

GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

E-Democracy: Online Youth Participation and Engagement

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E-democracy, also referred to as digital or cyber-democracy, encompasses an expanding range of participatory acts: from internet campaigning and electronic voting to the transformation of citizen involvement in democratic and deliberative processes enabled and mediated by information and communication technologies (ICT) (Coleman, 2008; Gronlund, 2003). Unlike broadcast media that disseminate news and information to be consumed by citizens, e-democracy utilises the internet and social networking technologies to enable more interactive modes of engagement and multidimensional information flows. They also stimulate peer-to-peer digital content creation and sharing, especially spontaneous and creative, individual and collective expression. Citizens use ICT to connect with each other and with their elected representatives and governments. E-democracy can also be interpreted through a social movement approach that promotes ideals of free, non-coercive, inclusive and meaningful participation by citizens in political and civic affairs.

The use of ICT for participation and engagement has a particular appeal to young citizens. Disenchanted with traditional politics, well-versed in ICT and immersed in the

internet in their everyday lives, young people are at the forefront of online activism. Yet this activism seems to be disconnected from conventional modes of political engagement centred on governments. A disengaged youth view emphasizes declining youth interest in public affairs, government institutions and voting in elections, accompanied by falling trust in official mass media (Bennett, 2008). Youth civic disengagement is presented in this viewpoint as a challenge for the future of democracy. On the other hand, an engaged youth view suggests that young people's engagement via the internet may present innovative approaches to political expression and social engagement. Youth-led activism via entertainment websites, through social networking or campaigning against the war or globalization, are seen as new and emerging forms of political action, that are changing politics as we know it. While not always viewed as unproblematic these new practices of youth online engagement are also seen as conducive of a more inclusive democracy.

This debate indicates not only polarized views, but also how little is agreed upon in contemporary practices of youth public engagement, and the motivations and barriers for young people's active engagement. This is the

case despite an extensive and growing body of diverse literature on e-democracy, youth online participation and technological infrastructure in disciplines ranging from information systems and information science, to social and media studies, political science, and public policy. There is a rich body of theoretical knowledge from political and social studies, a large and increasing number of empirical studies of cases and surveys of online youth participation and many technologically focused studies concerned with web-based and digital media, tools and technologies to enable and support online participation. These discipline-specific studies are not necessarily informing each other. Many important assumptions and propositions from democratic theory and the public sphere have not been empirically tested, especially not within an online participation environment. We also lack knowledge of new opportunities and challenges emerging from the use of Web-based social technologies for large online public consultation and deliberative processes by young people. Theoretically informed and empirically grounded insights informing both technological developments and social innovation and transformation, are lacking. There are compelling arguments for multidisciplinary cross-fertilization of theory and practice, as well as for theoretically informed empirical studies and technological developments. These concerns and arguments motivate this special issue of *IJEP*.

The main purpose of this special issue is to engage in existing debates and also move significantly beyond them. Its specific objectives are a) to re-examine online youth participation in political and civic affairs from multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary perspectives and b) to promote and contribute to cross-fertilization between theory and practice of e-democracy and youth participation.

Among several submissions to the special issue we chose those that contributed to at least one of these objectives. Three papers, a book review and an interview included in this special issue come from broadly different national and disciplinary perspectives, reflecting the trans-

disciplinary interests in contemporary internet studies.

The first paper by Philippa Collin, a young postdoctoral researcher based in Australia, examines how non-government organisations are increasingly looking to the internet to implement policies designed to engage young people in democracy. Through a focus on two case study organisations – the Inspire Foundation based in Australia and the Youth Action Network based in the UK – she examines what forms of e-citizenship are now being created for young people, and whether these correspond with forms of participation being pursued by young people themselves. Collin engages with the work of Stephen Coleman (2008) to argue for a ‘productive convergence’ between managed and autonomous forms of citizenship found on the internet that can facilitate democratic e-citizenship for young people. Using qualitative interview-based research, this paper argues that what is particularly powerful in these new e-citizenship programs is that they facilitate young people’s connection to existing networks as well as building of new communities for action. The paper presents a critical analysis of how organisations, and politically and socially active young people, in Australia and the United Kingdom view and use the internet for participation; and considers the extent to which there is increased democratising potential in these e-citizenship programs. This paper is particularly innovative for two main reasons: first, it takes a comparative approach to show that discourses of democratic participation are important in both national contexts of Australia and the UK; and second, it places young people’s online participation – often seen merely as an individualised activity – within the organisational context that enables or constrains it. As part of this it usefully includes both the perspectives and voices of young people, as well as organisational decision-makers.

The second paper by Christian Fuchs, from University of Salzburg, Austria, presents a critical theory approach to the study of Social Networking Sites (SNS) and their use by young people. Broadly informed by Frankfurt

School critical theory, critical theory of media and technology, and critical information systems research, the paper examines the assessment of the implications of SNS usage by young people for society. It first introduces and compares three different approaches to technology assessment: technological determinism; the social construction of technology; and complex dialectical technology assessment. To avoid technological and social determinisms that characterise the first two approaches respectively, the paper argues for a dialectical relationship between technology and society. The dialectical relationship reveals how society conditions the invention, design, and use of technology while at the same time technology use shapes society through interaction with societal contradictions in complex ways. The argument is further developed based on the analysis of a survey of SNS usage by students from Salzburg universities. Survey results show that students are intense users of social networking sites despite being aware of the risks of increased surveillance. The main contribution of the paper is a critical theoretical interpretation of communication advantages and surveillance risks as antagonistic counterparts of the usage of commercial social networking platforms. Based on these findings, the paper recommends two potential courses of action: a) the creation and use of non-commercial, non-profit SNS (that would eliminate surveillance for commercial purposes but not necessarily others) and b) civic mobilization for monitoring and documenting instances of surveillance of participants of commercial SNS that will increase public awareness of the threats.

The third paper by Dominic Thomas of Emory University in the United States (US) takes an entirely different approach. The paper develops and presents a theory for designing effective online civic engagement systems. It begins with the information systems literature, specifically the literature of group support systems and computer systems design theories to identify key components of a design theory: i) a kernel theory that identifies the key human dynamics that must be handled in the type of system covered by the theory, ii) key principles

that will govern the development process for the given type of system being designed, and iii) key specifications of the design that would be required for successful implementation. The proposed kernel theory for designing online civic engagement systems has seven ‘dynamics’ related to individual-level and group-level interactions. The dynamics addressing individual-level interactions are authentication, authorization, masking, interests and expertise. The dynamics addressing group-level interactions are local access and timeliness. The paper argues that when these dynamics are addressed in the design and development of online civic engagement systems people, especially young people, are more likely to engage, participate and interact using the online civic engagement system. Secondly, the paper argues, when these dynamics are incorporated into online civic engagement systems, the systems become extensible and scalable, which enables young people to develop and control their own resources and discussions within the civic engagement online system. This paper analyses existing civic engagement sites in the US to support its arguments.

The review of Lance Bennett’s edited book *Civic Life Online: Learning how digital media can engage youth*, by Ariadne Vromen, suggests that this is 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. The book covers diverse theoretical and empirical content and can be divided into chapters that focus on what young people are doing online (such as e-petitioning, blogging, and campaigning on non-traditional political issues such as cultural production); with chapters that look at the political and democratic policymaking implications of these new practices. The book thus provides new frameworks with which to understand young people’s civic engagement broadly and the likely impacts on both formal politics and the education system in advanced democracies. The review raises further questions for how we can understand these new practices, how we categorise young people’s involvements

and the new comparative climate for online action since the successful online Obama US Presidential campaign of 2008.

In preparation for this Special issue we organized an interview with the Hon Graham West MP, Minister for Youth in New South Wales (NSW) Government in Australia. Minister West commissioned a pilot research project to examine the use of online social networking technologies to consult with young people aged 9-18 about Government expenditure in the "Better Futures" program in two regions of NSW. The project was highly successful. During the 9 week online consultation it attracted 8,000 young people as 'friends' with a little over 2,000 of them 'voting' on a list of projects. We asked the Minister about this project and his views on the use of social networking technologies for government consultation with young people. This led to a more general question about new possibilities for online consultation as well as responsibilities for governments to engage youth in civic matters. Minister West talked about the necessity for governments to adopt new and innovative youth engagement strategies and also discussed challenges and risks of a new era for youth civic engagement.

We hope that this special issue contributes to the richness and diversity of research on online youth participation in political and civic affairs. With papers drawing from a wide range of theoretical and disciplinary foundations and

presenting empirical materials from different epistemological standpoints, this special issue aims to promote and advance a multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary discourse. Furthermore, and importantly, the papers, the book review and the interview included in this special issue hope to demonstrate the richness and vivacity of the engagement and dialogue between theory and practice of e-democracy and youth participation.

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