BOOK REVIEW

Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth

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This book is arguably the most important book to be published recently in the area of the Journal’s special issue, as it sets the agenda for the ongoing study of young people’s civic and political engagement with and through the internet. It comprehensively includes many of the main theorists and empirical researchers currently working in this field of study. It also poses important research questions for the future on how to best understand contemporary forms of civic engagement that are now facilitated by the internet. Luckily for readers the book is also accompanied by a web based discussion where the contributors and other invited experts debate and discuss concepts and ideas that underpinned the development of this book project (now archived at http://depts.washington.edu/ccce/civiceducation/Civic_Engagement-Online_Discussions%2706.pdf). The publication was sponsored by The MacArthur Foundation and is published in their Digital Media and Learning Series.

THE NEW CIVIC YOUNG PERSON

Lance Bennett in the introductory chapter ‘Changing citizenship in the digital age’ explains how the practice of citizenship itself has changed in the contemporary epoch and that the internet amplifies how we understand this. He identifies all age groups’ increasing cynicism with formal, electoral based politics...
that relies on professionalised communication techniques to engage in top-down contact with citizens. He then notes that there are two broad responses in the existing literature on young people’s political engagement that are normative responses on what the ‘good citizen’ ought to be: he labels these as the engaged youth and disengaged youth paradigms. In brief, the engaged youth approach examines new civic spaces and practices that young people create and are involved with, especially online. This viewpoint focuses on young people’s power and agency by ‘recognising personal expression and their capacity to project identity in collective spaces’ (p. 3). On the other hand the disengaged youth paradigm worries about the individualisation or personalisation of young people’s political engagement and expression and chooses to focus more on ‘how to promote public actions that link to government at the centre of democratic politics’ (p. 3). Much of this book follows the engaged youth paradigm, while other chapters build bridges between the two to show that they are not mutually exclusive terrains and emphasise that a policy response to youth engagement as currently practiced is now overdue. Bennett argues that a policy response has to be cognisant of changed practice whereby government emphasises a notion of ‘dutiful’ citizenship while much new online practice is activating a ‘self actualising’ approach to young people’s citizenship (pp. 14-21). This binary is an important conceptual innovation for understanding the often ambivalent response young people have towards norms of political citizenship that place formal, conformist and often unreasonable expectations on their online behaviour. In the age of social networking and everyday internet interactivity citizens now have contradictory expectations of their politicians and policymakers commitment to facilitating their personal expression and engagement in decision-making. The book provides a useful background on how the internet is currently being used for civic and political engagement, and as instruction on how policymakers can also both harness and engage with these normalised practices.

The remaining eight chapters in the book can be loosely categorised into those that focus on what young people are doing online and how we can best interpret it (Earl and Schussman; Raynes-Goldie and Walker; and Rheingold) with chapters that look at political and policymaking implications of these new practices (Xenos and Foot; Levine; Bers; Montgomery; and Coleman).

**What Are Young People Doing Online?**

Online we find that young people both create new interactive forms of political engagement and participation, as well as translate established media and political practices into a new online format. For example, Howard Rheingold’s chapter advocates the expanded use of online tools, such as blogging and digital video production, by young people on political and social issues that are of relevance to them. Thus teaching young people how to harness new media practices to develop their engagement as citizens. This premise of young people selecting issues that matter to them – rather than existing political processes or institutions – is an important theme of the book.

Jennifer Earl and Alan Schussman in their chapter ‘Contesting cultural control: youth culture and online petitioning’ suggest that the shift of social movement strategic repertoires of petitioning and protest online has given young people the capacity to link youth culture and popular culture with their political demands. For these authors online petitioning is emblematic of everyday citizen politics in what are now movement societies (see p. 72). Many of the issues young people create petitions about – in the area of entertainment including music, television and video games - are not ones we would associate with the formalised political sphere. Instead they show that political and civic engagement is now deeply embedded within cultural production and consumerism found in young people’s lives. The chapter leaves as an open question...
whether young people gain political efficacy from their involvement with petitioning and also how the targets of petitions – be it governments or, increasingly, corporations – respond to this form of protest and advocacy. Similarly, Kate Raynes-Goldie and Luke Walker identify the importance for young people of interactive, online community building sites in their chapter ‘Our space: online civic engagement tools for youth’. They report on interesting cases studies of sites such as TakingITGlobal that campaigns on social issues. They also conclude with questions about whether using sites such as these can increase young people’s sense of efficacy in contemporary politics.

What Does This Mean for Government and Policy?

Mike Xenos and Kirsten Foot in their chapter continue to assess current practice but shift the focus onto whether electoral politics is responding to the new online interactive environment for politics. Despite that they report on the use of online technology in the 2002 US Congress election and the 2004 US presidential election, (that was outdated by innovation in the Barack Obama election campaign in 2008), their message clearly still applies to many electoral uses of the internet. It is not simply a process of adding limited interactivity that will bring young people’s engagement with mainstream politics. In a prescient way of what was to come in 2008 they note that ‘if greater numbers of young voters are to be attracted to the system of electoral politics through the web, candidates and their campaigns will need to learn how to balance the competing logics of transactional and co-productive interactivity’ (p. 65). Thus there is an obvious tension in state actors simply emulating the agency and cultural production focus that exists on young people’s websites. Stephen Coleman in ‘Doing IT for themselves: management versus autonomy in youth e-citizenship’ more overtly refers to this trade-off as being about finding a democratic middle between managed and autonomous websites to foster young people’s engagement in having a real and lasting effect on policy making and governments.

But how do young people learn how to become self actualising and democratic citizens? Both Marina Umaschi Bers and Peter Levine focus their chapters (‘Civic identities, online technologies’ and ‘A public voice for youth’ respectively) on the importance of schools for inculcating online civic skills among young people. One important point both authors agree on is that civics education ought not to be the knowledge based and knowledge testing approach that is common in the USA and UK, and in some Australian states. Instead it needs to move to a ‘praxis-based’ approach where active civic participation or community service or involvement in school-based decision-making is all part of the curriculum (pp. 127 & 146). Media production as part of the school curriculum is only the first step for Peter Levine as he also focuses on the idea of finding an audience for young people’s media work and how schools themselves need to function more like communities to be able to properly foster this (p. 135). This discussion of the deterministic and constraining affect major institutions like schools can have on young people’s civic engagement is an important link to Katherine Montgomery’s chapter: ‘Youth and digital democracy: intersections of practice, policy and the marketplace’. This excellent chapter is the most cautious about the democratic potential of civic engagement through the internet. Here market forces, and particularly youth specific marketing and advertising, are foregrounded as sites compete with one another for both young people’s attention and their financial commitments. Montgomery sees that it is these practices that are centrally influential on ‘both the online political youth sphere and the more participatory platforms that have come to define Web 2.0’ (p. 26). This kind of commoditization of online culture will bring forth its own policy challenges that Montgomery outlines, including: regulation and corporatisation of internet architecture may make it harder for youth-led,
less profitable uses of the internet to survive; and there are ongoing digital divide concerns about access both to high-speed broadband or free wireless internet.

Concluding Questions

Most of the chapters in the book are optimistic about the future of young people’s online civic engagement. This is an engaged youth viewpoint that I am broadly sympathetic with but also think that there needs to be further self reflection about the normative view on politics and society – and about liberal democracy in particular – that underpins these standpoints. Is a participatory society really possible? What is the role of the state? Is it as porous to genuine influence and engagement as we might like to hope or believe? That is, if we are to encourage and facilitate young people’s civic engagement what is it for: do we focus mainly on their individual sense of efficacy or the capacity their actions have to create social and political change? These are questions all of us working in this field increasingly need to be able to answer.

I have two other concerns about this book that actually reflect an agenda for ongoing research. First, do young people experience civic engagement or technology use in the same way? There is often a tendency to homogenise youth experience as distinct from non-youth, or adult, experience. Yet in reality the differences among young people may be of greater interest to developing targeted and successful civics-based policy initiatives. Diversity, inequality and identity all matter. Peter Levine starts to discuss this (see p. 132) but does not really provide a solution for changing equity of access, differences in political expression, and engagement across social or identity groups.

Second, does political context matter? The book sometimes generalises from a predominantly US-based experience to understand contemporary civic engagement of young people in advanced democracies. Different policy approaches in different countries and educational systems probably play a largely structuring role as well. Until there is systematic comparative research on this these differences remain invisible. Further, there are likely to be instructive different experiences from nations where participatory liberal democracy is not the norm. Would this work help us to explore those broader normative concerns such as: What role should governments play in facilitating civic life? And the corporate or nongovernment sectors? How can government learn to be more responsive to young people’s online citizenship practices?

My last ongoing issue asks future research to reflect more on recent events and whether the internet has changed civic engagement irrevocably. The debate on the role of the internet has moved on from a simple mobilisation or reinforcement dichotomy. There is much greater acceptance that many mobilisations that happen online were simply not possible in the past. Yet when we look closely at the successful mobilisation of young people online through the Obama 2008 Presidency campaign it is hard to see a process of ‘self actualisation’. We are left asking whether the state has simply learnt how to harness civil society and foster a renaissance of electoral-institutional focused citizenship engagement.

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