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## TALKING AMONG THEMSELVES

### Online youth civic communication in managed and autonomous environments

*The character of youth civic engagement on the internet has emerged as a productive topic of study in communication research. Concurrently, a number of recent studies of online forums have found that technological design features can powerfully influence both the form and content of civic discussion. The present study integrates these previously unacquainted literatures, contributing to each by comparing the user content of two online youth engagement forums: one of which tightly manages communication between participants and the other of which grants them far more expressive latitude. The results indicate that technical design matters: significantly more topics of a traditionally civic character were raised in the former than in the latter. Further, the expressive forum elicited twice the number of total posts than its counterpart, although the highly regulated forum attracted significantly more unique users. Notably, the populations posting in the two spaces were almost completely mutually exclusive, with the vast majority of users posting exclusively in one or the other. The implications of these findings are discussed in the context of youth civic forums and youth civic engagement more generally.*

**Keywords** young people; computer-mediated communication; politics; systems design; civic engagement

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## Introduction

Q2

The implications of the internet for civic engagement have, in recent years, attracted a considerable share of scholarly attention. The simultaneous late-modern trends of plunging civic indicators and rising usage rates of digitally networked media raise the possibility that the latter might go some way toward ameliorating the former. Also common to both trends is young people as a focal point: they rank at once among the least civically engaged and most

technologically engaged of all age groups (Delli Carpini 2000; Putnam 2000; Livingstone 2003; Lenhart *et al.* 2005). But as the diverse domains of social-scientific internet research have matured, the medium's ever-expanding set of affordances have made apparent the limits of approaches that attempt to capture uniform internet effects on various variables of interest (e.g. Davis 1999; Jordan 2001; Wellman *et al.* 2001). In a similar fashion, civic engagement is far from a unitary construct – it comprises many conceptual subcomponents, and a developing strand of theory argues that its traditional definition should be expanded even further to accommodate recent developments in youth civic preferences. It therefore follows that there is no single, easily summarized internet effect on civic engagement, but rather a collection of various and potentially contradictory influences awaiting scholarly explication.

The present study contributes to the literatures addressing both youth civic engagement and how different technical design choices influence online behavior. Here, the emphasis is fixed upon civic communication between youth, a relatively infrequently studied topic compared with the organizational priorities and online offerings of youth civic web sites (Montgomery *et al.* 2004; Bachen *et al.* 2008; Gerodimos 2008; Wells, forthcoming). The data are drawn from a single American web site which offers a rare research opportunity: it contains within it two interactive subsections which map neatly onto a key conceptual division between politically consequential technical configurations for citizen-to-citizen communication (Coleman 2008). This division is situated in a body of theory that argues that software design choices can render certain value-laden social outcomes more or less likely, and that these choices can thus be considered 'politics in code' (Neff & Stark 2004). My goal here is to begin to sketch the contours of the relationships between two relatively common species of participatory techno-politics and two broad classes of youth civic communication.

## **The great civic divide**

The lengthy history of civic engagement is far too rich and complex to review in detail here (Schudson 1998). For the current purposes, it will suffice to distinguish between two broad types of civic activity to which scholars have turned their attention in recent years (Delli Carpini 2004; Bennett 2008a). The first type is clearly expressed in the work of Verba *et al.* (1995), Putnam (2000), and Delli Carpini (2000), for whom key civic indicators include news consumption habits, political knowledge and interest, participation in civil society organizations, and perhaps most importantly, voting. When evaluated according to these metrics, youth (roughly defined as those aged between 18 and 30) nearly always fall far short of their elders, with significant differences between young and older citizens repeatedly reported on civic engagement surveys (Delli Carpini 2000; Putnam 2000; Galston 2003; Zukin *et al.* 2006).

To the extent that such institution-centric civic indicators are the only ones under consideration, youth appear overwhelmingly disengaged from civic life and content to devote their leisure time entirely to private pursuits.

85 At the same time, an increasingly influential contingent of scholars has argued that this traditional definition of civic engagement ignores many civic-spirited activities of which young people do partake in comparatively larger numbers. These activities are largely performed outside the confines of traditional civic institutions such as government, the mass media, and civil society, in part because many youth do not trust them (Putnam 2000; Baumgartner & Morris 2006; Bennett & Iyengar 2008). Examples here include consumer activism, direct action (such as political protest and social network-driven activism), and civic expression through digital media. There are almost as many novel terms for this youth-friendly civic orientation as there are scholars who study it, including 'life politics' (Giddens 1991), 'postmodern politics' (Inglehart 90 1997), 'sub-politics' (Beck 2000), the 'citizen-consumer' (Scammell 2000), Q3 'new politics' (Dahlgren 2005), 'the politics of everyday life' (Gerodimos 2008), and 'actualizing citizenship' (AC) (Bennett 2008a). All of these concepts share the core argument that the components of traditional civic engagement (as described above) are to a significant extent being supplanted by a set of individually driven priorities, with most adding that this process is particularly pronounced among young people. The phenomenon is a global one, manifesting in both Western and non-Western contexts (Yates & Youniss 1999; Burbach 100 2001; Livingstone 2007; Gerodimos 2008). Q4

Of the various conceptualizations of this distinctive civic orientation, Bennett's (2008a) actualizing/dutiful framework distinguishes itself by directly addressing the conflicting accounts that bedevil youth civic engagement research. He argues that claims about youth engagement and disengagement are both largely accurate – from an AC perspective, youth seem relatively well-engaged; and from a traditional perspective (which Bennett labels 'dutiful citizenship', or DC), they appear largely disengaged. Overall, then, young people are not quite as disconnected from civic life as some studies have concluded. But their stronger inclination toward AC does not eliminate all cause for concern: there are some issues that can only be adequately confronted through DC channels; choosing government representatives being only the most obvious example. Further, some civic scholars claim that DC-style engagement should be the field's primary concern, with AC relegated to a distant auxiliary role if it is considered at all (e.g. Galston 2003). For his part, Bennett makes it clear that AC and DC are not substitutes for one another, and stresses that well-rounded citizens (young or old) will incorporate the aspects of both into their civic lives (Bennett 2008a). 105 110 115 120

The civic divide presents an appealing framework for the study of online youth civic communication for several reasons. First, it extends a growing program of inquiry into youth civic life online (Montgomery *et al.* 2004;

Livingstone 2007; Bachen *et al.* 2008; Bennett 2008b) by emphasizing that civic engagement is not a unitary construct. A few studies in this area have conducted civic-divide analyses of the form and content of youth civic web sites (Gerodimos 2008; Wells, forthcoming), but none have yet investigated how young people express themselves within such sites. Second, the general assumption that characteristics of user-generated communication can be analyzed in terms of normative theories of civic engagement lies at the heart of the field of online deliberation research (Wilhelm 1999; Dahlberg 2001; Author, forthcoming). Many of these studies employ Habermas' (1989) idealized public sphere as an analytical framework, assessing online forums for deliberative criteria such as rational-critical debate, reciprocity, and discursive equality (see Janssen & Kies 2005 for a review). But the civic divide is more appropriate than the public sphere as a framework for investigating youth civic communication primarily because the latter focuses on a highly circumscribed set of conversational characteristics, most of which do not address what is interesting and distinctive about young people vis-à-vis civic engagement. By contrast, using the civic divide as an analytical lens can help generate evidence about the extent to which youth civic communication corroborates the survey-based narrative that young people tend to embrace AC over DC.

### The politics of technological design choices

A diverse coterie of scholars of communication, social studies of science, and related fields concur that technologies contain specific political potentialities inscribed within their designs (Winner 1980; Lessig 1999; Feenberg 2002; Rogers 2004; Neff & Stark 2004; Wright & Street 2007). Individual formulations differ, but the common idea is that the choice of certain design features over others renders certain social outcomes more likely than others, and that this privileging is 'political' in the sense of conferring advantages and disadvantages upon those parties invested in the outcomes thusly favored and disfavored (Feenberg 2002). This position departs from the commonplace view that technology does not merit social-scientific inquiry because its only unique influence is to enable users to accomplish their tasks more efficiently (Winner 1980; Feenberg 2002). Theories which defend a politics of technology also avoid the conceptual dead-end of technological determinism by specifying that technologies enable and constrain, but do not mechanistically determine, social practices (Jones & Rafaeli 2000; Foot & Schneider 2006).

Within the domain of online political communication, a small cluster of studies has addressed how the designs of discussion forums can condition the substance of the conversations held therein. This research has generally sought to link particular design features with corresponding patterns of user communication, though the results have rarely been used to generate predictive

165 hypotheses. Lessig (1999, p. 69) furnishes an early example of a plausible relationship between design and user communication, noting that the 23-user limit America Online placed on its synchronous chat rooms at the time constituted a near-prohibitive bias against political mobilization. In analyzing this same design feature (albeit as implemented by a different site), Jones and Rafaeli (2000) argue that the interactions enabled by synchronous, limited-capacity discussion spaces are typically fleeting and insubstantial. Wright and Street (2007), examining an asynchronous online forum hosted by the European Union, conclude that prior-review moderation, organizing messages into subject-based threads, and support for multiple language all helped forum-users engage in deliberative discussions with one another. But by much the same token, Rogers (2004) claims that the UK government's Citizens' Portal suppressed the inclusive, free-spirited ethos of the web by banning incoming hyperlinks and deleting user posts that violated its strict code of conduct.

175 While the studies reviewed above have made valuable contributions to our understanding of how technological designs facilitate distinct patterns of user communication, they focus primarily on concrete features without developing much in the way of the abstract theory. One promising theory of techno-political influence on civic discourse emerges from Coleman's (2008) analytical distinction between *managed* and *autonomous* online engagement spaces. The management/autonomy framework improves over prior approaches by combining parsimony and specificity: not only does it recognize that designers tend to select bundles of features that work in concert to support particular user experiences (Jones & Rafaeli 2000; Sack 2005), it also describes two common types of Q4  
185 feature bundles and predicts the sorts of interactions they are likely to engender. Managed spaces are those whose technological affordances implement tight control over civic debate with a bias toward institutionally approved subject matter. By contrast, autonomous forums allow their users far more latitude to set their own civic agendas, which opens the potential for discussions to develop in transgressive directions. Autonomy, in this sense, represents a technological manifestation of the well-established normative criterion that truly democratic publics must be allowed to communicate freely without institutional interference (Mills 1956; Habermas 1989; Dahlberg 2001). Management largely rejects this position, instead proceeding from a view of young people as citizens-in-training not yet competent to define citizenship in their own terms (Coleman 2008). As a technological philosophy-in-action, its goal is to ensure that youth internalize age-appropriate civic values while participating in online civic spaces intended specifically for them.

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200 The management/autonomy typology can be used to derive specific, testable hypotheses about the relationships between the politics of online forum designs and the civic characteristics of the user communications they host. The AC/DC divide serves in this context to characterize the communications in each type of discussion space. Because a vast majority of youth civic sites are created by adults

(Montgomery *et al.* 2004), who – according to Bennett (2008) – are primarily DCs, management should favor the DC model of citizenship, which is comparatively more traditional and well-delineated. This is exactly what Wells (forthcoming) found in his study of youth civic web sites, with the complementary result that AC was correlated with autonomy. The present study continues this line of research by ascertaining whether the hypothesized AC-autonomy and DC-management relationships hold when analyzing user contributions to youth civic web environments.

In accordance with the above discussion, this study's hypotheses are as follows:

- H1a: Managed youth civic environments will contain more DC user-generated text than autonomous environments.
- H1b: Autonomous youth civic environments will contain more AC user-generated text than managed environments.
- H2: Autonomous youth civic environments will be more popular than managed environments.

In addition to these hypotheses, the unique structure of this study's data set permits measurement of the degree of overlap between youth participation in managed and autonomous spaces.

- RQ1: Will managed spaces and autonomous spaces attract essentially the same set of participants?

## Data and methods

All of the data analyzed for this project, which employed the method of content analysis, were drawn from a popular American youth civic engagement web site called Youthnoise ([www.youthnoise.com](http://www.youthnoise.com)). Launched in 2001 by the nonprofit Save the Children Foundation, it is described in its 'About' section as '... a social networking site for people under the age of 27 who like to connect based on deeper interests than Paris Hilton's wardrobe and want to get engaged within a cause' (Youthnoise 2008a, n.p.). The events of 11 September 2001 supplied the site with an initial cohort of young users eager to commiserate (Montgomery *et al.* 2004), and its membership has since grown to over 113,000 as of early 2008. Although based in San Francisco, Youthnoise claims members in over 170 nations and some 500,000 unique visitors per month – figures comparable to those of such commercial non-civic youth sites as Teenpeople.com and Seventeen.com (Youthnoise 2008b). From its colorful design scheme to the casual, youth-friendly language it employs in its official communications with members, Youthnoise's distinctive stylistic flourishes represent a self-conscious attempt to recast civic engagement as 'cool' for its target audience (Montgomery *et al.* 2004).

245 Youthnoise is divided into several subsections, each of which affords its users a different set of options for engaging with civic, political, and social matters. Among these are self-contained index pages devoted to various site-defined causes, such as government, the environment, and animal rights, which aggregate relevant content from across the site; a separate section where users can define and attach their names to their own causes; a database of youth-initiated civic projects; tools to facilitate citizen-to-government communication; and two types of discussion boards. Most of these subsections are populated primarily by user-generated information and opinions in textual form occasionally punctuated by a poll or YouTube video. Users can participate in whichever section(s) they choose based on the issues they care about and the engagement methods that appeal most to them.

250 Youthnoise was chosen as the object of this study because one of its subsections exhibits many characteristics consistent with management, and another leans far closer to the autonomous ideal. While neither is a perfect example of its associated category, it is argued that the affordances available within each brand it firmly as one or the other (as opposed to both falling in the middle of the managed/autonomous continuum). Their colocation within the same web site allows the present analysis to hold constant such factors as visual design, site purpose, and (most importantly) user population. Moreover, the primary user activity in both subsections consists of posting public messages to which other members can reply, forming chains of related messages called 'threads'. The fact that they share a similar BBS-style format reduces the possibility that any differences between them might be due to basic differences in application type. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the two sections in terms of the managed/autonomous typology.

270 **TABLE 1** Management vs. autonomy in Youthnoise's forums.

	<i>managed: 'debate'</i>	<i>autonomous: 'boards'</i>
275	Members must email site owners to post new topics; no guarantee that submissions will 'go live'	Members can post new topics instantly; no interaction with owners necessary
280	Most topics presented in a single format: facts from 'both sides' of the issue, followed by a question(s), followed by links to more info	Topics can be written in whatever format and containing whatever content the member chooses (as long as site policies are not broken)
	Lack of quoting function encourages response only to the initial discussion post	Quoting function of 'Boards' software facilitates communication between peers
	No avatar or signature capabilities	Graphical avatars and signature blocks allow for expression of individual civic identities

Youthnoise's managed section, which it labels 'Debate', allows users to append comments to discussion topics posted by the site's administrators (although members can submit suggestions for new debates via email). Topics are grouped by issue category (e.g. 'Environment', 'Government', etc.), listed on their own separate pages, and typically consist of one or more statements of fact followed by a solicitation of members' opinions. A representative example, titled '*Are the Homeless Less Fortunate – or Lazy?!*', follows:

It's an ongoing debate between both sides of the political posse: are the homeless really just down on their luck, or do they just not want to work? Volunteers who donate, give out change, and work at shelters might say that some people just need a helping hand; people who don't might say that these people living on the street will only use their money for drugs and alcohol. Who is right-or are they both?! (Youthnoise.com 2006)

Nearly all discussion topics in Debate are written in this same balanced, grammatically immaculate style. In addition, many of them include several links to related information under the heading 'Need more facts before taking a stand? Start with these sources and then face off!' or similar. Member replies appear below each initial post in chronological order, but the response box contains no option that allows users to quote each other. By design, therefore, users are encouraged to respond to the initial post rather than to each other, although they occasionally deviate from this default option. Combined, these features grant forum operators significant discretion over the style and substance of the environment's main content, a key indicator of management (Coleman 2008; Wells, forthcoming).

'Boards', Youthnoise's autonomous section, shares some similarities with Debate but differs in several key aspects. It consists of a series of message forums grouped under headings that are similar to, but not exactly the same as, the categories found in Debate (thus, while both sections contain categories called 'Environment', one of the Boards is called 'Pop Culture and the Media' while the closest analogue in Debate is 'Arts, Literature, & Media'). As in Debate, each forum contains a series of threaded discussions covering various loosely related topics. However, members can instantaneously post discussion topics about whatever they choose without waiting for approval from Youthnoise's owners. Further, they are free to structure their posts however they choose – they can offer an even-handed consideration of the topic at hand, present links to support their arguments, use colloquialism-free language, or speak however else they like. The software that underpins Boards places a button at the bottom of each thread message which automatically inserts a quotation of that message into a new reply message for reference purposes. This functionality greatly encourages communication among respondents as well as between respondents and discussion-starters. As a final nod toward autonomy,



Boards allow each user to express herself via a graphical avatar that appears next to her every post along with her username, in contrast to Debate which includes only members' usernames next to their posts. Taken together, these design choices establish Boards as a distinctly autonomous counterpart to Debate.

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## Sample

The sample frame of this study could have potentially been defined as all messages found in both Boards and Debate. However, because the earliest Boards' threads predate the advent of Debate by about five years, the decision was made to limit the sample frame to messages posted to both forums between 31 May 2006 (the date of the earliest Debate thread) and 31 December 2007 (an arbitrary ending date). In Debate, all messages posted between those two dates were included; however, several subforums in Boards were omitted completely (specifically, those listed under the headings 'History' and 'Other Stuff') due to the absence of a comparable subheading in Debate. The discussion thread, rather than the individual message, was chosen as the sampling unit to allow for the construction of an index of discussion popularity based on the number of unique authors in each thread (the more authors per thread, the more popular the discussion). The individual message served as the unit of analysis to determine which authors in each section were most active and to cross-reference authors between forums. Q6

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Once its boundaries had been established, the sample frame was constructed manually by adding the URL of each thread found under the relevant headings to a database if the first post was determined to have occurred during the aforementioned timeframe. This process produced 480 threads from Debate and 896 threads from Boards. Next, 250 threads were randomly selected from each section, creating a final combined sample of 500 threads. Each page of these threads was then archived using the Firefox browser add-on Scrapbook to ensure that the reliability metrics would be based upon identical texts (i.e. to safeguard against the possibility that the pages might change between analyses). Eighteen threads from Boards and 27 threads from Debate had to be removed from the sample due either to technical errors in the source data or thread duplication, in which case the replies from the duplicate threads were coded as a single master thread. The final sample size thus came to 455 threads (232 from Boards and 223 from Debate). Only messages posted within the sample timeframe were coded; that is, any messages posted on or after 1 January 2008 in threads started prior to that date were omitted.

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## Analysis

For each post, the content analysis captured the username of its author and the section in which it appeared. All posts appearing in Debate were considered

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managed, while all that appeared in Boards were considered autonomous. For the initial post of each thread only, the following information was recorded: whether the author referenced one or more DC institutions and/or AC engagement activities. Four subtypes of institutional mentions comprised the DC search criteria: government, mainstream news media, voluntary organizations, and religious institutions. AC mentions also included four subtypes: consumer activism, offline media creation, online engagement, and ad hoc activism. Only the first posts were analyzed for these civic indicators because early attempts to code all posts for this information failed to produce acceptable reliability statistics. It was quickly determined that conversational clarity was generally at its highest ebb in first posts, as they tended to state their premises clearly (to be understood by other users) in the course of delimiting the scope of the thread to follow. Only the text content of posts was coded; images, graphical avatars, and signature blocks were all ignored.

The values of all the AC and DC variables were discrete and nominal; each variable was coded as either present or absent for each post. Multiple instances of a single variable were coded identically to singular instances. Inter-coder reliability was assessed for each variable between the primary coder and a secondary coder using Scott's pi, and the values ranged between 1 (perfect agreement) and 0.73 except in two cases, for which the reliability coefficients were much lower (0.66 and 0.44). However, these low coefficients should be considered in light of the fact that their associated variables were both (1) binary and (2) very rare, data characteristics against which Scott's pi and other chance-correcting reliability metrics discriminate. The percent agreement statistics for these variables were 94 and 92 percent, respectively, indicating levels of agreement far above what their Scott's pi values suggest.

Government mentions were operationalized as references to any of the following: the word 'government' and synonyms such as 'the state', etc.; branches (federal, state, and local); branches or departments; elected or appointed officials; political parties and candidates; and legislation or talk of legality. Mainstream news media mentions included all references to businesses or media products having three characteristics: (1) a primary purpose of producing civic and/or political information; (2) some offline presence; and (3) for-profit status. Voluntary group mentions were defined as all references to membership-based organizations not associated with government or business and dedicated to social, political, or civic goals. Religious institution references covered all denominations, churches, mosques, parochial schools, synagogues, temples, and religious advocacy organizations, but not mentions of religions themselves (such as Islam or Christianity) or their holy texts.

AC is considerably more difficult to measure than its dutiful counterpart, since by definition it could take a potentially unlimited number of forms. However, for the purposes of this study, four subtypes based on Bennett's (2008) original theoretical exposition were conceptualized and assessed. **Q5**

Consumer activism consisted of all attempts to improve society through market-  
place choices or the moderation of use of goods and services, and included behav-  
iors such as boycotts, vegetarianism, recycling, and buying hybrid cars. Offline  
405 media creation included all creative or artistic uses of non-internet media to  
advance a civic or political agenda, e.g. flyers, posters, stickers, political art,  
and handmade publications. Online engagement covered civic activism (aside  
from commentary) implemented primarily online, such as circulating online  
petitions, creating political/civic mailing lists, and online protests. Finally, ad  
hoc engagement attempted to capture AC activities that did not fit any of the  
410 other subtypes, and was defined as attempts to improve society on one's own  
or through small, informal social networks. Examples included political  
protest, discussing social and political issues with friends and family, and self-  
initiated community service (such as picking up trash in the park of one's own  
volition).

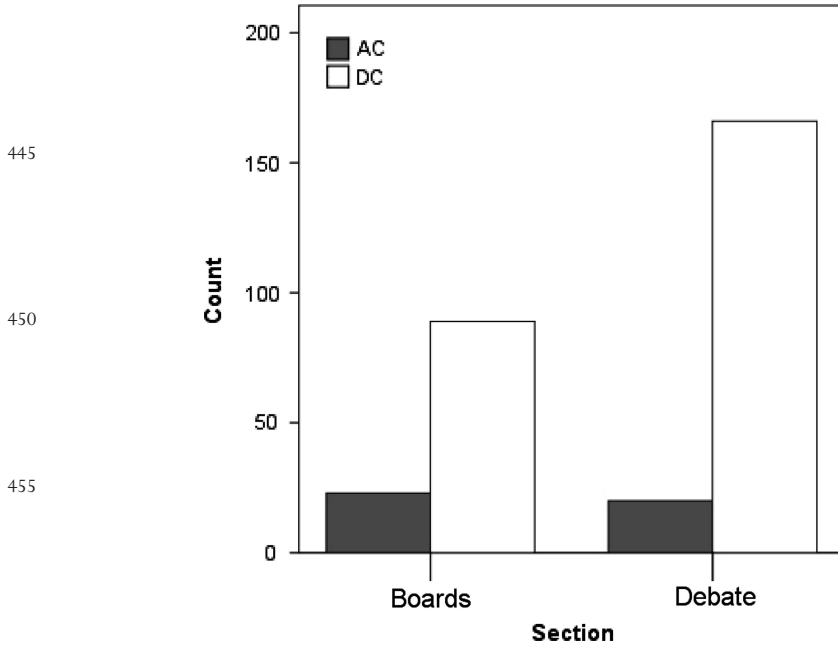
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## Results

Managed civic environments, imbued with the philosophy that young people  
420 need to be taught the civic wisdom of their elders, were hypothesized to  
contain more discussion of DC than AC based on the logic that DC represents  
a traditional conception of citizenship (H1a). Complementarily, if Coleman's  
argument is correct, autonomous civic environments should contain more AC  
425 than DC references, since young people's preferences for individually initiated  
forms of civic engagement over older, institution-based forms should manifest  
in forums where they have complete freedom to set the public agenda (H1b).  
Chi-square tests were computed to determine whether the differences in first-  
post AC and DC mentions between Boards and Debate were significant. The  
results of these tests, represented in Figure 1, supported H1a but not H1b:  
430 Debate contained significantly more DC mentions than Boards ( $\chi^2 = 60.08$ ,  
 $N = 455$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), but the two forums did not differ significantly  
in their respective numbers of AC mentions ( $\chi^2 = 0.119$ ,  $N = 455$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p$   
 $> 0.05$ ). Further, when viewed individually, each environment contained signifi-  
cantly more DC content than AC (Debate:  $\chi^2 = 114.60$ ,  $N = 223$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p$   
435  $< 0.0001$ ; Boards:  $\chi^2 = 38.89$ ,  $N = 232$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Thus, at least  
on Youthnoise, the DC orientation predominates regardless of whether the  
forum is managed or autonomous.

Table 2 displays the chi-square results for each of the AC and DC subtypes  
across Boards and Debate. All of the four DC subtypes were found in significantly  
440 greater numbers in Debate, while only one of the four AC subtypes was signifi-  
cantly more prevalent in Boards.

H2 predicted that autonomous forums would be more popular with young  
people than managed forums, given their presumed distaste for traditional forms



**FIGURE 1** AC and DC mentions in Boards and Debate

**TABLE 2** Prevalence of AC/DC first-post invocations by forum type.

	<i>N</i> mentions in <i>boards</i>	<i>N</i> mentions in <i>debate</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>chi-square</i>
Gov't (DC)	63	109	172	22.82**
News media (DC)	34	97	131	46.14**
Voluntary orgs (DC)	7	33	40	19.68**
Religious institutions (DC)	5	14	19	4.83*
Consumer activism (AC)	7	12	19	1.59
Offline media (AC)	2	1	3	0.30
Online engagement(AC)	11	3	14	4.40*
Ad hoc activism (AC)	6	5	11	0.06

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

of political and civic engagement. The implications of the results for this hypothesis (shown in Table 3) turn out to depend on exactly how popularity is defined. With an approximately equal number of threads in each section, Boards contained over twice the number of posts as Debate. However, defying hypothetical expectations, Debate was found to contain almost double the number of unique

**TABLE 3** *N* of posts and unique users in managed and autonomous forums.

	<i>boards</i>	<i>debate</i>	<i>Mann-Whitney U</i>	<i>z</i>
Threads	232	223	–	–
485 Posts	4138	2015	20,895.5**	3.56
Unique users	543	1014	22,753.5*	2.27

Note: The Mann-Whitney *U* test was used to analyze differences in both the number of posts and unique users because both variable distributions were highly non-normal (for posts, Shapiro–Wilk = 0.237, *df* = 455,  $p < 0.0001$ ; for unique users, Shapiro–Wilk = 0.391, *df* = 455,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

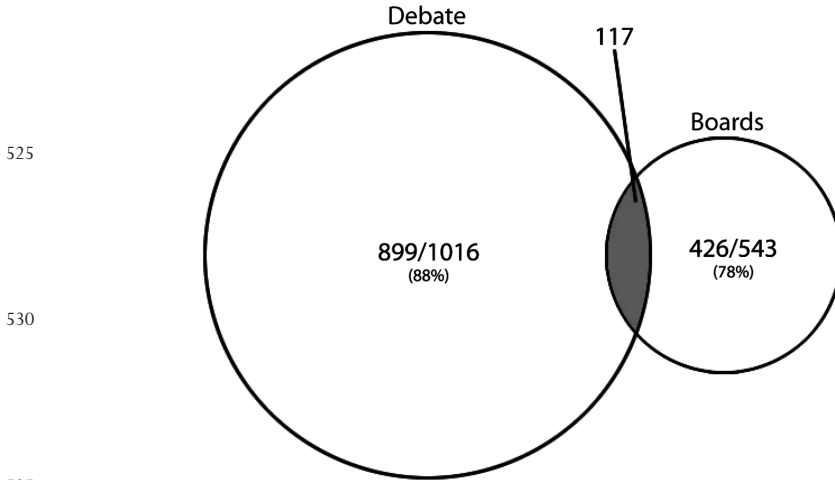
\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

495 users in Boards (Mann-Whitney  $U = 22,753.5$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Debate clearly drew more people in total during the sampling period than Boards, but the latter appears to be more engaging among the population that prefers it since they collectively post far more frequently than those who prefer the former.

But knowing simply that Boards and Debate contain certain aggregate numbers of posts and unique users convey no information about how the two quantities are related to one another. Another way of thinking about popularity Q7 considers the depth of participation in each environment on a per-user basis. Popularity implies sustained interest, and sustained interest in this case consists of repeated participation. If a significant segment of contributors in either context was found to be represented solely by one post, it would suggest that many youth did not find their single experience compelling enough to warrant further engagement. A metric adapted from commercial web analytics called the *bounce rate* assesses the extent of this phenomenon in online environments (Nielsen 2008). A site's bounce rate is typically the percentage of unique visitors who leave it after viewing only one page; the lower the bounce rate, the more engaged the site's audience. For Boards and Debate, this definition was applied to the number of posts, rather than page views, per user: that is, the bounce rates computed here measure the percentage of users in each context that posted only once. The results of this analysis reveal Boards as the more engaging environment, as its bounce rate (57 percent) was significantly lower than that of Debate (67 percent;  $\chi^2 = 15.43$ ,  $N = 1,560$ , *df* = 1,  $p < 0.0001$ ). This means that the participants who used Boards were significantly more likely than those in Debate to post on more than one occasion.

520 Did the two sections attract two different groups of users, or did they merely influence a single group that visited both to behave differently depending on where they posted (RQ1)? Because Youthnoise users retain the same usernames throughout all sections of the site, it was possible to measure the extent of participant overlap between Boards and Debate by comparing the



**FIGURE 2** Overlap between contributing populations of Boards and Debate

540 unique usernames found in one forum to those found in the other. This analysis counts each appearance of a single username in both Boards and Debate as an individual unit of overlap and thus ascertains whether the two forums attracted the same user base or two different groups. As the Venn diagram in Figure 2 **Q8** (which is not to scale) illustrates, Boards and Debate did in fact appeal to two very separate sets of users. An estimated 88 percent of participants in Boards never posted to Debate, and 78 percent of Debate users never posted to Boards. And of 1,442 total contributors, only 8 percent (117) posted in both forums. These findings are especially striking in light of the low threshold set for a unit of overlap: a user needed to have made only one post in each environment to count as overlapping.

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## Discussion

555 The findings presented above provide a strong support for the central notion that the politics of youth civic forum designs are associated with distinct patterns of civic communication. DC institutions such as the government, news media, and civil society organizations were clearly better represented among discussion-starting posts in Debate than AC forms of engagement that require no institutional sanction. At least one DC-related subject (such as the president's actions, pending legislation, news stories, or initiatives started by voluntary groups) was included in 166 out of 223 (74 percent) of initial thread posts in this section, indicating a clear association between adult management and DC content. In comparison, DC content appeared in 89 out of 232 (38 percent) first posts in Boards, a clear minority. This suggests that the users

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of Youthnoise, while not quite as firmly DC as their elders, nevertheless subscribe to the view that civic engagement means spending a significant amount of time attending to and debating institutional issues. Given the present case study design, we can only speculate as to whether these characteristics are particular to Youthnoise's user population or if they are shared by civic-minded youth more broadly.

The healthy presence of DC issues in both forums stands in marked contrast to the comparative paucity of AC discussion. The two environments contained nearly identical amounts of AC content: 23 of 232 (10 percent) managed posts featured an AC mention while 20 of 223 (9 percent) autonomous posts featured one. Out of all civic mentions detected in the entire sample, 86 percent were DC while only 14 percent were AC. One key factor that likely influenced the relatively low numbers of AC mentions detected stems from a methodological design choice. DC is elegantly circumscribed by the institutions associated with it; that is, civic engagement under the auspices of government, the news media, and civil society become DC by definition. However, because AC is defined in opposition to DC as civic action that is individually motivated and enacted, it could take a potentially unlimited number of forms. Moreover, as Bennett (2008a) himself acknowledges, there is no scholarly consensus on the question of whether the various activities that constitute AC ought even to be considered 'civic', and if so, whether they are of greater, lesser, or equal normative importance to DC. Given that even the better-understood manifestations of AC (e.g. consumer activism and political protest) are still somewhat contested, it becomes extremely difficult to simultaneously identify lesser-studied forms empirically and argue for their theoretical validity as AC. With this in mind, the AC portion of this study's coding scheme was inspired by Bennett's (2004, 2008a) examples of non-traditional forms of civic engagement and intended to represent some of the more widely acknowledged variants of AC. Enumerating a list of specific AC instances to seek out in the data was necessary to ensure adequate intercoder reliability. But any content analysis coding scheme aimed at capturing AC will inevitably be limited by both the imagination of its author and the patience of its coders. In light of this disadvantage, it is possible that some unknown amount of potentially interesting AC activity eluded the final data tally.

In addition to their subject matter differences, Boards and Debate also diverged sharply in their respective quantitative participation patterns. Debate drew twice the number of unique participants as its counterpart, but they contributed only half the number of posts as found in Boards. Additionally, users in the latter were far more likely to post repeatedly than were their more managed counterparts. Taken together, these findings suggest that management as a technological engagement strategy is more likely to elicit relatively shallow levels of participation from a broad base of young users. In Debate, participants overwhelmingly expressed their opinion on a single topic once without lingering

to consider the views of others who might respond to them. Autonomy, on the other hand, seemed to promote a significantly higher degree of activity (both civic and non) among a much smaller core of deeply engaged users. However, this increased depth of engagement sometimes came at the cost of topic focus: the ability to respond easily to any post also enables conversational tangents, which often bear little or no resemblance to the initial thread topic. Because Debate did not facilitate peer-to-peer discussion in this way, its contributors were left with only the default option of responding to the initial prompt. Reading its posts in isolation conveys the impression that most authors are scarcely aware that anyone other than themselves have contributed. The phenomenon resembles what Dumoulin called 'interactive monologues' (2003, as cited in Janssen & Kies 2005): standalone pronouncements of opinion broadcasted to an unresponsive audience. But both focused opinion expression and reciprocal discussion are valuable civic skills, which indicates that management and autonomy each possesses distinct civic benefits.

The fact that both the forums examined in this study were both located within the same site – their links abut one another on the Youthnoise navigation bar – made possible the discovery that the two sections attracted two very different user populations. Once a given user chose one of the forums as her preferred base of expression, she was highly unlikely to drift over to the other to make even a single exploratory contribution. This surprisingly clear-cut finding calls into question the utility of presupposing a fixed set of civic preferences for youth as an undifferentiated group. Autonomy, in Coleman's (2008) original formulation, was supposed to be the design philosophy favored by the overwhelming majority of young people. Allowing them the ability to co-construct their own civic perspectives in cyberspace was presented as a unilaterally advantageous decision rather than as a tradeoff with potential drawbacks. Similarly, Bennett (2008a) cites quantitative evidence showing a decline in DC forms of civic engagement among youth together with instances of AC engagement popular with youth to argue for a general generational preference for the latter over the former. This may eventually be found to be the case overall in future studies that include representative samples of youth. But most of the users observed in the current project were probably much more civically aware than the youth population at large by virtue of the fact that they chose to spend part of their limited free time on an explicitly civic web site. Within this group, the evidence presented here indicates a considerable degree of segregation in terms of how participation is distributed across the two forums, and consequently that there is no uniform youth civic preference to speak of. If this result is replicated in future studies designed specifically to explore it, new conceptions of youth civic engagement may be called for. Until then, however, civic engagement scholars should bear in mind that civically active young people are a diverse bunch and deserve to be studied as such.



## Conclusion

This study represents an attempt to assess the relationships between the technical design choices implemented in youth civic websites and the kinds of youth expression found therein. In this, it represents a fruitful convergence of two formerly distinct research areas: (1) online youth civic engagement and (2) the politics of technology in general and of online discussion spaces in particular. The findings detailed here provide substantial evidence that discussion space designs and civic communication styles covary in theoretically relevant ways, and therefore testify to the utility of the overall approach. Scholars and civic practitioners can build upon the work begun here to help determine what sort of civic experiences young site visitors are having and how they might be improved.

This study's generalizability is, to some extent, limited by its case study design, particularly in that other sites (such as those operated by governments or advocacy organizations) are unlikely to share Youthnoise's exact AC/DC content balance. But despite this external validity limitation, the overall results endorse the interpretation that meaningful and varied civic discussion abounds in Youthnoise's Boards and Debate forums. The subject matter analyzed consists primarily of DC issues, with a few mentions of AC concerns scattered throughout. The two discussion forum formats both encourage young people to practice framing opinions, exploring unfamiliar topics, posing critical questions, and critiquing others' stances. Youthnoise and other sites like it offer their users online spaces that help them develop their burgeoning interests in political and civic life, which can be important for youth who lack opportunities to address such concerns offline. The young people engaged in these discussions are well on their way toward developing the kinds of citizenship skills that are highly predictive of civic activity in adult life. Indeed, the site's own internal research shows that 'YouthNoise participation has led to a 25 percent increase in volunteering and a 90 percent increase in the global awareness of users from modestly aware to highly aware' (Youthnoise 2008b).

The present theoretical focus notwithstanding, it is important to note that civic engagement of the type analyzed here constituted only one of multiple kinds of activity prevailing in the forums. Not all threads were directly civic; many addressed more quotidian youth issues such as popular music, movies, celebrities, abstract philosophy, and issues with parents and the opposite sex. More than a few posts seemed to capture something ineffably civic that could not be coded under the theoretical framework. Consider 'Dear Ampy', an advice column created in Boards by a self-identified high school aged young man. In the opening message of this 254-post thread spanning an entire year, the author offers to dispense honest advice to his Youthnoise peers, who oblige him with questions ranging from the facetious to the tragic. His responses are typically folksy, solicitous, and phrased in a pithy, conversational style. For

example, in answer to the question ‘Why can’t I keep my big mouth shut and not volunteer for stuff? I have too much on my plate already. . .’ (Youthnoise 2007, p. 2), Ampy writes: ‘I don’t know hun, I think it’s because your cool like that, you can never turn down a person in need and while this is good you need to learn how to say “no I’m busy”’ (Youthnoise 2007, p. 2). Is this civic? It certainly projects an appearance of genuine concern, especially considering that Ampy donates his services free of charge and for the most part avoids overt irony and sarcasm. But neither management/autonomy nor AC/DC captures this altruistic enterprise cleanly, and Youthnoise contains many other instances of difficult-to-categorize civic spirit for which existing theory offers little explanation.

Future research in this area, therefore, should continue to adjust operational definitions of ‘civic’ so as to include such nontraditional attempts to improve society. Exploratory studies should be conducted to construct relevant categories of youth civic engagement, which could then be applied in large-scale research efforts to generalize about youth civic sites and their impact. Moving beyond explicit attempts to cultivate civic attitudes in young people, scholars might consider devising methods to examine youth civic exchanges in ostensibly non-political forums such as the larger social networking sites (Myspace, Facebook) and online games (World of Warcraft, Eve Online). Finally, additional factors which were held constant in this study, such as the goals of the site’s sponsoring organization and rules of conversational conduct, should be manipulated. Attempts to classify civic engagement in the digital age are still in their infancy, and there is much theoretical and empirical work to be done. A well-founded conception of the role of technological design in enabling and constraining different forms of civic communication is critical to a complete understanding of youth civic engagement in the twenty-first century.

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