Gerodimos, 2008). H2 and H3 may help us sort out these differences and reveal patterns of how different types of organizations interact with constituents through participatory media.

- H2: Online-only sites will contain more user contributions than sites sponsored by organizations based offline.
- H3: Nonprofit sites will contain more user contributions than government or party sponsored sites.

Methods

The methods for this study consisted of three components, each based in content analysis: identifying and categorizing a sample of youth civic engagement-based websites; determining the extent to which each site offered engagement in an actualizing, versus dutiful, form; and measuring the quantity of user contributions on each site. We use content analysis in order to quantify actually existing patterns of youth engagement as revealed through publicly available digital traces. Our goal is to offer an organized impression of how young people are engaging with the digital resources being marketed specifically to them. We thus intentionally forgo some of the rigor of alternative methodological approaches such as experimentation, which might be able to better establish the causes of engagement. Instead, we benefit from the ability to observe

unobtrusively a wide variety of online civic engagement activities, several of which have not yet been empirically documented.

Sample and organizational categories

We drew a sample of 90 websites devoted to promoting citizenship among young people—often referred to as the “youth civic web sphere.” The process was to develop a corpus of sites dedicated to engaging youth in civic or political life, broadly defined, then select the most-trafficked sites within four organizational types likely to offer engagement opportunities to young people. In order to meet our criteria for involving young people in civic or political life, a site had to specifically mention young people or a correlate (e.g. students, youth) and describe how it was attempting to advance citizenship, connect people with politics or community or advance a political cause or candidacy.

The corpus was developed from sites identified in previous studies, including Montgomery et al. (2004), Bennett and Xenos (2004, 2005; Xenos & Bennett, 2007) and Wells (2010); searches for sites based on a list of major American NGOs; and original Google searches on an array of civic and political terms. In all, 264 live youth engagement websites were identified and were categorized into four groups: *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* sites, which emphasize local youth leadership and character development (e.g., YMCA, Key Club, and 4H); and *Activist* sites, which work to mobilize young people on behalf of specific political movements or causes (e.g., the youth outreach pages of the NRA, Sierra Club, and ACLU). Partitioning the data in this way allowed us to test for differences in both participatory features offered and numbers of user contributions between site types.

Based on rough traffic counts retrieved from compete.com, we selected the most trafficked within each category. We oversampled on Online Only sites to accommodate the variety of sites within that category, selecting 35 of those sites; we sampled only 15 Government/candidate sites, reflecting the relatively lesser richness there; and we sampled 20 sites each from the Community and Activist categories.

During the year between the construction of the original sample and this study,

seven sites from the original sample had ceased operations and were thus dropped. This left a final sample of 83 sites: 34 Online Only, 10 Government/Candidate, 19 Community, and 20 Activist. A complete list of the sites in the sample is available in Appendix A. All analyses below correct for differences in the category sizes.

Dutiful and actualizing presentation of engagement

To determine the extent to which each site presented engagement opportunities in line with dutiful citizenship (DC), actualizing citizenship (AC), or both, we followed a two-step coding process. This was necessary to reduce the complexity of often enormous websites into manageable coding tasks (Weare & Lin, 2000). Our strategy aimed to identify key areas of the site that were rich in engagement opportunities of different sorts and were likely to be highly visited by site users. First, a team of coders identified specific sections of the site within one link of the homepage in which four key types of civic engagement were encouraged. These four types were drawn from an extensive review of civic education literature, and included Knowledge, Expression, Joining Publics and Taking Action (Bennett et al, 2011; Gibson & Levine, 2003); second, another team assessed each site section for the presence of DC and AC versions of each type of engagement (Bennett et al., 2011).

The operational definitions of AC and DC engagement presentation were in line with the theory described above: encouragement of young users to engage in expressive and personally-defining approaches to the four learning areas was considered AC; didactic and authoritative instruction in what was important about each area was considered DC. For example, when it came to offering Action opportunities, sites often offered a link to a page with a name like ‘Take Action,’ or ‘Projects’ or ‘Get involved.’ Each of these could take a dutiful form, an actualizing form, or both:

- On Students for a Free Tibet’s ‘Take Action’ page, the group offers links suggesting that users “Start a Chapter” or “Become an Individual Member.” These were considered dutiful because they were encouragements for supporters to take action in a way prescribed by the site.
- DoSomething’s ‘Projects’ page, by contrast, encouraged users to “peruse some great projects for inspiration, go do something great and then post it here. Or, if

you're already doing great things, post away.” This page was coded as actualizing because it encouraged users to learn from peers or suggest actions of their own. It is critical to note that the ability to contribute content to a site was not sufficient to earn a designation of “actualizing”: young people had to be able to post content without prior review. The site Reznetnews, for example, featured a staff of youth bloggers whose voices were no doubt authentic, but did not permit non-staffers to post. We therefore categorized it as containing no actualizing features in spite of its blogging feature. This distinction explains how dutiful sites could contain user-generated content—by proactively restricting who counted as a youth “user.”

Intercoder reliability reached acceptable levels of agreement (well above 80% pairwise percent agreement for all but one element of the coding, which reached 78%). Each site was assigned separate DC and AC scores ranging from 0 to 4 based on whether each of the four engagement types was displayed in a DC mode, an AC mode, or both (Bennett et al., 2011).

Criterion variable: User contributions

To construct a quantitative impression of user participation on each website, we first determined exactly which participatory features each site offered. We searched each site for eight participatory affordances that a pretest found prevalent enough to allow meaningful statistical comparisons between sites. These were: user-created blogs, discussion forums, user-generated groups, opportunities for users to suggest civic actions, and the presence of four common external social media services (Youtube, Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter).

User-created blogs were defined as sections of sites to which discrete entries could be posted in reverse chronological order by registered site users (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008). Discussion forums were site sections whose primary function was to facilitate threaded, topical discussions between users. If a site allowed its users to define and join their own autonomous groups, it was coded as offering user-generated groups. Any feature offering the ability to post a civic action proposal or ongoing project for public feedback was counted as an opportunity to suggest civic action. Finally, we recorded every instance in which a site linked to its own branded

presence on Youtube, Facebook, Myspace, and/or Twitter, termed 'external' features below. Intercoder reliability for the presence of each feature was assessed using a 10% random subsample and all met or exceeded 80% agreement. (Complete codebook available upon request.)

After identifying which sites employed which features, we measured the amount of user activity in each feature. For user blogs, we selected as our unit of analysis individual blog posts; for discussion forums, conversation threads; for user groups, groups; for action suggestion opportunities, described actions; for Youtube, posted videos; For Facebook and Myspace, "friends"; and for Twitter, followers.

Assessing the user activity on the sites was not as straightforward as it may seem: while the external features (Youtube, Facebook, Myspace and Twitter) were manifestly countable and uniform, different functionalities across different types of blogs, forums, groups, and actions made reliable assessment challenging. To address this challenge, we developed a three-step strategy to accommodate the different ways in which user contributions were presented.

We first attempted to manually count all units of analysis falling within the six-month period between October 1, 2008 and March 31, 2009, which we selected to include both election-related and non-electoral civic activity. When this was not possible, for instance, when a blog's posts did not display timestamps, we tried to count the number of units whose most recent dateable elements (e.g., blog comments) fell within the six-month timeframe. Finally, if a section's units lacked date-stamps entirely, all units were counted, either by recording the listed number of units (when available) or manually. If a feature's units could not all be viewed within the same section, the feature was marked as uncountable for that site. (This occurred, for example, when a site's blog posts were not all collected in a single blog section, but were instead only viewable from individual users' profiles.) This decision was made based on the impossibility in some cases of generating a complete list of units of analysis from which a valid tally could be drawn.

For nearly every feature, the data were distributed in highly skewed patterns, as discussed below. In order to make the activity data more comparable across features, and to reduce the potential bias introduced by the varying functionalities on different sites, we

devised a set of feature-specific *civic activity indices* that ranked each feature on each site by the amount of user contributions it received. Each site coded as offering a given feature whose user-contributed content could be measured was placed into one of three scaled categories based on how the volume of its user content ranked relative to other sites possessing that feature. To take forums as an example, sites scoring in the top third of forum threads from among all forum-containing sites were given scaled scores of three, those scoring in the middle third were given two, and those in the bottom third received one. Thus, a site's activity score of three on any feature meant that it ranked in the top third of user activity volume on that feature (see Figure 1). This scaling method allowed us to greatly reduce the distorting impact of our data distributions and the sizable disparities between many of the individual data points.

(Figure 1 about here)

Results

Descriptive statistics

Dutiful and actualizing engagement encouragements were not distributed equally throughout the sample. As previously reported (Bennett et al., 2011), AC engagement was found disproportionately on sites of online-only organizations. On those sites, 48% of engagement opportunities involved at least one AC element. By contrast, AC appeals appeared in only 14% of the engagement presented by government/candidate sites; 12% of that of community sites; and 15% of that of activist sites. (Percentages differ slightly from those reported in our earlier study because of the removal of seven sites that were no longer functional at the time of this study.)

When it came to identifying participatory features, of the 83 sites in the sample, 59 were judged to contain at least one feature, leaving 24 (28%) with no user-contributed content.¹ As displayed in Table 1, among the 59 sites containing at least one feature, we found 13 user action pages, 15 group pages, 17 user blog pages, 18 discussion forums, 33 Youtube channels, 33 Facebook pages, 25 Myspace pages, and 18 Twitter accounts.

¹ Some of these sites contained user-generated content of a type we did not search for, e.g. the ability to post audio files or create personal profiles.

Within these, we were able to count units of analysis within eight of the user action pages (62% of all such pages), nine of the group pages (60%), ten of the user blog pages (59%), and all of the discussion forums, Youtube channels, Facebook pages, Myspace pages and Twitter accounts, leaving a total of 18 uncountable feature pages sample-wide (11% of the entire sample).

(Table 1 about here)

On what kinds of sites did participatory features most occur? Overall, we found that sites containing AC engagement opportunities also tended to contain more opportunities for user contribution. When comparing the prevalence of each feature across sites that contained at least one AC opportunities and those that contained only DC opportunities (every site offered at least one DC opportunity), we find that Some-AC sites contained more instances of all participatory features except Youtube; t-tests revealed the differences to be significant for Facebook and user blogs (at the $p < .05$ level), groups and user actions ($p < .01$), and discussion forums ($p < .001$). This finding comports with our understanding of actualizing citizenship as offering young people more opportunities to express civics in their own terms, and it is not terribly surprising that organizations that are encouraging interaction and participation are providing some features for those activities.

It is also notable that DC sites use ‘external’ services (Youtube, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter) to roughly the same extent as AC sites—suggesting that some sites offering only dutiful engagement opportunities in-house may in fact offer more actualizing experiences in outsourced social media presences.

User-generated content

The quantities of the various units of user-generated content are displayed in Table 2. It is clear that young people are taking at least some advantage of the opportunities offered to them and that they exhibit no overwhelming preference against any of the measured features. The absolute numbers of blog posts, user actions, discussion threads, groups, Facebook and Myspace friends, and Twitter followers show that each feature has amassed

substantial amounts of user-generated content. Though direct comparisons between features are difficult due to differences between the units of analysis (in what sense is a blog post equal to an online group?), it is nonetheless instructive to consider a set of standardized measures of activity that controls for number of feature pages. Dividing each absolute unit count by its corresponding number of countable feature pages generates such a metric. (For instance, Table 2 demonstrates that within the ten blog features we were able to count, we identified 81637 individual blog posts, or 8163.7 posts per blog feature.)

(Table 2 about here)

Looking to the rightmost column of Table 2, all of the unit means number in the thousands except for that of Youtube, which makes intuitive sense as creating a video is a more work-intensive endeavor than posting text. By the same token, a major reason why the means for the social networking services are far higher than the others may be because "friending" a civic site is a relatively low-effort activity.

Test of Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 predicted that sites offering actualizing engagement opportunities would display relatively more user activity than sites communicating only dutiful engagement. For this first test, we have simplified the data by comparing "DC-Only" sites that offered only dutiful engagement opportunities from "AC" sites that offered at least one actualizing opportunity as well as dutiful ones (attesting to the continuing strength of the dutiful citizen ideal). Figure 2 displays the differences, in mean raw (non-scaled) user contributions, between DC-Only sites and AC sites. (Only sites with a given feature were included in this analysis; thus, dutiful sites' tendency to offer fewer participatory features does not reduce their average number of contributions in this chart.)

(Figure 2 about here)

In every case, the AC site mean exceeds its DC-Only equivalent, in some cases by large margins, though the differences are not statistically significant in a t-test. The

reason for this lack of significance in spite of large differences in means is that the variance for every feature is very large. These large variances indicate massively unequal distributions of contributions between sites; in all cases, a minority of sites contained disproportionate amounts of user content, a phenomenon that will be discussed in greater detail below. These imbalances notwithstanding, the differences in user activity between the Some-AC and DC-Only groups do indicate that the former elicits more participation than the latter.

To conduct a test better suited to this distribution of data, we investigated whether possessing *more* AC opportunities was associated with *more* user activity. By assigning numerical scores between 0 and 4 for both AC and DC engagement styles, we created a summative measure of the civic style each site projects: the higher the score, the more AC or DC opportunities each site offered. Similarly, we added together the scaled scores for users' activity in each site's blogs, groups, discussion forums, and user actions, generating a site-specific civic activity index score (as opposed to the feature-specific scores discussed earlier).² (Once again, only sites with a given feature were included in the analysis; thus no sites have scaled scores of 0 simply because they lack a feature.)³

We computed correlations between each site's civic activity index score and its actualizing (AC) and dutiful (DC) score using the Kendall's tau correlation coefficient, which fits the ordinal and non-normal nature of our data. The results show that the scaled user activity score is highly correlated with sites' AC scores (tau = .508, $p < .001$) and unrelated to DC scores (tau = .093, ns). Eliminating BarackObama.com, an extreme outlier that will be discussed in detail later, and computing the equation again yields similar results (AC: tau = .502, $p < .05$; DC: .194, ns). This is quite strong evidence that sites that invite youth to define their own civic experiences by offering engagement in an actualizing style tend to attract more user activity, while defining "civic" in a dutiful mode is not predictive of quantity of user contributions.

² Our rationale for excluding the external features here is that merely "friending" a civic organization or network requires significantly less thought and effort than posting a blog, starting a discussion thread, assembling a group, or suggesting a civic action, and that the two types of behaviors should therefore be kept separate. Further, since there were rarely any explicit indications that individual Youtube videos were user-produced, these were also omitted from the index.

³ The formula for this score is: $A_c = A_b + A_g + A_f + A_u$, where A_c is the total score, A_b is the activity score for blogs, A_g is the activity score for groups, A_f is the activity score for forums, and A_u is the activity score for user actions.

Test of Hypotheses 2 & 3

In contrast to the dramatic differences between sites of differing AC and DC orientations detailed above, no one category of site markedly over- or underachieved in terms of either feature presence or quantity of user activity. However, a few differences emerge when we distinguish between internal and external features. Table 3 breaks down feature presence by site type.

(Table 3 about here)

Chi-square tests reveal that the differences in participatory feature presence between site types are not significant when considered in aggregate, but emerge when we distinguish between in-house and external (i.e. social media platform) features. Online-only sites collectively account for more user action pages, group pages, and discussion forums than the other three site types combined—to a degree that is significant in the cases of discussion forums and user actions (chi square tests, $p < .05$ and $p < .01$ respectively). By contrast, they contained fewer than half of all Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and Youtube pages. In fact, adjusted for subsample size, the online-only category contains the lowest percentages of all the site types for each of the four external features (Table 3). Because online-only sites are defined by their lack of offline presence, it may not be surprising that they offer a fuller suite of internal functionality than sites that offer youth offline activities. Further, what this seems to indicate is that conventional organizations are outsourcing their social media to outside commercial sites: it is quite easy for an organization whose priorities lie largely outside the internet to add instant participatory features to their sites via prominent external services. How effective this latter strategy turns out to be will of course depend upon how the organization employs the external services it adopts, an interesting question for future research.

We also observed that user activity did not differ greatly between site types. An ANOVA testing for significant differences in numbers of scaled units between the four site types found that no type emerged as a clear leader in mean quantity of user-generated content. Four additional ANOVAs that were run between site types comparing scaled

units for the three social networking services and Youtube videos similarly produced no significant results.⁴ These results proved robust to the omission of BarackObama.com. Sites throughout the sample have been successful in attracting user-generated content; young people do not seem to overwhelmingly favor any one category over others. This finding provides no support to hypotheses 2 and 3 and further highlights the significance actualizing engagement offerings in spurring user contributions.

Discussion

This study has attempted to develop the empirical picture of the distribution user-generated content, and the features that facilitate that content, across a sample of youth civic web sites. The impression presented here is one of a vibrant youth public sphere with no shortages either of communicative activity or spaces to display it. User-generated content is strongly represented in every site type, and the more opportunities a site offers its users to participate, the more participation tends to occur.

Our core concern was examining the often-assumed but previously untested premise that young citizens are looking for civic engagement experiences that resonate with emerging norms of citizenship and communication. Drawing on the framework of dutiful and actualizing civic styles, we tested whether sites presenting more actualizing engagement opportunities would in fact receive visibly more attention from users. This was confirmed (Hypothesis 1) with our finding that the more sites encouraged actualizing engagement, the more their interactive features were used. By contrast, dutiful appeals to engagement were unrelated to user activity level. This result provides the critical test of the dutiful-actualizing theory on which this study was built, and supports the assumptions of those working within this theory (Bennett et al., 2011). Where site users found engagement projects oriented toward inviting their input and displaying their peers' contributions, they were considerably more likely to participate in visible online spaces. These results contribute to our understanding of actualizing citizenship as tightly linked with participatory technologies that enable young people to pursue their civic interests

⁴ Since the purpose of the civic activity index was to eliminate spurious associations resulting from non-normal user content distributions, and the raw figured for the social networking services produced no significant associations whatsoever, it was deemed unnecessary to generate a separate social networking index.

with a degree of self-definition and expression.

In contrast, the hypotheses anticipating different levels of users response based on the type of organizations sponsoring the site failed to find support (Hypotheses 2 and 3). Although online only sites did indeed provide more participatory features than sites of organizations based offline, at least when we look at in-house features, there were no corresponding differences in user activity levels. The implication of these results is quite striking: it strongly suggests that how engagement is presented to young people is quite consequential to their participation, while the kind of organization offering the engagement makes little difference.

We also made a potentially interesting observation about the distribution of kinds of user engagement with youth civic websites. In absolute terms, Facebook emerged as the dominant participatory feature by far, followed by Myspace and Twitter. The low participatory bar associated with “friending” a cause or organization as compared to contributing blog or forum posts is a likely contributing factor to the disparity between internal and external participation. Clearly not all forms of participation are equal in either their impacts or their requirements in terms of personal commitment, and future research might explore techniques to increase high-value forms of online participation.

Superstar sites

One important qualification to the overall pattern of findings is that participation was very unevenly distributed within the sample: it was concentrated in a handful of *superstar* sites scattered across the site types. Even among sites that offered some actualizing learning opportunities, some sites received a disproportionately large number of user contributions. Our use of the civic activity index served to reduce the analysis-distorting effects of the most popular sites and allowed for our focus on systematic differences within the sample, but it is worth briefly considering the nature of these superstars.

By far the most active of the superstars was Barack Obama's campaign site, which contained at least an order of magnitude more units than the second most active site for all of the five features it contained: user blogs, Youtube, Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter. Obama's site accounted for 88% of all user blog posts in the sample, 49% of all Youtube videos, 92% of all Facebook friends, 76% of all Myspace friends, and 97% of all Twitter

followers. It was not that these sorts of user contributions were absent for other sites, but simply that Obama attracted such massive attention, garnering, for example, over 70,000 user-contributed blog posts and 6.2 million Facebook friends with his official profile. Similar patterns characterized the remaining three features: CollegeDems contained 55% of all groups, Peta2 held 74% of all discussion posts, and Idealist accounted for 52% of all user actions. Thus, while no site *type* was found to be completely moribund, there was clear evidence that a very few sites struck a major chord with youth in terms of eliciting civic contributions. These findings are consistent with those of other web studies indicating that online content publishing tends to follow a power law distribution—that is, a minority of sites tend to garner the vast majority of the attention (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Benkler, 2006).

Limitations

The task of comparing the affordances and user content amounts of 83 disparate sites required a number of methodological choices that, while justifiable, are not without limitations. First, as discussed previously, the configuration of certain features made it impossible for us to count their units of content. In every case in which we could count units of analysis, we relied on the site's automatic archiving processes to deliver the requested content on demand. For features that lacked complete archives, or whose content could only be found through keyword searches, we could not determine how many units were present. Searching for a common word might turn up hundreds of results, but there was no way to know when we had exhausted the database. This drawback is difficult to surmount, but one way of doing so would be to take periodic web archive snapshots of pages containing user-generated content within each site under investigation for a specified period of time. This method would not only address the issue of some sites not offering complete archives, but would also create a standard and consistent sampling frame, thus eliminating the need to use multiple counting procedures. However, collecting, storing, and analyzing such a dataset would be quite work-intensive and would most likely require considerable funding for the necessary hardware, software, and labor.

We also must emphasize that the evidence supporting our core finding—that more actualizing sites seemed to attract more participation from users—should not be

construed as a strong, causal, one. In particular, we are unable to entirely separate the effects of a site's citizenship orientation and possible self-selection processes in producing the results we presented. The latter problem is as follows: if our conceptualization of civic styles is correct, and actualizing and dutiful citizens are attracted to different sorts of civic experiences and styles of participating, it is possible that our count of increased activity on actualizing sites is simply an artifact of the fact that actualizing citizens are likely to display their participation in online participatory expression. More dutiful sites may attract as much total engagement, but do so in ways that are not visible online, and consequently not counted by our method. We have strong theoretical reasons for suspecting that this is not the case, but future research should account for the possibility.

Conclusion

The American youth civic web of today contains a much greater variety of participatory features than it did when Montgomery et al. (2004) surveyed it. The present study represents the only research of which we are aware that probes the degree to which their target populations are using these tools. However, what this study has added to the conversation, we hope, transcends its empirical specifics: we have documented the importance of communication patterns that go beyond the affordances of any particular feature. In assessing an organization's orientation to communicating and mobilizing young citizens, our perspective has taken a deeper look at the communication relationship between organizations and their young supporters—a relationship that, we found, is crucially important in spurring young people to become involved.

Those findings are quite consequential not only for scholars but also for the many practitioners experimenting and innovating in this area. For these individuals, the story of this study is clear: organizations aiming to connect with young people online need to be aware of the style of engagement they are adopting. These are considerations that should be at the forefront when designing civic technologies that are meant to underpin an organization's online presence. Finding ways to promote an actualizing, participatory experience built on genuine communicative exchange is crucial to successfully engaging young citizens.

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APPENDIX A

Websites in Sample

Site type	Site name	Site URL
Online Only	Tolerance: Mix It Up	http://www.tolerance.org/teens/index.jsp
Online Only	Holymeatballs	http://www.holymeatballs.org
Online Only	DoSomething	http://www.dosomething.org/
Online Only	Wiretapmag	http://www.wiretapmag.org/
Online Only	u4prez	http://www.u4prez.com/
Online Only	Spankmag	http://www.spankmag.com
Online Only	Girls Inc	http://www.girlsinc.org/gc/
Online Only	Peacefire	http://www.peacefire.org/
Online Only	BattleCry	http://www.battlecry.com
Online Only	Rock the Vote	http://www.rockthevote.org/
Online Only	TakingITGlobal	http://www.takingitglobal.org
Online Only	Libertarian Rock	http://www.libertarianrock.com/
Online Only	Idealist	http://www.idealists.org
Online Only	ProgressiveU	http://www.progressiveu.org
Online Only	Pearl News	http://www.pearl.learn.org/pearlnews
Online Only	Itsgettinghotinhere	http://itsgettinghotinhere.org/
Online Only	PETA2	http://www.peta2.com/
Online Only	Think.MTV	http://think.mtv.com/
Online Only	Servenet	http://servenet.org/
Online Only	Campus Activism	http://campusactivism.org
Online Only	Newzcrew	http://newzcrew.org
Online Only	Razoo	http://community.razoo.com/
Online Only	Future Majority	http://futuremajority.com
Online Only	Bullying.org	http://www.bullying.org/
Online Only	Black College View	http://www.blackcollegeview.com/
Online Only	Conservative Punk	http://www.conservativepunk.com
Online Only	Freeculture	http://freeculture.org
Online Only	Declare Yourself	http://www.declareyourself.com
Online Only	YouthNoise	http://www.youthnoise.com/
Online Only	Reznetnews	http://www.reznetnews.org/
Online Only	Campus Progress	http://www.campusprogress.org
Online Only	My Sistahs	http://www.mysistahs.org/
Online Only	TrueU	http://www.trueu.org/
Online Only	Youth Resource	http://www.youthresource.com/
Govt/Candidate	Peace Corps	http://www.peacecorps.gov/teens/
Govt/Candidate	Democrats	http://www.democrats.org/a/communities/young_people_and_students/
Govt/Candidate	EPA	http://www.epa.gov/students/
Govt/Candidate	Collegedems	http://www.collegedems.com/
Govt/Candidate	Boston Youth Zone	http://www.bostonyouthzone.com

Govt/Candidate	YDA	http://www.yda.org/
Govt/Candidate	Collegerepublicans	http://www.collegerepublicans.org
Govt/Candidate	RNC	http://youth.gop.com/GroupPage.aspx?
Govt/Candidate	USA Freedom Corps	http://www.usafreedomcorpskids.gov/youth
Govt/Candidate	Barack Obama	http://barackobama.com
Community	Key club	http://www.keyclub.org/
Community	Iearn	http://www.iearn.org/
Community	Ysa	http://www.ysa.org/
Community	City Kids	http://www.citykids.com/
Community	Beta Club	http://www.betaclub.org/
Community	Teen Ink	http://teenink.com/
Community	Harlemlive	http://www.harlemlive.org
Community	Boys and Girls Clubs	http://www.bgcmd.org/
Community	Channel 1	http://www.channelone.com/
Community	Highschooljournalism	http://www.highschooljournalism.org/
Community	Girl scouts	http://www.girlscoutsofblackhawk.org/
Community	Boy Scouts	http://www.circle10.org/
Community	4h	http://www.nc4h.org/
Community	YWAM	http://www.ywam.org
Community	Gen V	http://www.genv.net/
Community	CRF	http://www.crf-usa.org
Community	Seattle YMCA	http://www.seattleyymca.org/
Community	Teen Empowerment	http://www.teenempowerment.org/
Community	NSPNET	http://nspnet.org
Activist	Youthrights	http://www.youthrights.org/
Activist	Arctic Youth Network	http://www.taiga.net/ayn/home.html
Activist	NAACP	http://www.naacp.org/youth/
Activist	The SCA	http://www.thesca.org/
Activist	YAF	http://www.yaf.org/
Activist	HRC	http://www.hrc.org/issues/youth_and_campus_activism.asp
Activist	GLSEN	http://www.glsen.org/
Activist	Hillel	http://www.hillel.org/index
Activist	ACLU	http://www.aclu-wi.org/youth/index.html
Activist	Outproud	http://www.outproud.org/
Activist	GSA Network	http://www.gsanetwork.org/
Activist	Students for a Free Tibet	http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org
Activist	Socialist Action	http://www.socialistaction.org/ysa.htm
Activist	NRA	http://www.nrahq.org/youth/
Activist	Survivors	http://www.survivors.la/
Activist	Kids for Saving Earth	http://www.kidsforsavingearth.org/
Activist	Greenpeace	http://members.greenpeace.org/students/
Activist	SADD	http://www.sadd.org/
Activist	UNICEF	http://www.unicef.org/voy
Activist	Sierra Club	http://www.sierraclub.org/youth/

Table 1: Presence of participatory features across sample of 83 websites.

Feature	N sites with feature	% of sites in sample (N=83) with feature	N countable features	% features countable
User blogs	17	20	10	59
Discussion forums	18	22	18	100
Groups	15	18	9	60
User actions	13	16	8	62
Youtube	33	40	33	100
Facebook	33	40	33	100
Myspace	25	30	25	100
Twitter	18	22	18	100
<i>Total</i>	-	-	153	-

Table 2: User contributions to participatory features.

Feature	Total number of user contributions	Mean contributions per feature
User blogs (unit of analysis= blog post)	81637	8163.7
Discussion forums (unit = forum thread)	20818	1156.6
Groups (unit = group)	20957	2328.6
User actions (unit = action)	30286	3785.8
Youtube (unit = video)	3850	116.7
Facebook (unit = friend)	6783186	205551.0
Myspace (unit = friend)	3573640	142945.6
Twitter (unit = follower)	1060836	62402.1

Table 3: Percentage of sites in each site category offering each participatory feature.

Feature	Online only sites	% Govt/candidate sites	% Community sites	% Activist sites
N sites in category	34	10	19	20
User blogs	12%	30%	5%	10%
Discussion forums	32%	0%	21%	15%
Groups	15%	20%	5%	5%
User actions	21%	0%	5%	0%
Youtube	29%	50%	37%	55%
Facebook	26%	60%	37%	55%
Myspace	21%	50%	21%	45%
Twitter	15%	30%	21%	30%

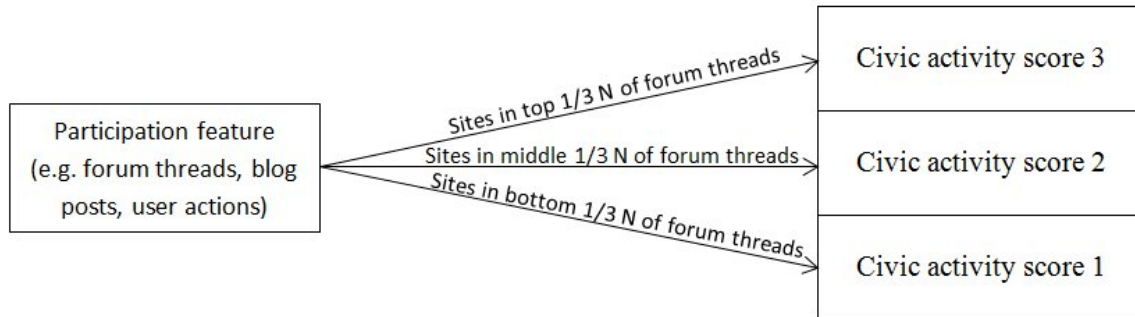


Figure 1: Schematic diagram illustrating how the civic activity index scores were created

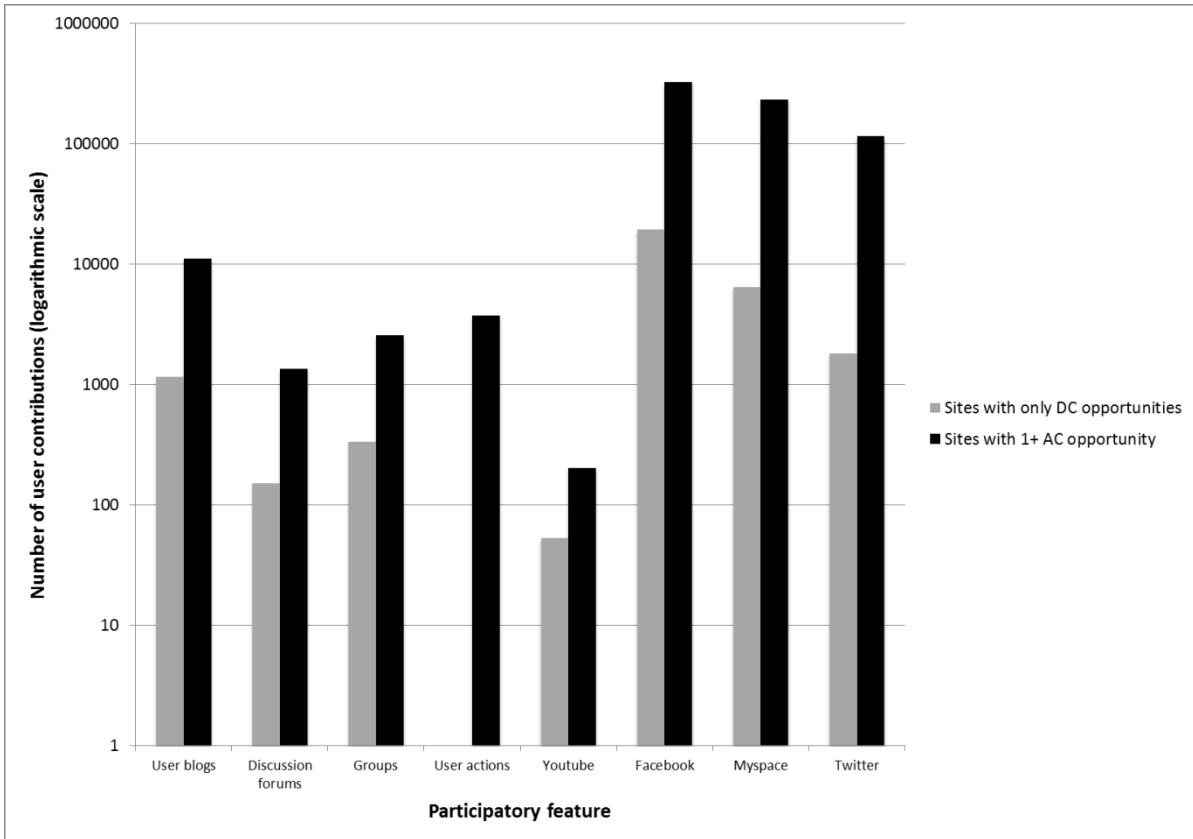


Figure 2: Raw (unscaled) counts of user contributions on each feature, comparing DC-only sites (n=44) with some-AC sites (n=39). (Logarithmic scale.)