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Chapter · January 2012

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Digital Media and Youth Engagement

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Abstract

The landscape of political communication is undergoing fundamental change due to structural shifts in late modern societies and the widespread adoption of new digital communication technologies. These changes create new opportunities for young citizens to interact with information and organize action. We explore broad trends in three of the most prominent areas: (1) changes in information reception and consumption, (2) the emergence of content production and public position framing by and between citizens, and (3) the shifting nature of political action and engagement in the social media landscape. Adaptation to these changes is most visible among young people, who are both immersed in social technologies, and least committed to older patterns of citizenship and information-use.

Author Bios

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Introduction

The story of communication and civic engagement that has developed over the past century of political communication scholarship goes something like this. Civic engagement begins with attention to information that arouses interest in various forms of public life, ranging from community involvement, to concern about issues, to taking political action. The information that stimulates engagement may be communicated through issue framing in the news, candidate position-taking in election campaigns, or social movements demanding inclusion in such processes. The symbolic qualities of communication interact with properties of the social environment in which it is received to produce various effects: arousing or killing interest and attention, enabling or inhibiting public opinion formation, and facilitating or undermining political action.

In recent years, a new story about the nature of citizenship and engagement is beginning to take shape. The plot is centered on how young citizens use digital media. This emerging story of political communication and civic engagement involves changes in societies and communication technologies, and resulting changes in the nature of citizenship and political organization. In modern democratic societies that matured in the mid-to-late twentieth century, political communication tended to be organized institutionally around authorities using mass media channels to cue individual identifications with values embodied by parties, unions, churches, branches of government, movements, and the press (Lippmann, 1922; Zaller, 1992; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). Citizens of this era engaged with these public institutions out of a sense of duty or obligation (Schudson, 1998; Dalton, 2008; Bennett, 1998, 2008). Over the past several decades, these foundations of the civic engagement process have begun to change rapidly. Early adopters of

emerging civic styles tend to be younger citizens who have come of age in changing societies that have been described by various theorists as late modern (Giddens, 1991) or post-bureaucratic (Bimber, 2003). As mass social membership organizations and authoritative institutions decline in this late modern era, publics display less interest in seeking common information (Putnam, 2000). At the same time, individuals become more likely to join fluid networks organized by social technologies (Benkler, 2006). Among the resulting changes is that information sourced from elite gatekeepers (the core of the news) is becoming less credible, while compelling public communication based on different gatekeeping rules (e.g., crowd sourcing) and media formats (citizen produced multi-media content) flows horizontally over digitally mediated networks.

Underlying these changes in political communication are fundamental shifts in the norms and practices of citizenship itself. As identifications with institutions, conventional leaders and civil society organizations grow weaker, affiliations with personally motivating issues and causes produce new self-actualizing citizen motivation and action repertoires (Inglehart, 1997; Bennett 2008). These new generations of actualizing citizens often form loose networks for communication and action in a variety of political contexts using social technologies (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells and Rank, 2009; Bennett and Wells, 2009). These communication networks may result in large-scale collective action that can be channeled into conventional forms such as election campaigns or interest activism if the organizations coordinating such actions can redefine themselves around more loosely tied, entrepreneurial relationships with individuals (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2005; **Bimber in this volume**).

Efforts to understand the relationship between communication and engagement in such times of change have produced considerable differences among scholars. Some continue to use fading

modern-era civic norms to evaluate youth civic practices, often with a resulting focus on the

problems with youth disengagement such as (pre-2004) declines in voting, and continuing defi-

cits in political knowledge and news consumption (for a review, see Bennett, 2008; Bennett and

Wells 2009). Meanwhile, others recognize that the foundations of citizenship, communication

and political organization are changing, and that new patterns of engagement may be emerging

(Bennett, 2008; **Bimber in this volume**). The result is that there are two conflicting and not easi-

ly reconciled paradigms of communication and civic engagement. One civic paradigm is an-

chored in norms and practices of <u>dutiful citizenship</u> (DC) centered around the sense of responsi-

bility to serve one's community, become informed, and channel preferences to government

through parties and interest organizations. The emerging civic paradigm involves the emerging

norms and practices of <u>actualizing citizenship</u> (AC), which emphasizes new repertoires of politi-

cal action based on personal expression through social networks often using digital media (Ben-

nett, 2008; Bennett, Wells & Rank, 2009).

If we step back and look at the communication processes that are in play in these two civic

worlds, we also see coming clashes over some of the core assumptions about political communi-

cation itself. Many core models in the field are rooted in a fading era of mass media and media

effects based on strategic delivery of messages to large audiences. Research reveals growing au-

dience fragmentation and proliferation of information channels, resulting in various difficulties

(e.g., soaring costs and diminishing effects) associated with large scale information targeting.

One important trend here, among others, is the growing tendency for individuals to seek self-

affirming information. Scholars of political communication may need to pursue new and crea-

tive approaches to theorizing and studying "media effects" in this changing civic communication

environment (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, 2009).

This chapter offers an overview of what we see as the emerging foundations of civic engagement in this changing era of citizenship and politics. In particular, we contend that the image of a citizenry whose interaction with traditional public information involves passive consumption of top-down mass communication content no longer holds for most people under 30. This chapter examines an emerging era of citizenship defined by: a) new sources, channels and formats for civic information; b) changing patterns of public expression; and c) new communication-centered structures for the organization of action. The trends apply, with some variation, across many post-industrial democracies.

Thinking about shifting patterns of citizenship, communication and civic engagement requires some conceptual shorthand, such as the simple distinction between dutiful citizenship (DC) and actualizing citizenship (AC). Typologies risk over-generalizing about the memberships of their categories as though they were a uniform group. We do not wish to imply that all young citizens are civic actualizers who are adept with digital tools. This is far from the case. Nor do we imply that all older citizens hold a dutiful conception of citizenship, or that they are exclusively mass media users (although they dominate the graying and declining news audiences and they vote at higher rates). The two civic types are undoubtedly mixed, both within demographic groups and within individuals. However, younger citizens tend to adopt more actualizing civic and communication styles than their elders. The second danger of drawing too-clean distinctions is that there is a tendency to assume that all young people are 'digital natives,' easily tackling any task involving information technology. This is not the case (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). Livingstone

(2008) has noted that even young people deeply embedded in social networking sites may be unaware of basic options and functionalities within those environments.

With reference to the importance of these changes in citizenship styles, we explore three shifts in the dimensions of civic engagement related to communication We first consider the topic of **Becoming Informed** by looking at the shift from mass distribution of information to multiplying sources and channels, often selected through personal preferences, recommendation algorithms and friend networks. We next address changes in public expression by looking at **Participatory Media and Shared Content Production.** Citizens not only consume information differently, but in the process, they also participate in its production. Here we develop an understanding of the important shift from top-down framing of issues and cueing of publics to more bottom-up personal involvement in the production of public information and the shaping of opinion discourse. Finally, we examine **Social Media and the Organization of Political Action** by looking at the mobilizing potential of social media through the lens of how young people are connecting to politics—of various sorts—through emerging information technologies. This leads us to consider ways in which communication processes themselves constitute forms of political organization and action that involve networks not just as information channels but also as political structures.

Becoming Informed:

The Decline of News and the Proliferation of Other Information Sources and Forms

The cohort differences between teens and young adults, and older Americans in regards to news consumption are pronounced. While 35 per cent of older Americans read a newspaper every day, only 16 per cent between 18 to 30-years-old, and less than 10 per cent of those 12 to 17-years-old do (Patterson, 2007). For national and local television, as well as radio news, the trends spiral

downward similarly, indicating that each successive generation finds less meaning and use for traditional news (Patterson, 2007). Perhaps not surprisingly, these trends are also accompanied by declining trust and credibility in news. The perceived accuracy of the press is now at an all-time low, with only 18 per cent believing that the press deals fairly with all sides, and 29 per cent thinking journalists get the facts straight (Kohut, 2009). In fact, nearly half of 19 to 39-year-olds would not miss their local paper if it disappeared (Kohut and Remez, 2009). The story unfortunately is also much the same in other Western democratic nations, such as the UK, where a recent review finds that 18 to 24-year-olds tend to 'reject the news; find it boring/depressing; don't have time, and generally [are] uninterested in the news…' (Currah, 2009).

If audiences, especially the young, increasingly reject news, where do they turn for political information? Like adults, teens and young adults do get their news primarily from television, but younger Americans also increasingly turn to the Internet and their immediate social networks (Patterson, 2007). In fact, 40 per cent of Americans turn to the Internet for news (up 67 per cent from 2004). The long tail of the online news supply is dominated by a mix of conventional organizations (e.g., CNN), algorithm-driven aggregators (e.g., Google News), and local paper websites tailing off into blogs and listserves (Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Horrigan, 2006). In 2008, the Internet bypassed newspapers for the general public as the second-most important source of national and international news, and for young people, the Internet has nearly eclipsed television as well (Kohut and Remez, 2008). However, the problems of trust and credibility also persist online, with majorities finding online news no more informative, reliable, or trustworthy than its offline equivalent (Ahlers, 2006; see also: Melican and Dixon, 2008). One cautious point of optimism is that although audiences may be turning away from news, it is hard not to 'bump' into

news in the information-saturated mediascape (Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex, 2001), which happened to 50 per cent of Internet users during the 2004 presidential elections (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan, 2005). The flip side of this finding is that for young people, the majority who report consuming news online tend to bump into it accidentally on their way to other places, whereas most older online consumers actively it out (Patterson, 2007). This suggests that at best, online news is no more useful for young citizens than its conventional media versions. If the news itself is in free fall, are there other information sources that young citizens may be using?

Changing Civic Information Formats

Political satire and late night comedy programming are increasingly attractive to younger Americans, rivaling their consumption of mainstream news. Fully 21 per cent of those between 18 and 30 learned about candidates via <u>Saturday Night Live</u> and <u>The Daily Show</u> in 2004 (Pew, 2004), programs with more than 40 percent of viewers in the 18 to 29-year-old demographic (Pew, 2008). Beyond thousands of political jokes told annually by late night comedians (Niven, Lichter, and Amundson, 2003), the quantity of substantive information in <u>The Daily Show</u> with Jon Stewart and broadcast network news was, by at some measures, equal (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007). Moreover, comedy programming like <u>The Daily Show</u> seems to improve recognition and recall in young voters (Hollander, 2005), and political comedy audiences are among the highest consumers of traditional news (Young and Tisinger, 2006). However, satirical content such as <u>The Colbert Report</u> may fly over the heads of some young people, and may lower trust in government and media (Baumgartner and Morris, 2008). Whether such trust levels are well-founded is an interesting question, but the clear implication is that political comedy offers perspective lacking in conventional news, and may actually shore up flagging news consumption among younger citizens. An interesting research question involves the importance of access to

this program content online via Youtube, the Comedy Central site, and via links from email, blogs, and other sites.

Another area of interaction between news and alternative information formats is blogging, where majorities of those engaged routinely consume high levels of news (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). Scholars are still sorting out the relationships between blogging and journalism, the dynamics of which are clearly in play and changing rapidly (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, and Jeong, 2007; Wall, 2005; Lowrey, 2006; Messner and Distaso, 2008; Kenix, 2009; Carlson, 2007). What is clear, however, is that blogging is less a younger person's medium than political comedy (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Pew Internet, 2005; de Zúñiga et al., 2007). Indeed, where political comedy makes news somewhat palatable for young people, blogging is less effective.

<u>Whether it is put in perspective by comedy or blogs, it seems that the news itself is increasingly at odds with a participatory media culture that enables direct access to information that bypasses journalistic gatekeepers.</u> During the 2008 Presidential elections, 23 per cent of Americans got campaign information directly from candidate emails, 35 per cent from campaign videos, and 39 percent accessed primary documents and materials, such as position papers and speech tran-scripts (Smith and Rainie, 2008). Candidates and political elites have long used the Internet to communicate directly with constituents in the U.S. (D'Alessio, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2000) and in other Western democracies (Lusoli and Ward, 2005; Jackson and Lilleker, 2007). An important and growing format for direct consumption is online video, with 60 per cent of Internet users having viewed such videos. The figure for all categories of direct video consumption among 18 to 29-year-olds is 90 percent (Madden, 2007; 2009). In light of these trends, it is not surprising that election campaigns are changing their media strategies. In 2008, for example, the Obama

campaign posted over 1,800 video clips on <u>YouTube</u>, generating over one billion minutes of total viewership by election day (Delany, 2009).

These trends are clearly related to different ways of using communication technologies. More than half of 18-24 year olds are actively engaged by web 2.0 social technologies compared to just 8 percent of older Americans. However, interactivity alone does not seem to lead to increased news consumption. A study of young Finns found that interactive features did not increase engagement with content (Hujanen and Pietkainen, 2004). By contrast, providing political action options along with information may well increase online civic information use (Livingstone, 2003; Vromen, 2007; Chung, 2008).

These shifting forms and uses of information have been termed a new (digital) media culture by Dueze (2006) and Jenkins (2006a; 2006b; Jenkins et al., 2006), among others. This mediated civic culture is primarily defined by the characteristics of: participation (i.e., becoming active agents in processes of meaning-making), remediation (i.e., adopting, modifying, manipulating and reforming ways of understanding reality), and bricolage (assembling and sharing individualized versions of reality). In this context, past information forms such as news appear less relevant to younger AC citizens who see themselves playing a more active role in selecting, engaging, organizing, and acting with civic information. Indeed, it is hard to separate the consumption of information from its production and sharing in networked publics.

<center>**Public Expression:**</center>

<center>**Participatory Media and Shared Content Production**</center>

The emergence of participatory media such as blogs, online forums, streaming video, and social network sites (SNSs) allow for an impressive range of content production by non-technical end-users. These communication technologies have been used for making friends, coping with grief, and creating direct information flows about 9/11 and various natural disasters. For our purposes, they are interesting because they enable direct and often large-scale content creation and distribution by non-elite citizens, particularly younger demographics. Not only do these technologies lower communication costs and other barriers (Davis, 1999; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson, 2001), but they enable public discourses to be initiated by formerly excluded media populations (Bennett, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2006; Kann, Berry, Gant, and Zager, 2007). Although there is a great deal of research still needed on the qualities and effects of this participatory communication experience, we are beginning to see some general patterns.

Research on User-generated Civic Content

A 2009 survey found that of the 83 percent of 18-24 year olds who possess an SNS profile, two thirds had used it for at least one of the following political activities: discovering who their friends are voting for, posting political content, seeking candidate information, starting or joining a political group, and 'friending' political candidates (Smith, 2009; see also: Raynes-Goldie and Walker, 2008; Smith and Rainie, 2008). By contrast, young people continue to engage in the fewest offline political activities, defined as direct interactions with government, the mainstream media, or civil society (Smith et al., 2009).

One possible inference here is that expression trumps political action among young citizens. However little research has thus far addressed this important question. One study that examined SNS user artifacts was a content analysis of African-American-focused SNS Blackplanet (Byrne, 2007), which found that although the site hosted an abundance of civic discussion, it rarely led to offline civic action. One possible explanation here comes from our studies of a sample of 90 youth engagement websites in the U.S. grouped into four types: Online-Only (which have no brick-and-mortar counterpart, e.g. Youthnoise and TakingITGlobal), Government/Candidate (self-explanatory, e.g. Barack Obama.com and College Republicans), Community/Service (which emphasize youth development and leadership, e.g. the YMCA and Key Club), and Inter-est/Activist (which take stands on live political issues, e.g. the NRA and the Sierra Club). We found that those sites emphasizing actualizing citizen styles offered the highest levels of opinion expression opportunities, but were similar to dutiful citizen sites in terms of heavily managing action opportunities (Civic Learning Online project, 2009). There seems to be a disconnection in these online civic communities between enabling expression, yet managing action, a point we will return to in the next section.

Studies of the quality of online youth expression have generated a similarly ambiguous spectrum of findings. Feezel et al. (2009) analyzed user-generated posts to political group pages on Face-book, and found them to be high in opinion but low in new information and thoughtful discussion. By contrast, the results of Kushin and Kitchener's (2009) analysis of comments to a Face-book group on the issue of state-sanctioned torture portray a largely flame-free discursive environment in which cross-cutting debate flourished. In a link analysis of comments on the Face-book pages of candidates in the 2008 US presidential elections, Robertson, Vatrapu, and Medina (2009) observed that user-contributed hyperlinks served various political functions, including

opinion expression, evidence provision, argument rebuttal, encouragement of political engage-

ment, and candidate ridicule.

The state of research into user generated online video is similarly embryonic. Early studies

looked mainly at electoral content (Carlson and Strandberg, 2008) and youth civic engagement

effects (McKinney and Rinn, 2009). The 2009 conference 'YouTube and the 2008 Election Cycle

in the United States' (forthcoming as a special issue of the Journal of Information Technology

and Politics) began to set a research agenda in this area. Some papers explored YouTube as a top-

down communication channel used by electoral candidates (Klotz, 2009; Williams and Gulati,

2009), while others examined participatory content sharing such as viral videos (Boynton, 2009;

Wallsten, 2009) and election-related user-generated content (Ricke, 2009; Robertson, 2009).

However, both Boynton and Wallsten operationalize virality as cumulative views over time, thus

leaving unexamined the defining element of viral transmission: person-to-person sharing. On the

other hand, Ricke (2009) and Robertson (2009) addressed user-expression surrounding online

video, with the former concluding that the CNN/YouTube debates were highly inclusive of youth

and minority citizens, and the latter noting that Facebook users posted YouTube links to the can-

didates' Facebook walls (i.e. comment sections) in order to debate, support, and ridicule both the

candidates and each other.

In addition to SNSs and online video, web sites explicitly intended to foster youth political and

civic engagement have also attracted empirical attention (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, and

Philippi, 2008; Gerodimos, 2008; Livingstone, 2007; Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson,

2004; Raynes-Goldie and Walker, 2008; Civic Learning Online, 2009). As noted above, we studied the relationship between the type of citizenship targeted by various U.S. online youth engagement sites and the kinds of activities going on in those sites. One of our studies looked at the activity patterns associated with different affordances for user expression. We found an abundance of user-contributed content in each of the participatory features we investigated (discussion forums and user-created groups, blogs, and take action features). We also found that sites appealing to AC civic styles had far higher participation volumes than predominantly DC sites (Civic Learning Online, 2009). As noted above, however, this volume of expressive activity occurs in the context of fairly common limitations placed on the enabling of user-organized actions in these same environments. This tension between using social technologies to promote expression and at the same time limit more autonomous activism runs through the emerging literature on digital media and political action as indicated in the next section.

Social Media and the Organization of Political Action

Beyond information consumption and production, how do social technologies affect the quality of civic action? In an effort to cast a broad net, we consider research in three diverse areas of: electoral campaigns; traditional civil society organizations; and emerging political and quasi-political action in online gaming and networking environments.

Electoral Engagement

The American presidential election of 2008 was a watershed in the use of digital communication, exemplifying some of the important changes occurring in how young people relate to and participate in electoral processes. Those changes have significant implications for the way that political communication scholars understand the relationship between young citizens, candidates, and the ever more complex media environment.

Perhaps the most striking opportunity seized by various candidates, and particularly by Barack Obama, was the development of digitally-mediated relationships with constituents. This was facilitated both by his campaign's presence on mainstream SNSs—already heavily populated by potential supporters only a click away from friendship or supporter status—and by the creation of my.barackobama.com, an in-house networking environment with all the functionalities of a typical SNS, but all focused on helping Obama become elected. Within the established networking platforms Obama's support was robust throughout the campaign, and by election day he had some 840,000 MySpace friends, contrasted with McCain's 218,000, and almost 2.5 million Facebook supporters, compared with McCain's 623,000 (Techpresident, 2008). Across fifteen different networking platforms the Obama campaign networked some 5 million online supporters (Delaney, 2009).

The opportunity to create such an active and to some extent personalized relationship with candidates is clearly attractive to young citizens (see e.g. Xenos and Foot, 2008). Not only did Obama win 2-to-1 among young citizens, but his supporters were also more likely than McCain's to sign up for election alerts and volunteer activities online, give money online, share multimedia

messages, and send texts about the campaign to friends (Smith 2009: 9 and 78). In this light, the election of 2008 should mark a starting point for political communication scholars to begin reevaluating the possibilities of candidate-supporter relationships. Understanding the nature of changes in campaign communication strategies is also an important item on the research agenda (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, 2009).

It is likely that participatory media have raised citizen expectations about interacting with and contributing to campaigns, what Xenos and Foot (2008) describe as "coproductive interactivity" in campaign media environments. They suggest that this is both appealing to young citizens and rather terrifying for campaigns (Xenos and Foot, 2008). While such coproduction may create tensions inside campaigns and ultimately with supporters, a good deal of online participation by supporters occurs beyond the control of campaigns. Indeed, Obama benefited tremendously from unsolicited coproductive messages from supporters across the web. Independent videos such as "I've got a crush on Obama" (by web comedy troupe Barely Political) and "Yes We Can" (from pop star will.i.am) both received more online views than anything produced within the official campaign media environment. Similarly, the "Dear Mr. Obama" video from a returning Iraq veteran was viewed and shared far more than any official McCain campaign video. While suggesting that externally-created campaign media can boost participation, these often powerful supporter networks can also challenge the need of campaigns to shape their own media environments (Gueorguieva, 2008; Sifry, 2007).

In addition to changing the structure of candidate-supporter relationships, online engagement may introduce new dynamics into the polarization and fragmentation noted by observers of con-

ventional media (Prior, 2007). While some have argued that these problems are reproduced online (Sunstein, 2001), growing research results suggest more sanguine possibilities. In his study of the 2006 Netherlands General Elections, Utz (2009) found that social networking sites were more likely to expose politically uninterested citizens to candidates' pages than traditional websites. More generally, studies on interactivity have shown beneficial effects on citizens' sense of efficacy and knowledge of candidate issue stances (Tedesco, 2007; Warnick, 2005).

Civil Society and Government

In the classic formulations of civil society (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999), citizens make sense of the political world and their role in it through their activity in community and interest groups. As noted earlier, many scholars whom we have associated with the dutiful citizenship paradigm have expressed concerns about threats to conventional citizenship and participation due to the decline of these group memberships. However, other scholars are theorizing how bases for individual participation (that we associate with actualizing citizenship) are shifting away from long-standing institutional organizations to digitally mediated networked relationships (e.g. Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2005; Bernnett, 2008; see also **chapters by Bimber and Walgrave in this volume**).

Beyond these paradigm differences about the nature and forms of engagement, research on civil society is also important for understanding places and processes where citizens develop their civic skill repertoires, which include: communication and knowledge development, political organizing and understanding how to act in civic contexts. Among the most obvious places where such

socialization might occur are the schools. Yet formal civic education has appeared increasingly problematic, in part because adults who create curriculum may fail to understand the transition from DC to AC citizenship, and thus continue to promote civic standards that young people find to be out of touch with their lived political experience (Bennett, Wells and Rank, 2009; Syvertsen, 2007). It is also clear that school environments fail to develop some of the basic digital media skills that may be helpful for participation in online politics (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Rheingold, 2008; Livingstone, 2005).

Research on how online communities constitute virtual civil society experiences for young citizens suggests that these environments have been less than successful in anticipating the changes in youth citizen identities and participation preferences. In a qualitative study of several prominent youth civic engagement environments in the U.K., Coleman (2008) introduced a framework of managed and autonomous online communication experiences. Managed sites tended to carefully structure users' opportunities for interacting with the site, and limit their opportunities for defining the contours of that interaction; in contrast, more autonomous sites offered users considerable latitude to decide what topics they wanted to communicate about, and what form that communication would take, thus offering an experience more in line with young citizens' expectations of a Web 2.0 experience. Disappointingly, Coleman saw websites from government and traditional civil society organizations overwhelmingly offering managed experiences, while youth-built sites tended to be poorly resourced, and perhaps too starkly opposed to conventional engagement. There were few signs of more balanced civic options.

Similar patterns have been found in various studies in different nations. In a pioneering U.S. study, Montgomery and colleagues (2004) found that most sites were not taking advantage of interactive features, a state of affairs reconfirmed later by Bachen et al. (2008), who also noted the lack of active civic pedagogical techniques offered. Looking at youth mobilization sites from the U.K., Gerodimos (2008) similarly found low levels of the kinds of interactive connections to political processes likely to motivate young citizens to action. His conclusion was that there was an overemphasis among youth web site producers on "participationism (i.e. participation for participation's sake)" and too little awareness of the kinds of experiences that would productively lead young citizens to engagement and efficacy (Gerodimos, 2008: 983). These findings appear again in a study of youth engagement sites in seven European nations, suggesting that developers of youth sites tend to be promoting a model of engagement that is out of step with the civic and media preferences of young citizens (European Commission, 2007).

As introduced earlier, our work in this area has used the Dutiful-Actualizing citizenship framework to explore how the adoption of implicit citizenship models shapes the engagement opportunities offered by youth civic websites. Perhaps not surprisingly, we found that traditional civil society organizations such as government, parties, interest groups and community youth organizations displayed a high level of commitment to the Dutiful citizen model, to the exclusion of more Actualizing socialization possibilities in different areas of civic skills development (learning, expression, organizing, and action). Sites existing only in online form—with no formal ties to an offline organization—performed somewhat better by offering actualizing experiences with peer sharing of information and opportunities for user-generated expression, but when it came to opportunities to create groups and share action ideas they also tended to manage participation

rather than enabling much user-generated political networking and action planning. (For a description of methods and findings; along with the few notable exceptions to these patterns, see Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2008).

These rather discouraging findings call for improved conceptualization of the possibilities and elements of youth engagement through civic sites. The area seems to be dominated by an outdated style of citizenship (Bennett et al., 2008) and a hobbling degree of misunderstanding on the part of sites' producers about their intended audience (Livingstone, 2007). We need to develop a better understanding of why civic organizations have been so slow to embrace networked and interactive tools (Gerodimos, 20008), and there is a need for more research on what effects different online civic environments have on which youth (see, e.g. Raynes-Goldie and Walker, 2008).

Emergent Forms of Political Action

Beyond the conventional sites of political action, there are other online environments that offer fertile ground for the young people engaging in contentious action of a various forms. These range from collective action taking place in multi-player games (see, e.g., Jenkins, 2006a), to fan communities organizing to protest the corporate treatment of music stars and other cultural objects. Jenkins et al. (2006) see such 'participatory cultures' as defining elements of digitally networked society, and young citizens' participation in them as fundamental to their citizenship. Such young citizens are willing to jockey for opportunities to create and modify—not only con-

sume—culture, and in cases where that inclination has been in conflict with owners of cultural products' we have seen organizing that looks remarkably political.

Earl and colleagues (Earl and Kimport, 2009; Earl and Schussmann, 2008) argue for the political significance of such cultural contestation. They document the rise of online petition tools for conveying fans' appeals to corporations such as Sony BMG and Disney to change their practices—such as by modifying concert tour schedules or allowing copyright exceptions (Earl and Schussman, 2008: 71). In the context of young people's lives and the producer-consumer relationships of the digital age, they argue 'that it is useful to expand notions of civic engagement to include cultural contestation that attempts to redefine the relationship between corporations and consumers of their products' (Earl and Schussman, 2008: 74). The tools and networking strategies employed by those young activists are not substantially different from the new modes of 'conventional' collective action being theorized elsewhere (Bimber et al., 2005; see also **chapters by Bimber and Walgrave in this volume**).

Games involve another areas of civic life online that warrants more study. Although the civic virtue of online games may seem dubious for those operating with the DC paradigm, Jenkins (2006 a,b; Jenkins, et al., 2006) has argued for the civic importance of various forms of collective action within game environments such as World of Warcraft and the Sims Online. His description of gamers' affiliations with guilds, and their ensuing sense of personal responsibility to the welfare of the group—some staying up all night out of a sense of obligation to other group members (Jenkins, 2006b)—sound intriguingly like the kinds of civic experiences attributed to

offline community involvement. In at least one example, a young person took that personal responsibility to the next level, waging an in-game political campaign to become mayor of the Sims Online town (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Other point to forms of virtual organizing in online communities in which users have banded together to resist policies proposed by website owners and administrators. Benkler cites an example from the world of Second Life in which aggrieved participants staged a protest that would have been obviously political in any real world context—stacking tea crates around the Washington Monument to protest proposed 'tax' increases (Benkler, 2006: 75). Similar protests have taken place in World of Warcraft (Zackheim, 2005), Facebook, and Myspace (boyd, 2007). These quasi-civic experiences are occurring in the heart of the youth Internet experience: video games, which 97 per cent of 12-to17 year-olds report playing (Lenhart et al., 2008). What relevance gaming experiences have for more conventional political engagement is a critical question for empirical research. A pioneering study of the relation between games and civic orientations showed that playing games that encourage cooperation, address social issues, and involve playing with others, along with participation in online forums about games, are all predictive of higher civic outcomes (Kahne, Middaugh and Evans, 2008).

This discussion indicates that political communication scholars would also do well to consider the broadly changing contexts in which young citizens experience politics. Although by many of the conventional DC standards noted earlier, young citizens may seem disengaged. Yet, by emerging AC criteria such as peer knowledge sharing, participatory content creation, and invent-

ing alternative forms of political action, they may be doing just fine – and even changing the practical definitions of citizen engagement in the process.

Conclusion

This chapter opened with references to the profound changes in civic engagement brought about a century ago by the rise of strong civic institutions, a national press system, and the norms of dutiful citizenship as described by Lippmann and Dewey, among others. It remains to be seen whether the changes associated with the decline of this last civic era and the rise of a participatory digital media culture will be as fundamental as that earlier transformation of citizenship and engagement. Nonetheless, we believe that the evidence and research reviewed above makes a strong case for the significance of current shifts in patterns of citizenship and communication. Not surprisingly, these currents of change have triggered a number of normative concerns that need to become better integrated with empirical research.

Normative Concerns: Selective Exposure, Information Overload, and Digital Literacy

The emergence of a participatory media culture and the growth of new civic information practices have raised a number of key normative concerns for scholars. Perhaps the issue receiving the most attention is the possibility of attitude-reinforcing selective exposure and political fragmentation (Sunstein, 2001; Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Garrett, 2009; Graf and Aday, 2008; see also **Bimber in this volume**). Even subtle shifts in selective exposure can be significant, as online use of The New York Times compared to its paper version led to different public agendas due to audience selectivity (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2002). Moreover, the online news audience generally consumes less public affairs content when given greater choice (Tewksbury, 2003). Recent

investigations have also raised concerns about news recommendation engines (e.g., favoriting/rating and reading/sharing systems) and their consequences for audience attention (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, and Alter, 2005; Thorson, 2008).

Although evidence for selective exposure does exist, the normative implications are not always so clear. For example, many citizens sought alternative sources online that better fulfilled their standards for credibility during the early Iraq War years, but that is perhaps a good thing considering the lack of critical national press coverage at the time (Best, Chmielewski, and Kruger, 2005; Choi, Watt, and Lynch, 2006; Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston, 2007). Moreover, individual level selectivity is also not the only cause of selective exposure, as specialized content from news outlets is increasingly aimed at attracting selected demographics (Tewksbury, 2005).

Another area of normative concern is the possibility of information overload (Bawden and Robinson, 2009; Nordenson, 2008), and the lack of adequate skills to navigate the ever more cluttered mediascape (Chiang, Huang, and Huang, 2009). Compounding the skill question is evidence of stratified engagement with participatory media based on socioeconomic status, age and gender (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008). More optimistically, it has been demonstrated that socialization and education can help overcome the socioeconomic divide (Howard and Massanari, 2007), prompting scholarly calls for increased investment in digital literacy assessments (Hargittai, 2009) and digital skills development (Jenkins, et al. 2006; Rheingold, 2008).

A Research Agenda for Socially Networked Publics

Based on the rapidly growing scholarship noted above, several directions for future research can already be identified. The first of these might be called the politics of apolitical spaces—the emergence of political activity in online environments, from SNSs to games, which are not explicitly dedicated to politics. We need to learn more about why young people find these environments so attractive so that key elements can be transferred to more explicitly civic spaces. Research also needs to compare the nature of engagement in these spaces with more explicit political activity. One early study here suggests that apolitical spaces may host significantly more cross-cutting discussion than sites officially devoted to political news and commentary (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). A related issue in need of more investigation is that of public vs. private voice (Rheingold, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006)—the question of what audiences are being addressed by expression in different digital contexts. The greater the amount of youth political activity taking place in SNSs, the more important it becomes to ascertain whether youth are speaking to broad publics or only within closed friend networks. We may have to curb our enthusiasm about SNS political expression somewhat if research begins to indicate that young people are willing to discuss politics informally with people they know, but not with strangers they might disagree with. More research is also needed to compare online and offline civic activity. Numerous studies have classified various forms of conventional offline civic and political activity (e.g. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Zukin et al., 2006). Yet, few studies of online engagement offer guidelines for differentiating and comparing activities such as discovering which candidate their friends intended to vote for, starting/joining online political groups, and posting political content in SNSs (Smith and Rainie, 2008; Smith, 2009). Finally, we need to pay more attention to the qualities of the political content generated online. To what extent do we find ra-

tional-critical argument, evidence-free rants, calls to action, pointers to useful offsite content (Robertson et al., 2009), and how do we evaluate these characteristics?

While there is clearly a good deal of research potential ahead, we already see evidence of an emerging era of citizenship in which young citizens are taking advantage of opportunities to personally shape their information, expression and action environments. Civic institutions—from schools teaching civic education to political parties trying to mobilize voters—operate at their own peril if they continue to reflect only the older DC civic paradigm and fail to recognize and credibly communicate with emerging AC civic styles. The goal here is not to abandon one model of citizenship and communication for the other, but to find ways to balance them in everyday communication and action repertoires. And as young citizens persist in changing the way we communicate and act, the norms and structures connecting them to the political process will ultimately change as well. Recognizing and understanding these changes present exciting challenges for theory and research.

KEY TERMS: digital media and politics, youth engagement, citizenship, political socialization, civic engagement

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