Building and Connecting to Online Communities for Action: Young People, ICT and Everyday Politics

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ABSTRACT

Young people are using information communication technologies (ICT) for new forms of political participation. At the same time, government and non-government organisations are looking to the internet to implement policies designed to engage young people in democracy. This raises the question of what forms of e-citizenship are being imposed on young people and are these same forms being pursued by young people themselves? Coleman (2008) has suggested that programs tend to promote autonomous or managed forms and argues for a ‘productive convergence’ that can facilitate democratic e-citizenship. Using original research, this article presents two case studies of such a ‘productive convergence’ and argues that what is particularly powerful in such e-citizenship programs is that they facilitate young people’s connection to existing networks as well as the building of new communities for action. This article presents a critical analysis of how organisations and 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.

Keywords: Australia, Citizenship, Community, Internet, Political Participation, United Kingdom, Youth

INTRODUCTION

In the context of growing concerns about democratic civic deficit, youth participation has emerged as a focus within a range of social and public policies in many western countries including Australia and the United Kingdom. At the same time, there is growing interest in the ways that participation is mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), in particular the internet. There are broadly two approaches to the study of the role of the internet for youth participation: the potential of ICT to reinforce traditional mechanisms of democracy; or, to create new forms of participation.

The first approach assumes a normative position on political participation and looks at how technology is extending or deepening democracy as a legal and administrative mechanism, and for strengthening the legitimacy of normative political ideas and culture (Montgomery et al., 2004, p. 102). The focus is often on the opportunities and effectiveness of ‘e-democracy’ in strengthening existing institutional arrangements (Lewis, 2005, p. 10), the ability of technology to link decision-makers and political elites to citizens (Dahlberg, 2001; Delli Carpini, 2000; Luhrs et al., 2001)
and extending government to marginalised or ‘hard to reach’ groups, such as young people (Brackertz et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2005). This form of e-citizenship has been criticised for focusing on communicating policy to young people and being government/decision-maker focused (Lewis, 2005, p. 12). There is also concern that digital technologies may reinforce the role of those who are already engaged, whilst further marginalising those who are not (Norris, 2001, p. 98). Studies in the UK (Livingstone & Bober, 2004) and Australia (Vromen, 2007) argue that class and level of education are predictors of internet use and quality of internet access. Furthermore, top-down mechanisms fail to effectively link policy makers with forms of online youth participation taking place through NGOs, youth-led sites or social movements.

The second approach challenges both the way that political participation is conceptualised (e.g., Norris, 2001; Vromen, 2003) and the way that it is researched (e.g., Coleman & Rowe, 2005; Livingstone et al., 2005). Survey-based research in the UK (Livingstone et al., 2005) and in Australia (Vromen, 2003) has deliberately explored a broad range of participatory opportunities, deepening our understanding of the range and forms of online participation. Nevertheless, one of the key challenges continues to be how ‘participation’ is defined (Livingstone et al., 2005, pp. 289-290). This dilemma reflects a wider limitation of existing research on young people’s political participation, epitomised by quantitative studies with predetermined notions of how young people relate to the political and how they translate their conception of the political into action (Marsh et al., 2007, p. 18; O’Toole et al., 2003, p. 53). Furthermore, it is often assumed that youth-led e-citizenship programs are more democratic than adult-led programs.

There is evidence that in both Australia and the United Kingdom, the internet has become a popular vehicle for policies designed to engage young people in democracy (Coleman & Rowe, 2005; Coleman, 2008; Collin, 2008; Vromen, 2008). However, less attention has been paid to the forms of e-citizenship being promoted to young people and whether these same forms being pursued by young people themselves.

Using original research undertaken in both Australia and the United Kingdom, this article presents two case studies of online e-citizenship initiatives. Through in-depth interviews with young people and executive staff it firstly, explores how both organisations and young people use and view the internet for participation. Secondly, it examines the democratising potential of the internet for young people. In doing so, it is identified that such programs play an important role in enabling young people to exercise citizenship by facilitating connections to existing networks as well as the building of new communities for action. However, important differences were identified between the case studies which call for a much more nuanced understanding of the role of the internet for democratic participation by young people.

What Kinds of Citizens?

In analysing the role of e-participation programs for youth citizenship, studies have examined the kind of citizenship being promoted. For instance, Montgomery et al. (2004) drew on the typology of youth citizenship promoted in educational settings developed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) to examine the kinds of citizenship promoted by online participation initiatives in the United States of America. By analysing over 400 websites, they categorised e-participation initiatives as either fostering ‘personally responsible citizenship’ (legalistic, norm-consistent, rights and duties-based), ‘participatory citizenship’ (focused on reaching and mobilising citizens in direct action) and ‘structural change agents’ (focused on structural change to achieve social justice) (Montgomery et al., 2004, pp. 108-109). In addition to these categories, Montgomery and colleagues (2004) also found that many e-participation initiatives were aimed at educating young people for citizenship and were targeted at those deemed ‘pre-engagement’ (Montgomery, 2004, p. 110). They acknowledge that a limitation of their study is that they make assessments about the intention...
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