

## ***MacArthur Online Discussions on Civic Engagement***

September 29 - October 13, 2006

Welcome to the online discussions in the MacArthur Series on Digital Media and Learning. The authors in the youth civic engagement volume have identified several challenging questions that seem essential for understanding the how digital media can facilitate civic engagement among young citizens. We have invited a group of experts to join this discussion which occurred on Google Groups between September 29 and October 13, 2006.

(<http://groups.google.com/group/civic-engagement/about/>)

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## **Question # 1 Changing Political Orientations of Young Citizens**

**Lance Bennett:**

To what extent should we be concerned that young people are less inclined than earlier generations to engage with former touchstones of citizenship such as voting and following news about public affairs? If these shifts should concern us, how might online experiences better link young people to credible information and satisfying participation opportunities?

Question Posted September 29, 2006

**Lew Friedland**

Glad you have started with an easy question, Lance.

I think there are two broad answers to this question shaping up right now. Both recognize that traditional civic engagement among young people by any reasonable measures (voting, membership in formal civic organizations, news attention) is declining (with the exception of volunteerism, addressed below).

One side understands this as a crisis. The rising generations (x, y, z? then what?) will fail to replace the activity of the previous civic generation and its boomer offspring (itself not so good). One answer, among others, is increased service-learning, youth voting campaigns, and a variety of measures designed to restimulate more traditional forms in current generations. The other says that this is a fundamental lifestyle shift, linked to the rise of new forms of networked individualism, made possible by an almost permanent life online.

I think the difficulty in framing this problem is the truth on both sides. There is a tendency in what I will shorthand as the traditional side to not recognize the fundamental changes in lifestyle, or to see them as part of the problem that can, somehow, either be transcended by acts of civic will, essentially urging current and future generations to act in more civically and publicly engaged ways. Or to moralistically bemoan this fact with few solutions. But the traditionals do recognize that in a functioning legitimate democracy (would that we had one) citizens do need to vote, follow news, and that solidarity with fellow citizens in some form is necessary.

Some on the other side engage in a kind of nominalism that tends to dissolve the problem. Online networks can replace older forms of place-based solidarity. Volunteerism, much more amenable to the lifestyle of networked individualism, with its ease of entrance and exit, can substitute for longer term commitments, including politics. But the strength this position is that, at minimum, it recognizes the irreducible fact that the networked lifestyle based on loose connections really does represent not just a media shift but generational-based shift in lifeworld that will as fundamentally shape the lives of future generations as the farm and factory did the civic generation and the shift to post-industrial work shaped the boomers. This is a core truth of all efforts to wrestle with this question, and no amount of back to the future exhortation can change it.

One further aspect of the current situation that affects both sides of the question. Ulrich Beck's work on risk, or in a more grounded American vein, Jacob Hacker's *The Great Risk Shift* or Tamara Draut's *Strapped* ( or just daily life in America) demonstrate that much of the relative social and economic stability that underpinned the long civic generation from the progressive era to the sixties has systematically been undermined. We haven't thought very well about the political economy of civic engagement, the relationship between social structure, economy, and, most important, the relative stability of the lifeworld, on propensities for civic engagement. Understanding the risk-society allows us to frame the question a bit differently: why, under conditions of enormous pressure to get into college (and a "good" one for the middle classes), to find a decent job, to find affordable housing, to pay off debt, and so on, would we expect Gens X, Y, and Z to be as engaged as previous generations? This begins to explain the powerful coupling of networked individualism and risk that, I think, defines the present.

A few first thoughts.

Lew

### **Raji Hunjan**

Hi. Here's my contribution. Its one of those questions that can be answered in so many different ways. Here's my answer today, might say something different tomorrow....

We should be concerned that young people are less inclined to take part in more traditional forms of democratic practice such as voting, in as much as this behaviour suggests that there should be a much deeper concern about the state of our current political systems. It is a system in which individuals are often perceived to be corrupt, institutions not to be trusted and the whole process to be elitist and only talking to the few. In theory, (and sometimes in practice) representative democracy should be one of the most effective ways to ensure the views of those that most need to be heard. Participatory forms alone can often be excluding.

So the challenge isn't really about how online experiences can lead to young people taking an interest in activities like voting, but more about how those with power can use online tools to prove that they are willing to listen to and share some of that power with young people. At the moment, I see how online experiences can make young people

enter into a dialogue with other citizens, but I don't see how in our current system, there is real opportunity for young people to influence those with decision making power.

Raji (in London, its raining)

### **Michael X. Delli Carpini**

Let me start by agreeing with the central points made by Lew and Raji. Simplifying their arguments a bit, Lew is correct that there are generally two camps - "traditionalists" who lament the decline in electoral participation by young people, and "new activists" who at least implicitly see electoral participation as over valued and believe the (presumed) new forms of on-line civic engagement is preferable. And Raji is correct that to the extent the decline in electoral participation among young people is happening, a good part of the fault lies with the established parties, candidates, etc., who fail to reach out (in old or new ways) to young voters.

So what can I add to this? For starters, I do see a reason for concern that young adults follow politics in the news less and are less engaged in "traditional" political behavior (despite the uptick in voting in 2004). One need only look at the consequences of the 2000 and 2004 elections to see that electoral politics still matters. I also agree however that voting is not the only way to participate in politics, and the traditional news is not the only way to become informed. I think new information technologies have the potential for doing several things: provide useful and useable information in forms more likely to be attractive to young people; provide ways to motivate and engage young people in politics; provide ways for young people to organize and be organized; cut some of the costs of participation; etc. But before speculating too much on how this might happen, we need a much better, thicker description of what is happening now. How (and how much) are young people using new media in ways that might reasonably be called "political" or "civic"? Is it really so different from more traditional approaches? Does the distinction between civic and political hold up? Does "virtual participation" enhance or detract from more traditional forms of participation and engagement. I'm not convinced we have good, systematic answers to these questions.

### **Howard Rheingold**

Of course, disengagement from the political process isn't confined to youth. Others besides the young regard the political process as corrupted, and political leaders to be

distant and not interested in what ordinary citizens have to say. But any constituency can activate when an issue it cares about comes along -- witness the youth self-organization of classroom walkouts and street demonstrations around proposed immigration legislation. Also, it's possible we're looking through the wrong lens and/or in the wrong directions to gauge the way today's youth are engaging with civil society. Skelton and Valentine looked at youth political activism and argued that "when young people's action is looked for, rather than focusing on what they are not doing, it becomes clear that even groups of young people traditionally assumed not to be active social agents are in fact demonstrating forms of political participation and action"

Skelton, T., & Valentine, G. (2003). "Political participation, political action and political identities: Young D/deaf people's perspectives," *Space and Polity*, 7(2), 117-134.

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### **Cathy Davidson**

As a historian of technology, I find myself antsy when "young people" (in any era) are judged to be more or less of one thing or another. This level of evaluation and generalization brings out the contrarian in me. In fact, I was quite delighted by a piece that came out this morning with the headline "Teens Tune Into News on the Internet, Knight Foundation Study Shows." If 66% of high school students get their news and information from the news pages of internet portals, 45% from national TV news websites, 34% percent from local tv or newspaper web sites, 32% from blogs, and 21% from national newspaper sites, that's probably comparable to previous generations as well as to older citizens at the present time. Even if this survey turns out to have flaws, I am glad to have the time to pause and consider why we are so invested in narratives of juvenile decline? (If I am going to be a real curmudgeon here, I would say that, given the quality and nature of most national news media, I would actually be happier if teens were more not less skeptical of standard news sources. I would much rather find fault with the producers of news than with the young consumers if I am going to point a finger anywhere.)

Now the second part of this question--how might online experiences better link young people to credible information and satisfying participation opportunities--is one that interests me profoundly. Not because I believe there has been a decline but because I think we have a unique opportunity to take advantage of peer-to-peer sites for creative, imaginative, activist learning purposes. That is a lot harder mission than critiquing the young. It requires working with youth as prosumers---producers and consumers of better media sources than are currently available in conventional media. How do we do that? Clearly, one project, one goal, one objective at a time. I don't need to tell anyone that it is a monumental task (as is any form of educational reform), but it seems a worthier goal

than castigating the youth for going astray. The serving girls and lads who bought the bestselling novel during the tumultuous era after the American Revolution, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, were said to be falling into ignorance, illiteracy, asociality, licentiousness, violence, and class warfare (all of that!). I would say, by contrast, that early cheap fiction (aided by the radical new peer-to-peer institution of the late eighteenth century: the circulating library) helped contribute to an alternative valuation of literacy and citizenship than that [of privileged, propertied, white elite Founding Fathers] afforded by the U.S. Constitution. I do not know what analogies exist in the current era but I want to be attuned to what youth themselves say about the alternative forms of learning and social networking afforded by Web 2.0.

### **Zephyr Teachout**

It's hard to answer this question without saying first what I hope for in citizenry:

A culture in which people take responsibility for political decisions which are made in their behalf.

A culture in which citizens meaningfully and truthfully can access political power, even in small groups

And lots of other things.

Participation as measured in political volunteerism, reading the news, voting, and other activities are necessary shortcuts in measuring these things, but not the things themselves.

Should we be concerned?

Of course. Democracy requires constant concern and tending. Here are some of my concerns of the day, from Burlington VT (where it is also raining). They apply more to "young people" than everyone else only because that is the topic at hand, and because, as William James says, "Habit is the great flywheel of society" and these habits will define our habits for a long time, whereas those of us either older or raised by prudish New Englanders developed different habits, and because, relatedly, education is always at the heart of any serious questions of democracy, starting with Plato:

- A globalized economy, enabled in part by the internet, makes it much more difficult for individuals to have meaningful political power outside of revolutionary times. The scale is too big -- the decisions of the NC legislature matter less, relatively, than they did before. Regardless of the positive effects, regardless of the media environment, people are much less likely to take responsibility when they have less relative power. (see Frank Bryan's powerful decade-long studies of attendance and involvement in town meetings -- size was the single largest factor, following by whether or not there was an important decision.)
- Relatedly, I think its hard to know what information is critical to be a good citizen in a globalized economy.
- A media culture in which everything is available create enormous opportunities, but makes subsidies for public information and public speech very difficult, as there is no

assurance that anyone will go there. The great downside of the internet is that because everything is available there, it is much harder to make PUBLIC choices about what we prefer, as opposed to private choices. I think there are great values in public choices – and yes, I mean regulation and subsidies -- where we choose to limit our own opportunities in the service of the collective health of the culture.

- A media culture in which gaming and entertainment is addictive and powerful and heavily funded makes it far more difficult for most of us humans to read extensively. A short attention span, making some kinds of thinking better, but also making deliberative, careful, conversations harder. A media culture in which language has a fairly limited and unpoetic range. A culture in which the dominant metaphor is the market. A culture in which I'm allowed to use these short sentence fragments without explaining what I mean.
- I am recently (as of today) enamored of an idea (anyone want to write an article with me?) that questions of healthy eating and questions of meaningful political information are very similar. How do we get people to eat what is healthy for them that they, in fact, claim they want to eat, but are so overwhelmed by desire and marketing that they don't? Same question goes for the internet and information, a lot of the time. Getting the Governor of Arkansas to read credible information online isn't going to do much more than getting him to go on a diet, though both are helpful. This is not an exact concern itself, but a way to think about the concerns.

How might online experiences better link young people to credible information and satisfying participation opportunities?

I am completely perplexed by these questions, but here are some thoughts.

1) On Credible information:

Education seems critical for this. Early, sustained media education, with a strong moral sentiment that information must be credible. The Internet is full of credible information, and full of incredible information, and full of degrees of credibility, and full of falsehoods. We need a strong moral position that credible information is all that should be used in polite conversation, and then the training to back that up. E.g. – if Wikipedia continues to thrive, understanding how to test it before citing it is important.

I think we should actively subsidize public media much more, with the basic assumption that any media you subsidize will be largely moving online in the next decade. I think we might want to think of ways that the fairness doctrine can apply to entertainment outlets, or to all online outlets with more than x traffic and more than x dollars (as a stand-in for broadcast rights) (fairness doctrine in its best formulation, requiring outlets to cover controversial issues and to allow rebuttals and equal time).

On satisfying political experiences:

I know what you're getting at, but still, the language of "satisfying" seems off to me. Hmm. If we try to lure young people in with "satisfying" experiences either they won't come, or they will, but our whole approach – of trying to satisfy them – will already be sabotaging our goal, which is creating a culture of responsibility.

That said, I think some of the earlier thoughts were just right – we need to create ways in which people can meaningfully engage in debate and meaningfully impact public policy. The meaningfully is critical here. In the past, the fora for mere citizens were the Moose Club and other mediating institutions – including political parties and unions – that enabled debate not directly with representatives (too unweildy, even in the days of the less-populated yore) but with others, who would decide what issues were worth taking to the representatives. (See *Diminished Democracy*, Theda Skocpol, for a great history of these not-always benign but always fascinating institutions).

So yes, members of Congress and others should meaningfully open up debate (which I've rarely seen) online. Its easy to have a "conversation" that is not a conversation. We should follow Estonia (aka, E-Stonia)'s lead and create places (TOM) where legislation can be deliberated upon online prior to going to the Congress, we should ask MOC to put all legislation online before they vote on it, and we should ask them to record their votes, and the federal government should be searchable, flexible, and open.

But most importantly, we should cultivate the growth of new online/offline voluntary civic associations, where people can come together for that mix of social and political and selfish that is so critical to meaningful engagement. Howard is right that it happens spontaneously sometimes, but the most powerful associations are those that are persistent – and we somehow have to support these persistent communities, so they can be the mediating institution that allows for a check on party and hierarchical media control.

PS:

I agree with Cathy that the important question is not relative, but absolute. The concern – which I have – is not that young people are less inclined, but that they are not very inclined. I would be just as concerned if the last three generations had the same habit. Its a small point, but rhetoric matters, and as much of a luddite as I might like to be, I think framing anything in terms of innocence lost creates a confusion about our aspirations – do we want to be more like we were, or do we want to be better than we are?

I think we want to be better than we are. Given the technology, we have to figure out a way to use it that enables meaningful citizenship. We aren't going to wish it away -- I happen to think the challenges are greater in a connected world than in a pre-connected world, but that is largely irrelevant – the fact is that there are challenges and we must face them, and that there are new opportunities and we must use them.

### **Yochai Benkler**

1. It would be helpful to me if someone were to point to the studies that show "that young people are less inclined than earlier generations to engage with former touchstones of citizenship such as voting and following news about public affairs?" In particular, it would be important to see studies that showed that people who are of age n (let's say, 16, or 22, or 25, whatever) were more engaged, knowledgeable, citizens in 1993 than they were in 2003. Because if we are talking about the effects of the Internet, then that is the

relevant comparison, not a comparison between periods when the parents were in the proverbial (or actual) bowling leagues and a period when the parents themselves were reputedly bowling alone. I'm not trying to be argumentative. I am genuinely interested in seeing the studies. Our experience with all the studies about the ways in which the Internet is fraying social ties should make us wary. We did, at least as of now, seem to learn time that these studies were mostly overhyped and emphasized in media reports because they fed into an anxiety as old as the anxieties about the loss of Gemeinschaft forms of association.

2. Here's a link to the Knight Foundation report Cathy mentioned:

[http://www.jideas.org/survey\\_update2.pdf](http://www.jideas.org/survey_update2.pdf) here are key findings etc.

[http://www.jideas.org/report92206\\_kf.html](http://www.jideas.org/report92206_kf.html)

It's interesting that the survey results, at least, seem oriented toward mainstream, "straight" news. For example, take the following sentence structures: "But despite their reliance on traditional news sources, nearly half of high school students say they also get news and information from entertainment programs like The Daily Show and others at least once a week." and ""When teens say they follow 'news,' sometimes they are talking about The Daily Show, but more often than that they're talking about the news pages of Google and Yahoo! – and they may even be talking about CNN.com or MSNBC.com," Newton said."

The descriptions suggest that the alternative sources: like The Daily show or Google News are not quite as good as CNN or the TV news, but still at least they're getting something. Of course, this would mean that kids getting their news from Fox News would be considered "serious." All things considered, I think getting your news from the Daily Show makes you a more critical, thinking, and engaged citizen than watching most news shows, from the morning news to the local news, and perhaps beyond. Watching hours of reports about local crime, and balanced coverage of the presidency does not make for a more engaged citizenry than watching Jon Stewart. More important yet, perhaps I am biased by the fact that in my own news use patterns, I find Google News to be more useful than going to one paper, because I get a much wider range of papers to look at, from different countries and perspectives. another finding is that kids use multiple sources, including blogs, and they are aware and critical enough to have, on average, less trust in blogs. This is good. My hope would be that they are also losing their respect for CBS/NBC/ABC and the New York Times. Refusing to respect the authority of media is good for democracy. Citizens who learn not to trust any report they hear until they investigate deeper are also known as critical readers.

A different point is that the survey seems to emphasize ranking of different sources as opposed to overlap. The cultural patterns of Internet usage are of redundancy. Not one paper, or one news show, but several different sources, of different types and forms.

Reading newspapers becomes investigation, not a search for an authoritative voice. If this is true, and I do not know of any empirically study that shows that it is--this is speculation--this would bodes well for the citizenry.

3. At the risk of throwing around anecdotes, I think it is important to look at several instances of young people's mobilization.
  - a. Howard already mentioned the kids' mobilization around immigration. There is a certain elegant recursiveness to looking at those through this site: <http://youthradio.org/politics/immigrationindex.shtml>
  - b. Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture*, describes the mobilization of Harry Potter fans in high school and below, around concerns that Warner would shut down their efforts to write a newspaper (they were running an online version of *The Daily Prophet*. <http://www.dprophet.com/>
  - c. The kids over at Free Culture, <http://freeculture.org/about.php>, don't seem to have any difficulty acting politically, on a global scale.
  - d. The kids at Universities Allied for Essential Medicines also seemed to have missed the memo about lack of political engagement in today's youth. <http://www.essentialmedicine.org/about.php>

I know, this is just a string of anecdotes. Maybe these kids in the fields I happen to work in are insanely unrepresentative of today's youth. That is very possible. But because I do work in these fields I see these kids, I speak to them, and I fail to see their lack of engagement.

One last point. Not in the Pew blogging study, [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/186/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/186/report_display.asp), the following data points:

1. 54% of bloggers are under age 30.
2. 29% say they blog to motivate people to action as a major reason, and another 32% as a minor reason.
3. 27% give a major reason as "to influence the way people think" and 24% give this as a minor reason.
4. 1/3 see what they are doing as a form of journalism. that's political engagement.

### **Cathy Davidson**

Yes, I will add another pathetically anecdotal comment: when HASTAC kicked off its first In|Formation event this Thursday night with a hip hop dance for Durham and Urbana middle schoolers (with the VJ'ing in Illinois and the sensor-space interactive hip hop music in North Carolina), we intended to introduce kids to science and technology as well as to civic-sponsored, citizen-activist broadcasting about the Katrina disaster. (It's a four-day conference, part of our year of distributed and webcast events on humane and activist technologies.) Everyone who spent time with the kids was surprised at how much (not how little) they knew about Katrina, partly because many of the kids identified themselves as from the same population as the people suffering in Katrina. This made me wonder again about the stratification of information v. the homogenization of news on traditional media. I agree with Yochai that I'd rather have kids getting news from the Daily Show or one another's blogs than from Fox News. And I agree with Zephyr that nostalgia is not and should never be a political goal of the old (if I might turn the tables for a moment). do we want to be more like we were, or do we want to be better than we are? do we want to be more like we were, or do we want to be better than we are? She

said it beautifully: we don't want to be more like we were. Want to be better than we are.

### **Ulises Mejias**

While I agree that we should not use previous models to judge today's emerging models of political participation, I would argue that what is at stake is not whether new practices are political or not--after all, even the alleged "non-participation" of teens is political--but what kind of politics these new practices are shaping. If voting and reading the newspaper are deemed antiquated forms of civic participation, what kind of public sphere is being created by new forms of participation such as blogging, news aggregating, etc.?

To ask this is to express not only a concern about the effect of new technologies, but to question the nature of democracy itself. C.W. Mills painted a tongue-in-cheek picture of what the democratic process looks like from a naive perspective:

"The people are presented with problems. They discuss them. They decide on them. They formulate viewpoints. These viewpoints are organized, and they compete. One viewpoint 'wins out.' Then the people act out this view, or their representatives are instructed to act it out, and this they promptly do. (The Power Elite, pp. 299-300)"

If we were to take this simplistic description at face value, it would be easy to argue that new media improves the democratic process by removing ossified political structures, cutting out the middle man, and rejuvenating the architecture of participation. Direct Democracy 2.0. But what makes Mills' description a caricature is the complete absence of power dynamics. Where, in other words, are the lobbyists, the biased judges, the power-hungry politicians?

Feenberg (2002, *Transforming Technology*) argues that there is no such thing as technology in itself, but only technical elements constantly being shaped by 'participant interests.' The exact same thing can be said about democracy. Despite the narrative of an unchanging code or constitution, democracy is actualized at every moment by the interests of those who participate in it (it seems our President is doing a good job these days to remind us that the constitution can be molded according to the particular interests of the day).

So the question is: what participant interests mold democracy's new architecture of participation? Unfortunately, I don't see much difference between the old and the new in this regard: the participant interests are influenced too much by market capitalism. When everyone is a producer in these 'new' economy, when the demand side supplies itself (as Doc Searles puts it), it just means that production is the new consumption. Yes, there are important alternative spaces, but as the Pew study that Yochai cites points out, while a minority is interested in exploiting these uses for pro-social political action, the majority of users are content to view the technologies as means of individual expression (articulated through consumer "choices").

But enough about my rants. What is to be done? We should be less concerned about designing technologies that will afford young people "satisfying participation opportunities" and more concerned about ensuring that new generations can question and challenge the opportunities that are "offered" to them. The goal--for young people as well as for us ol' farts--should be the self-critical individual. Cathy talks about teens being "more not less skeptical of standard news sources." Yochai argues that "refusing to respect the authority of media is good for democracy." Perhaps we should strive to ensure that young people can also refuse to respect the authority of us technologists. Zephyr asks: "what information is critical to be a good citizen in a globalized economy?" As technologists, we seem to be interested in how this information should be delivered and acted upon. As soon as we attempt to determine that for younger generations, perhaps we are one step further away from democracy.

Sorry if I've gone off tangent ;-)

Cheers,

Ulises (nice and sunny in Ithaca)

<http://ideant.typepad.com>

### **Barry Joseph**

I have enjoyed reading responses to the first question. I think I only have two things to add to this discussion.

Global Kids, where I worked, has spent 17 years advocating for the role of young people, particularly teenagers from low-income backgrounds, in foreign policy debating arenas. For example, our teens run a monthly event at the Council on Foreign Relations, in NYC. But whether we look at 1989 when we were founded or today, adults always come at our work with the delighted surprise that young people would care to know about what is going on in the world and would spend their time doing anything about it. And these are the "good" people. The response that follows is the presumption that we attract a "special" group of youth, the high achievers, the Model UN type, top-graders. And sure, we do attract those type. But we also attract teens who are failing out of school, have no vision for their future, and can barely read and write.

My point? That the common "narratives of juvenile decline" around civic issues reflects less reality than our own anxiety about our inability to connect and communicate with youth. Why do youth come to Global Kids programs to develop leadership skills around Global Issues? Because adults treat them with respect. Because they get an opportunity to have a voice and learn from their peers. Because they can learn about these issues in a way that is fun, interactive, and experiential and take on a public leadership role as their advocate.

More often than not, tradition politics designed for youth simply mimics the adult-version of the program - let's call it Kid Lite. When I took teens to the UN World Conference Against Racism, in South Africa, the teens got to participate in the "official" youth summit. It was a disaster. A not-unexpected revolt by teens challenged the entire process, which was led by UN-picked teens who knew little more than to follow the procedures and structures used by their adult mentors. Teens refused to participate. Some who had travelled from half way around the world decided to leave and go home. A remarkable opportunity was wasted since it was not designed to be Kid Lite, rather than what I might just call youth-friendly, which is often an approach that makes many adults uncomfortable.

We may only see the seeds now in place, but the civic engagement online has the potential to create formalized means of engaging youth, but doing so in a way that is youth-friendly, that feels less like the UN General Assembly and more like a youth development program like Global Kids. I suspect the features I described about why teens are attracted to Global Kids are also some of the more powerful aspects of new media.

The second point I wanted to raise is that as online spaces become seen as less "virtual" and instead just another feature of our social sphere, like, say, a telephone conversation, the more online spaces will be viewed as valid and new locations of civic engagement. But until then, emerging forms of youth engagement in these spaces will be devalued and dismissed as less relevant, or ONLY relevant if the experience transfers to the "RW" (real world).

Barry

**Ed Gragert**

Hello Everyone,

I'm honored to be part of this discussion.

>> To what extent should we be concerned that young people are less inclined than earlier generations to engage with former touchstones of citizenship such as voting and following news about public affairs?

Like some of you, I am not convinced that this is actually true, but rather a perception among politically active adults like us who look back at our own youth, which was characterized by interest and activity in civic issues--both nationally and internationally. Of course, this is just a perception on my part too because I have not seen the data over generations to make the comparisons.

When I think of this question, I think back, not so much on my own experience, but on that of the friends I had at high school who were mostly into music, what they would do on Friday night and what clothes they should or should not be wearing. Perhaps I go back further than most of you, but in the early-to-mid 1960s, there was not a lot of

community engagement prior to college. Some of us (about 10 perhaps) were involved in the Johnson/Goldwater campaign--but we were a tiny minority. Out of a graduating class of 500, I would estimate that maybe 10% were actively engaged in reading news, community service, and we were not voting because we couldn't vote at 18 in those days. Out of that same graduating class there were only six of us who applied to participate in an international exchange experience.

Our work over the past 18 years has been to create online opportunities for young people (ages 5-18) to engage in international dialogues and action. I actually see a much different interest level and pattern of community engagement than what is reflected in our first question. But, that too is anecdotal and skewed because our network is voluntary and students come in via a youth organization leader or teacher--who, by definition and self-selection sees value in international engagement. In this atypical youth sample the indicators that I look for are the topics that students choose to discuss--when they are not part of a structured online project. In this context, they are typical teens.

What I see is that about 50% is about music, movies, how to make friends, etc.--things that were on my list in 1966 as well. But the other 50% is about the environment, the war(s), solidarity at times of natural disasters, about cultural differences, national and ethnic stereotypes, religious differences and practices--things that most in my generation did not discuss much at all.

What I see in iEARN is the creation of online communities in which young people who share common interests and concerns are finding each other on a level never imagined when I was their age. The six of us who had an interest in going abroad were isolated in our small Washington State community and had no way of connecting with like-minded others.

Like Barry, we see young people engaged in new ways with their new virtual and physical communities.

One initiative in New York City is called YouthCaN (Youth Communicating and Networking). It is a youth-run environmental networking project between iEARN and the American Museum of Natural History. This voluntary after school initiative brings together young people who have an interest in affecting environmental change in their urban setting. They are not sent as part of a school requirement or course. What keeps them active and growing as a group is the community that they have created online and through community hikes and actions, shared virtually with others worldwide who share their passion. They then go on to use connective technologies to organize one of the world's largest youth-run events, bringing together 5,000 other young people in physical events in different countries to share what's happening and what's possible when they educate each other and act collaboratively.

How typical are they? I have no idea, but would love to have the kind of empirical data that others have called for.

Ciao,

Ed

**Jennifer S. Earl**

Yochai's comment about the actions of young Harry Potter fans foreshadows part of the next question that Lance is likely to offer, and a major theme from Alan Schussman's and my chapter in the volume. We argue that before certifying some crisis in youth civic engagement, it is worth looking around at how youth do express their concerns, and allowing for the possibility that are a lot of kids who are learning how to be engaged through organizing around the failings of their XBox relative to their expectations (just as Barry and others point out that some kids are learning about engagement through more standard political concerns). Of course, these kids may eventually bring that engagement-related skill set to bear on other issues, perhaps issues we adults care about more than the XBox.

I think the growing importance of consumerism as a core part of American's daily lives, and the growth of "prosumers," is also important, because as Alan and I argue, it is likely that kids will organize around consumer products if much of their daily life involves using, building, and re-configuring those products.

By way of closing, I have enjoyed everyone's commentary on this question.

Cheers,

Jenn

**Peter Levine**

This conversation is off to a great start. I fully agree that a story of decline is unsatisfactory, for the following reasons that have already been proposed:

1. The narrative of decline overlooks creative developments, often led by youth, that may be building the foundations of civil society in the 21st century.
2. The decline story overlooks ways that various subpopulations engage on issues of special concern to them. For example, African American youth may be well informed about Katrina. (NB: African American youth are generally more politically engaged than White American youth, across the board).
3. It overlooks certain positive trends in youth engagement, such as a steep rise in the volunteering rate in the US.
4. It focuses narrowly on youth, without recognizing that many declines in participation are evident among all age groups.

5. It treats a withdrawal from major institutions (such as elections and the press) as a decline, when these trends may actually reflect growing sophistication. Perhaps youth are deliberately and wisely choosing not to endorse forms of participation that are flawed.

The last point underlines the fact that “civic engagement” is a deeply normative concept. It is impossible to decide whether recent trends in engagement are good or bad--or important or meaningless--without developing a full-blown political theory.

I think that there is a problem with youth civic engagement, but it is not located inside young people’s heads. Institutions are also at fault. Telling young people to participate in bad institutions is mere propaganda. On the other hand, young people need to be taught and encouraged to take part in reform efforts and other aspects of politics. Political participation does not come naturally, nor do powerful institutions have incentives to encourage it. In short, we must prepare citizens for politics, but also improve politics for citizens.

From my perspective, several trends in youth civic engagement are troubling. These trends are symptoms of institutional failure, poor civic education, and cultural forces that work against democratic participation.

Below I provide selected survey results for US residents, age 18-25. (Apologies to our non-US colleagues for this parochial focus.) To generalize, I think they show:

1. A decline in face-to-face, local participation—except volunteering. This decline precedes the rise of the Internet. The increase in volunteering is often attributed to service programs and requirements in high schools and colleges.
2. A big decline in all forms of election-related participation and protest until 2004, when there was a substantial increase.
3. A big decline in interest in the news and public affairs, accompanied by falling trust in the press--both of which occurred before the rise of the Internet. (I would blame the press, rather than youth, for this trend.)
4. A big decline in trust for other people, but no change in beliefs about government’s responsiveness. (Also, young adults are somewhat more confident in the government than their elders)

#### I. Participation in civil society, mostly local

Attend a club meeting (DDB Life Style survey): down from 49% in 1976 to 23% in 2005, with most of the decline in the 1980s.

Member of at least one organization (General Social Survey): down from 63.5% in 1976 to 54% in 2004

Work on a community project (DDB) down from 29% in 1976 to 21% in 2005. (The decline among older people is much steeper.)

Volunteer (DDB): UP from 39% in 1976 to 41% in 2005

Membership in extracurricular school groups such as student governments, school newspapers, and music clubs: down between 1972 and 1992, according to four waves of federal adolescent longitudinal studies.

## II. Social trust

Believe that other people are generally honest (DDB): down from 64% in 1976 to 38% in 2005, with most of the decline in the 1980s.

Believe that most people can be trusted (GSS): down from 37% in 1976 to 25% in 2004

## III. News consumption/interest

Follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time (National Election Survey): Down from 24% in 1976 to seven percent in 2000, then slightly up to 10% in 2004

Read a daily newspaper (GSS): down from 44% in 1975 to 19% in 2002, but then back up to 28% in 2004

Watch the TV news at least twice a week (NES): down from 79% in 1980 to 44% in 2004.

## IV. Knowledge about government (or confidence in one's knowledge)

Feel that you can understand government (NES): UP from 26% in 1976 to 34% in 2004

Able to identify Republicans as the more conservative national party (NES): UP from 49% in 1976 to 78% in 2004 (all the increase is recent)

Know the name of your own candidates for US House (NES): down from 25% in 1978 to 16% in 2000.

## V. Political participation

Vote in presidential election (Census surveys, self-report): basically unchanged from 43% in 1976 to 42% in 2004, but there was a deep decline in the 1980s and 1990s.

Been contacted by a party or candidate (NES): up from 49.5% in 1984 to 66% in 2004.

Persuade other people to vote a certain way (NES): UP from 37% in 1976 to 56% in 2004, but the big increase in 2004 followed decades of modest decline.

Protests involving young people: down by about 50% according to Soule and Condo, using a database of news articles. (But CIRCLE's new survey, to be released on Tuesday, will show lots of protest by immigrant youth.)

#### VI. Efficacy/trust in institutions

My vote matters (NES): basically unchanged from 88% in 1976 to 84% in 2000.

People like me have a say in government (NES): basically unchanged from 58% in 1976 to 55% in 2004 (with modest changes in between).

Trust the government in Washington to do the right thing most of the time (NES): basically unchanged from 42% in 1976 to 36% in 2004, with 45% recorded in 2000.

Confidence in the press (GSS): Down from 32% in 1976 to 13% in 2004.

#### VII. New media

In 2005, according to the DDB Life Style survey, 20% of 18-25s had read a blog at least several times during the past year, compared to 32% of the whole population.

Thirty-three percent of 18-25s had regularly participated in online forums or chatrooms, compared to 36% of the whole population.

#### **Richard Rogers**

The extent of civic engagement amongst the youth begs a current question in political philosophy -- i.e., the question of the formation of engaged publics, youthful or otherwise.

There should be a debate about which steady state of engagement -- the baseline -- against which we can measure and discuss engagement. Putnam and others provided a classic, in terms of amateur association participation, which forms a civic engagement foundation. Volunteerism is part of this.

Moving to the Web, social software, blogging amongst younger people and other new areas of study and practice, are on a different level of abstraction. This is media participation.

We could develop a media-based participation model, but let's make sure that it's called that. Let's take on the problem of the difference between civic engagement and media engagement.

richard rogers  
amsterdam

### **Ulises Mejias**

Richard's point about different models of engagement reminded me of the following quote:

“The Internet” can entail very different activities with divergent or even conflicting effects on human phenomena under investigation. Time spent in a political discussion in a so-called ‘chat room’ is different from time spent sending e-mail to a group of neighbors about a weekend community project, and these are different from time spent viewing pornography. To speak in simple terms about “the Internet” can conceal important functional differences with distinct implications for civic engagement.

Bimber, B. (2000). The study of information technology and civic engagement. *Political Communication*, 17, 329–333.

### **Marina Bers**

I am finding this discussion very interesting. Thanks to all. I want to follow up on a couple of thoughts by Ulises, Peter and Peter Levine. In my own reading, they are pointing, in different ways, to the need of opening up the "black box" of democracy and trying to understand if and how a decline (or not) in youth civic engagement and political participation should be understood in the context of failing institutions and systems....in my own reading some of their comments were inviting us to explore how digital media can help us re-think what the powerful idea of democracy should look like in the 21st century.

One of the possibilities of technologies is that they can invite us to discover powerful ideas (for an interesting discussion on technology, learning and powerful ideas...see Papert, *Mindstorms*...1980 and also...check out this nice later article...by Papert --- pioneer on educational technologies--- Papert, S. (1991). What’s the big idea: Towards a pedagogy of idea power <<http://www.research.ibm.com/journal/sj/393/part2/papert.html>>. *IBM Systems Journal*, vol. 39, no. 3-4.)

In my own field of expertise, learning technologies, we like to say that new technologies afford us with new ways of thinking about the world...about math, science or democracy....if the printing press was the technology of democracy.....what are digital technologies enabling us to do? how are we re-conceptualizing, re-empowering the notion of democracy? No doubt that democracy is a powerful idea...however...what can it look like in a new highly connected world? what democratic mechanisms and institutions can be re-thought and conceived in new ways? What can new technologies bring to the debate over fair organization and distribution of power and transparency over corruption?

Maybe the power of new digital media, and the possibility it offers for young people to create new spaces for sharing information, self-organizing, connecting with each other and fighting their own fights with their new tools, is that it provides a forum for re-thinking the political system and... even democracy....maybe even the political system and the voting system as we understand it today....opening the "black box" of democracy, while we still believe in all of its power.

Marina--

### **Lee Rainie**

After digesting all this wonderful material, I'd like to suggest that someone start a follow-on thread to Peter Levine's post below. Peter runs through the things that are known about the current state of traditional civic participation/voluntary association. The new thread might tackle: What do we know from existing research about the quality and value of online communities compared to offline communities?

I know some of the list participants have done extensive work on this and there is a big initiative underway at USC-Annenberg School on digital communities. Perhaps a good lit review has been done there or elsewhere? Several posts have already contributed on this.

And to cut to the underlying question about places where the MacArthur Foundation might have opportunities to make an impact, I can think of two:

1) Further study of the incidence of, quality of, and impact of "smart mobs". Howard Rheingold did a grand thing by educating us to the prevalence of this kind of activity, which seems qualitatively different from more traditional forms of voluntary association. And smart mobbing clearly creates a different kind of civic engagement and social structure. It strikes me that more work figuring out how these kinds of groups form, what they mean to participants, where they have influence, and where they go "wrong" would be pretty darn useful to organizations, activists, engaged citizens, and perhaps even tech designers.

2) Study of the civic value of content creation/sharing. What do people (especially teens and young adults) who create and share their words, artistic works, mashups, etc. add to stores of social capital and innovation? This is a central and unresolved question at the center of the debate over Net Neutrality. It should be considered on equal footing with the economic/investment questions that now dominate that debate.

Thanks -- Lee Rainie

### **Cathy Davidson**

Hi, Lee----and everyone----I love the idea of a subthread (!) where we collect and report on existing research about the quality and value of online communities compared to offline communities. So much of the research does not provide this comparative content

and seems to be intended to scare worried parents about the demons of the internet as if the world outside it is better, smarter, safer somehow. What are your favorite studies, everybody?

Thanks much, Cathy

### **Howard Rheingold**

Mimi Ito is working on these issues that Lee raises, of the relationship between cultural content creation/sharing and more public issues of civic engagement.

I blogged Ito's presentation at Annenberg Center here:

[http://weblogs.annenberg.edu/diy/2006/09/mizuko\\_ito\\_on\\_amateur\\_cultural.html](http://weblogs.annenberg.edu/diy/2006/09/mizuko_ito_on_amateur_cultural.html)

I should let her speak for herself in this regard. (I believe she is involved with this discussion). But I believe she addresses Lee's question. (And of course, Henry Jenkins has a lot to say about this -- and I hope he does)

Here are a couple of the graphics she used in her presentation:



I hope Mimi doesn't mind my quoting her comment on my own post on that blog which seems relevant here:

> Although this is not a domain that would commonly be considered civic or political mobilization, the fan groups I am engaged with now are interesting to me because there are easily traceable trajectories from more "private" to "public" voice. Kids might start doodling or dabbling with something like comics as a personal distraction, and gradually start sharing with larger and larger publics as they develop a stronger skill set and a more public persona. I think the important thing to ask in settings that are more adult driven rather than peer driven, is how people can find role models for translating from more private to public voice, from personal communication to something that looks more like publication. My guess is that if the aspirational pipeline is well populated with accessible mentors and role models along the way, this shift in voice is much more likely.

Howard Rheingold

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### **Constance Flanagan**

To what extent should we be concerned that young people are less inclined than earlier generations to engage with former touchstones of citizenship such as voting and following news about public affairs?

1. We should be concerned about voting, less so about following news through traditional sources.

a. Although following public affairs is important, the discussion about the "informed voter" seems too much framed as if individual voters read various (aka diverse) sources of information and came to their own conclusions. For many, that has never been the mechanism by which they become informed voters. Instead, they rely on sources of information such as political machines, friendships, and various associations/organizations. I confess that in local elections one source of information I use is the list of names of people who have endorsed a particular judge, etc. With respect to the second part of Lance's question, I think we want to cast a broad net in thinking about how young people use on-line opportunities to gather information - including whether the friendship networks and group associations provide useful information, perspectives, motivations

2. Second we should put the apparent decline in seeking information in the context of the homogenization of information and loss of diverse sources that's occurred in recent years. Some skepticism also is called for with respect to whether mainstream media is providing fair and balanced information or whether they are mainly participating in the marketing of political personalities and battle lines. In light of those trends, the value of the John Stewart show could be seen as providing a critical perspective (and, frankly informing in the process - I've heard the worries about political cynicism connected with JS's show but am not convinced -- viewing the show also could motivate people to seek more information or to take action). In Hungary prior to 1989, political satire had a huge viewing audience.

3. With respect to the second part of Lance's question - the Internet is far more democratic than other media. People can weigh in in many different ways and (if motivated) can seek out information from a wide range of diverse sources (most of which are at least as trustworthy as mainstream media). The interactive nature and constant feedback loops does make for a constantly shifting field of information

### **David Buckingham**

I've been away and have just been trying to sift through this discussion, so please accept my apologies if this has all been said before...

Part of me would agree that we do need to be worried, although I would accept that disengagement is a fairly understandable response to what currently seems to count as 'public affairs'. Yes, new media may be offering new possibilities for civic participation, at least for some - although we need to know if this is just for the 'usual suspects'....

But the point that worries me a little is the Harry Potter anecdote. OK, young people may well be participating and engaging in all sorts of very active and interesting ways online; and we could probably think of many other examples. But in what ways is this CIVIC engagement? Peter Dahlgren raised an interesting question about the distinction between

'civic' and political'; and somebody else (sorry) pointed out that 'media engagement' is not necessarily the same as 'civic engagement'. I would accept other people's comments to the effect that this term 'civic' is a little worthy and moralistic... but how, in the end, are we defining what counts as 'civic', and what doesn't?

I would suggest that 'civic' implies some notion of the public (the polis or the public sphere, even) - by which I suppose I mean an open debate about issues of general social concern between people who may not agree with each other. In this respect, there are certainly tendencies in the internet towards an individualisation, or at least a fragmentation, of social/political debate (a settling into established niche groups). So there may be ways in which the internet promotes participation, but undermines the 'civic'...

DB

### **Kathryn Montgomery**

All of the responses to our first question have been terrific, thought provoking, and full of fascinating new directions for our research and writing in this volume.

I will just comment on a few points and offer some of my own thoughts:

I very much liked Cathy Davidson's comment about why we as a society "are so invested in narratives of juvenile decline." This general frame continues to dominate much of the public discussion and debate over new media and youth. It is my hope that our work will help challenge this narrow, too-often sensationalist view. I also agree with Michael Delli Carpini that we need more "thick description" of exactly how young people are engaging with new media in order to understand the extent to which their interactions are contributing to their political and civic engagement. I suspect that there is a great deal going on that we have not yet fully documented and that will require new research strategies to seek out and identify. The dynamic nature of digital media has made it a moving target for researchers, but one that we need to figure out how to study. There is some heartening evidence in the recent studies from Pew and Knight, as various people have noted. But these surveys are just scratching the surface.

But at the same time, we need to understand these emerging new technologies in the broader context of the media culture, and particularly how market forces are driving the growth and shaping the nature of new digital technologies. For example, there has been a great deal of enthusiasm about the participatory qualities of Web 2.0, but these same qualities are also driving the rapid commercialization of MySpace, YouTube, and other social networking platforms. To what extent are these trends enhancing the civic potential of new media, and in what ways might they be undermining them?

I also agree with several people who stressed the need for proactive initiatives to ensure that the digital media can serve the civic and political needs of youth. For example, there is a role for education to help guide – and perhaps learn from – youth in using

digital technologies for civic and political purposes. But this will require pushing for changes in educational policies that may be very difficult to bring about.

Kathryn Montgomery  
Contributing author, Civic Engagement volume

### **Howard Rheingold**

A brief excerpt from my chapter:

Constructivist theories of education that exhort teachers to guide active learning through hands-on experimentation are not new ideas, and neither is the notion that digital media can be used to encourage this kind of learning. What is new is a population of "digital natives" who have learned how to learn new kinds of software before they started high school, who carry mobile phones, media players, game devices and laptop computers and know how to use them, and for whom the internet is not a transformative new technology but a feature of their lives that has always been there, like water and electricity. This population is both self-guided and in need of guidance: although a willingness to learn new media by point-and-click exploration might come naturally to today's student cohort, there's nothing innate about knowing how to apply their skills to the processes of democracy. Internet media are not offered here as the solution to young people's disengagement from political life, but as a possibly powerful tool to be deployed toward helping them engage.

Making connections between the literacies students pick up simply by being young in the 21st century and those best learned through reading and discussing texts is an appropriate role for teachers today. My fundamental assumption for beginning such a practicum in participatory media, based on my own encounters with students in social cyberspaces and the advice of more experienced educators, is that "voice," the unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one's communications from those of others, can be called upon to help connect young people's energetic involvement in identity-formation with their potential engagement with society as citizens. Moving from a private to a public voice can help students turn their self-expression into a form of public participation. Public voice is learnable, a matter of consciously engaging with an active public rather than broadcasting to a passive audience. By showing students how to use Web-based tools and channels to inform publics, advocate positions, contest claims, and organize action around issues that they truly care about, participatory media education can draw them into positive early experiences with citizenship that could influence their civic behavior throughout their lives.

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what it is ---> is --->up to us

### **Peter Dahlgren**

Greetings, all!

Already many fine and helpful ideas have been aired on this question. I won't review them here, but will just leap into my own thought: I sometimes wonder if there isn't some ambiguity in the notion of 'civic engagement'. In the official rhetoric and 'discourses' about democracy that we offer the kids there is a dimension that tends to frame the 'civic' as a selfless service, an altruistic gesture for the public good. This is of course part of the story. But democracy is also about the political - about resolving heavy conflicts of interests in civilized ways. We admonish the young to 'get civic', but not so often to 'get political'. 'Politics' has an awkward position in our vocabulary - an aura of self-interest, of ethical sleaziness, etc. Yet this too is part of the story. But do we contribute to a sugar-coated version of democracy in repressing this aspect of engagement? In Europe it seems that we see the political - as intense conflict - manifested more often among the young in the extra-parliamentarian (internet-heavy) domain than in party politics. To connect this thought to the question: I have the impression - based on an intuitive reading of some interviews we have done in Sweden with younger citizens, that they find it easier to 'get political' via the net. They can throw themselves into issues that have personal resonance unhampered to a great extent by geographic specificity. Moreover, the conflicts, the insecurities, the uncomfortableness of political confrontations IRL are in part avoided via the net. In the process, they see that democracy is at least as much about politics as about civics.

Peter Dahlgren  
Lund, Sweden

### **Stephen Coleman**

I am one of the contributors to the volume on civic engagement. My chapter contrasts online initiatives that have been established for young people (usually by governments or charitable foundations) and those that have been set up by young people for themselves.

Peter Dahlgren is right to distinguish between the cuddly, worthy, consensual notion of 'civic engagement' and the much harsher, more antagonistic concept of politics. There is an argument for suggesting that political elites promote civic engagement, particularly amongst 'apprentice citizens', as an alternative to/distractor from real politics. Political citizenship is good for young people not because it gives them a greater sense of moral worth or civic belonging, but because, within a democracy, it's their best chance of advancing their interests.

Of course, not all young people have the same interests: some are rich, most are poor; some have hope, others don't. Young people are divided by class, ethnicity, gender ... in short, they should not be expected to subscribe to a single set of appropriate political activities. The 'civic engagement' discourse has tended to bury diversity under a rhetoric of 'tolerance' and to promote normative ends, regardless of competing interests.

My sense is that the most effective uses of the online environment are being made by people who have recognised its value as a locus for agonistic collective action. My prediction is that, in nine cases out of ten, governments and other funders would not seek to encourage such online mobilisation - indeed, they are eager to discourage it. As ever, attempts to level the democratic playing field in favour of the least powerful (such as most young people) entails a struggle for recognition and influence which is not advanced by the depoliticised rhetoric of elite-driven civic engagement.

Stephen Coleman

### **Michael Xenos**

Greetings All,

I am also a contributor to the Civic Engagement volume (along with my co-author Kirsten Foot) and would like to personally thank everyone for their insightful and stimulating contributions to this conversation.

In our chapter, we draw on a number of studies we have been involved with over the past few years to highlight the ways in which, as Michael Delli Carpini underscored in an earlier post, if we are concerned with levels of traditional participation among young people "a good part of the fault lies with the established parties, candidates etc., who fail to reach out (in old or new ways) to young voters." Naturally, this means I tend to agree with those in the conversation leaning toward an affirmative answer to first question in Lance's original post. For a variety of reasons, but especially because electoral processes still matter, and will continue to matter, I think we should be concerned. To be sure, they probably matter slightly less than they once did, and I (along with most people on this list I suspect) share enthusiasm for moving away from that "innocence lost" frame many of us are so tired of, but they definitely still matter (even if they are not the \*only\* things that matter or are interesting, which I also believe).

So I'd like to probe the group for any more thoughts on the second part of the original post in the thread, as they relate to traditional forms of political engagement. One important point that has already surfaced in this discussion is that traditional actors (especially candidates, parties, and consultants) don't necessarily have strong incentives for promoting, and are often uncomfortable with, the kinds of media engagement that youth are most drawn to. There are also plenty of encouraging signs and happy anecdotes about young people doing things on their own (typically in non-traditional ways). But other than the few obvious examples (read, Howard Dean), there seem to be fewer that illustrate effective uses of new media forms to engage young people in the traditional forms. Zephyr has raised some very interesting policy related ideas about this that I would love to hear more about, and other elements of the volume and discussion touch on this issue, so I hope this part of the thread continues to grow along with discussion of the data on participation and decline. There is clearly an opportunity for new media to help (re)engage young people in traditional touchstones of citizenship, but our research suggests that it is likely to be missed in the electoral arena. And, not to

drum up the crisis frame again, but it also suggests (consistent with Zephyr's emphasis on "the meaningful" earlier, and Barry's interesting examples) that the \*way\* in which it is missed could even lead to a net loss, where young people are actually further turned off by shallow/insincere/kidlite efforts to engage young people politically through new media. What can be done to keep this from happening?

I look forward to the continuing discussion on this and the other questions.

Michael Xenos

### **Lonnie Sherrod**

I have been in DC at a meeting and on limited email access. I just returned tonight and have not been able to process all the excellent exchanges. I would just add two points, which I might expand on later if anyone has interest.

First, I would like to examine the data documenting the decline in youth participation. In the last Presidential election, youth remained the same percent of all voters but they doubled in number, thereby keeping up with all other voters. We have surveyed youth's views and they have well formed views, especially about issues that affect them. And they discuss politics with friends. I would especially like to know if there are data on use of internet and other such new forms of potential participation. We live in a very different world. It is not surprising that youth's forms of civic involvement differ as well. The important question is if there are consequences of these differences.

Second, it is very important to examine population differences. The youth population is becoming increasingly diverse. In a short time, the current majority will be the minority. It is likely and we have some data that youth participation and views differ across groups varying by social class, gender, ethnicity, immigrant status, sexual orientation and religion. It is no longer appropriate to examine youth as a single homogeneous population. This especially applies to forms of participation.

I apologize if anyone has already made these points.  
Lonnie Sherrod, Ph.D.

### **Stephen Coleman**

I agree with Lonnie Sherrod that 'It is no longer appropriate to examine youth as a single homogeneous population' and would urge colleagues not to assume that American youth constitute the universe of that population. Unless we look at the behaviour and attitudes of young people in a global context (at least, in the context of global democracies), our conclusions are likely to be skewed. For example, there have been several references in this discussion to the 2004 US election results and an increase in the youth vote. This is an exception to the trend in youth voting in almost every other democracy. In the UK, there has been a 12% drop in first-time voting (from 49% to 37%) between 1997 and 2005. Recent French, German, Swedish and Dutch elections witnessed similar trends.

Besides this question of who we are counting in order to substantiate statements such as 'youth civic participation has declined', there is a further question of how much we are ever going to learn by simply measuring trends. I would like to think we are capable of recognising and addressing failures of inclusive democracy without having to be over-reliant upon the the spurious scientificity of social quantification. This is particularly relevant when examining the online communication environment, in which relative increases in certain kinds of opportunity, access and activity (such as consumption and socialising) serve to diminish the reputations of other communicative relationships (such as those between government and governed) which remain static and ossified.

Stephen Coleman

### **Raji Hunjan**

I too agree with Stephen's first paragraph. I suppose that's why in my first posting I made the point about defending our representative form of democracy. Participatory forms alone can exclude, particularly the voices of minority groups of children and young people, usually from poorer backgrounds.

As we look to develop online activity, we should not only be looking at opportunities for young people to engage as individuals but also to help them understand their roles and responsibilities as a part of a wider community.

Also going back to a point that continues throughout this thread, its about motivating decision makers to actually listen to young people. In the Scottish Parliament, there is a petitions committee, which enables anyone to start a petition on a subject that is then discussed by the official petitions committee. There may be some potential in this idea. Perhaps there needs to be a young people led online campaign to make decision makers take them more seriously.

Some of the authors may want to check out [www.headsup.org.uk](http://www.headsup.org.uk) which tried to engage young people and politicians to discuss specific issues in a moderated forum. I was involved in it when it was first set up 4 years ago, but don't know whether there are any recent evaluations.

raji

### **Peter Dahlgren**

Hello again,

Lance's original question ended with the phrase "satisfying participation opportunities"; this has been remarked on a couple of times, but I'd like to go further, in the light of some of the posts.

One line of thought, among several, in these stimulating contributions underscores that: democracy has a number of irreducible dimensions; engagement can take many forms;

'young people' should not be seen as some singular population, but are as diverse in their backgrounds as adults; young citizens seem to have good BS-detectors and turn quickly off to adult-initiated pseudo-participation.

Linking up this strand of thought with the notion of multiple public spheres and the web's ability to offer innumerable civic communicative spaces, it strikes me that we should put more emphasis on the question of 'satisfying participation'. This may involve some kind of 'pleasure' - or not - but basically I take this adjective as a synonym for 'meaningful'. If engagement feels meaningless (which it might for an array of reasons) - then comes indifference (or irony) and apathy. Passion dissipates. Hence the relevance of Stephen Coleman's and others' reflections about qualitative dimensions. Certainly statistical data can tell us important things, and the quantitative profiles of how many and who voted and how, are essential to know. But that's not the whole story. 'Meaningful' is a dimension that resonates with experience. Thus, qualitative analyses of important/relevant online civic environments (i.e. selections from the vast array that exist) could give us clues as to what is being experienced - if it's meaningful, i.e. satisfying. for young citizens. And of course I don't simply mean if discussion lives up to Habermasian discourse ideals. Civic agency needs to be nurtured, reinforced, developed - but largely by civic agents themselves, whatever their age, through their activities. For young people, the net is a natural environment (and I would be careful about making too much of a bifurcation between online/IRL). How are different groups of young citizens being nurtured as citizens by their various online environments? What kinds of civic cultures are being generated? What modes of engagement, civic identities, etc. are being promoted? What notions of politics are emerging?

I am by no means original in posing such questions - I know Kathryn Montgomery and others have been researching them. I'd just like to give weight to this perspective - and also hear from those who have some findings/thoughts on this aspect of online engagement.

Peter Dahlgren  
Lund, Sweden

### **Stephen Coleman**

I very much like Peter's point about the relationship between 'satisfying' engagement and pleasure. In my study of how audience-participants in 'Big Brother' encountered and engaged with the 2005 British election campaign, it was precisely such contrasting experiences of pleasure that led them to conclude that one voting opportunity was engaging and the other dull. Many of the (mainly young) audience-participants in 'Big Brother' explained that they derived pleasure from the show's involving and consequential use of digital technologies. I do not recall any similar evidence of anyone deriving pleasure from interacting with a government or politician's website.

Stephen Coleman

**Lance Bennett**

Hi all,

Thanks for a wonderfully rich conversation about our opening question.

Some of my takeaways:

\* I think that avoiding the contraction of a "narrative of despair" about young people is very important, and this will become a focal point (with due acknowledgments) in my concluding chapter.

\*At the same time, I noticed a gap between those who seem boosterish about young people's political activities and those who are cautioned by the cross national data on generational decline in conventional participation trends. I think that greater mutual information and discussion across this intellectual divide is essential.

\* My own work has focused on the changing citizenship styles and political orientations of young citizens. In general, I do not think that clinging to old notions of duty and obligation make sense. But there remains one nagging question: Who will hold government in check and give it its democratic mandate if current attitudes of avoiding politics and government prevail among younger citizens?

\* This said, the \*problem\* seems unlikely to be addressed by finding ways to motivate young people to engage with systems that they (and many older citizens) find unresponsive and corrupted. Indeed, young people may simply be registering a more honest reaction.

\* Thus, the area of learning that may be most important here is for policymakers, candidates, educators and other \*authorities\* to invite the participation of young citizens on different terms -- more democratic, more p2p, more challenging of authority, enabling them to participate in the political process on their terms.

\* But this would seem to require some enhancement of public communication skills and acquisition of basic operating information (suggesting a chicken and egg dilemma).

One earlier branch in the discussion that makes sense too revisit at this point is to decide what constitutes the kind of civic engagement (online) that might lead to more authentic (satisfying, fun) participation in politics. Harry Potter anyone?

Feel free to jump back to this question with reflections (but do use the Question # 1 thread when doing so).

**Lance Bennett**

Hello Everyone,

If you respond to a question, please try to respond either to my original message or to another reply that contains the full original question in the header.

That way, the Google archive will keep all responses together.

If you go to the site, you will notice that several people generated independent messages to the list and they are now posted as somewhat lonely new threads.

thanks, Lance

### **Barry Joseph**

I hope this does not come across as too naive, as I come to this topic more as practitioner than one familiar with the history of the field, but a number of posts made me wonder: if youth learn what it means to be civically engaged through modeling, from adults as well as peers, then 1) is there anything specific of value that is known about what the current generation is being shown as definition/definitions to be emulated, avoided or modified that is distinct from what previous generations had to work with and 2) is there any valid way to quantify and characterize the affect digital media is having on this modelling process?

Barry

## **Question # 2 Are the Boundaries of Civic Engagement Changing Online?**

### **Lance Bennett**

Our discussion from the last question makes me think of this as the Harry Potter question:

Are the boundaries of civic engagement changing for young people online? For example, when can online spaces such as myspace and facebook constitute forums for civic engagement? Do protests in online games constitute civic engagement? If so, how can such engagement experiences translate into broader participation in politics, and public life?

Date Posted: October 2, 2006

### **Peter Dahlgren**

Here we get into sticky conceptual issues... A quick response:

The boundaries - and character - of civic engagement are evolving, as many noted in their answers to Question #1. Certainly the net amplifies and pushes forward such developments, being such a definitive cultural and communication feature of late modernity.

BUT: how do we define 'the civic'? David Buckingham's idea that the concept fundamentally contains a sense of 'public' - perhaps even 'public good' - is a helpful starting point. Though still broad, it would seem to exclude activities which are only of personal relevance.

Thus, the next step: 'the civic' has to connect to not only with the publicness, but also with issues, solidarity, conflict, etc., i.e. with the political. The political can in principle pop up anywhere, unexpectedly, anytime in any social context (I have seen my teenage sons suddenly encounter the political in online discussions of music: for ex, racism reared its head in the form of a white power group trying to lay claim to a music genre). Yet, I would argue that such an encounter with the political is still not enough - a brief brush with an environmental issue, for ex., in the context of a pleasant interchange, game, etc. can be an experiential stepping stone, but it is insufficient in terms of what a viable democracy needs. It must be developed further.

Thus: from the civic, to the political, but finally: to politics - in SOME sense of dealing with issues, conflicts, us/them, etc. - in a public/civic manner. This of course can - and is - taking many new forms today, and the net is an important facilitator in this regard.

One final thought (at the risk of getting too long-winded and sticking my neck out): I sometimes find myself stumbling over the concept of 'engagement', and have recently tried distinguishing it from 'participation'. Engagement = a subjective state of involvement, a focus of attention and enthusiasm (and can in principle be aimed at any object). It is a necessary step towards: Participation, which I treat as something more observable, as a social manifestation of civic agency. It constitutes some form of doing (often some act of communication) in a civic/public/political context of some kind. Engagement is a precondition for participation, but (for democracy), not sufficient unto itself.

MySpace might trigger civic engagement, but if it stops there - as an experience in MySpace and does not lead to civic participation in some form, democracy doesn't quite get its due, even if such experiences can build up and have a participatory payoff later on.

Apologies for the length here...

Peter Dahlgren

### **Zephyr Teachout**

What a great discussion group! Thank you all for your fascinating contributions.

I find question #2 usefully confusing. I've answered different aspects, or versions, of it below.

Version A: Are there more types of civic engagement available to people because of the internet.

Yes. Uncontroversially. There are also fewer types of collective action/civic engagement opportunities available in small geographical areas. I just joined the Moose Club here in Burlington, but it took some finding, and its a little bit like joining a MySpace group with one member. I cannot find weekly democratic party meetings that are open to the public, I can find daily democratic conversations in my state that are open to the public. So there are more types, but the availability of some types of engagement have declined, and if they aren't locally available, they aren't available for all intents and purposes.

Version B: Are the boundaries of the term civic engagement changing because our public goods are often private goods?

I think of a robust civic life involving people who have meaningful access to developing and implementing policies regarding public goods.

So I take the question to mean, is there worthwhile civic activity going on when groups of students use the extraordinary collective action power of the internet to change a private companies policy because that private company provides a public good?

Are the openness of Yahoo listservs and Myspace a public good? Is the openness of Google Groups a public good? Is FaceBook's policy of not emailing changes in facebook profiles a public good?

I tentatively answer, yes. There is a collective public good of robust political speech in regularly trafficked areas, and there is a public good of relative privacy in regularly trafficked areas. Protests against Yahoo keeping out Pro-Ana groups is a civic action (whether or not you agree with it). I rather wish that more of our regularly trafficked space was actually public, in the legal sense, but just because its not doesn't mean that we don't have to fight for it.

Version C: Does wielding power in one arena make it easier to want to wield power in others?...

I assume, without data, that the answer is overwhelmingly yes. The habit of empowerment seems critical. The habit of healthy, critical skepticism seems critical. I believe John Stuart Mill, among others, wrote about this – the necessity of citizens being deeply creative and active in their family lives as well as work lives in order to be good democratic citizens.

... and Does wielding power in a company arena translate easily to wielding power in a governmental arena...

I don't know. Companies that are responding to consumer protests are under vastly different pressures than politicians responding to citizen protests.

William Greider writes beautifully, in "The Soul of Capitalism," about the importance of a habit of independence for a healthy democracy. "How is it," he wonders, "that we send people to work in enormous bureaucracies where they are rewarded for obedience and the narrowness of their skills (blue collar and white collar) and then expect them to come home and in the early evening hours demonstrate enormous independence of mind?"

(Complete

shameless paraphrase. Its been over a year since I read it).

.... and how does the cultural habits the web rewards play into this?

The utopia is that the inevitable generativity of the web means that young people who remix songs are empowered to remix political life, because they are in a habit of exercising power. The dystopia is that corporate control of the actively trafficked areas of the web purposefully rewards certain kinds of creativity and divides it completely from other kinds of creativity, like collective political action around public goods.

In order to lean our possibilities towards the utopia, our own agitation for the public goods of transparency, free political speech, meaningful access to forums of persistent collective action, meaningful access to important public information, and some privacy, seem important. (This is not, I think, deciding for the young people what is good for them. This is taking responsibility. Which is to say, I don't think we should get out of the way, but if WE don't engage in these questions along with young people, we are failing the very civic duties that we bewail when we see missing in teenagers – not to mention that the modeling we would be doing is very poor indeed).

Version D: How can we (the we includes all of us, 16-110), help the shift from facebook protests and demonstrations of collective action power in a less electoral realm to a more electoral realm, given that more power than you might think resides in the electoral one, and gradual collective disengagement from that power is, well, terrifying.

I have no idea. Someone in this illustrious group (I've lost track of names, but not wonderful ideas), talked about the de-fanging of politics, and that seems right to me. If, say, you approached all 100,000 protesters in the facebook protest and said, "hey kids, now you should vote!" that might garner a little interest, but it would infuriate me. If, on the other hand, you approached them and said, "you're interested in privacy, okay, well lets look at this particular judge, etc, etc, his opinions on privacy, use the power you just used to get him out of office," that might work? I don't know. But I agree that entreaties to engage for the sake of engagement are ultimately a little disturbing, because they talk about politics in terms other than responsibility and power and public goods.

How else...

If the leading political parties used the internet as places that people could meet others in their district, and actively supported that with free pizza and responsiveness, that would

be a good thing. (Basically, weekly/monthly versions of things like Drinking Liberally, but sponsored by groups with heft).

If all membership organizations in this country with email lists of over 100,000 used their emails out to their members to ask them to meet locally and decide policy questions for their local chapters, that would be a good thing. Assume that includes membership organizations like "hotmail" and "yahoo" and "facebook"? Would that be a good thing? I tend to get very nervous when thinking about commercial enterprises using the community building powers of the web. I've written elsewhere, and still believe, that there are three powerful forces in the world today: civic democrats, radical theocrats, and multinational corporations, and whichever figures out the best way to use the organizing power of the internet will WIN, manage world history. When I see xbox, and all its enticing features, including community features, I don't think, gee, that's great training for civic community. I think, good lord, if only the public sphere developed that first...

### **Henry Jenkins**

Sorry, guys, I seem to have been called out with this Harry Potter question but I've been bogged down on other fronts and am just now catching up with the flow of great comments to this list.

Let me start by spelling out the Harry Potter example Yochai was referencing more fully. In my new book, *Convergence Culture*, I describe two political struggles which are known by Harry Potter fans collectively as the "Potter Wars." The first centered around Warner Brothers' attempts to reign in what they initially saw as violations of their intellectual property by young people who were creating a broad range of fan websites. The second centered around the efforts of certain fundamentalist Christian groups to have the Harry Potter books removed from classrooms and public libraries.

Yes, David, I consider both struggles to be "civic" in even the most classic sense of the word. They center around disputes about free expression -- the right to read and the right to critically engage with books that matter to your generation. If there's one issue that I see recurring again and again among the young people I encounter in my own work, it is a deep concern for free expression (which might be broadly defined as the right to participate) and the ways it is threatened by both governmental decisions (the Deleting Online Predators Act being a primary current example) and corporate decision (various attempts to use intellectual property regulation to silence alternative cultural practices.) So, at its core, the "Potter Wars" were about the right to speak out in the culture.

The side of the war Yochai referenced was organized almost entirely by young people as part of a global network and it required them to use a range of tools and practices we might traditionally associate with political life. We can start with the fact that these young people felt strong civic bonds with others around the world who shared their tastes and interests. They speak of a "Harry Potter fan community" to which they are deeply committed -- it is not a community defined in geographic terms but in terms of common

interests. (This may be a trend worth discussing more fully here -- what does it mean that so many young people defined "community" around shared interests, including gaming worlds, subcultures, fan communities, that straddle the planet). A young HP fan told me that WB went after fans in obscure part of the world first not realizing that these kids already formed a global network and the minute the first Cease and Desist letter went out in Thailand or Poland, they all knew about it at the heart of the fandom and all felt something was a stake for them. They organized an international alliance to exert pressure on the studio. They contacted the news media. Some of them went on national talk shows to debate the studio executives. They lobbied behind closed doors to get them to change their policies. They identified "poster children" who would embody the issues for the media. And they, unlike most adult fan communities that have found themselves in similar situations, won over the news media and actually convinced the studio to change some of their policies towards their fans.

The other side of the Potter Wars is also instructive in this current context: here, a group of adults, teachers mostly, stood up against more conventional forms of censorship and an alliance of Free Expression groups and book publishers constructed a website to educate young people about the threat which censorship posed in their lives, using Harry Potter as a point of entry. The campaign also generated a great deal of interest and many young people wrote essays to talk about what the book bannings meant to them. As I note in the book, though, many of the young people felt compelled in this adult controlled site to recant their fantasies, to stress again and again that they knew the world depicted in the books was not real and that it had no influence over them. By contrast, the other Potter campaign mobilized their fantasies: they were fighting for the right to have a role in constructing the public meanings associated with these books. I think the two examples pose an interesting challenge for us to think about the role of fantasy, pleasure, desire, the imagination, creativity in fueling citizenly discourse.

In the book, I discuss another example of citizenly discourse among young people -- the struggle over an election in Alphaville, the largest town in The Sims Online. This was an election where one of the players rigged the voting technology to insure that he would always stay x number of votes ahead of his rival, because he was playing at being a corrupt politico under the control of organized crime, while the other candidate took the election seriously as someone who wanted to improve things in her community and was outraged when her friends were not allowed to vote. There are two things I take from this story: first, that even in fantasy, we as a society have trouble imagining a democracy which isn't broken and second, that this occasion turned into a heated debate about the nature of democracy, elections, and citizenship and that kids were capable of making all kinds of connections through their arguments between what took place in the game and what was going on within the larger society.

All of this is, as others noted, anecdotal. Yet it also seems to me to be illustrative of the degree to which these fantasy worlds are generating some strong forms of "civic engagement" if we define civic engagement to be about the relations between people within a community of common interests rather than defining it purely around news and elections. I see strong social contracts at work in many of these communities; I see young

people as deeply invested in what happens there because they have some power over the outcome; I see them motivated by debates in these communities towards greater awareness of real world issues whether defined in terms of free expression or in terms of elections; and I see at least in the case of the Harry Potter struggles young people willing to stand up publically for what they believe in. So, yes, David, I do think this constitutes "civic" life.

Much more I could say on some of the other issues raised here but I will hold it for the next post.

### **Ulises Mejias**

I think this group is pretty savvy when it comes to recognizing that the online world is not an alternate or virtual reality, but part of the social realities we construct, and that therefore it can be a site for meaningful civic participation. However, let me try to use the second question about online protests to explore the issue of the effectiveness and meaningfulness of mediated civic participation in our times.

In short, I would say that the effectiveness of both online and onsite protesting is diminishing, and that this has a lot to do with the forms of civic participation engendered in our times through modern technologies. For instance: as evidence of the power of new media, I frequently hear opinions about how it has helped organize massive protests such as the one that took place all over the world before the war against Iraq was launched. But in my mind, the fact that such massive demonstrations can be mounted with no impact whatsoever on the actions of the governments that represent the protesters (not even acknowledgment, really) goes hand in hand with the nature of mediated forms of social organizing and participation.

If we look at online communities as a continuation of the process of urbanization, we can recognize a trend towards the decreasing importance of physical location as a basis for community. Cities--along with advances in transportation--made it possible to construct social formations that were not based on spatial proximity (one's family and acquaintances need not be located next door, but could be 'distributed' all over the city). Modern communication technologies are a continuation of that process which results in location-less communities (what Yus, 2005, calls 'cognitive communities'). As a result, networked individualism becomes the foundation for community-building: the isolated individual becomes the self-sufficient, location-agnostic social building block. The latest US census, for instance, shows that 25% of the nation's households (27.2 million) consist of just one person, compared to 10% in 1950.

Now, I am not romanticizing location as the only model for building communities (although in my research I do try to critically examine our changing relationship to 'the near' as a result of using modern technologies). After all, even location-based communities can be said to be 'cognitive communities' in some sense. But I think the question we are trying to answer is whether networked individualism can accommodate

the kind of civic engagement that can have an impact on prevailing systems of authority, or whether it leaves us more vulnerable to control and with less opportunities for action.

Which brings me back to the issue of protests. If onsite protests have little effect on the policies of 'democratic' governments, I doubt online protests will be of any more consequence. Protests represent actions against the established order, which means the act of protesting involves a certain risk. Many forms of onsite and online protests, based on networked individualism, have removed that risk almost entirely, which results in the anomie of feeling like our actions have no consequences. I believe new media can help translate online engagement into more meaningful participation, but only if the individual is willing to assume some risk. In an age where risk can be simulated and attenuated by technology, I think the necessary first step is to critique the way in which the technologies themselves are being applied.

Anyway, I think I've managed once again not to provide any clear answers ;-)

-Ulises

References:

Yus, F. (2005). The linguistic-cognitive essence of virtual community. *Ibérica*, 9: 79-102. Accessed on October 3, 2006 from <http://www.aelfe.org/documents/05-Ib9-Yus.pdf>

Census figures: Isolated Americans Trying To Connect.  
[http://cbs3.com/health/health\\_story\\_217195709.html](http://cbs3.com/health/health_story_217195709.html)

### **Andy Carvin**

While sites like MySpace aren't necessarily designed with civic engagement in mind (in contrast to communities like [takingitglobal.org](http://takingitglobal.org)), that doesn't mean young people aren't adapting them to their personal civic needs. The Nation did an interesting article on MySpace and youth advocacy called MySpace, MyPolitics:  
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060612/melber>

(sorry if this article has been mentioned already, but I've been offline for several days dealing with a family emergency.)

The article outlines how students in California and Texas used MySpace to organize protests on federal immigration reform. It also discusses the launch of [essembly.com](http://essembly.com), which intends to serve as an online social network for civic-minded young people.

Similarly, there have been various attempts to conduct online protests against federal telecommunications reform, specifically in support of "network neutrality" and local control of community media. [FreePress.net](http://freepress.net) has been very successful at mobilizing the blogosphere in support of these causes, while other groups organized what they called "A Day of Outrage" in which blogs encouraged people to protest at state houses and telecom

company headquarters. Protestors were encouraged to post text, photos, podcasts and videos online, then tag them "dayofoutrage" so they could be aggregated easily. There was also talk of organizing a major network neutrality rally in Second Life, but I'm not sure if it ever got off the ground.

Lastly, young bloggers have played a major role in lobbying for the release of fellow bloggers imprisoned by governments around the world. For example, bloggers associated with GlobalVoicesOnline.org mobilized to protest in support of Hao Wu when he was arrested in China for making a documentary about underground Christian churches, and when Alaa Abdel Fatah was arrested by the Egyptian government for protesting in support of an independent judiciary. In both cases, bloggers (including myself) set up protest blogs, news aggregators, published videos and podcasts, etc, demanding their release and raising public awareness. They also successfully got mainstream media covering their cases. Both of them were subsequently released, though it's hard to gauge if the online protests made an impact.

<http://www.freealaa.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.freehaowu.org/>

andy

### **Howard Rheingold**

I want to respectfully contest Professor Mejiias' general claim that the effectiveness of online and onsite protests have diminished. These two photographs are just two of literally hundreds of examples I have compiled. The first one is of a demonstration in South Korea that was organized via OhMyNews, to protest the attempt of the Korean Congress to impeach President Roh. Politically, it was effective -- as was the get out the vote campaign, mounted literally in the last hours of the election, via email and SMS, that tipped the election in Roh's favor. The second photograph is of the political protests that were organized largely via SMS and online, in response to the Spanish government's claims that the Madrid bombings were caused by Basque separatists (again, an electoral upset was the result). I don't want to get into tiresome detail, but I have more evidence that demonstrations and electoral activities have indeed been mobilized effectively via online media.

### **Andy Carvin**

Howard's post reminded me that I forgot to include another example, one that received little media attention in the US. A group of young activists in Belarus has been using flash mobs as a way of pointing out the absurdity of their country's rules against public assembly. For example, earlier this year they used the Internet to organize a flash mob in which young people would come together in a public square solely to eat ice cream.

There was no political discussion; just a group of kids enjoying their ice cream cones. It didn't take long for the secret police, who observed the online formation of the flash mob, to arrest them. Full story and pics from the protest:

[http://www.andycarvin.com/archives/2006/05/belarus\\_flash\\_mobs\\_a.html](http://www.andycarvin.com/archives/2006/05/belarus_flash_mobs_a.html)

I was actually planning to organize a solidarity rally online among video bloggers, who would go to their local public square and tape themselves eating ice cream, then tag their videos "belarusicecreamprotest" but my baby daughter came a few weeks early and changed my priorities. :-)

### **Lance Bennett**

This is an important discussion -- but one thing keeps nagging at me.

How typical are these examples? Put another way, are they exceptions to the rule that most online experiences for young people are heavily commercialized and walled off from political expression?

I am reluctant to make generalizations based on anecdotes. At the same time, it would be wonderful to design research on how these examples are trending, how young people in general think about them, and where the Harry Potter protesters go next with their online engagement.

Here's to future discussions based on a better research picture!

### **Zephyr Teachout**

It nags me, too. I think largely because of my experience here, and I think, while there are extraordinary global examples, most effective political life is national.

So while the questions may not be different for different countries and cultures, the answers certainly will be.

A small point to make about the United States -- candidates use email to amass email. They use email to bring together people in house parties. But, having worked around a handful of campaigns and online groups, the email is not typically used to serve people's ability to connect to each other, but to serve the candidate/organization's goals to build lists. Even the community building is seen, often, as a means to an end of list-building, instead of list-building being a means to an end of community building. Most online political petitions (in the United States) are created not with the aim of the petition working, but with the aim of list building. This is a perversion of organizing, and a perversion of political engagement using the internet, that is very disappointing, if not surprising.

That said, there are less established groups that use email and texting for genuine mobilization, and which enable genuine self-government within their organizations.

Another set of points that came out in teaching, and to which I am indebted to Stephen Coleman for his work on:

There is a big difference between governance and campaigns. There is a big difference between civic society and movements.

And relatedly, Many movements, but by no means all, rest on pre-existing networks. Not all preexisting networks are civil society networks.

In the United States, we have good networks and weak civil society organizations, and as much as I would like a movement, the persistence of strong civil society seems powerfully important right now, as a balance to the wealthy forces that have captured many of the industries of government.

Good lord. I'm rambling. But these are things I'm desperate to figure out.

### **Ulises Mejias**

Thanks for that supporting evidence, Prof. Rheingold. I am all for celebrating these kinds of examples, but like Prof. Bennett, I also wish there were more of these to make a rule, rather than exceptions. Is it simply the case that the Spanish and Korean governments are more responsive? Can it be explained by the cultural differences? Are people there just more willing to assume personal risk in the name of a larger non-Harry Potter related social cause? ;-)

What lessons can we learn from these exceptional cases, so that we can indeed make them the rule? I guess that's what we are all struggling with.

-Ulises

### **Jennifer S. Earl**

In response to Lance's earlier post about the need for additional research on the topic:

My NSF CAREER award, which is getting into full swing now, funds a five year project examining the relationship between "online protest," organizing actors (e.g., social movement organizations, social movement entrepreneurs), and tactical innovation. I put "online protest" in quotation marks because one of the major issues the project is taking on is the variety of meanings of online protest--sometimes people mean the ways in which the Internet and other digital media can be used to facilitate organizing that happens on the streets, while other people mean protest that really happens in online environments (e.g., Internet petitioning, denial of service actions that are politically oriented, etc). My project will study each of these different visions of online protest and

examine how those different versions of online protest related to organizing actors and tactical innovation.

So, that is a long way of saying, in about 5 years we should know a lot more about the broad contours of online activism and be able to better situate particular cases within a broader field of study.

Cheers,

Jenn

### **Howard Rheingold**

A good question, Ulises. We need to wait for some real empirical research like the study Jennifer Earl is embarking on, but my immediate reaction is that one thread that seems to connect these effective instances of self-organized protest or get-out-the-vote was that the constituencies involved (not always young people, although the myspace/immigration instance is definitely youth-centric, and the OhMyNews constituency skews young) were mobilized by an incident in which they felt their interests were threatened by the government and/ or that the state was lying to them.

The three elements I see are:

1. A constituency that has online tools available, which they may use for other purposes (OhMyNews in Korea, SMS in Spain, MySpace in LA), but which they use to mobilize collective action when
2. A precipitating incident directly threatens their interests
3. A critical mass of literacy about how to deploy online media for political purposes

There's no way to really predict precipitating incidents, and I see the issue of political media literacy as the one point in the process where educational intervention could be viable.

### **Ulises Mejias**

I'm worried about the manufacturing, not the predicting, of precipitating incidents that threaten the alleged interests of populations, Howard. I guess that's what makes some people see visions of Maoism and unsmart mobs.

### **Peter Levine**

The comments so far are making me think about a typology. (Uh-oh.)

I wonder if we could place online activities along the following dimensions:

1. Individual actions versus collaborative, deliberative, or co-productive activities.
2. One-way uses of technology versus interactive uses of technology.
3. Actions concerned with individual welfare, interests, or rights versus actions that define and promote some group's interests.

The examples that Howard and others have provided are collaborative, interactive, and concerned with groups' rights/welfare. In contrast, completely individual actions concerned with completely individual issues don't seem very "civic" or "political." (Examples: complaining to a company about bad service or to the government for failing to provide a service.) Some strictly online activities--such as organizing fellow gamers to improve life within a game--would qualify as "civic," because people work together on group interests.

The Internet and other digital technologies offer great promise for work that is collaborative, interactive, and concerned with the welfare of collectivities. But Lance and others have raised questions about how frequent such work is today among youth.

### **Zephyr Teachout**

Can I add a fourth?

Leadership roles in persistent civic activity.

We once lived in world where 5% of the country was a president of a local group. I'm not nostalgic for that world (okay maybe a little) but I think it shows that that is possible. Its those persisent organizations, mediating organizations, that make ongoing democratic life possible, I believe.

### **Michael X. Delli Carpini**

There are so many interesting threads to this conversation that I don't know which to react to, so let me follow up indirectly on Peter's attempt at a typology and suggest some simple (simplistic?) definitions of key terms that we are using or that seem relevant (I know all of these are problematic, but it's a start):

**Civil Society:** Societal institutions that are not part of the official state/governmental apparatus and that structure private (eg, family) and public (eg, religion) life.

**Polity:** Institutions of the state/government that authoritatively allocate public goods, services and values.

**Social Capital:** Connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. (from Putnam)

**Civic Awareness** (need a better name for this): Cognitive (e.g. knowledge), attitudinal (e.g., interest) and affective (e.g. concern) involvement in civil society.

Civic Participation: Individual and collective actions designed to address public issues through the institutions of civil society.

Civic Engagement: The combination of Civic Awareness and Civic Participation.

Political Awareness (need a better name for this): Cognitive (e.g. knowledge), attitudinal (e.g., interest) and affective (e.g. concern) involvement in the polity.

Political Participation: Individual and collective actions designed to address public issues through the institutions of the polity.

Political Engagement: The combination of Political Awareness and Political Participation.

Democratic Awareness (need a better name for this): Cognitive (e.g. knowledge), attitudinal (e.g., interest) and affective (e.g. concern) involvement in BOTH civil society and the polity.

Democratic Participation: Individual and collective actions designed to address public issues through the institutions of BOTH civil society and the polity.

Democratic Engagement: The combination of Democratic Awareness and Democratic Participation.

Putting aside for now the artificiality and problematics of some of these distinctions, I think they might help in both raising/focusing some sub-questions and providing the direction for finding answers. In terms of our current Question #2:

1. Where does cyberspace and its various components fit in this schema? Is it part of civil society? The polity? Both? Neither? Is it its own civil society and polity with its own rules? I suspect the answer is it depends on which part of cyberspace we are talking about...
2. How do various "on-line" or virtual activities contribute to or detract from the various forms of involvement, participation and engagement; from social capital, described above? I see the various examples raised by others over the past day or so as, alternately, building social capital, strengthening civic or political awareness, participation or engagement, etc. Some of these do so in ways that don't seem much different from more traditional, pre-cyberspace approaches. Others break new ground.
3. What is the normative end game driving our interest? For me, it is creating citizens who are DEMOCRATICALLY aware, participatory and engaged (e.g., who are facile in both the civil and political worlds). A research question that emerges for me is do virtual activities like playing on-line games that might "model" awareness, participation, social capital building, etc., lead to "the real thing" (even if the real thing still happens on-line) or do they move people away from it? Substitute for it? Another is does, for example, on-line civic engagement lead to the likelihood of on-line or off-line political engagement.

I have no answers for these or similar questions, but this typology helps me think about what to look for, how to think about various on-line activities.

Michael

### **Cathy Davidson**

This is a fantastically rich and interesting set of comments. On Question #1, I expressed my skepticism about the declension theory of youth so I won't go that route again on this question. However, I would like to ask a quite instrumental question: what do we gain by seeing online civic actions (such as protests) as civic engagements? What do we lose by making those claims? In this case, I would suggest that all the answers are "yes" and all the answers are "no" depending on what one is trying to think about. So, for example, yes it is a form of protest to immolate a character carefully and patiently constructed in game play for the reason that others who are playing the game and who appreciate what that action means will read it as a protest. Does that form of protest translate into action outside the game space? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But then a Buddhist priest's self-immolation in protest on the Capitol steps (you name the capitol) also may or may not lead to other civic actions. The performativity of even the most dramatic protest is not necessarily guaranteed to have results, nor is it sure to have the result the protestor wished (i.e. backlash, unexpected consequences, apathy, repression, etc., all being forces that contribute to the enactment and efficacy of civic actions in response to the original protest). Then again, neither is voting necessarily tied, in any simple fashion, to results ("result" itself being a quite problematic concept) in a representative democracy. One's vote does not guarantee a result. Even if one's candidate wins, one cannot assure agreement with every action that candidate takes.

Perhaps it is useful to recast this question not as an either/or but as a continuum of civic actions, all with different kinds of performative, representative, representational, affective, and sometimes effective powers.

### **Mimi Ito**

I'm sorry to be jumping into this so late. I just finished reading the threads attached to both questions. Very interesting sets of conversations. I'm going to try to respond to a few questions raised in #1 in the process of responding to #2. Warning: long post.

First I need to get one thing off my chest. With respect to the status of the examples of "new" civic engagement being brought up here, I am wondering if it might be useful to try to untangle the difference between:

1. Descriptive empirical agendas, where we worry about how representative certain examples are and how it stratifies, how widely it is distributed in society etc.

2. Normative conceptual work that enables us to reframe our theoretical vocabulary to take into account different phenomenon as well as reframe how certain practices are valued and recognized in the culture at large.

Part of the debate on this current thread seems to involve talking past each other based on whether we are in more descriptive mode or normative mode. This is also what is interesting - this set of issues involves both an empirical fact-finding agenda as well as one to imagine and enable alternative forms of discourse and practice. As Peter Levine remarked earlier - terms like "civic engagement" are deeply normative, political even. I'd like more clarity as to when and how we are engaging in the normative debate as distinct from the debate over "scientific facts." I assume this slippage in stance is familiar for political science. It certainly is for educational research and technology studies which are closer to my home turf.

Calling examples of new political forms "just anecdotal" because they don't conform to all the accountabilities of the empirical agenda misses the point of what for me is interesting about case-based research. The interest of cases like what Yochai, Cathy, Henry and Howard are providing are not that they are "representative." Rather, good case studies are vehicles of conceptual cross-over between the empirical and normative frames. They are triggers for the scholarly imagination as well as triggers for the imagination of the culture at large, culture and practice-changing phenomenon in the world that are forcing us (and here I include youth) to reconsider our categories and belief systems about what political and civic engagement means. Events that capture the public imagination like the Harry Potter Wars, Gen Text, or the recent mobilizations over immigrant rights are interesting and important precisely because they are new and non-representative behaviors that challenge dominant common culture and norms. Same goes for the 2004 elections. These are media spectacles that complicate any easy distinctions we might want to make between "media engagement" and "civic engagement." If we can talk about negative cases like Columbine changing the spaces of possibility for youth action, we should also be able to talk about cases of positive social mobilization as changing the space of possibility and imagination for youth culture.

(Here I am drawing from some of the conceptual vocabulary introduced by Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown in the paper posted here:

[http://weblogs.annenberg.edu/diy/2006/09/diy\\_and\\_new\\_ways\\_to\\_play](http://weblogs.annenberg.edu/diy/2006/09/diy_and_new_ways_to_play))

This is a long detour to get to the topic at hand. But as an anthropologist who does a lot of interdisciplinary work, it matters to me that people don't dismiss case-based research. I'm not going to bother to defend the empirical agenda because it seems relatively more self-evident to this group. But let me just note the limitations of a strictly empirical approach with respect to phenomenon that are going through substantive change, and where many of us are actively participating in shaping its future direction. Grrr. This discussion is bringing out my inner Margaret Mead.

My work that I'm engaged in for Macfound is in large part (though not exclusively) about documenting peer based knowledge cultures that kids are participating in via new

communications technologies (<http://groups.sims.berkeley.edu/digitalyouth/>). It is a sustained ethnographic inquiry into youth "native" social forms, as well as investigations of more adult-planned but informal learning environments like what Barry and Ed Gragent have described. I like to partner with people who do survey research in order to place my cases within broader demographic buckets, but that's not really what I think is the most important dimension of what our project is documenting. What we are trying to describe is a set of social practices, literacies, and media vocabularies that are evolving together with certain digital technologies and online environments. One very important dimension of this is how these environments support unique ways of dealing with power, membership, participation and social organization. I'll let the political scientists debate whether this is "politics" or "civic engagement" (if you'll let me own "culture"). But without doubt it includes highly organized, mobilized and activist forms of engagement with public life.

I can produce my own litany of examples about this - but we already have some interesting ones like the Harry Potter case of Sims politics on the table. The cases my project is dealing with span a broad range of participation in similar social dynamics. They are a bit more "average" and a bit less media-genic than the cases that have been described so far, but they still exhibit the structures of participation that are becoming more salient with the spread of new networking technologies - peer-to-peer ecologies of communication and media exchange, identity and reputation building through peer exchange and digital aggregation systems, and the growth of amateur digital culture and knowledge production. Some examples of what we are looking at are video blogging on YouTube, MySpace participation, podcasting, anime fandom, remix video production and circulation, multiplayer online role playing games, cybercafes, and youth video and hip hop production. Our contention is that understanding the structures of power, learning, and participation in these spaces is an important first step to understanding the changing landscape of how media is mobilized to participate in public life and how they relate to specific forms of social identity (including traditional indicators such as gender, ethnicity, and class). We are hoping to address both the exploratory phase of an empirical agenda, as well as a normative agenda: to advocate for recognition of the value as well as pitfalls of certain practices, and to design new learning opportunities that draw from the best of the "native" youth practices as well as fill in gaps where adults can productively take a leadership role.

As we move forward on the empirical agenda, the burning question that I have is not how widely distributed these practices are in the culture today, though I would definitely be curious to know that. My empirical work is directed more toward the normative and future-directed question of what sorts of practices we should be advocating for as emerging sociopolitical forms and valuable forms of youth mobilization. With respect to the politics question, what I really want to know is whether the habitus of online participation of the kind that Henry, Yochai, Howard are documenting provide a techno-socio-political toolkit for forms of engagement, given the right triggers, that the "traditionalists" would recognize as political engagement. (This seems to be what Cathy is suggesting in her last post as well?) I'd really love to see a longitudinal study that tracks indicators that are well-informed by the kids' native media cultures as well as more

traditional indicators, and that is ideally responsive to certain important "trigger" events including elections but also other public controversies and issues that are a bit less predictable, like the immigration rights issue.

Personally, I think youth media engagements are worthy social causes and examples of civic engagement in their own right, but I also understand that we may need more to convince the more traditionally-minded of the social value of these practices. This very much mirrors what we are trying to do in the educational realm, by reframing some of the questions of whether playful/joyful/recreational activity "transfers" into "serious" academic learning. The terms of this debate I think are problematic, but they are part of the culture we live in and must argue with.

With young people the longitudinal frame is particularly important - young people are generally profoundly realistic about what forms of socio-political action are actually going to be valuable for their success in the here and now which is often at odds with the future-tense of adult guided goals for civic engagement. Add to this that we ghettoize children and youth into age-based institutions that force them to engage with same-age peers as their primary social context. I think it is important that we recognize kids' engagements in "their" politics today (which often centers on peer-based social ecologies), as well as how this is part of a longer developmental trajectory of social participation. Counting how many wired youth participate in traditional political activities today is a very incomplete indicator of trends in political and civic engagement. And the normative debate over whether what they DO participate in is properly civic could really benefit from a more contextualized sense of what the trajectories towards adulthood look like for wired youth.

### **Andy Carvin**

Hi everyone,

Sorry if I somehow missed this, but I was wondering if there's a particular del.icio.us keyword tag we should use for cataloging relevant websites. Like macfound-civengagement or something like that. I keep seeing interesting sites and news stories but don't know if there's a specific protocol for sharing them, apart from emailing a link to the group.

thanks,  
andy

### **Rachel Smith**

Actually, there is. If you tag an item with "macarthurseries" and "civic" it will be picked up. There's a link within the online community, or you can access the del.icio.us page directly with this link:

<http://del.icio.us/tag/macarthurseries+civic>

Best,

Rachel

**Kate Raynes-Goldie**

hey kate here, one of the authors from takingitglobal...

I think you raise a very interesting point when you say that protests (both occurring or organized online and offline) are increasingly irrelevant in influencing the actions of our governments in north america (based on howard and andy's evidence, perhaps this is more of a north american problem?). I would tend to agree and think that it has some interesting implications...

The debate about civic engagement is often framed as online versus offline, whereas the problems you raise are not about where engagement/activity happens but with politics or government itself. I think it calls for a rethinking of how we affect change and influence our governments. protesting online still reproduces an old paradigm of political action. if the internet is changing the way we consume media and interact with each other, it is not hard to imagine that it could change civic engagement. of course that is what we are all wondering.... but maybe youth are already beginning to create those new forms of engagement.

Another implication is that the increasing ineffectiveness of protesting can/(maybe is?) encouraging youth NOT to participate because they see no pay off or results of their actions. and as protests are usually seen by older generations as valid and familiar forms of effecting change, youth not participating in protests or civic action is interpreted as flat out apathy.

**David Buckingham**

A quick response to Mimi:

I wouldn't in any sense want to deny the value and interest of media engagements of the kind you describe, or indeed of well-documented cases of such engagements (however typical or untypical they may be). Nor am I intending to be normative (though I think we are all probably being normative in some way - how could we avoid it?). I just think it's important that we are clear about how we are using terms, and indeed whether the terms we are using are actually useful. My concern is with what exactly we are talking about when we use this term 'civic' - and whether it's any longer a meaningful term.

So: is 'media engagement' just a(nother) form of civic engagement? Is there a meaningful distinction to be made between the two? Are there forms of media engagement that you would say are not 'civic'? Is 'civic' co-terminous with 'public'?

Can we use a term like 'civic' without being normative, and if so how?

And, a slightly different question: Is offline civic engagement different from online (i.e. media-related) civic engagement? Or what's the relationship between them?

DB

### **Harry Jenkins**

I am weighing in very late on question 2 but I have been traveling and tied up during the week.

I have been reflecting a lot over the past few weeks about a concept that is slowly taking shape for me -- that of civic media -- as opposed to activism or citizen journalism. The later two concepts are also very important and we are having good discussions around them here but they appeal to a somewhat narrow and classic notion of what constitutes civic engagement. It doesn't reflect very well, for example, new forms of cultural politics which have emerged over the past few decades and it doesn't fully capture the ways that media might work to reinforce notions of social connectivity or empowerment which might be foundational for the future of civic engagement. I define civic media as "media which contributes to our sense of civic engagement, which strengthens our social ties to our communities -- physical and virtual -- and which reinforces the social contracts which insures core values of a democratic society."

I wrote about this in my blog a little while ago and will refer people to the post there at [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/09/civic\\_media\\_in\\_the\\_digital\\_age.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/09/civic_media_in_the_digital_age.html).

But let me port over a few paragraphs from that post to add to this conversation:

"Newspapers and news broadcasts can certainly play that role and some of the speakers from traditional newspapers at the Forum events made powerful points about the important role that newspapers play at all levels -- from the micropublics of individual neighborhoods up through cities, states, regions, nations, and global cultures -- in forging a sense of connection between and within what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined communities." Anderson's point is that we feel a sense of emotional bond with people who we will never meet in part because media, like newspapers, continually remind us of what we have in common as citizens. Democracy depends not simply on informing citizens but also on creating the feeling that we have a stake in what happens to other members of our community. Such an attitude emerges in part from what the newspaper reports

and the rhetorical structures it adopts; it also emerges through the perception of the editor's responsiveness to her readers and the notion that the op-ed page of the paper functions as a shared forum where community members can speak with an expectation of being heard. Part of what may be leaving young readers feeling estranged from traditional journalism is that they feel that these publications do not represent the most important experiences of their lives, do not care about the issues that matter to them, and do not value the kinds of communities which they inhabit. One need only point to the ways that news coverage of issues from games violence to MySpace and DOPA emphasize the adult's concerns but do not report or reflect young people's perspectives.

Players often experience a similar sense of social connection in regard to their guilds, for example, in multiplayer games. There are plenty of players who go on forays on nights when they are too tired to see straight because they don't want to let their virtual neighbors and comrades down. Such games are powerful introductions to civic engagement because they taught young people what it was like to feel empowered, what it was like to feel capable of making a difference within a world, and what it was like to feel a strong set of bonds with others with whom you worked to accomplish common goals. This is something radically different from Robert Putnam's argument that people who go online lack the deep social ties that emerged through traditional community life. Those people who form guilds in multiplayer games can scarcely be described as "bowling alone," to use Putnam's potent metaphor. This is a totally different ballgame. What ever we want to say about what they are doing -- they are doing it together. Now, many concerned with civic engagement want to know how we could transfer those feelings and experiences from the game world to the "real world." And I am certainly interested in ways we might use games to strengthen ties to local communities. But this approach may discount the social and emotional reality these game worlds have for their players."

I don't suggest that these new forms of social bonds should substitute for more traditional forms rather that they may potentially be mutually reinforcing. It may be this is what some of you are calling "media engagement" rather than "civic engagement." But in so far as many of us now feel strong social ties to communities which are not defined in geographic terms this alternative notion of engagement seems important to hold onto. These feelings of connection and empowerment should be seen as valuable in their own terms as well as resources upon which other projects for civic engagement may build.

Such cultural work need not depend on the facts and arguments of traditional journalism but might harness forms of play and might work as much around discussions of fictional texts which provoke ethical and social delimmas as around "real world" civic events. Indeed, I suggest in *Convergence Culture* that there may be new forms of social engagement which are possible through popular culture than, given the charged nature of contemporary partisan politics, may be difficult to sustain around traditional political communities. We may suspend mutual distrust when what we are discussing are the imaginary worlds of popular culture even as we are heavily armoured in talking about actual social policies. Such conversations might be important politically precisely because they are not about politics but rather than invite us to listen to the perspectives of people who take very different political positions than us.

Civic groups with real world agendas might then learn by studying the forms of rhetoric and the modes of engagement which work in these spaces and using them as a bridge to draw young people into political conversations. This is part of what people are getting at when they talk about harnessing music for political purposes. Most of us in this discussion are of an age to remember how central rock was to the politics of the anti-war movement of the 1960s or for that matter, soul and hip hop have been to various civil rights movements around the world. How might the language of games or fan cultures be used to draw people into civic engagement? Jane McGonigal's work on alternate reality

fans points to one example where the "collective detectives" turned skills they deployed in solving fantasy conspiracies towards tracking real world crime or political corruption. In *Convergence Culture*, I talk about the ways that tools created for the exchange of Beanie Babies (Meetup) got used by the Dean campaign, how amateur filmmaking efforts got deployed by Moveon.org during its Bush in 30 Seconds efforts, how the form of fan videos got mimiced by True Majority during the last presidential election, etc. We might think about how last season of *West Wing* modeled alternative political rhetoric and campaign practices which could, if anyone was watching, get pulled into the next election cycle. All of this is to say that culture -- as well as journalism -- has something to contribute to the discussion of civic engagement and I have been a bit uncomfortable with the ease with which some posts have dismissed forms of civic engagement which have their roots in popular culture.

Anyway, let me toss this into the archives of our discussion of how new media broaden our notion of the civic.

### **Question # 3 How to Facilitate Public Voices for Young Citizens**

#### **Lance Bennett**

What are the opportunities and pitfalls in teaching participatory media skills and orientations for creating the capacity to raise public voice(s)? What suggestions do you have for helping make such pedagogy successful?

Date posted: October 5, 2006

#### **Howard Rheingold**

Start with issues that young people care about.

#### **Lance Bennett**

Can you (we) suggest procedures for identifying issues that young people care about and then forming common positions or concerns?

For example, in the Student Voices project, we began by asking students to do a survey of their communities and identify issues that mattered to them. Then we trained teachers in how to hold class deliberations to move from individual to common ground. Then questions were formed, and other skill sets introduced after that. Then students learned to find online communities, resources, etc.

It seems that moving from individual interests to shared interests is important for getting a sense of how one's voice might join a public.

#### **Zephyr Teachout**

If we start with what people care about, won't they care about what their parents, their friends, mainstream media, games, and advertising has told them to care about? I mean American children, especially. I'm asking this question seriously, and not because I have another answer. (American students seem to care about Darfur, but not the Congo, and while there is plenty to care about in both places, if they don't know about the Congo they aren't going to care about it.)

Therefore, I would imagine many strategies, but they do not all start with what children care about, some of it starts with what we, or teachers, care about.

1. I assume modeling is critical -- teachers, parents, others, showing their own passion for moral issues that they care about and connecting that moral passion to civic action. Living in the world we do, a significant part of that civic action will involve using the internet.

2. Create structures for mediating young people's interests. (following Lance's idea of public) The strategy I've been mulling over recently is a little different, modeled on the creation of the mega churches, where people were focus-grouped about why they didn't attend church, and then churches were built with the responses to these focus groups. I could see a similar model for a political party -- starting with asking people why they aren't involved in something they already are known to care about. I keep returning, and I will keep returning, to building structures that enable persistent action, because without these structures we do not have a democracy capable of managing civic action. If every person wrote letters to their member of Congress every day, the Member, assume a well-intentioned and responsive one, could not listen to those letters, or inasmuch as he listened to them he could only do so in a polling fashion, not by engaging in the deliberation with the writer. Without structures to enable meaningful civic action as collective action, we don't have a good model of civic life because it's not universalizable. WITH structures that create mediation and deliberation on a lower level -- ideally local -- our democratic model works with universalized civic engagement.

Because of the internet, some of the small-scale, federated communities can be exclusively online, but all of them will use the internet.

3. Cultivate a strong sense of duty I think civic engagement must be a moral commitment and a societal expectation, and is more likely to work if we cultivate a sense of the moral responsibility of each citizen to make informed collective decisions and engage in civic life.

4. Lower the voting age The fact that the voting age coincides with the year that 30-40% of Americans go to college, often in a place they do not intend to live, completely disconnects all the civic lessons taught in high school with adult experience.

5. Oh dear. I misread the question.

**Michael X. Delli Carpini**

This approach make intuitive sense Lance, but just to throw it on the table, isn't also possible that the reverse could work - for example, start with a central issue or moment like the civil rights or student movement of the 1960s or the feminist movement of the 1970s (including their "methods" of engagement), and then bring these back to both issues of today and ultimately, to issues that still affect the students everyday lives, tying the more contemporary versions to the more contemporary information environment as well?

Michael X. Delli Carpini

### **Howard Rheingold**

Please forgive me. My first answer was so glib that it seemed to be something of a show-stopper.

I asked my friend Andrea Saveri, research director at Institute for the Future, about the process that I know she uses to help young people envision "what really matters" to them. Here is her reply. It probably isn't THE answer to Lance's question of how to identify what really matters to young people, but it seems to me to be a worthy candidate for AN answer:

What I've noticed in doing foresight work at IFTF with organizations and with kids, is that looking ahead is really a tool for examining present day actions and choices in a broader and longer term context, which allows individuals and organizations to see the connections among driving forces and longer term implications that get hidden in the short view. It allows one to do "ecological thinking" (systemic thinking) as described by our colleagues at the Center for Ecoliteracy. I think this is critical for young people who rarely get the chance to think ahead about consequences of actions and the kinds of forces that shape decisions and their consequences. It also helps reframe issues that matter to them in a way that links the present and the future. The future becomes connected to their present in a meaningful way.

So when I think about process for kids to identify what issues matter to them, I take a long view with them. I ask them to imagine their lives ten years in the future and to write a personal story about a decisive moment in which something happens, they choose a course of action, consequences result, and deeper understanding emerges from reflecting on those consequences. The personal story reveals what matters to them (such as violence in their schools and graffiti as a way to escape it), but the future context helps them see how trends and driving forces might shape that issue (eg. what graffiti becomes in ten years and new ways to escape violence). It also allows a discussion of what may be the driving forces of the violence (economic shifts, race etc.). So to continue with the example, public voice could be developed around supporting new forms and venues for graffiti like expression, youth volunteer or employment opportunities in the fields of design/arts or civic engagement around issues of community employment or racial equality.

For me the key is to make it personal so it stays real for the kids and isn't just a bunch of data, but to link the personal story and personal choices with a plausible and data supported description of a future context. I've done this with 8-12th graders in a few pilot projects and they can do it. We prepare them by helping them think about what a ten year time period means, is it far away/close, we discuss uncertainties and wildcards that can shape the future. Then we introduce selected driving forces/trends that we think will shape the ten year horizon--things like global climate change, global production networks, social media, demographic change...so that they can get an understanding of what the future context may be like. They need to include at least one of the drivers/trends in their stories. The interesting part is how they see that driver affecting what is important to them, like preservation of their family heritage amidst technological change or their citizen rights in a new context of genetic engineering and ethnicity.

It is really exciting to work with kids. I think the foresight exercise could be a great link to public voice as supported by participatory media.

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 The following is a basic outline of the process flow for a curriculum that develops youth foresight. this process can be adapted to various schedules: semester in class activities, weekend workshop, 3 week summer intensive. Each process step is linked to possible activities.

#### 1. Why think about the future?

- \* Significance of the long term view for youth
- \* Relevance to their present day challenges
- \* Threading the future to the present

#### 2. Exploring a Ten Year Timeline

- \* Thinking ahead: one month, one year, 3 years, 10 years
- \* Uncertainties - what do we know for sure? what's uncertain? Cone of uncertainty.
- \* How does data change over time? What do we need to know to have more certainty?
- \* Driving forces - trends
- \* Discontinuities
- \* Wildcards

#### 3. IFTF Forecasts - Stories of the Future

- \* Map of the Decade - key driving forces and impact areas
- \* How do a set of driving forces shape a future context?

#### 4. Personal Stories

- \* Personal stories as embodiments/expressions of time - present and future
- \* Decisive moments - critical junctures for learning

#### 5. Bringing Stories to Life - Personal Forecasts

- \* Narratives - scripts
- \* Artifacts
- \* Story boards
- \* Digital stories

#### 6. Mapping a Collective Forecast - What are the issues?

- \* Mapping personal forecasts to generate a collective future landscape
- \* How do the personal forecasts represent intersections of key drivers of change and impact areas?
- \* What issues matter? What issues emerge from the map?

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 what it is ---> is --->up to us

#### **Cathy Davidson**

Howard, that's a pretty amazing action plan. The only thing I would add to the content mix is more of the kinds of media that kids like---music, most of all, but also graphic novels, anime, fashion, games, social networking spaces. I'm actually not being glib here, but suggesting that using forms other than text and pedagogy is important. That is, do all of the above, but make sure it has a beat, a look, a groove . . . and let the kids lead the way on all of that. I'm not saying that civic engagement has to be "fun" but I am saying it has to look like what kids see as civic engagement, what kids find important and meaningful to them, or it will seem like a school exercise and not like "life" (in all its actual and virtual manifestations).

#### **Marina Bers**

Hi,

I am a contributing author to the book....and my focus is developing technologically-based interventions to address some of these issues. I connect with what Andrea shared....in my own work with students I ask them to imagine and design a virtual community of the future (if I am working with college students...then a virtual campus of the future) and how these virtual spaces (which they make from scratch, both in terms of urban design and social organization and virtual institutions) could address some of the issues or problems that they are facing in their communities or campuses today....Over the years I found this a good way to get to what matters to them and, at the same time, to

promote the idea that they CAN and SHOULD imagine a better, fair, more just world....that is their job as young people...I worry about young kids losing their idealism....even if they are voting...we want them to be able to think outside the box.  
Marina--

### **David Buckingham**

There is a course a very long tradition of this kind of work in media education, and several well documented examples of practice. In the US context, I would recommend Steve Goodman's book 'Teaching Youth Media', Kathleen Tyner's 'A Closer Look' and Glynda Hull's work. You could even look at my own book 'Media Education'. These all come out of many years' experience of work with young people on media production projects. Meghan McDermott, Shelly Goldman and Angela Booker have a thoughtful piece on this in the Identity volume.

The International Clearinghouse for Children, Youth and Media in Goteborg, Sweden, publishes an annual yearbook which has several accounts of such projects: the 2002 yearbook is particularly relevant.

UNESCO also recently published a study of such projects in developing countries, easily accessible via: [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=22831&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&UR...](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=22831&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&UR...)

### **Ulises Mejias**

Not much I can add in terms of a framework, so I thought I would just share some personal experiences based on a course I taught last Fall, called Social Software Affordances. It was a graduate seminar, so the audience was perhaps not what we have in mind in the context of this discussion, but I think some of the lessons learned are still applicable.

The goal for the class was to engage in a critical assessment of social software and its affordances in terms of individual and social change. We tackled questions such as: What is social about social software? How is the notion of community being redefined by social software? How is social agency shared between humans and code in social software? What are the social repercussions of unequal access to social software? Can social software be an effective tool for individual and social change?

One of the main projects was what I called an 'issue entrepreneurship' project: students were asked to identify a social cause they felt passionate about, and use social software tools to attempt to make a meaningful contribution to the cause at the local and global levels. Students weren't graded on how successful they were, but on the quality of their reflections about the process. In fact, many of the projects failed, at least in their initial incarnations. I warned most students that given the time frame and scope of the project,

they would encounter significant obstacles. But more than quantifiable success, the goal was to explore the opportunities and limits of the new media for activism and civic engagement. There is a report of the whole course experience here if you are interested (free subscription required).

Cheers,

-Ulises

### **Lance Bennett**

Making historical tie-ins may work in some cases. Indeed, this seems to be a common approach in current civics education. Yet for many of the young people who are hardest to motivate (so called at risk populations) this requires a leap of abstraction and attribution of relevance that are hard to make.

### **Lew Friedland**

Much has already been said here, but I want to put a few things on the table. This is an international discussion, so I apologize if my comments are too US-centered. But the U.S. school structure is peculiar, and poses some distinct barriers to the kind of political interventions that some folks in the thread have favored. A few years ago, I did an ethnography of civic engagement (with Shauna Morimoto) involving 100 high school students in Madison, Wisconsin. Madison is one of the most liberal cities in the U.S., (although less than outsiders think). Our sample traversed nine high schools, ranging from Catholic, to minority, to alternative schools, to suburban, to high achieving public schools. ([http:// www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP40Friedland.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP40Friedland.pdf) for those interested).

We had a number of findings that I won't go over here. But one was the extraordinary difficulty of building networks for civic engagement of any sort (our approach was inductive, we looked at any activity that could be understood as civic or political). Even those kids who were relatively interested and engaged, who had teachers who taught issues (particularly the war in this case), or who sat on official youth boards, or school bodies, were primarily focused elsewhere, to small networks of friends, and toward the next steps in their lives, often college (as true for minority and low income kids as others). There were occasional dense nodes of activity (e.g. war protests). Some sustained volunteering, usually of the least political sort. But little of this had anything to do with the schools themselves. Almost all of it was outside both the school boundaries and the school framework. And, again, this was in a community in which, although there were some divisions, you could probably find wider general agreement that civic and political discussion belonged in schools than 98% of those in the U.S.

My only point here is that, acknowledging that things may be different in other countries (including Berkeley and Cambridge ;)), making progress in schools in the U.S. is going

to be very difficult. It is no small achievement to get even smaller scale issue discussions going. Zephyr's teacher friend was reacting for good reason.

But, at least from our experience, I want to also caution against what I see as a slightly-utopian vision of how the movement of young people online will open up more civic and political space. That may be true, and I hope it is, but I still don't see a huge amount of evidence for it. We can locate some cases (Lance and Mike Xenos have made a good counter argument, and Yochai, in his fine book makes a good macro-level case). But, and perhaps I am just a bit old here, I am extremely skeptical that MySpace, etc. or other forms of online cultural activity teach the kind of collaboration that leads to civic or political action. I hope I'm wrong, and I'd love to see counter evidence. I realize it creates the infrastructure and certain habits of communication that, in theory enable political activity. But I don't think that infrastructure, plus use, lead, necessarily, to political thinking or discussion. ( I hasten to add that I recognize that no one is saying that they necessarily do.)

I think this leads us back, perhaps paradoxically, to the schools, to smaller programs, to small steps, including the kind of civic engagement, simple discussion, and skills building that some on the list see as less valuable. Going back to Michael's typology many posts ago, this is an extremely useful framework for thinking about precisely what kind of skills can be built through what kinds of institutions and communications networks. I think it's worth revisiting.

### **Howard Rheingold**

danah boyd makes the point rather strongly in her chapter for another volume that:

1. American youth in particular have lost almost all opportunities to meet in public spaces -- the spaces have been privatized and/or denied to them, and the way their lives are regimented has left very little in the way of public space.
2. boyd contends that what young people are doing in MySpace is, in large part, the creation of publics -- this is important to them for identity-formation, but it is also a substrate of the public sphere.

In other words, this is not a utopian place where political activism is automatically generated, but one of the few places where young people are expressing their identities and creating publics. The part about learning how to use these media to exercise power and influence is, in my opinion, where education has a role to play. And I share Peter's skepticism about this happening in the public schools (in the USA).

### **Ulises Mejias**

If the last space youth have left to build publics and express their identity is owned by Rupert Murdoch, then I think we are in trouble. I am not being facetious: I'm genuinely concerned about the privatization of public space, and I fear that new technologies might

be more of a facilitator than an obstacle to this privatization. I'm not saying anything new by pointing out that whereas before the economy was part of society, now society is part of the economy. That's the modern condition. And yet we cling to the hope (and I'm including myself here) that the same technologies that have evolved as a result of this particular kind of economy can also somehow subvert it.

To the extent that technologies reflect the values of a society, you need to change the values (and therefore, the society) first before you can start seeing different applications of the technologies (otherwise we might be putting the cart before the horse). I see attempts at this happening already, and I am encouraged by them. But the question nagging me is: are these real alternatives being engendered by social media, or are they simply part of the process by which capitalism tests its own limits so that it can learn to assimilate potential threats? I guess it's partly up to us to decide.

-Ulises

### **Howard Rheingold**

Technologies, of course, don't subvert -- it's up to people to act. The first printing presses were licensed by the Crown and controlled by monopolists who were every bit as rapacious, if not as globally successful, as Rupert Murdoch. That didn't help King George or Marie Antoinette, nor did it stop Jefferson and Madison (with some help from Peter Zenger).

### **Henry Jenkins**

I very much share Peter Levine's desire to push our schools to become free press/free speech zones where students can explore ideas that matter to them, including activities which have real world implications. But this seems very different from what is happening in our schools. There have been an alarming number of cases where schools have not only sought to censor the student press but have sought to extend this authority to police what students post on the web even if the writing takes place outside of school hours, on their own computers, off school grounds, and does not directly target the student body. For a good report on these trends, check out this essay at the Student Press Law Center -- <http://www.splc.org/legalresearch.asp?id=74>. In many cases, these efforts have been upheld by the American courts even though the suggestion that these materials disrupt school life because they can be accessed on school computers seems to be stretching well beyond any claims of a compelling interest. I would think that these trends should be part of any discussion of the civic engagement of young people.

### **Lance Bennett**

Many of us are skeptical about the schools as places likely to facilitate civic engagement. I understand Howard to be pointing to myspace and similar online community sites as providing opportunities. So how can we facilitate more effective and prominent public networking in these spaces?

### **Kathryn Montgomery**

As many have already noted, there are numerous obstacles in the contemporary public education policy and culture environment that may make it seem naive to suggest schools can embrace the new digital technologies in their curricular efforts to teach civics. I don't question those obstacles; they are very real. But I also don't think we can afford to simply write schools off in this area. I think Peter's last option in his post from the other day -- to "fight for political liberty within schools through political means" - is worth trying. At the very least, such an effort may help raise the issues more prominently in the public arena, contributing to a much-needed national conversation about youth and new media, as well as generating more controversy over our flawed educational policies. As Stephen Coleman suggested earlier, we need to make this an international conversation as well.

However, at the same time, I share many of the concerns expressed in several recent comments that the takeover of new online youth forums by large corporations does not bode well for future digital democratic discourse. As more and more media companies seize on these popular venues, they will shape them to serve their own needs.

We can already see this happening with MySpace, as an increasing number of marketers have moved in to take advantage of the profiling and viral opportunities the site offers.

(This is one of the patterns I'm exploring in my own chapter for this volume.) The Ad Age article that Peter referred to [http://adage.com/digital/article?article\\_id=112306](http://adage.com/digital/article?article_id=112306) is emblematic of this pattern of large media companies seeking out the places where young people are on the web, and swiftly moving in to monetize those spaces, altering their features and functions in the process, and perhaps, making them less interesting for the very youth they are trying to target. (Though it is admittedly unclear which is the chicken and which the egg in this case.) As one of the analysts quoted in the article notes, the MySpace "brand" is "bound to get old" with teens, suggesting that this is why Fox Interactive is now "developing MySpace as a platform for services and delivering content." Will such moves undermine the democratic potential of social networking platforms like this one? There are also legitimate concerns, as Lew Friedland and others have noted, that most of the youth interacting on these spaces are engaged in civic and political activities anyway. But the rapid commercialization of popular online areas may move them further away from the civic and political realm.

By the way, one of the challenges we all face in writing about MySpace and other contemporary developments is that the entire digital media culture is very much in transition, making it difficult to arrive at any definitive conclusions about where it is headed. But it is also important that we continue to collectively monitor and comment on its direction, and perhaps find ways to intervene, through public education and policy efforts.

### **Howard Rheingold**

Taking off from Kathryn's caution that we should keep in mind that digital media culture is in transition, I think it's worth recalling the (hyper-accelerated) history of

online social spaces. When they get boring, people move on. Does anyone remember TheGlobe, Tripod, or Xoom? They were also huge, multi-hundred-million-dollar deals with millions of mostly young users and were also touted as marketplaces of the future where youth culture could be monetized, commodified, sliced, and diced. Except the youth moved on and the businesses collapsed. If danah is right, and young people are taking advantage of one of the few "places" available for identity experimentation and creation of publics, then they might well move on if the corporate owners enclose their freedom to experiment in those ways. While the commercialization and privatization of everything is certainly a factor of the media environment that should not be ignored, I wonder how far the owners can go without losing their constituency. Look at how Friendster shot itself in the foot by clamping down on "fakesters." Although it requires capital to scale, the costs of starting up a new place are not an obstacle to new competitors, and the online constituency is only a mouseclick away from the next new place.

Again, I would also make a distinction between learning how to advocate to, connect with, and mobilize publics -- activities which can take many cultural forms (c.f. Henry Jenkins on fan cultures) -- and overt political activity.

I think it's a noble goal to fight for liberty within schools and don't want to discourage anyone from trying. In the USA, it looks to me like a steep uphill battle. I'll be happy if we can keep Bible class out of public schools and keep Darwin in the curriculum. To dream that public high school students could be encouraged to organize political discussions or demonstrations around issues that matter to them seems to me to be utopian, but I don't feel happy about conceding the future of public education. At the same time, I do believe that there is plenty of room to maneuver in after-school programs and in online spaces independent of public education institutions.

### **Barry Joseph**

Many of us are skeptical about the schools as places likely to facilitate civic engagement. I understand Howard to be pointing to myspace and similar online community sites as providing opportunities. So how can we facilitate more effective and prominent public networking in these spaces?

Global Kids has been effective in facilitating civic engagement in schools (albeit, in after-school settings). So I am far from giving up on schools as a location for developing civically engaged youth. But the bulk of my experience in recent years has been experimentation with methods for doing so online. I'll share a few thoughts on the matter below (and please forgive their unformed nature, as I am developing these ideas as I write them).

If we (adults) want to promote civic engagement of youth in online spaces, it strikes me that the first thing we need to do is recognize that in doing so the entire educational model is overturned. The second thing is to explore the ramifications of working in the models that emerge in their place.

For example, rather than work with teens in a space so tightly bound they can't go to the bathroom without asking permission, we would be working in a space that is often bound by little beyond the limits of the technology (and their access to it). An education approach based on having a captured audience - they are in school so they HAVE to be there - no longer works. We will be entering their worlds, their own social spaces, and seeking to engage them on their own terms, selling ourselves and our message (in a sense) in an attempt to gain their buy-in. Schools have the recruitment issues down - it's the law, and teen's futures depends on their compliance. When we enter teen online spaces we lose our ability as adults to use our powers to force participation.

So one ramification is recruitment.

After school programs are in a similar position, and have developed all sorts of incentives to attract the attention, then dedication, of teens: e.g. stipends, internships, mentoring, food, opportunities, etc. many of these methods can work online. But even after school programs are closer to schools, at least around this issue: they are adult-run physical institutions, with their own rules and procedures, that seek to bring in youth. It is harder online to reach youth as an adult when we can't set the rules, define the space, measure participation and hold teens accountable in the traditional ways, etc.

So another ramification is that we need to give up methods for running such programs that have been really effective in person... without losing the aspects that we can adapt or learn from for use online.

A third is that we have to learn to not only show but have respect for youth spaces online - and look to them as experts on these environments - yet be able to honestly critique their limitations at the same time.

Another big change is that, in person, adults are often the authority and centralize the activity around their agenda, with their leadership, on their timeframe, etc. This model often breaks down online, or needs to be structured in a very different manner, both from a centralized to a decentralized model, and away from an adult-as-expert model. At the same time, centralized authorities do have a positive role to play, as do the expertise and strengths of adults. So a further ramification is that new power models need to be configured to both change from the traditional school model without losing all of the good parts.

Our summer program in Teen Second Life offers one model elucidating many of these points. I will overgeneralize in my description since I fear this post is already longer than I intended.

In June we launched a competitive application process in the teen grid of Second Life for Camp GK. We were asking teens to commit to spending 3 hours a day, five days a week, for four weeks, to learn about global issues and then develop their own action plan on an issue of their choosing. We hired an intern to help us run the program - a teen from outside NYC who is an expert user in SL. We could not have run the program without

him. He developed and ran the ad campaign for the camp, creating some brilliant billboards, placing them on properties around the grid (often his own, as he is a land baron), and using an in-world advertising system that allowed me to track on a web site how many times they were viewed and offered Camp applications. We had no idea that he would do all of these things and that he would become the main point of contact for applicants. But he knew the space and knew how to sell something to his peers.

The competitive nature of the process made the camp seem special - it meant something to be accepted - and it offered \$100US to those who completed the program.

If you are not familiar with teen second life, it is the teen community of this popular virtual world. Only teens should occupy this space. The only reason I can be there, as an adult, is that I have been submitted to a background check, bought an island, and agreed to have my avatar locked to that island. Teens can visit me, but I can leave to visit them. Our challenge thus was to carve out a space FOR teens in this teen community but have them accept that it was owned and, most times, run by adults. At first, many teens challenged our presence there - what right did we have to be in their grid? By the end of the camp, many of our most vocal critics became our most vocal supporters, arguing why our presence supports teens to make their community a better place.

We spent the whole summer learning how to retool what we do in person within Second Life. Rather than one channel for communication (voice in a classroom) we had multiple, simultaneous channels running - the public chat, private personal IMs, private group IMs, sometimes a Skype line, etc. Learning how to facilitate and coordinate conversations and activities in such a way to not let all the "noise" drown out the "signal" was quite a challenge. But in the end we developed some rather effective techniques and in the process were able to maintain and reproduce many of the core aspects of our programs: basic behavioral guidelines, experiential and interactive workshops, constructivist learning, etc.

We learned rather quickly to not pretend to know more about SL than the teens. We touted our own expertise - on global issues, on education, on youth development - but always looked to them about their area of expertise - teen second life. We looked to them to create much of what the program required - scripts, objects, buildings, clothing, etc. And before we learned how to even ask they would offer or simply create the offering. Eventually, we learned to ask them to build the factory for the workshop on globalization, and supported their Camp GK t-shirt contest to encourage identification. We learned that one of the strengths of these online youth communities is that they often attract teens who want to make a difference and are looking for something to do; one of the limitations is that there is often no clear path to engagement. This creates opportunities for organizations like ours who are delighted to meet the needs of teens who are hungry to do more and looking for guidance.

After a few weeks they picked the topic of child sex trafficking. They decided to build a maze as both a challenging puzzle and as a metaphor for the issue. They also developed three actions teens could take, connected to something outside SL - donate money to the

Polaris Project, sign an online position, or submit a photo to an online project showing people wearing a t-shirt that reads "slavery still exists" (which they did using the free shirt offered in the maze). In 8 weeks, 2,500 teens visited the maze and 450 donated money, with another 60 offering photos.

The teens constructed the maze, including photos and text from the web, wrote scripts to quiz you along the way, built attractive issue-related objects, posted instructions, and did what was necessary to create the maze. It was VERY hard to organize this build, and again our teen intern played a lead role in making it happen. Of most interest to me, to promote the maze, they led a 1.5 hour teach-in, OFF of Global Kids island. They developed it on their own using the methods they learned from Camp GK... and then took them places we could never have imagined. (you can read all of it here: [http://www.holymeatballs.org/2006/08/hmds\\_camp\\_gk\\_action\\_on\\_teen\\_se\\_1...](http://www.holymeatballs.org/2006/08/hmds_camp_gk_action_on_teen_se_1...)). Keep in mind, I could not have attended if I had wanted, as it was off of Global Kids Island.

So what did I learn from Camp GK about how to "facilitate more effective and prominent public networking in these spaces"? Create spaces in these communities in such a way to effectively recruit teens to defend your presence in their community, within this space develop their leadership skills, then support them to leave your space to enact change OUTSIDE the space you created.

I know there are many other models, and we have explored others as well, but I hope sharing a few details about just one example could offer some food for thought about this important topic.

Barry

### **Stephen Coleman**

I am less interested in skills than power, for educating young people to acquire the former while shielding them from the latter, is always going to result in their mystification and frustration.

The best way to teach young people about how to deal with power is to give them a chance to recognise, contest and negotiate with the powers that exist to control them. In the UK, school councils have provided a significant opportunity for young people to not merely reflect upon, but engage with power that intimately affects their lives. The present Government has made encouraging policy statements about the need to open up opportunities for school students to engage in 'decision-making with children and young people as partners engaging in dialogue, conflict resolution, negotiation and compromise.' (Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say, Department for Education and Skills, 2003) The Young People's Advisory Group, which was established to help the Government think this through, offered the astute reflection that

We as children and young people know what we want. The only way we can change things is to make sure that people who make decisions know what we

think and what we want. If you don't get involved you are likely to get only what other people want.

Alas, the gap between official aspiration and democratic realisation is conspicuous. As Dominic Wyse, in an excellent study of children's participation rights in English schools, found that

\* opportunities for the children in the study to express views freely in all matters affecting the child were extremely limited;

\* where school councils were present, they were hampered by a lack of action and poor lines of communication; ...

\* the way the children were treated by their teachers was of particular concern to them and they felt that basing fair treatment on a condition rather than as a right resulted in inequality

Of particular relevance to this discussion is the observation about 'poor lines of communication.' I would like to argue that nurturing skills of political engagement should entail the following communicative opportunities:

1. Schools should move away from centralised decision-making practices and encourage students to develop their own networks of communication. In large institutions like schools, this is likely to involve electronic networking.
2. Students should be encouraged to network with students in other schools, with a view to developing comparative awareness of conditions and a broader sensitivity of democratic opportunities available to them. Again, digital technologies are likely to be central to such communications across distance.
3. School students should not be penalised for engaging in practical, real-world issues, rather than the cosy simulations presented to them as 'civic education.' (See my chapter in the MacArthur volume for an illustration of how British school students were penalised for engaging in active opposition to the Iraq war - a campaign in which digital technologies were used in sophisticated and effective ways.)
4. Schools should not aim to manage and constrain young people's civic/political activities. If we are serious about education for democracy, then we have to acknowledge that if this is shaped and managed by those already in authority is likely to lead to young people getting 'only what other people want.'

### **Cathy Davidson**

Stephen--I could not agree more. In fact, I wonder if it would be useful, either as part of this volume or as part of the "uberintroduction" to all the volumes or as part of an ancillary website hosted by MacArthur to include specific recommendations as well as specific examples of what works as well as critique of what doesn't. In the U.S., given

the obscene high school drop out rate, given the relationship between lack of education/illiteracy/and incarceration rates, and given that public education does not seem to be responding creatively to different ways that kids learn from and on the Web, that we could provide useful interventions by highlighting some good examples of schools and out-of-school educational experiences that involve kids in learning in a bold and progressive way. Peer-to-peer learning, investigative reporting (on civic or scientific or other issues), gaming environments, writing lyrics, mixing music, doing it and not just reciting, reading, memorizing, taking standardized tests. All of the above, actively and creatively! It would be great to have a site on which great teachers could post their ideas and students could post theirs too.

### **Marina Bers**

I would add one more thing to Stephen's wonderful list....

\*opportunities for students to debate and make decision regarding how their school curriculum is organized and the content is taught...without this....school councils or any other opportunities for participating are not truly empowering kids...

Of course....what I am proposing is hard and in the early 80's when Lawrence Kohlberg launched his just-community program to address moral education through civic participation in the school communities, these kinds of curricular discussions and decisions were not allowed....however...civic engagement and participation means discussing what is important. and for student's whose goal should be to go to school to learn, what is important is to be able to explore what they are learning, why and how (the epistemology behind how curriculum frameworks and teaching methodologies are decided)..

### **Howard Rheingold**

I've tried to get a start on a website, aimed primarily at educators to share ideas and best practices and resources, at [https:// www.socialtext.net/medialiteracy](https://www.socialtext.net/medialiteracy)

### **Stephen Coleman**

I am certainly in favour of such a practical outcome - especially if it has an authentically international dimension.

### **Cathy Davidson**

Stephen--I could not agree more. In fact, I wonder if it would be useful, either as part of this volume or as part of the "uberintroduction" to all the volumes or as part of an ancillary website hosted by MacArthur to include specific recommendations as well as

specific examples of what works as well as critique of what doesn't. In the U.S., given the obscene high school drop out rate, given the relationship between lack of education/illiteracy/and incarceration rates, and given that public education does not seem to be responding creatively to different ways that kids learn from and on the Web, that we could provide useful interventions by highlighting some good examples of schools and out-of-school educational experiences that involve kids in learning in a bold and progressive way. Peer-to-peer learning, investigative reporting (on civic or scientific or other issues), gaming environments, writing lyrics, mixing music, doing it and not just reciting, reading, memorizing, taking standardized tests. All of the above, actively and creatively! It would be great to have a site on which great teachers could post their ideas and students could post theirs too.

### **Kathryn Montgomery**

I agree as well with Stephen's points. And the policies he describes in UK educational institutions are a heartening trend. It seems to me that U.S. public education will require substantial policy reforms, and changes in its culture, in order to reverse some of the patterns that Cathy identifies. Educators will also need to find ways to embrace digital media as an integral part of the lives of young people, and finding more creative ways to incorporate them into the curriculum. Unfortunately, public policies based on fear, such as the proposed Deleting Online Predators Act, could seriously undermine such efforts. I hope we can find ways to take this discussion outside of the realm of academic discussion and debate and into the broader public arena. In particular, I'd like to see us promote our research to members of the educational community. There are numerous educational associations in Washington working on the policy front, whose leaders and members should be invited into our conversation when the volumes are published.

Yes. Good point. I'm more familiar in my own work with U.S. organizations, but by all means, we need to make such education efforts international.

### **Yochai Benkler**

This has been a very useful thread, and I have little to add. Reading the poses, however, made me think that there is a distinct tension between the kind of approach Howard Rheingold characterized in his second intervention (the IFTF class), as well as the approach that seemed to be implied by Lance Bennett's question, and the approach hinted at by Howard's first quick response and Stephen Coleman's interventions based on the UK experience, as well Kathryn Montgomery's reference to DOPA.

The former approach looks for a relatively ordered approach, with curriculum and teaching. It has the advantage of manageability and low risk. In particular, the projection out to the future allows a certain intellectual remove between the proposed actions and the emotions of what irks me now. This is in stark contrast to thinking of active political engagement in what you care about intensely as the highest form of education to civic engagement. This is because (a) students may care about things that matter to them, which may well be the ways in which they are subject to the power of teachers,

institutions, and parents; and (b) students may care passionately about highly contested political issues of the day, to an extent that public institutions, in particular, but even private institutions that must cater to a politically diverse parent body, will find troubling and threatening. For public school teachers to be engaged in helping and encouraging students to protest the President's immigration policy, the local government's decision to impose a curfew, or the high-school's (or university's) ban on p2p filesharing or on MySpace is institutionally difficult. For teachers to have a "civic engagement" curriculum while cooperating in the suppression these actual, real world efforts around things students may feel passionate is hypocritical.

Civic engagement today is moving gradually online; when it does, it permeates institutional and organizational boundaries, and is dynamic. As such, it is hard to control, and fits very poorly with the traditional school model of siloed authority. Education aimed to facilitate greater civic-engagement will likely be stuck between, on the one hand, the wish to engage students in what they care about and to give them the tools to organize, share opinions, and act together on these issues, and, on the other hand, the threat that youth mobilization poses to the school system and to parents' control over their children and their school districts. I wonder whether safe curricula, mock legislatures, etc. end up teaching what really matters about civic engagement.

### **Zephyr Teachout**

Yochai,

Thanks for this thought. Last night a friend of mine and I were walking through the possibilities, assuming that what we wanted was to bring meaningful demonstration of a students power into the classroom. And every time the thought experiment got serious, where a student was using his social connections in the school to actively cause something to happen, the hypothetical teacher and school brought it into safer territory.

What we found troubling was the idea of students who did not have models of parents or friends who were actually leveraging power, so you'd want the school to do it -- but then the school would either become a block, or start to be actively working against the opposing views.

In an Internet & Politics class that I taught last year, I found this happening to me. I, like others on this list, gave students the project of choosing something (in groups of 1 to the entire class) that they would then try to change, using new technologies as well as old, with a focus on the new technologies. Four students chose to try to do something about the cafeteria food -- a project that started with hating the food and ended with an effort to boycott them for being a corporation that treated animals and workers badly. It turned out the most effective work was flyering, a very offline activity, so while they did petitions and used facebook and blogged, I encouraged them to follow the power where it worked -- not where it was "online" for pedagogical reasons. Sounds nice, right? Another student decided she wanted to support the incarceration rates for criminals who had served their time but were still considered possibly dangerous in society, but not dangerous enough

for being kept in a mental facility. As a former criminal defense attorney, this went straight to my hackles, and as much as I told her who to call, etc, to lobby, I felt strongly that this was NOT an issue I wanted her to achieve power around, and I'm sure I didn't put as much energy into that project.

All of this is old hat for those of you who teach regularly, but I think Yochai has put the conundrum well.

### **Peter Levine**

I'm weighing in late with a sober thought about schools that I hope is not simply discouraging. We want kids to work on issues that they choose and to struggle with power. That's going to be very, very hard in schools that are accountable to adult politicians, under pressure to raise test scores in a competitive, globalized economy, and pure examples of Weberian bureaucracy, to boot. Which leaves several options--

- 1) Ignore schools and think about online venues that students can use voluntarily on their own time. The drawback is that many students will not participate, especially those who are not already on a course to political and civic participation. The main reason I'm interested in statistical information about youth and media (to return to an earlier discussion) is that I want some sense of what proportion of disadvantaged people may be taking to online politics. I fear that it is very low. (Maybe it's a red herring, but I was struck by the recent news that only 12% of MySpace users are between the ages of 12 and 17, compared to 41% who are 35-54; [http://adage.com/digital/article?article\\_id=112306](http://adage.com/digital/article?article_id=112306) One by one, the online venues seem to be taken over by the old and established.)
- 2) Recognize a division of labor. Schools teach skills and facts; kids can learn to contest power elsewhere. But then what are useful pedagogies for school settings? Isn't it worth trying to teach skills and facts well?
- 3) Try to persuade schools that it would serve their own purposes to allow some degree of political liberty in students' media projects. Perhaps giving youth opportunities to create their own media products keeps them in school and improves their achievement on standardized tests of reading and mathematics. That is plausible, but it would need to be proved.
- 4) Fight for political liberty within schools through political means--filing lawsuits to prevent prior censorship of student media, working with teachers' unions, finding allies in community-based groups that want to recruit youth, etc. I'll simply say that I think this would be a very hard fight. For example, if schools are forced to allow publication without censorship, they can always cancel the whole media program.

ps, I had misfiled, and therefore overlooked, the latest posts by Yochai and Zephyr. They had already explored basically the same point.

**Lee Rainie**

Forgive me for this very late posting on Question 3....

I thought some useful insights might come from my friend Kavita Singh, who for several years has facilitated research at CTCNet (an association of community technology centers) in a program that encourages teens to use tech/media tools to facilitate civic engagement. So we traded emails and here's what she reported to me:

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CTCNet's Youth Visions for Stronger Neighborhoods program gives high-school age youth and community technology programs the opportunity to use multimedia tools and training to engage in community decision-making. Between 2003 and 2006, CTCNet provided grants to community technology programs to implement the Youth Visions curriculum. Each year, the grantee organizations would provide feedback, revisions, and additional suggested activities to CTCNet, which were then incorporated into the next year's revision. After 3 years of revisions, this field tested curriculum will be made available to the public in November 2006, along with a web site of the video productions from the grantees and case studies.

Team building and collaboration were key components of the curriculum activities and so group decision making on what need or issue would be worked on was not difficult. Additionally, there was a beginning focus on [community] assets, putting a positive light on the neighborhoods in which the youth live.

The curriculum is divided into 4 phases:

Phase I - Youth learn about what their peers and other community residents identify as assets, needs, and issues and are introduced to the media skills they will need for the remainder of the project (e.g., video production, website design, graphic design, mapping, presentation).

Phase 2 - Youth analyze the information they gathered in Phase 1 and choose the asset(s) they'd like to focus on, the local needs or problems addressed by this asset, and their ideas for enhancing and better exposing the asset. They continue to build their collaboration, presentation, and research skills.

Phase 3 - Youth refine their multimedia and teamwork skills by dividing into teams tasked with producing different presentation pieces (e.g., website, map, video, or electronic presentation) and focus on project management and building partnerships with other institutions.

Phase 4 - Curriculum activities culminate in a youth-produced multimedia piece, typically video, that the youth use to educate stakeholders on key community issues.

Overall, our outside program evaluation found that both the Youth Visions coordinators and the youth participants were satisfied with the curriculum activities and program.

Program highpoints include:

- . Connecting youth to community leaders.
- . Using a camera and editing film were the youth's favorite activities.
- . Youth rated their skills in teamwork, creative arts, leadership, public speaking/presenting, research and visual arts higher after completing the program.

The project is no longer active in that we won't be providing grants to groups to run the curriculum, until we find new money. I don't anticipate that happening until next year.

Certainly, people [on the listserv] can contact Hanh if they're interested and perhaps they can be linked directly to groups that are implementing it on their own.

Hanh Le, [h...@ctcnet.org](mailto:h...@ctcnet.org)  
 Director of Programs  
 CTCNet  
 202-462-1200

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Thanks to all on the list for such a wonderful, rich exchange. I learned a lot more than I contributed. But isn't that always the way....

Lee Rainie

#### **Final Question #4: Strategies for youth voices and Research questions**

**Lance Bennett**

Since the last discussion was moving in this direction, launching this question seems appropriate:

What strategies can we develop to influence educators, policy makers, community youth workers, professional associations, and parents to adopt more creative and democratic opportunities for young people to raise their public voices?

And what key research questions might inform these strategies?

Thanks to you all for a wonderful and rich set of discussions. Our working group wants to archive this conversation, organize it a bit, and give it a broader audience. We will be in touch later about this. Suggestions are welcome.

best, Lance

Date Posted: October 9, 2006

**Peter Dahlgren**

Have been tied up at a conference abroad these past few days, alas...

Well, this question is really the tough one, isn't: what can we actually do to make a positive impact?

Obviously there are many possible paths – most of them no doubt difficult in various ways, yet we have also heard about positive experiences that have opened doors/minds/eyes...

Since there can be no one singular way or strategy in this regard, I suspect that what we can anticipate here is a cumulative set of suggestions or reports of fruitful measures. Here is my small contribution based on an ongoing project.

We have been studying how politically active young citizens - both in traditional party politics and in alternative movements – use and learn from the internet. The funding agency wants to spread the results beyond the confines of academic researchers.

Thus, my colleague and I have been booked for a travelling road show where we meet large groups of high school teachers in lecture/seminar/discussion settings. These teachers want to reach the students – they really want to connect with them.

Even in Sweden there can be some sensitivity about political expression/involvement in school contexts. And even if the issues ultimately do center on power, as Stephen Coleman says in his posts, we can go fairly far by playing on the rhetoric of the 'civic', 'democracy', 'engagement', etc – without emphasizing the 'nasty realm of politics'.

What we also emphasize is the centrality of the net (and popular culture) for the youngsters. We underscore questions about daily experience, identity development, and what is actually meaningful for the kids. And how the net is a fantastic pedagogic tool. All this to loosen up what I think is often a resistance on the part of the teachers – based on unfamiliarity and feeling threatened by youth culture, the net, etc. We encourage them to be receptive – and to develop their own expertise/competencies in these areas. We argue that the architecture of the net is fostering new cognitive structures/patterns, and teachers simply must plug into this. Thus, we sort of 'soft sell' political participation in a larger pedagogic package. So far, no eggs or tomatoes have been thrown. On the other hand, we're still waiting for the 'participatory revolution'.....

But it feels like we're making a small, positive dent.

**Cathy Davidson**

Clearly there is no one right way to promote social and educational change. Rather, what is required is learning strategies (pun intended) to take advantage of digital possibilities and new ways of social interactivity for civic engagement on every level---in the schools, outside the schools, in organized political action, in social support situations, and in representative and symbolic actions online and off. It also requires listening to kids (on the one hand), respecting their goals and points of civic interest and intention, and(at the other end of the spectrum) retraining and reorganizing schools of education but also all the departments and disciplines in academe that should be concerned with learning. And don't miss all the points in between! As a group, one relatively small but still significant thing this remarkable contingent of MacArthur authors can do is pool and locate our resources (intellectual, institutional, organizational, bibliographical, disciplinary, and even affective), use one another for collaborative purposes and for information-exchange, publicize one another's efforts, and move to the next level of aggregating and mobilizing what we contribute. Ninety academics is a lot. If our goal beyond the MacArthur series is to form a powerful but loose coalition, we can begin that process by being a network that supports one another's work (if only by linking to one another's websites), publicizes and attends one another's events (and sending our students), and strives to make a critical mass that makes a difference. Learning 2.0 is also about aggregating ourselves and our complex professional and personal networks. Even a data base of efforts, with convenient kinds of tagging or visualizations to allow us to know who, what, when, why, and how the others are contributing would be enormously beneficial. By "beneficial" I mean that it would be useful to us so we don't always have to reinvent the wheel when we start something new, but it would also be beneficial beyond us if we can make the connections between and among our numerous enterprises so that it is clear how strong we are in concert.

### **Zephyr Teachout**

I really like the suggestions so far. I want to join Peter on his roadtrip!

Some other nuts and bolts ideas. Creativity has to start with basic understanding of how easy it is to engage power, if difficult to overcome it:

Applying some of the strategies that have been effective in volunteerism to playing with power & civics:

- High Schools can give class credit for working on local political campaigns.
- High Schools can give class credit for working on national/international political campaigns.
- High Schools can give class credit for corresponding with political bloggers in other countries.
- All major civic organizations (so few in the US) can be supported in developing student chapters. The web seems a natural tool for this -- use the web to recruit students in 10 states simply by collecting emails and cell numbers, and then contacting and supporting

those students in the development of ongoing chapters.

- Lower the voting age. Actively engage students in a major lower-the-voting age campaign.
- School trips for voter registration.
- Credit for writing letters to the editor on a political subject

Work to overcome the "Second Digital Divide" (Hargattai), where people have internet access, but don't know how to use it for information that is useful to them. I would contact Hargattai and ask her to help develop a system.

- Especially in poor schools, teach political internet literacy online:

Where online can I find my candidates, and what they stand for?

Where can I find who contributes to them?

Where can I find concerns about them?

How can I contact them, and who should I contact at their office, and how should I talk to them?

How would I start a small group of people who wanted to oppose a candidate?

How do I start a petition, and how do I deliver it?

How do I find out information about a company?

How & where do I find out about the laws in my local area, my state, and the country?

How do I find how those laws have been interpreted?

Who do I ask about those laws?

How do I test the reliability of political information?

Where can I find data about my country (basic economic facts)?

Where can I find legislation that is about to be passed?

Where can I find legislation that has been passed?

How can I object to legislation, before and after the fact?

(The Sunlight Foundation, the organization that I work for, has been working to make these kinds of information more meaningfully accessible online (meaningfully searchable databases, etc). I'd be happy to work with anyone on developing curriculum around this.)

Using the internet, teach political propaganda:

Have students make ads from online materials (but not put online, or not if high school).

Using text found from recent political speeches online, have students re-enact what happened in Congress the day before, and their school board meeting.

Using the internet, develop mini-publications:

Create political reporting publications in high schools, where a class must create weekly report on what happened in their political environment. It can be completely nonpartisan.

Identify particular school clubs that have preexisting networks that can be tapped, and then help build those networks. E.g., if there is a drama club at every school, help create a place where drama students can engage across the country. Support networks that engage students in things outside themselves by developing internet networking capacities and connective tissues.

Infiltrate the PTA. Building on Cathy's point, I just went to an ACME conference. What is remarkable about ACME is its structure - all volunteer, federated. Build a mini all-volunteer civic society around the promotion of political internet literacy.

I've really enjoyed this discussion, and look forward to hearing more ideas..

### **Raji Hunjan**

Sorry for not writing more, too many days away from the desk. I come at this as an ex teacher, now working for a foundation. The suggestions below and the ones made by Peter are fine as one aspect of civic engagement. But I want to return to the notion of real power sharing in schools and indeed within any children and young people's services.

This is about experiencing democracy in practice, making decisions on real issues - such as school budgets, curriculum design, community level decision making. The creative bit is helping practitioners combine education and active participation - deliberation days, citizen's panels, young people on school governing bodies, students as researchers, as classroom consultants. Its more than the school council or a youth forum. The class credit for this work should not be grades, but making change happen.

Maybe the picture is less gloomy in the UK, but there is def a growing appetite at policy and practitioner level to make this happen. (although I am less inclined to praise government policy than Stephen Coleman is). The internet can be used to create the networks that enable teachers and students to work in partnership, making decisions that benefit the whole school.

### **Michael X. Delli Carpini**

Three suggestions regarding this question: (1) the list of people whom we are asking to "adopt more creative and democratic opportunities for young people to raise their public voices?" (i.e., educators, policy makers, community youth workers, professional associations, and parents) should also include young people themselves, and probably centrally so; (2) whatever research agendas are developed (much of which I still think should initially focus on thick descriptions of what is happening now) might include aspects of "public scholarship" by including young people in the research design and implementation itself; and (3) part of the research should include random assignment experiments when possible so we can really test what "works" and what does not.

### **Lonnie Sherrod**

I have been travelling and seem to have fallen behind. I thought we were still on question 2. Anyway I will address 4.

There actually is quite a bit happening already. Connie Flanagan is evaluating Annenberg's Voices. Ron Watts and others had a conference on activism at which folks discussed programs on poetry etc that gave youth a voice. Under NCLB hundreds of character ed/civics programs have been launched by schools funded by DOE. Shep Zeldin and Linda Camino have reviewed programs that give kids responsibility, eg 4-H has put youth on their Board. Not all have research connected to them and most do not have experiments as Delli Carpini recommends.

Assembling what is being done, where there is research and where it is needed would be quite useful.

### **Ulises Mejias**

I like what has been suggested so far, in particular Prof. Delli Carpini's suggestion that research strategies need to adopt a 'public scholarship' framework by involving youth in the research design and application.

I would add to the list of curricular strategies suggested by Prof. Teachout the following:

- Promote Open Content and intellectual rights literacy.

This might not seem immediately relevant to civic engagement, but I think it's of the utmost importance. The way we distribute what we produce is of enormous consequence to the way we imagine ourselves in society, and to the forms of government we envision. Students should learn that there is more than one way to 'protect' and disseminate their intellectual works, and experience the benefits of contributing to an economy where interest is reconfigured in terms other than personal profit. I really think that youth who learn to distribute their pictures, music, writings, machinima movies, etc. under a Creative Commons license, or who learn to be productive members (instead of just users) of non-profit open content projects such as Wikipedia, will develop different understandings of what it means to participate in the public spheres of our age.

Finally, I just wanted to thank you all and say that participating in this online discussion has helped me to frame some of my ideas. For instance, as an outcome of this discussion I've been thinking recently about the dangers of using the metaphor of the network to imagine and organize society. I've posted some preliminary ideas here, in case you are interested.

I look forward to the rest of the discussion.

### **Constance Flanagan**

Two general points when considering strategies and research questions:

1. Demographics of younger and older generations: According to the 2000 census, about 14 percent of 18-24 year olds are first generation immigrants and 19% of 25-29 year olds are first generation immigrants. 84% of Americans 65 plus identify as non-Hispanic whites whereas less than 62% of 18-29 year olds do (and an even smaller percent of those under 18) Youth of color are disproportionately less likely to finish high school and to continue their education in post-secondary. Ethnic minority youth also are overrepresented among the "disconnected" -- with respect to being in jobs, schools, or other associations where they could be recruited into political action.

In light of these demographic realities, I think that we should be conscious of contexts where ethnic minority youth would be more likely to be found (e.g., community colleges as opposed to 4-year institutions; high school rather than college; and community based organizations). N.B. I could be wrong but wouldn't a focus on something like Facebook leave lots of young people out? Doesn't access to Facebook, at least for now, flow through colleges that sign up for it? Has anyone studied the process whereby Latino media and service unions collaborated on pulling off the demonstrations some months back? That was an example of political action that really worked and I wonder what has been sustained from those organizational efforts? Do we know anything about what SEIU and AFSCME are doing specifically to build youth leadership in their organizations?

2. My second point is that we remain aware of issues of intergenerational relationships and flows (of money and of knowledge and expertise). Putting aside money and trends in social policy that positively affect older and negatively affect younger people, the one advantage that youth have over their elders is that they learn faster and are more likely than their elder to appreciate the potential of new media for voice. I've been in too many classrooms where the technology sits idle because teachers weren't comfortable with integrating it into classroom instruction. I liked the ideas in this conversation about ways to enable more teachers to engage their students in political issues. I'd also add that it's worth knowing what young people, left to their own devices, are doing.

Since Michael Delli Carpini mentioned public scholarship, I'll selfishly put in a plug for our 2006 Jossey-Bass New Directions for Teaching and Learning - A Laboratory for Public Scholarship and Democracy.

Thanks, Lance and others, for a stimulating exchange.

### **Stephen Coleman**

My chapter for the MacArthur volume concludes with a list of policy recommendations which I think make sense - but I shan't rehearse them here.

As I argue in my chapter, citizenship itself needs to be understood as a technology (i.e. a way of making things happen) - as is schooling, as is the internet. Technologies do not

possess inherent purposes, but are shaped and influenced - by design, use and policy. I want to argue that each of these is currently in a state of ambivalent instability.

Nobody is quite sure what the internet is for or what citizens are for. Some see the internet as a new form of broadcasting; others see it as networking. Some see citizenship as comprising a set of imposed obligations; others see it as the reflexive formation of one's own social identity.

As with design, so with uses. Some see the internet as a tool for educating apprentice citizens; others see it as an opportunity for young people to create their own lifeworlds. Some are active citizens by joining political parties and voting; others prefer looser, acephalous, networked movements.

Policy is the process through which these definitions are contested and supported. I favour policies which support the use of digital technologies by young people to establish their own self-empowering networks which enable them to act as citizens in ways that disrupt authoritarian or exploitative power relationships. We talk in this discussion as if we're losing the argument. In fact, I think we're doing quite well: more young people share 'our' conception of the internet and citizenship than share the obsolete, frightened views of analogue policy-makers. Most politicians that I know would at least pay lip service to the kind of ideas that we've been discussing over the past couple of weeks. But they are working in new territory; they are anxious about giving way to the culturally and technically unfamiliar; and they prefer to think about other matters which fall within their experience. They need help. That's where we come in.

I endorse Cathy Davidson's excellent proposal to sustain a network of thinkers and practitioners upon whom policy-makers can call for advice - and who can call upon one another for the same. Her idea of a website showing 'a database of efforts, with convenient kinds of tagging or visualizations to allow us to know who, what, when, why, and how the others are contributing' is an excellent one - and a very practical project for the MacArthur Foundation to support. We should invite into such a space policy-makers from around the world who, as we have done in recent days, can post questions and comments, exercise frustrations, express bewilderment. In my experience of speaking with governments, they will not thank us for telling them what they want to hear. We need to be telling them the kind of things they never thought of asking about. And we need to be giving them lots of different answers, not necessarily agreeing with one another, because, as Peter Dahlgren rightly says, when you're in a fluid situation it's best to have multiple strategies.

**Lonnie Sherrod**

Both really good points

**Peter Levine**

I start with the assumption that we could make good policies for schools if we were in charge of education. As Zephyr and others suggest, we'd provide lots of opportunities for experiential civic education. We would put relatively few limits on what students could say and create. We would encourage them to participate politically.

However, we're not in charge, and the people who do run our schools face powerful pressures to enhance students' preparation for the workforce while protecting kids from violence and other ills. These pressures work against the policy ideas we might endorse.

Picking up on Michael's suggestion of randomized studies--I think it would be influential to sponsor studies in which the outcomes were not civic engagement, but preparation for the workforce. The interventions (not the outcomes) would be civic. It seems entirely plausible that youth media production improves academic skills and high school completion. If we could show that, we might be able to persuade school districts to invest in civic education, broadly and liberally defined.

The following is lifted from my chapter, so apologies to my fellow authors, who have already seen it:

Major institutions are in a panic because only about 2/3rds of students are completing high school. Many students drop out because the assigned work is boring and because they lack personal connections to teachers. For instance, in a 2006 study of recent dropouts, more than half said they had satisfactory grades before they left school ("C" or better), but half said that classes were boring. Further, "only 56 percent said they could go to a staff person for school problems and just two-fifths (41 percent) had someone in school to talk to about personal problems." There have been rigorous evaluations of programs--albeit not media production courses--that help students to work on community problems in collaboration with adults. For instance, an evaluation of the Quantum Opportunities Program studied randomly selected students and a control group. For about \$2,500/year over four years, QOP was able to cut the dropout rate to 23 percent, compared to 50 percent for the control group. QOP's approach included academic programs that were individually paced for each student; mandatory community service; enrichment programs; and pay for each hour of participation.

We also have anecdotes about media production classes that may have prevented individuals from dropping out. For example, in an evaluation of the Educational Video Center (EVC), one student said, "EVC helped me stay in school. Like last year, I was really going to drop out but . the teachers [at EVC] are like so cool I was able to go to them and talk to them and tell them what was going on in my life, tell them all my problems." Participants also reported gains in skills and academic engagement.

I find such testimony promising, especially since it is consistent with fairly relevant experimental results and the theory of positive youth development. However, administrators who control scarce resources will not place large bets on youth media production on the basis of such evidence. They may suspect that: (a) students who sign up for voluntary media programs already have positive attitudes and skills on entry; (b)

students' self-reports of skills are unreliable; (c) participants are generous in their evaluations of programs; and (d) other opportunities for student engagement, such as service-learning, have been better researched.

In order to influence educational policy, I believe we need randomized field experiments that measure the impact of digital media creation on relatively hard measures, such as high school completion or valid and reliable measures of skills.

If such experiments showed positive results, then federal law and policies would provide some leverage. But these laws also create a challenge by focusing on basic literacy and mathematics as measured by pencil-and-paper tests. That focus makes it harder to devote instructional time to media production; media skills are not directly tested, yet what is tested is taught. Nevertheless, current policies could accommodate youth media work if we could show that providing creative opportunities is an efficient way to keep kids engaged in school.

-- Peter

(From the floor in Hartsfield International Airport, Atlanta)

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- [ii] American Youth Policy Forum, SOME Things DO Make a Difference for Youth, summary of Andrew Hahn, Tom Leavitt, and Paul Aaron, "Evaluation of the Quantum Opportunities Program" (June 1994) and "Quantum Opportunities Program: A Brief On the Qop Pilot Program" (September 1995) {it would be better to cite the original summaries}; cf. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, eds., *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, a report of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth (National Academies Press, 2002), pp. 184-186.
- [iii] National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, "Technical Assistance Grants Evaluation," p. 27
- [iv] For a sample of the theoretical literature, see Reed. W. Larson, "Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development," *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, no. 1 (January 2000), pp. 170-183.

#### **Diana Owen**

I apologize for being late to join the discussion. I've been traveling, and have just now had the opportunity to read and attempt to digest the rich ideas that are being shared.

With regard to question 4, I would like to echo and expand upon some of the points that have been made by other participants.

Connie Flanagan's point about the different demographic makeup of the current generation is essential to consider when exploring democratic opportunities for young people. This issue, in some sense, has been touched upon within the context of all of the questions addressed in this discussion. The gap in opportunities available to youth from diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds is growing even as programs and practices designed to engage young people have been increasing. I have been examining programs whose goal is to promote youth voting. In part because the 'deliverables' in terms of meeting funders' expectations are linked to tangible benefits, such as the number of young people registered to vote, there is a tendency to target the "easy gets," college students and young professionals. Programs barely tap into potential young voters from the working class or those attending technical schools because they are more difficult to reach. Strategically, it may be important to emphasize to decision makers the fact that creating democratic opportunities for young people is complicated, multifaceted, and difficult to achieve in general, and it is especially so for particular groups. Setting realistic expectations about what constitutes successful programs and opportunities that are not based upon established models that often assume the middle class as a baseline might be one approach.

I would like to emphasize that peer-to-peer approaches to developing and implementing creative democratic opportunities for young people have great potential. This approach invests young people in the teaching and learning process, and allows them to express themselves in way that is meaningful to their generation. It is important that young people who are engaging in this kind of work be given the opportunity to showcase their accomplishments, which also serves as a way of making decision-makers, parents, etc., aware of what young people are doing. For example, my university is sponsoring a number of classes where students develop peer-to-peer programs and curricula to foster civic orientations and skills among young people in an inner city school in Washington, D.C.. In one project, high school students used photography to deal with issues of justice and crime, and prepared an online exhibition that was presented to educators in a public forum. This presentation generated visibility for the project, and subsequently enhanced support for its continuation. There are, of course, many examples of this type of approach.

Finally, I would like to reiterate the call for continued and expanded research into the effectiveness of programs designed to stimulate democratic engagement that has been made by several others. It is important to know as, as Michael Delli Carpini states, what works and what doesn't. In talking with people who implement civic education programs, there appears to be two reasons not to conduct research or to allow researchers access to their programs. First, research costs money which they feel might be better used to implement programs than to evaluate them. Second, the results might show that the program doesn't work, which jeopardizes its future. As Lonnie Sherrod and others point out, research and program evaluations have been conducted. However, this work has not been organized or assessed systematically. It is likely that the quality of this work varies

widely. Some form of meta analysis of this work might be beneficial in terms of being able to speak more knowledgeably to educators, policy makers, etc. Further scholarly research into what works and what doesn't in the digital environment specifically is needed.

Research Questions:

1) Are there differences in the approaches to the development of democratic opportunities that need to be considered for young people in different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic status groups?

2) In what ways do digital strategies for developing democratic opportunities for young people improve upon traditional approaches? In what ways do they simply mirror traditional approaches? In what ways are they less effective than traditional approaches?

Thanks for including me in the discussion.

### **Peter Dahlgren**

I feel a bit 'empowered' just reading some of these encouraging suggestions...! Networks of researchers/policy-makers/experts, etc. would certainly be valuable in many ways, not least because we are in a sense still groping - and in a situation that is indeed still evolving rapidly - Stephen's rendering of the instabilities of the technologies of citizenship, schools and the net sums it up nicely.

The calls for research offering 'thick descriptions' are on target. We have established the enormous diversity found within the category of 'young people'. Diana Owen's research suggestions underscore the important variables here. She also targets the question of the particular features about the net compared to traditional approaches. Also spot on. I think all too often we stare ourselves a bit blind on the net, and, moreover, ignore that it - and not least its use - is embedded in the larger media landscapes. Convergence is the key.

This means understanding not just how the technologies are articulated, but also probing deeply into content/use. Where, for example do young people (and not necessarily middle-aged researchers) find the political in the broad fields of popular culture, consumption, and entertainment? How do identity processes for young people via media/net use include/exclude civic dimensions? We need to look at these matters close up.... For most of us such multi-perspective approaches probably means linking up with colleagues who can fill in some of the expertise that each of us lack on our own.

Thanx to all for all the good ideas!

### **Lew Friedland**

This is a dangerous group to fall behind, even for a day.

I hope you all will forgive a U.S. centric comment again. I've learned a lot from Peter Dahlgren, Stephen, and Raji and am encouraged about what appears to be a greater openness in Sweden and England. That said...

I felt inspired by Zephyr's list, and wish that many of her ideas could be implemented relatively quickly here. That said, I fall back toward Peter Levine's realism, and Michael Delli Carpini's limited and modest agenda. I think that those of us in the U.S. do need to be realistic about the state of our public schools, the difficulty of basic teaching in many of them, and the limiting of the vision of what schools are and can be that No Child Left Behind has imposed.

Partly for the reasons that Peter L. cited, the need for good teaching generally, that the idea that a number of you stressed, that we need to begin where young people are, looking at how media and technology projects can intersect with broadly civic or public teaching makes a lot of sense. We are embarking on a youth civic mapping project, which adapts social networking technology to local communities, using the virtual to map the local. This partly addresses Connie's legitimate objection that Facebook and even MySpace tend to center around middle-class youth. Building on her other point, we hope that training youth to bring these skills to a larger community as "experts" will build confidence but also demonstrate that they can lead in concrete ways that use technology to build public goods.

Regarding research, I think that Michael is spot on: we need to build more thick description, but we also need a broader experimental and comparative framework for evaluating the real effects of different experiments in different context. One thing this group might do is to begin to build that comparative typology, so that as cases accumulate, we have a rigorous framework for comparison, as opposed to dueling cases.

Finally, it would be great to have a research portal, however modest, that would pull this work together. It probably wouldn't take much more than a good PA, and would do a lot of good.

### **Raji Hunjan**

I hope not to paint too rosey a picture of the UK. Issues of social justice, with only a small number of young people participating is a key concern. I was at a meeting yesterday where a group of committed teachers/academics have come together to try to create a network to support teachers who want to work with students in a more participatory way. I know this particular research is about online communities for young people, but there could also be opportunities for adult/young people working in partnership type networks.

With regards to starting where young people are, I agree. But bad participation can be very damaging, and all of us working in this field should/do start from the view that if we involve young people in decision making, we must ensure they are listened to as the most

basic criteria, but moving towards enabling young people to shape the agenda and make change happen on issues that matter to them.

Stephen Coleman wrote a great report for us - he is probably too modest to tell you about it himself (or is he????). you can find it here  
<http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/cypi/publications>

It is not about policy recommendations (Stephen, I did worry when you said in one of your postings that the work you are doing for this particular collaboration ends with a whole list of policy recommendations) but more about challenging us as adults think more carefully about how we engage with young people online.

Just to say that I have enjoyed reading all these postings (even though some of the more academic language went straight over my head). Would be good to put some of these issues to young people themselves....

All good wishes, and hope I am invited to join in again sometime.

Raji (from a very sunny London)

### **Lance Bennett**

Hello everyone,

Greetings from Karlsdat Sweden. Through the wonders of digital media I have been able to follow and moderate this wonderful conversation from across the world. Your insights have made valuable contributions to our project. Thanks for your generosity of time and ideas.

Rather than say goodbye, I would like us to consider ways of continuing this network and even adding people to it. I have several suggestions, and perhaps you can add others:

1. I plan to use many of these interesting exchanges in the concluding chapter of our voulume -- I will cite excerpts of some of your thoughts as they pertain to my summary of our collaborative work. Of course I will send them on to you for approval and revision.
2. We are considering ways to work with the text of this discussion. One possibility is to edit the topics and introduce the comments into a private wiki that we can all edit (protecting authors' original statements of course) -- and perhaps even place the results into wikipedia (which is rather thin in our area).
3. The MacArthur Foundation is planning to launch a blog to put the \*Spotlight\* (current blog working title) on this project. I may come back to some of you to ask if parts of your discussion can be blogged (along with the usual links to sites that you find important).

4. Finally, our ideas about creating a resource network seem nicely in tune with the foundation's hopes for this project. I would like to continue thinking together about how to set up such a resource net and how it might look.

Please feel free to continue responding to these points in the next week or so. However, it is time, with regret and appreciation, to declare the formal part of our online discussion closed. Thanks again for a most stimulating couple of weeks.

Lance

**Barry Joseph**

Thank you Lance for leading an excellent dialogue. I apologize to all for only responding to two of the questions and have since learned the value of posting EARLY.

Barry

**Larry Johnson**

On behalf of the MacArthur Foundation and all the participants of the MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, I would like to thank each of you for what has been a truly unique online discussion. I found the dialog substantive, thought-provoking, and very enjoyable.

As I mentioned in my earliest posts to you, the participants in the MacArthur Series are engaged in a significant undertaking. In addition to Lance and the other authors you met through this one-of-a-kind discussion, there are about 80 other writers, editors, researchers, and foundation staff working across the project to create six volumes on important dimensions of digital media and learning.

Your perspectives, expressed so articulately in these dialogs, will greatly inform this work, and words can only fail to convey our deep appreciation.

Nonetheless, let me try...for all of us, thank you for your time, your thoughts, and your participation!

Sincerely,

Dr. Larry Johnson