*4 questions about the educational potential of social media and civic engagement*

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Current experience

The authors of this article (universities of York, Leeds, Sydney, Washington and Wisconsin) form the Networking Young Citizens Group (see <http://www.wun.ac.uk/research/nyc>). We are examining how Web 2.0 tools and social networking applications help young people develop new civic capacities. We are interested in how traditional institutions of political socialization respond to new youth media practices and how new social movements might relate both to youth culture and mainstream politics through the use of new media.

*4 questions about the educational potential of social media and civic engagement*

Abstract

We explore the educational potential of social media for developing civic engagement among young people. We argue that 4 questions need to be addressed about the development of educational interventions that aim to promote civic engagement through social media: is the current extent and nature of usage of social media likely to allow for the development of education for civic engagement; what possible congruence may exist between civic engagement and use of social media; what educational processes and outcomes could be experienced by students and teachers when using social media for civic engagement; and, what new directions may need to be taken by educators? We conclude that there is a need for further research and clear recommendations for professionals and others.

Structured practitioner notes

What is already known about this topic  
• there are concerns about disengagement by young people from the democratic process;

• use of social media among young people is increasing;  
• there are conflicting assertions about the educational potential of social networking sites for civic education.  
What this paper adds  
• clarification of the nature of civic education;  
• clarification of the congruence between social networking and civic engagement;  
• consideration of ways of investigating forms of civic education that use social media.  
Implications for practice and/or policy  
Clearer understanding of the nature of civic engagement and the potential of social media for civic education will allow for:

* the development of policies that target relevant achievement;
* the development of appropriate pedagogies by professionals and others;
* the improvement of outcomes for learners who will understand more about civic engagement and be able to participate (and reflect on that participation) more effectively.

*4 questions about the educational potential of social media for promoting civic engagement.*

Introduction

Civic engagement is involvement in the public sphere, incorporating participation in constitutional politics as well as less formally constituted activity. Social media are relatively new forms of technology (principally, but not exclusively, social networking sites) that allow users to interact. We explore here education for civic engagement through the use of social media.

The educational potential of social media for enhancing civic engagement is contested. Johnson and Johnson (2004) assert that access to the web is a right. Some suggest that engagement by young people with new media would connect them to democratic politics (eg Kann et al 2007; Loader, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Coleman and Blumler, 2009). A significant increase in the youth voter turnout during the 2008 US Presidential elections has been directly attributed to online campaigning by the respective candidates (Information Week 2008). Strong statements have been made about the educational potential of ‘new’ technology (eg Ofsted 2004). Others, however, question the value of social media for civic engagement. In the 2010 UK general election social media did not feature largely. Technology itself or, at the very least, the ways in which social networking occurs, may strengthen dictators at least as much as democrats (Morozov, 2011). Doubts are beginning to emerge about the power of social media to promote democracy in specific contexts (eg work on the Egyptian ‘revolution’ by Sayed Hanafy, unpublished). The educational potential of technology in general and the internet in particular are questioned (Carr, 2010). Perhaps what these assertions and counter assertions reveal is that little is known about the relationship between young people’s political cultural norms, their use of social media for political and civic engagement and the role of, and potential for, education in developing civic engagement. It perhaps suggests that debates are being conducted at unhelpfully vague and general levels. In this article we raise 4 questions to clarify the nature of these debates.

Question 1: is the current extent and nature of usage of social media likely to allow for the development of education for civic engagement?

In March 2009 70% of UK homes were online (Dutton, Helsper and Gerber, 2009). This figure will probably have already increased by the time of writing (July 2011) and access for young people (as opposed to households) is probably higher. There is perhaps the possibility that within the UK we are close to saturation point as two fifths of the remaining 30% of people declared that they would not use the internet even if it were freely given. In 2008 24% of families with children under 16 in the UK had no internet access at home (Curtis, 2008). Arguments for technology as a democratising force are not persuasive if it is concentrated in the hands of those who are already privileged. Selwyn and Gorard (2003) suggest that:

access to ICT does not, in itself, make people anymore likely to participate in education and (re)engage with learning. We know that access to ICT continues to be largely patterned according to long-term pre-existing social, economic and educational factors (p. 177).

The ways in which usage occurs is relevant to questions about its potential (Mossberger, Tolbert and Stansbury, 2003). Bennett, Wells and Rank (2008, p.24) have argued that:

Even populations as sophisticated as undergraduates at Stanford or Berkeley do not automatically understand what a blog is, why one might want to participate in blogging, or how to do it effectively even if so motivated.

The availability of media technology and generalised usage expertise are not sufficient pre-conditions for learning to engage civically.

Social media are usually not highlighted in relation to civic education. In the citizenship National Curriculum programme of study in England there is only one relevant statement (9 in a list of 10 ‘curriculum opportunities’). This suggests vaguely that teachers should: “use and interpret different media and ICT both as sources of information and as a means of communicating ideas”. Kerr (2007) reports low levels of use of new media:

Table 1 about here

We need to know more about the extent and nature of the usage of technology generally and social media in particular if we are to be able to make judgements about the development of civic engagement through education that uses social media.

Question 2: What does civic engagement mean and is it congruent with social media?

Many assert that social media offer potential for civic engagement (Delli Carpini 2000, Iyengar and Jackman, 2003; Montgomery *et al*., 2004) but there are currently rather vague arguments “ranging from claims that experiences in video war games and popular culture fan sites are somehow civic, to the equally fervent convictions of designers and managers of youth engagement sites that their environments offer the kinds of civic experiences young people should have” (Bennett, 2008).

‘Civics’ specifically refers to 3 matters. Firstly, there are contexts in which relevant issues are raised. So, for example, the economy is a context in which people may debate or act about unemployment, inflation, exchange rates and so on. (And, of course, engagement does not occur within these contexts only when the intended outcome is achieved and engagement may incorporate purposeful and deliberate inactivity). Secondly, civics has a conceptual underpinning in such things as power, representation, legitimation, authority, justice. Different types of concept help us to characterise particular contexts as well as identify processes of engagement. Thirdly, civics involves making a distinction between the private/personal and the public/collective. This distinction does not neglect contributions of, or impacts on, individuals, but instead allows for an awareness of public concern (eg a decision to smoke may be a personal matter; an understanding of the societal consequences of smoking and decisions about whether and if so how to persuade others about healthy living would be a public concern).

We need to consider the specific purposes of civic engagement to which social media could relate and how those purposes might impact on different types of users. Very broadly, we feel that it is appropriate to establish a connection between technology use and civic engagement. Social media, arguably, are breaking down the distinction between the private and public. The act of defining what is acceptable and the manner in which it is discussed in the public sphere is itself political (Papacharissi, 2010). Campbell and Kwak (2010) point to the connection between competence in using mobile telephones for information exchange and civic participation. Informal conversations (which feature so strongly in social media usage) are important in the development of civic competence (Marques and Maia, 2010). More specifically, social media may have the capacity to generate a more inclusive approach to civic engagement but there is limited research about the relative effectiveness of various strategies generally, or across youth sub-populations (Livingstone, 2009). Social and economic status (SES), gender, ‘race’ and ethnicity are key indicators in relation to civic engagement (eg Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995; Bartels, 2005; Nie et al, 1996; CIRCLE, 2007; Kahne and Sporte, 2008). Marsh, O’Toole and Jones, 2007, p.212) suggest that “the economic, social and cultural resources that young people had access to shaped their experiences and these in turn shaped their definitions of politics and views of political institutions”. Young people of lower SES, are more likely to be both distrustful of government and disadvantaged in terms of access to and skills for technology and civic learning efficacy (Marien et al, 2010). “There are hints that forms of civic engagement anchored in blogs and social networking sites could alter long-standing patterns that are based on socio-economic status” (see http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1328/online-political-civic-engagement-activity). There is little difference in propensity to post political content or generate political use of social network sites based on educational attainment. 40% of young people use social networking politically (Schlozman et al 2010, p. 502).

Some have suggested that radical change is occurring in civic engagement itself:

Whereas voter turnout, party membership and other more institutionalised forms of political engagement are caught in a downward spiral, innovative ways of civic engagement seem to be on the rise in most liberal democracies (Merien, Hooghe and Quintelier 2010, p.187).

Of course, traditional political participation may always have been low (Jeffreys 2007). And it is possible that passive representative politics is perhaps still significant and is not fundamentally changed by new technology. Calende and Meijer (2007, p.879) conclude that: “the internet reinvigorates political participation but does not trigger a shift from ‘old’ to ‘new’ politics. Traditional politics has managed to rethink its communication formats and therefore plays an important role in political participation by young people on the internet”. However, some suggest a fundamental shift is occurring because of social media. Young people may be abandoning traditional modes of dutiful citizen participation (voting, party membership, reading the newspaper), for a more personalized politics of self-actualization through digital networking, volunteering, and consumer activism (Bennett, Wells and Rank 2009; Bennett, Wells and Freelon forthcoming; Xenos and Bennett 2007;also see Bang 2005; Dalton 2008). Coleman (2007) explores which websites treat their visitors as autonomous political actors, using design to enable users to interact with one another on their own terms. Social media may foster the autonomy of nascent political actors or involve participants merely in managing their own passive approach to democratic citizenship (Coleman 2007). Bennett, Wells and Rank (2008, p.8) show the different possibilities:

Table 2 about here

Earlier research offers only rather generalized findings on both youth technology usage, and digital media projects designed to encourage young citizens to express themselves (Dahlgren, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; van Zoonen, 2005; Kann et al, 2007). These studies probably underestimate young people’s civic use of social networking sites as they focus on elections, and do not necessarily measure young people’s everyday political expression, involvement in issue based campaigns, or their peer discussions. Often young people’s use of social networking sites is explored only as a predictor of their offline participation (mainly voting) rather than trying to understand how this online behaviour manifests and constructs their civic engagement. Further exploration of these matters is desirable.

Question 3: what educational processes and outcomes could be experienced by students and teachers when using social media for civic engagement?

Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) claim that those born since 1982 prefer to learn from communication formats rather than text, and interactively rather than independently. Teachers use technologies to access information (eg customised digital repositories), as presentational tools (eg interactive whiteboards), to engage within (eg using voting devices) - and beyond - the classroom (eg video conferencing) (Moylan 2010). However, it has been claimed that commentators have been “seduced by the technology” and that increased use of open questions and faster pace as a result of using technology were undermined by more superficiality and greater use of teachers’ ‘recitation script’ (Smith, Hardman and Higgins 2006, p.455; Waller 2007). Livingstone & Bober (2005) suggest that young people lack key skills in evaluating online content. Young people may communicate principally about personal rather than civic matters and in education contexts nearly a quarter of their sample admitted to copying something from the Internet and passing it off as his or her own. Selwyn and Gorard (2003, p.178) argue that “the evidence does not suggest the 'new learning technologies' imply or precipitate 'new forms of learning”.

However, these reservations are not in themselves an argument for failing to explore the potential to generate new forms of learning in relation to civic engagement. Beldarrain (2006) notes the transition from teacher as deliverer of knowledge, to facilitator of online interaction, reflecting the two tenets of constructivism: learning as an active process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it; and, instruction as a process that involves supporting that construction rather than of communicating knowledge (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996, p. 171). Consideration of web 2.0 heightens these claims. Mason (2009) contrasts traditional knowledge bases which are exclusive, slow and imposed, with user generated content that allows learners to actively engage in the construction of their experience; continually refresh content rather than rely on expensive expert input;and support collaborative work.

To fulfil the potential of social media for learning for civic engagement it is necessary to go beyond ‘merely’ transmitting civic information, exploring academic concepts, focussing on controversial issues and organising schemes of community involvement. Ideas about autonomous and dutiful citizenship are relevant here (Bennett 2008, p.12).

Table 3 about here

The essence of education and civic engagement requires a focus on contemporary content, key citizenship concepts (such as human rights, justice, equality), opportunities to learn about, and practise, participation, within a framework in which a diverse society is celebrated and promoted. Teachers should have a notion of what effective pedagogic and civic engagement practice looks like and should be able to communicate it to learners. This will involve activities that promote reflection and interaction; focussing students’ minds on the principal purpose of an activity; helping students to elaborate and justify their positions; and allowing students to recognize good work. The extent to which students “believe that a communicative relationship exists between oneself and the institutions that govern society” (Coleman, Morrison and Svennevig 2008, p.772) is important. Students’ cognitive skills (ability to criticize, synthesize, evaluate, judge) and their practical action skills (communicate, organise, persuade) are relevant to the use of social media for civic engagement.

Question 4: what new directions need to be taken by educators?

What then should be considered by educators who are interested in using social media for the purposes of learning about and for civic engagement?

First, education should occur in the public domain. Education (or, at least schooling) is already a public activity but there is normally a strong focus on individual work. Blogging, wikis, e-portfolios and other electronically available social networks depend entirely on others in “a public forum in which the cumulative process of concept formation, refinement, application and revision is fully visible to student peers and teachers” (Boettcher, 2007). Much depends on process but the obvious connection between activity within a public forum and civic engagement should be explored. Caution will be needed if this radical point is accepted. Advocating professional involvement in forums in which hitherto user generated content by young people has dominated may risk destroying the essence of new forms of civic engagement.

Second, assessment is likely to change significantly from individual to collective learning (Jenkins, 2006) and from ‘assessment of’ to ‘assessment for’ learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The active techniques already applied in various subjects such as drama; and the group projects that exist already in citizenship education allow for further specific development in social media. New forms of learning could be identified from the interplay between participants as well as the ‘performances’ for audiences.

Thirdly, the divide between learning and activism could be explored. Webb (1980) investigated the educational capacity of an anti-Nazi league for political education. Service learning is now an established approach (e.g. Strait and Lima, 2009) and is just one of many initiatives related to education for civic engagement. Educators, generally, are pleased when something useful has been created, self esteem may have been raised and there may be increased motivation to learn and learning itself may have occurred. An exclusive focus on activism would be inappropriate. Crick emphasised reflection on action in order to avoid previously inappropriate emphases on volunteering. The debates about indoctrination among those promoting political education in the 1970s and 1980s (eg Porter, 1986) and led to legislation that banned partisan teaching would make teachers pause if they were asked to become more associated with learning through activism. And yet, the logic of any encouragement to promote civic engagement through participation through social media suggests the need for more educational work. What remains is the challenge of determining in the new context brought into being by social media, how to educate while the boundaries are blurred between private and public, formal and informal and engagement for democratic learning in the non-democratic environment of most schools.

Conclusion

There are potential connections between learning, civic engagement and social media. This argument has consequences for individuals’ identity (people may seek and manage multiple identities more easily); community (virtual democratising communities are growing and fears about isolation of individuals may be contested); and, the management of information (more information is accessed and it is processed more selectively) (Haste, 2009). Increasingly easy access to others means that traditional politics may weaken. We are struck by the potential connections and disjunctions between technology and civic engagement, democracy and learning. There have been unhelpfully strident comments which seem to suggest the inevitability of improved learning through ‘new’ technology. Without proper investigation of such matters we will be left to repeat these claims and counter claims. We need to know what motivates young people to use social media for civic engagement, what they do when so engaged and what perceived and actual impacts occur as a result. That research should lead to clear recommendations for professionals and others who seek to enhance education for civic engagement through using social media.

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Table 1

2004 2006

Teachers’ Planning 24% 36%

Researching 21% 28%

Teaching in classrooms 8% 13%

Table 1: Frequency with which the internet is used for citizenship education. Teachers answering ‘*most of the time*’ or ‘*all of the time*’ (Kerr et al 2007).

Table 2

Younger (AC) Actualizing Citizen Older (DC) Dutiful Citizen

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Weak sense of duty to participate in  government | Strong sense of duty to participate in  government |
| Focus on lifestyle politics: political  consumerism, volunteering, social activism | Voting is the core democratic act |
| Mistrust of media and politicians – less  likely to follow politics in the news | Higher trust in leaders and media -  informed about issues and government, follows the news |
| Joins loose networks for social action –  communicates through digital media | Joins social organizations, interest groups  and parties – communicates through mass  media |

Table 2: Generational Citizen Identity Differences in SOME Post Industrial Democracies

Table 3

**AC Civic Learning Styles DC Civic Learning Styles**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Interactive, project based, peer-to-peer  networked information sharing | Authoritative, text-based one-way  knowledge transmission to individuals |
| Participatory media creation | Passive media consumption |
| Preference for democratic environments –  learners participate in creating content and  assessing credibility | Knowledge and skills and assessed by  external standards – little learner content  creation or peer assessment |

Table 3: Civic Learning Styles and Citizen Identity