

GoodWork® Project Report Series, Number 50

Engagement 2.0? How the New Digital Media can Invigorate Civic Engagement

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September 2007

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Abstract: Engagement 2.0? How the New Digital Media Can Invigorate Civic
Engagement

I explore the relationship between civic engagement and democratic practice. I suggest that the traditional model of civic engagement does not capture the distinctive engagement of many young people today and is limited in three crucial ways: an inflexible model of organizational commitment, an antiquated understanding of contemporary group membership, and the assumption that nearly all forms of engagement are equal in the sense of efficacy that they convey to participants. A new model inspired by participatory culture is necessary. A contemporary model of civic engagement, Engagement 2.0, suggests that the NDM represents a new space for political change—a space that has been overlooked by many political scientists.

Engagement 2.0? How the New Digital Media can Invigorate Civic Engagement

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Introduction

When it comes to assessing the degree of civic engagement displayed by youth, widely contrasting pictures emerge. By almost all traditional measures, youth civic engagement is faltering. Whether the measure is attending a club meeting, working on a community project, or following government and public affairs, the current generation of young people (15-25) is civically engaged at a much lower rate than youths 30 years ago (Levine, 2007). At the same time, according to a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 57% of teens create New Digital Media (NDM) content for the internet (such as blogs, webpages, artwork, videos, etc) and 33% of teens share such creations with others online (Lenhart and Madden, 2005). On the one hand, political scientists bemoan youths' lack of engagement with their communities, arguing that the NDM are a distraction from political life and therefore democracy. On the other hand, media scholars and educators argue that youth are participating in democracy, albeit in ways that are deemed insignificant and therefore overlooked in the traditional models of youth civic engagement (Bennett, 2006).

Using insights from democratic theory and participatory culture, I propose that a critical approach bridging Political Science and Media Studies is necessary to understand the democratic potential of the NDM. Traditional measures of civic engagement should take note of the flurry of cultural production taking place in the NDM. A contemporary model

of civic engagement suggests that the NDM represents a new space for political change- a space that has been ostensibly off the radar of political scientists.

Traditional Civic Engagement and Democratic Practice

The term ‘democracy’ is popularly used as an ambiguous noun, relying on a modifier (such as ‘representative’, ‘delegative’, or ‘participatory’) to supply a more precise definition. ‘Democracy’ is rarely used actively; thus it tends to be understood not as a dynamic practice, but as a finished product. I would like to avoid the conceptual muddiness of the term ‘democracy’. Instead I invoke the term ‘democratic practice’ to highlight the importance of the active ‘practices’ that comprise democracy. While democratic practices are typically divided into three categories (civic, political, and electoral) (Keeter et al, 2002), I am most directly concerned with civic practice—more commonly known as civic engagement—because civic life is the arena of democratic practice in which youth engagement is understood as noteworthy, primarily for its role in shaping future citizens.

Youth civic engagement typically clusters around three important dimensions: Intent, membership, and commitment (Kirlin, 2003). The term ‘civic engagement’ most generally defines public actions *devoted to a common good* (intent), achieved through *sustained participation* (commitment) in a *group or association* (membership).

Membership in civic engagement is cooperative, facilitating solidarity through the consensus of many to achieve a goal. Civic engagement includes such activities as

volunteering, belonging to an organization (from a sporting team to Rotary club), and/or supporting an organization through a fundraiser.

It is now widely accepted that the roots of political engagement lie in organizational membership (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1993, 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Organizational membership is often understood to be synonymous with civic engagement, providing the structure for impacts in participants' behaviors, attitudes, and political knowledge (Kirlin, 2003). In short, adolescent civic engagement shapes future political beings.

There is a strong correlation between adolescent extracurricular participation and adult political and civic behaviors. Extracurricular participation during high school is a more important predictor of adult political participation than academic performance (Hanks 1981; Smith 1999). However, type of organization is important. Instrumental organizations (such as student government—in which interaction, cooperation and collective decision-making play a role) are correlated with later political and civic behaviors (Kirlin, 2002; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Youniss, McClellan and Yates, 1997) whereas expressive organizations (such as cheerleading, band, etc) are not.

In terms of attitudes, young people learn how to be members of communities through membership in organizations, and also begin to see themselves as part of a larger public beyond the self. An attitudinal shift of this kind makes the collaborative work of democracy much more feasible. Social trust is another oft-mentioned attitudinal by-

product of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993). Social trust allows a group to accomplish much more collaboratively than individually, and reinforcing solidarity.

Finally, youth civic engagement is important by virtue of the knowledge and understanding of political processes that it imparts (Chapman, Nolin & Kline, 1997; Niemi & Junn, 1998). According to Niemi and Junn, “those who fail to understand the significance of democratic norms often fail to believe in them” (Niemi and Junn, 1998). Levels of political knowledge affect the acceptance of democratic principles, attitudes towards specific issues and political participation (Galston, 2001). Adherence to the traditional civic engagement model would suggest that by not being civically active, youth are foregoing important civic benefits, with major implications for democratic practice.

Flaws in the Traditional Model

I argue that young people are gaining the above-mentioned benefits of civic engagement through their activities with the NDM, but that their methods of doing so are typically overlooked in the traditional model of civic engagement. While an in-depth analysis of the apparent decline in youth civic engagement over the past 30 years is out of the realm of this paper, I argue that the existing model itself is at fault. The focus begins on the common good over the individual (intent) should be the foundation of any model of civic engagement, but the traditional model suffers from three crucial shortcomings: an inflexible model of organizational commitment, an antiquated understanding of contemporary group membership, and the assumption that nearly all forms of engagement are equal in the sense of efficacy that they convey to participants.

The traditional model of civic engagement rests on the principle of an organizational commitment that is sustained over time. Time is important in the traditional model because it is assumed that over time social trust will be built between members, and that sustained commitment will carry over to influence later political behaviors. Committed participants are then assumed to be better democratic citizens. While this may be true for participants, it obscures the fact that organizational commitment based on time may preclude many citizens from being part of organizations.

Considering a political economy of traditional civic engagement may be helpful to this discussion. Commitment for some participants may mean active organizational participation, while for others it may simply be presence in a group. Such free-riders may keep an organization technically alive, but assuming they receive the same civic benefits is an insult to active contributors and detrimental to democratic *practice*. Furthermore, for adults, commitment to an organization assumes regular freedom from professional and child-rearing obligations. Privileged youth must choose between expanded athletic and educational opportunities, while underprivileged youth may be so committed to other responsibilities that time is simply not available for regular organizational membership.

In a recent book exploring the decline in youth activism Daniel Brook argues that a persistent and growing income gap, paired with spiraling educational costs, leave many aspiring activists so overworked and indebted that engagement gets pushed aside for just getting by (2007). With too much debt to work as activists, or not enough time to

volunteer, the NDM may provide alternate spaces for engagement. This is not to suggest that time is not a crucial factor in involvement, or that the NDM do not require sustained engagement- quite the contrary. Instead, I suggest that the traditional model of civic engagement is limited because it fails to consider adequately the importance of time to engagement. In treating leisure time as an assumed commodity, traditional engagement is difficult and unlikely when time is scarce.

As stated above, the benefits of civic engagement are conveyed primarily through group membership. 'Group' refers to a set of people united by an abiding common interest who are bound by some type of formal institutional commitment. The qualification as 'formal' is necessary if local membership-based organizations are the only associational option (as they were in the mid 19th century). It seems anachronistic in an age of networks and affiliations, for it assumes that citizens are in need of an institution to keep them motivated and active.

Finally, the traditional model of civic engagement makes little distinction between particular types of activities and the efficacy that they respectively endow. The distinction between 'instrumental' and 'expressive' organizations has been replicated in many studies, but there has been little research on the differences between activities *within* the categories of instrumental and expressive. For example, serving on a prom committee and organizing tenants for rent control are weighted equally in terms of impact on future civic and political behaviors (both are 'better' than a drama club, for example). A crucial, yet lacking, variable in the qualitative distinctions between types of

engagement is some measure of efficacy. All political actors need reassurance that they have a political voice and that their voice can make a difference. The interactivity and network of affiliations of the NDM make such reassurance—and therefore efficacy—an integral part of participants’ experiences. As Jenkins argues, “the step from watching television news and acting politically seems greater than the transition from being a political actor in a game world to acting politically in the ‘real world’” (2006b,10). A focus on efficacy rather than type of engagement reduces the normative bias in the traditional model of engagement that currently discredits activity in the NDM by labeling it ‘virtual’ and therefore not valid in the ‘real’ world.

The limitations of the traditional model of civic engagement suggest that a new model is necessary to characterize youth participation in the NDM. The new model should fuse an understanding of traditional civic engagement based on intent, commitment and membership with the interactive features of the NDM. Enter participatory culture.

Insights from Participatory Culture

Participatory culture describes the background in which a new form of civic engagement is taking form. A participatory culture is one where low barriers to expression and engagement are matched with strong support for sharing creations in an environment of informal mentorships. Furthermore, the beliefs that anyone can contribute, and that such contributions matter, are intrinsic in a participatory culture. Participation in a participatory culture takes the form of *affiliations* in online communities such as Facebook, or game clans; *expressions* of art like fan fiction writing and mash-ups;

collaborative problem solving to complete tasks and develop new knowledge such as Wikipedia; and *circulations* of media such as blogging or podcasting (Jenkins 2006b).

In a participatory culture, empowerment is central. Empowerment comes about through the active construction of, and contributions to, culture. The concept of participatory culture allows the cultural productions taking place online to be understood as indicative of limitations of the traditional model of civic engagement. Culture is made accessible by flexible understandings of organizational commitment and membership—precisely what is lacking in traditional models of civic engagement. Rather than simply consuming media, with politics as a spectator sport on the margins, citizens in a participatory culture produce media and therefore have a greater stake in the issues that matter to them (Jenkins, 2007).

In terms of organizational commitment, it is not time or tenure that is important in delivering civic benefits in a participatory culture but rather participation (in the forms outlined above). The shift from a time-based system of commitment to a participation-based one can be understood through the political economy of civic engagement and low barriers of entry to the NDM. The political economy of civic engagement suggests that the time commitment required of traditional engagement makes it an unattractive, if not impossible, use of scarce resources.

Previously cited statistics about participation indicate that the NDM are determined to be an attractive use of scarce time, particularly when compared to traditional civic

engagement. One hypothesis for the choice to participate in the NDM is the low barriers of entry, which encourage users of all skill levels to contribute in the NDM. Low barriers of entry in a participatory culture suggest that with access to a computer (which is increasingly common), any participant can use entry-level computing skills to participate in an environment of exchange and sharing. Furthermore, a participatory culture is built by numerous forms of participation—leading to multiple roles for participants. Beyond a simple dichotomy of contributors or free riders, participants are reinforcing the notion that a participatory culture is built by their sundry productions. Indeed, a participatory culture may endow participants with a sense that their contributions have an impact on others that is not available through traditional forms of civic engagement. The ensuing sense of efficacy is a decisive factor in future political behavior.

A participatory culture exists only if people contribute to it, for it is sustained through the interaction of participants with theirs' and others' creations. A participatory culture cannot be mandated; it requires neither formal membership nor face-to-face meetings between participants. To this point, a few words about the potential for social connection in virtual networks are necessary. While the web is anecdotally seen as a place where 'no one knows you're a dog', participants in the NDM are not so naïve as to be completely ignorant of the presence of dogs (or non-dogs for that matter) online. Gee's notion of an "affinity group" is helpful here:

People in an affinity group can recognize others as more or less 'insiders' to the group. They may not see many people in the group face-to-face, but when they interact with someone on the internet or read something about the domain, they can recognize certain ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing as well as the typical sorts of social practices associated with a given semiotic domain (Gee, 2003, 27).

An affinity group does not just come into existence out of nowhere—it is formed by participants who collectively craft a community through shared interests and experiences. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1983) speaks of a similar process by which “nation” is created, invoking the impersonal, yet shared experience of reading a national paper. If a shared experience such as reading a national paper may contribute to a sense of nationalism, the potential for affinity groups to craft the social connections and obligations that require social trust and foster engagement may be great.

A structured group or parent organization is not necessary to ensure access to capital such as knowledge, production tools, or distribution channels in the NDM. In a culture that promotes informal mentorships and exchange, with low costs associated with most cultural productions, membership is not about a parent organization. Rather, it is about the virtual networks that one sustains and develops and how those networks are utilized. Consider *The Daily Prophet*, an online Harry Potter fan club and fan fiction website. After Warner Brothers acquired the rights to the Harry Potter films, the firm began to send “cease and desist” letters to young fans who wrote fan fiction for *The Daily Prophet* website, accusing them of copyright violations. The young Harry Potter fans organized themselves in defense of their creative works, and Warner Brothers eventually lifted the restrictions (Jenkins 2006a, 186-188). The young fans were not members of a ‘formal’ organization; they were just networked young people, bound together by an abiding and common interest. The popularity of the fans’ fiction and websites allowed their collective presence to be noticed. The writers were organized (as a network) rather than atomized,

and as a result, they had an impact that rebuffed one of the largest entertainment companies in the world.

Towards Engagement 2.0

The Daily Prophet struggle demonstrates a new model of civic engagement: a model that I call ‘Engagement 2.0’. Engagement 2.0 is a term meant to invoke both an updated version of civic engagement, and Web 2.0 (the technologically-enabled creation, collaboration, sharing and diffusion of web-based products typical of a participatory culture). In Engagement 2.0 commitment is represented not by time, but by meaningful participation in a networked community. Engagement 2.0 argues that a flexible understanding of group membership and commitment, coupled with an appreciation of the efficacy encountered in a participatory culture, may offer a more accurate way to understand contemporary youth engagement. Engagement 2.0 should not be understood as another word for participatory culture. Instead, the two work symbiotically. Participatory culture fertilizes the seeds of engagement in novel ways, and engagement, in turn, shapes participatory culture. In other words, participatory culture is a democratic practice in itself.

	Traditional civic engagement	Engagement 2.0
Intent	outward-focused	outward-focused
Commitment	time-based	participation-based
Membership	group, face-to-face	networked, virtual
Efficacy	N/A	Interactivity; networked affiliations

Comparison of Traditional civic engagement and Engagement 2.0

Below I discuss two sample products of participatory culture in order to show how Engagement 2.0 may impact democratic practice. In the first example, Global Kids Summer Camp, the importance of a participation-based commitment to an emerging sense of efficacy is highlighted. In the second example on political remixing, the civic potential of citizen-created political commentary is discussed. Both examples hint that participatory culture may foster democratic practice.

Global Kids Summer Camp

In the summer of 2006, Global Kids convened the first-ever virtual summer camp—*Global Kids Summer Camp*—with 15 teens from the United States, Canada, Russia, and the United Kingdom. The participating teens gathered together on Global Kids Island in the Teen Grid of Second Life for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 4 weeks; they took part in global issues workshops covering topics from the genocide in Darfur, to global human rights and globalization. After a few weeks, teens chose a global issue of concern—child sex trafficking—and endeavored to take action. The teens held a teach-in for peers in Second Life to bring attention to the issue, and then built a maze with real-world photos and commentary. As of October 2006, 2500 teens had visited the online maze, with 450 visitors donating 42,000 Linden dollars (US \$175) to the cause (Global Kids, 2006).

Pilot work by the staff of Global Kids suggests that the summer camp nurtured critical habits of mind, feelings of efficacy, and increased knowledge and understanding of transnational social movements and politics (Global Kids, 2007). By participating in educational sessions and building an informative maze, young Global Kids Summer

campers were demonstrating their political voices and finding affinity with other concerned youth. While many variables may contribute to a sense of efficacy, Engagement 2.0 suggests that the low barriers to participation, easy accessibility, and affinities with other users may give participants the feeling that their voice ‘counts’ in conversations about global issues—an important factor in future political behaviors.

Global Kids Summer Camp raises intriguing questions about the role of membership in Engagement 2.0. Youth participants from around the world met virtually every day, but never in person. Participants had a formal relationship with Global Kids, the non-profit organization that convened the summer camp, but the campers alone conceived of and constructed the maze. It may be argued that the age of the campers requires formal oversight (or group membership) to achieved desired pedagogical ends, or, alternatively, that there are many examples of youth engagement which remain off the radar because the traditional model assumes that youth need formal direction to engage in civically productive ways.

Political Remixing

Lawrence Lessig, founder of the Creative Commons license (a digital copyright license that allows copyright holders to grant some rights to the public while maintaining others in efforts to keep cultural creations ‘common’), petitioned the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee to Creative Commons license political debates for presidential candidates—opening them up to remixing and inviting citizen commentary in the 2008 presidential election (Lessig, April 25, 2007). It is important to

note that most remixing is illegal because it consists of copyrighted material used without permission. While I do not intend to minimize legal concerns, Lessig's request reveals the implications of restrictive copyright law for free speech and democracy. At the same time, Lessig's request also speaks to the potential of participatory culture to create meaning and therefore play a role in how citizens understand politics. Citizen-generated content potentially represents a way for citizens to act politically and for politics to act more participatory, by allowing citizens to engage with politics in ways that are familiar to them.

It should be noted that 'citizen' in the case of 'citizen contributions' implies work created by citizens for other citizens, and not for-profit labor. The site *Political Remix Mashup Videos* (McIntosh, 2007) includes links to citizen videos on fair use, fair trade, racism, and war. While much of the linked mashup videos are citizen contributions made by professionals, YouthLAB and Youth Radio are two organizations devoted to developing and giving space to young people's political and cultural works. The works of the young people are similarly concerned with political issues such as racism, inequality and poverty. What is important about these sites and organizations is not simply their existence, but rather the demonstration that citizens—even young ones—can play a direct role in the political process.

Political remixing raises important questions about the unique contributions of citizen contributions. At best, such productions inspire or serve as a platform for political debate, but they can also represent candidate advocacy, or worse, propaganda. If politicians begin

to pay attention to citizen creations as political commentary, or even independent focus groups, the practice of politics can change. In the process of changing politics, ordinary people may impact the way that their fellow citizens think about their roles and voices in the political process. To this point, citizen contributions such as political remixing need not be seen as intermediary steps to further engagement, but rather as important acts on their own.

The suggestion of a new model of civic engagement raises normative concerns about the value of face-to-face human contact and the sanctity of lived cultural and political experiences, as well as the primacy of organizational membership and elite politics. For example, many political scientists cite readership declines in traditional media as indicative of disengagement, whereas others celebrate the lack of deference to 'biased' media. As a result, citizen media and other cultural creations are interpreted on poles of distraction versus empowerment. A bifurcated interpretation has political implications, as excluding cultural productions from civic engagement reinforces the notion of high politics as the only true political engagement, while ignoring insights from civic engagement and further isolating citizens from politics. Engagement 2.0 suggests that participatory culture is a democratic practice in itself, raising competing claims about the conservative potential of the internet.

Conclusion

The scholarship on civic engagement indicates that civic activities outside the political sphere can have positive impacts on democratic practice. Building off of this, I suggest that the traditional model of civic engagement does not capture the distinctive

engagement by many young people today and that a new model inspired by participatory culture is necessary.

Additional research is necessary on the *kinds* of young people that are participating in participatory culture—specifically their demographic characteristics and digital skills. Perhaps the most active participants in engagement 2.0 are also inclined to be involved offline, which could suggest that engagement 2.0 inspires no new participation but rather a different venue for those already prone to participate, with participatory culture serving as a constant rather than variable. Ideally, such work would be longitudinal so as to determine the impact of participation in the NDM on future civic and political behaviors, attitudes and values. Research on the political economy of civic engagement is sorely lacking- perhaps it could be jump-started by gaining a more complete understanding of the relationship between how citizens structure their time and the perceived efficacy of their actions vis-à-vis the NDM. Finally, the perennial problem of non-transfer of skills should be investigated. It may be that Engagement 2.0 bridges more easily to the real world than more traditional civic engagement and if this is so, the reasons therein should be explored.

I do not want to imply that participation in the NDM is a substitute for traditional civic engagement. Instead, participation in a participatory culture should be understood as revealing a new model of civic engagement that organically arises out of an understanding of contemporary youth practice. The traditional model of civic engagement should not be grafted onto young people. Young people have the energy and

desire to contribute to democratic practice, and they should be encouraged to do so. The NDM, in some ways, offer the path of least resistance to young people. While online, young people can come and go from sites as they please, and they can make the best use of their time by multi-tasking—talking to friends, writing emails and checking the sports scores—all while a video they are contributing to a local news site or Youtube is uploading. They don't have to leave the house, and they don't have to put down the things they are tethered to. Rather than see these 'social facts' as debilitating to democracy, they should be leveraged to get the most out of young people's desire to be active and feel a part of something beyond themselves.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Howard Gardner, Carrie James, Margaret Weigel and the rest of the GoodPlay team at Project Zero for providing comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Henry Jenkins and Joe Kahne shared insightful comments and Rafi Santo provided data on Global Kids. Preparation of this paper was facilitated by grants from The Carnegie Corporation of New York, The MacArthur Foundation, and The Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

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