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With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility:  
A Framework for Civic Thinking in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

In this paper, I describe an analysis of responses given by civically active young Americans to a hypothetical civic issue. The analysis offers insight into how these young people, as members of a digitally-connected society, approach civic challenges and action. Four key considerations are set out which characterize sophisticated responses:

- **Sources:** *considerations about the origins of the information acted on, and in particular, what range of perspectives are taken into account.*
- **Scope:** *considerations about the extent of ones responsibility with regards to an issue, and in relation to different roles (e.g., student, neighbor, voter).*
- **Scale:** *considerations about the range of an issue in geographic and social terms, the size of desired impact, and ways one could achieve a greater impact.*
- **Strategy:** *considerations as to what tools and methods are available, and are best suited to the issue.*

The four considerations are illustrated and discussed as a mutually reinforcing, comprehensive method of reflecting on civic issues and actions. The set is presented as a flexible and effective framework for thinking about how to manage the risks and opportunities present in the digital civic context.

## Introduction

At the same time as individuals around the world are increasingly connected by digital media and technology, the context of civic engagement and action is rapidly evolving (Bennett, 2008; Rheingold, 2008). Civic education, to remain relevant and helpful, aspires to offer tools and supports that are aligned to the current opportunities, risks and responsibilities of today's young citizens and aspiring civic actors.

A weight of expectation lies at the door of digital technologies to inspire and empower a generation of new civic actors (Schmidt & Cohen, 2010). But young people will need more than digital tools to make the most of a new landscape; they must have also *cognitive* tools. Fortunately, a number of initiatives (such as Generation Citizen or the National Alliance for Civic Education<sup>1</sup>) exist to prepare young people with the knowledge and reasoning skills necessary for civic action, many of which are attentive to the digital context (Middaugh et al., 2012). Yet, as I describe in the first part of this paper, civic education agendas often find it hard to encompass the diverse forms of action now possible. We are in need of flexible tools that promote shared reflection across a range of contexts. As the boundaries of communities and societies become more fluid, there is need continually to re-assess what constitutes good 'civic' thinking and action.

To develop supports for such thinking, one starting point is to examine the ways in which young people think about and respond to archetypal civic issues. In this paper I analyze a sample of young people's responses to one of four hypothetical civic scenarios. These responses formed part of longer interviews with youth chosen for sustained civic engagement and work.

To establish the assumptions governing the analysis, in the first half of this paper I engage with the relevant context; the changing nature of civic action and consequent demands on civic education. From this I establish a set of criteria for the kind of civic thinking that might be advantageous in this context. I then introduce the study of responses to hypothetical civic dilemmas, and use select responses to illustrate a proposed framework for civic thinking in the form of four considerations. To conclude, I summarize the findings and propose ways in which the framework might be developed for use by young people and educators.

## The demands on civic education: past and present

Inherent in the notion of "civic" is an idea of citizenship or membership of some place. Civic education has been characterized as the concern to "promote...feelings of membership and the development of a 'civic ethic' among young people" (Dubnick, 2003, p. 253). Within this definition, we find that prior to civic engagement is some kind of community, locale or group to which the individual is a *member* and through which are constituted the various rights and responsibilities that come with citizenship.

The advent of the Internet, and the subsequent emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and social media, radically changes what it means to "feel membership". Previously, membership and community generally presupposed a common location that brought

with it a shared culture and environmental conditions. This context cultivated what we might call “neighborly morality” (Gardner, 2012). The past 10-15 years has seen the arrival of communities that traverse time and place – and ever more compelling signs that every aspect of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship similarly cross such boundaries<sup>ii</sup>.

In line with this change, civic education and new media researchers have observed there are now more pathways to civic engagement than those represented by traditional school-based civic education or service learning programs. They have uncovered the ways in which online participation, particularly in connection with specific civic issues or alternative fan groups, develops in young people an identity and set of competences as a civic actor (Jenkins, 2013; Zimmerman, 2012).

A conception of “self-actualizing citizenship”, as opposed to “dutiful citizenship”, characterizes a variety of civic engagement realized through online participation in self-chosen interests or issues, as opposed to locally defined practices and norms (Bennett, Wells & Rank, 2008). It is this context that gave rise to a notion of civic education as “educating nomads” (Dubnick, 1998).

Research focused on the issue of civically educating this generation of “nomads” typically highlights specific online practices and digital media literacy more generally (Kahne, 2012; Middaugh, 2012; Reich, 2013). While there is much guidance on strategies for integrating technology and civics, the perception of digital media is predominantly as a set of powerful *tools*; as opposed to a *context* that it is incumbent on all educators to consider and critique with youth<sup>iii</sup>.

### **The Risks and Opportunities of the Digital Age**

In order to appreciate fully the implications of the more diverse pathways to civic engagement and development, I consider further two questions. What are the additional risks that come with a less institutionalized condition? And what are the opportunities? Answers will indicate the responsibility of 21st century civic education if it seeks to guide young people towards (or, perhaps, catch up with and contain) digital civic participation.

One need not look far to identify the risks. The story of Jason Russell is now familiar to many as an extreme example of the potential for unprecedented consequences of an online action. On March 5th 2012, Russell launched a campaign to raise awareness about the former Ugandan dictator Joseph Kony, and garner support and funds for a mission to capture and imprison him. The campaign was phenomenally successful: the *Kony2012* video was viewed 100 million times in the first six days, featured in 5 million tweets, and resulted in 3.6 million pledges to the online campaign (*The Guardian*, 2012). The relationship between those numbers and the actual impact on the situation in Uganda is less clear<sup>iv</sup>, but yet more difficult is what to make of the personal effect the explosion of interest had on Russell. On March 15th, ten days after the release of the video, Russell was detained naked on the streets by police, having apparently suffered some kind of breakdown.

Russell’s case and those like it illustrate how individuals acting with a civic purpose now have the potential to become embroiled in events wildly out of their control

(Allen, 2013). Educators have a collective responsibility to minimize unintended fallout for youth as agents - and for the targets of their action. Young people, through their ‘innocent’ (and therefore trusted) status may have particular power to draw attention to causes and – in a few cases – achieve change as a result (see stories as covered by e.g Dias, 2011; Vidal, 2013). If a campaign on platforms such as MoveOn or Change.org catches the eye of the “editors”, it can swiftly be spiraled to national-coverage status (Ly, 2012). Even if we are willing to trust that young people will generally choose worthy – or at worst innocuous – causes, the potential for effects on this scale suggests young people need to be equipped with the skills to weigh their actions and potential consequences in a whole different way.

Even if young people are not intending their civic actions to have a large-scale impact, the digital context requires careful consideration. When using social media or interacting online, the familial or community norms which reinforce ‘neighborly morality’ fall away. Digital output can swiftly move from being ‘within’ a social network to being shared by outside groups, who might see the world in a different way. Any digital action may be exposed to a more open and contested social context traditionally associated with the ‘ethics of roles’ (Gardner, 2012).

Young people need to be prepared for more abstract and complex decision-making at a much earlier stage. Mapping the potential set of consequences – even within reason – requires multi-stage thinking and a few degrees of perspective taking. I would argue that engaging responsibly in the hyper-connected world requires a level of systems-thinking that is atypical in high school graduates (Maani & Maharaj, 2004; Senge, 1990; Sweeney & Sterman, 2007).

Before turning to how one might support such thinking, it is important to draw attention to the way in which digital connectivity not only poses risks, but alters civic responsibilities. As educators have pointed out, “although our actions have always had global and long-lasting impacts, never before have we been able to see them” (Crockett, Lukes & Churches, 2011, p. 79). Crockett and colleagues are making a point about the potential for young people to damage their personal reputation through online media use. But increased visibility - of others as well as ourselves - arguably increases our liability for the consequences of our actions. In this way the internet brings to bear a new set of considerations and seriously raises the ethical stakes of youth civic action - and inaction.

Of equal importance to considering risks, therefore, is the question of whether a more connected society offers more *opportunities* to do something. And this must be actively considered. We cannot assume that the potential of the internet and mobile technology to spur increased civic engagement and positive action will be realized without some effort:

As many writers have observed, each of the telegraph, telephone, radio and television was accompanied by its own heroic rhetoric of democratic transformation and reinvigorated civic engagement. None have delivered fully on this promise... (Barney, 2007, p. 21)

The moral of Jason Russell’s story is not to *not* attempt such avenues, but to be as well prepared, supported, and informed as possible before and as you do so. There is a need for a flexible framework for young people and civic educators that seek to

mitigate risks, while also pushing potential civic actors towards realizing the opportunities offered by digital tools.

The starting point for such a framework - and grounding for an analysis of young people's responses to hypothetical civic issues - must be the existing codifications of desirable civic action and actors.

### **Shaping Civic Action and Education in the Digital Age**

There exist a large number of codifications of ideal civic action and actors, drawn up in an attempt to shape civic education through the definition of its desirable outcomes. The Campaign for the Civic Mission of schools has produced such a list, which includes general ("intellectual") skills such as problem-solving and more specific ("participatory") skills such as community mapping or utilizing electoral processes. It also includes a list of necessary knowledge, for example, of the key elements and amendments of the American constitution ([www.civicmissionofschools.org/educators/civic-competencies](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/educators/civic-competencies)). These examples illustrate a problem, in that they are either so broad as to be non-actionable, or so specific that they cannot be applied to more general civic educational experiences. In particular, the list would struggle to encompass the emerging range of potential opportunities and risks in digitally-enabled civic participation.

We see similar problems in other frameworks. Kirlin (2003) examined all major theoretical or empirical frameworks of civic skills and arranged them into four major categories of key competencies:

- 1) organization
- 2) communication
- 3) collective decision-making, and
- 4) critical thinking.

Each competency is seen as being comprised of several more specific skills. Critical thinking, for example, entails both the ability to analyze and synthesize "information about political and civic life" and "Evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public events and issues" (Patrick, 2003). Here again we see the danger of falling between being empty of content, on the one hand, and being overly demanding, on the other. Developing these competencies in full would require a wide and deep education that prepares one to analyze, synthesize and understand the vast range of information and perspectives which could be, depending on the issue, relevant to 'political and civic life'.

Already, this is a daunting task for a process that gets limited time in formal education, and yet Kirlin's (2003) list does not acknowledge the new and challenging dimensions added by the context of the online sphere. For example, the ability to analyze the relevant information and perspectives about a local civic issue is rather less demanding than the ability to research, evaluate and consider the range that might be relevant to a national or global issue.

Demandingness should not, of course, be shied away from. And yet it is important that the goals of civic education are widely attainable and - quite possibly - measurable, if their attainment is to gain serious traction in the time and space of schools.

A step towards making these competencies more manageable and demonstrable comes in the form of the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Fluency” project (Crockett et. al., 2011). The authors propose that school students be asked to sign “contracts” where they pledge to uphold the role of the “Global Digital Citizen”<sup>v</sup>, and to corroborate this, rate their behavior against a set of self-response statements. For example, students seeking to benchmark their performance as a global digital citizen are asked to indicate their agreement level (on a scale of 1-5) to the statement: “I am self accountable and take personal responsibility for my actions and inactions related to our global and digital living and working environment” (p. 83). Reflecting on these words opens the way to a vast range of questions; in the digital age, what does it really mean to “take personal responsibility” for actions *and inactions*? The difficulty with any kind of goal-setting in citizenship education today is that civic issues can swiftly take on a bewildering level of complexity.

The gap between the abstract goals of such lists, and the reality of the highly connected lives of young people, leads to my conclusion that a framework could be improved by starting from the position of how today’s young people themselves view civic issues and challenges.

## Summary

From this review of the context, we have seen that:

1. The digital age provides us with more diverse and more open pathways into civic engagement, which civic education struggles to encompass.
2. Digital technologies and media represent both risks and opportunities - many of which are currently unknown to us. Civic education must balance mitigating unforeseen fallout with promoting the discovery of new practices.
3. Within civic education frameworks, there is a tension between under- and over-prescription; defining competences in the abstract is of little help in the bewildering complexity of the digital age, while prescribing only particular skills and knowledge runs the risk of continually lagging behind important developments.

In what follows I analyze a set of responses to hypothetical civic issues, in an effort to develop a more flexible and actionable framework for civic education. The framework is developed by examining the thinking and reasoning processes of young people in response to these scenarios. It offers a means to bridge the gap between abstracted and practical ways of thinking about risks of and opportunities for civic action in the digital age.

## Method

The responses that form the data for this analysis are drawn from a set of 70 interviews with highly engaged American civic youth, aged 15-25. These interviews were carried out in 2011-12 as part of the Good Participation project, a strand of the Youth and Participatory Politics network funded by the MacArthur Foundation<sup>vi</sup>. The participants in this sample were selected as ‘highly civically engaged’ by their participation in existing civic initiatives, using a snowball sampling method. The majority of participants were from the Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States. All had some experience of involvement with a formal civic group, such as

environmental action groups, or the Young Democrats or Young Republicans. They are therefore a sample of young people whose civic experience is typically grounded in a mentored, offline environment, albeit one where, in the majority of cases, digital and online media were leveraged as part of their civic practices.

As part of their interviews, participants were presented with one of four hypothetical civic challenges and asked how they would respond. The four scenarios covered issues of different types:

- illegal dumping in the community
- youth violence in the neighborhood
- election of a candidate for national president
- youth homelessness in the community

As would be expected with this variety of contexts, the actual content of each response was largely determined by the nature of the problem. For example, digital solutions were more common in response to the issue of how to help a candidate get elected, than to that of solving youth homelessness. My analysis focuses, however, on the factors respondents considered in making their response, as opposed to the ideas or plan they came up with.

I make no claim that the interviewees would or do act in the way they describe, but their answers show something of the approaches and considerations that are most readily accessible to them. As argued by Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Burney & Neale (2010), “the aim of qualitative vignette interviewing [is] not to arrive at an accurate prediction of an interviewee’s behavior but instead to achieve insight into the social components of the participant’s interpretative framework and perceptual processes.” (p. 178).

The analysis proceeded in several stages; initially, identifying the practices that participants named in their responses. In a first deductive stage, practices were coded in relation to prescribed definitions of “participatory practices” (Cohen & Kahne, 2012).

In the coding of practices, it became apparent that there was significant diversity in the sophistication and range of reasoning and ideas that participants brought to bear in describing their imagined approaches. In an effort to codify this range, in a second inductive stage, responses were marked for the range of considerations they showed, and for evidence of systems thinking (Stave & Hopper, 2007). A smaller number of responses were selected for further analysis.

Through an examination of this smaller sample of responses, I identified a common set of broader ‘considerations’. The considerations named below are ‘etic’ in the sense that the terms were not used by the youth themselves, but have been constructed to describe recurrent preoccupations in responses. The four constructions arose from an effort to map, collate and name the distinct types of considerations which made up the smaller set of selected responses.

## Results

In this section I summarize key overall findings before introducing the four broad considerations.

A key initial finding was that just under half (34) of the 70 highly engaged civic youth in our sample did not describe digital media as part of their plan for responding to a civic issue. Use of digital media was defined as any use of a new technology or social media as part of a 'participatory practice' (PP). The PPs have been identified and defined by the Youth Participatory Politics research network and include activities such as mobilizing support for an issue, circulating information on a civic cause, and taking part in dialogue around a civic issue. (Use of e-mail for individual communication purposes was not defined as use of digital media).

This finding was surprising in light of views that digital media-enabled political participation is now relatively common among youth, and is the only mode of participation for some youth (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012). This finding underpins the argument that any framework for civic education must be equally flexible to both online and offline forms of action and participation.

The main analysis identified a set of patterns of subjects and forms of reasoning that marked responses of strategic and ethical maturity. These were found to entail four considerations -

- **Sources:** considering the origins of the information you are acting on, and in particular, what range of perspectives you are taking into account.
- **Scope:** considering the extent of your responsibility with regards to this issue, and in relation to your different roles (e.g., student, neighbor, voter).
- **Scale:** considering the range of the issue in geographic and social terms, the size of your desired impact, and in what ways you could achieve a greater impact.
- **Strategy:** considering what tools and methods are available to you, and are best suited to this issue.

At least one reference to each of the consideration types was observed in almost all answers, but in varying degrees of sophistication. The considerations should not be considered modal. Rather I aim to describe ways of responding that were salient for a variety of young people addressing a range of diverging hypotheticals, and which appear to contribute to the construction of a balanced and mature response.

### **The four considerations**

For the remainder of the paper, I use selected responses to develop a sense of the parameters of these considerations, and illustrate the different ways they serve to construct a response and course of action. For each area of consideration, I propose a set of questions that help to describe the lines of reasoning observed in responses, and also go beyond the data to point to how the considerations could be developed in more depth. The practical goal is to allow the considerations to highlight both risks and opportunities in new and old, offline and online contexts.

#### **Sources: seeking information and co-ordinating perspectives**

*(Considering the origins of the information you are acting on, and in particular, what range of perspectives you are taking into account.)*

Among our set, the more mature responses were those who took a conscientious approach to how and why they would seek additional information or insight into their

given problem. Take, for example, this answer from a 23-year-old woman, when presented with an unfamiliar hypothetical situation about illegal dumping:

*One thing I would do, because I have, I'm not as familiar with departmental procedures and things for environmental issues, I have an aunt who just retired from one of those departments .... And I would just kind of ask her what, like, who should I be talking to?*

This respondent went on to list a host of other contacts she would draw on – displaying an effective approach to sources that draws on available resources. Her approach is responsible in that she gets a range of perspectives to understand the issue, and also potentially effective, because she also asks for views and expertise as to her possible course of action.

An attendance to sources also included attendance to issues of complexity, and how to think about the root of an issue versus a manifestation. This tendency was particularly likely to emerge in our older respondents – as in this quote from a 24-year-old former political science major:

*I feel like we often jump to solutions without finding out what's at the root of something. Or we think we have it figured out, but actually that's not the, it's just this young person is just a bad person, incapable of changing, and jumping to very quick conclusions about how to solve something, you know, just put them in prison and get them out of society, and that will solve the problem.*

Considering one's sources of information is a first step towards interrogating how an issue is framed, and whether the problem-as-presented is the right problem. The key questions when considering sources are therefore:

- On what am I basing my picture of this problem?
- Are my sources reliable?
- Do I understand all the important and relevant perspectives?
- How can I reconcile conflicting information or arguments?

There are no simple answers here, and tracing an issue back to its root(s) may not always be a plausible or preferable option. This dilemma leads to the next consideration: that of **scope**.

### **Scope: Evaluating an issue and situating individual involvement**

*(Considering the extent of your responsibility with regards to an issue, and in relation to your different roles e.g. student, neighbor, voter.)*

By gathering information about a range of perspectives, the first respondent above was better placed to make judgments about the appropriate **scope** of her involvement. A small number of other respondents were similarly conscientious about how they would approach their involvement. The respondent below, a 22-year-old, female college student, describes how she would approach an issue of illegal dumping:

*...I'm not involved in environmental stuff at all really, so it would be a matter of looking at what organizations are, what they're trying to do... I would definitely talk to the people that I know on campus about it, people I know who are in the geosciences program, or environmental studies programs [and] see what they were doing about it, if they felt compelled to do something about it....Hopefully I would have read books and be informed if I was about to go marching away, or traveling away. Looked*

*on websites for sites that are informed about this, organizations that are informed about it. ... But, yeah, I'd really want to be informed before I did anything major.*

Her response is to seek advice from those she sees as more informed on this issue, and trust their judgment about what level of individual action would be appropriate. She also suggests using the internet – news websites and pages of particular organizations – to gather the information on which to make a decision.

Scope covers not only *whether* one would want to act, but what kind of individual responsibility one should take for acting. A large number of respondents favored an approach that involved collaboration with existing organizations or institutions. For example, again in response to the issue of dumping, this former political science major said:

*I'd try to contact organizations who focus on the environment, get their input and see if I could possibly partner up with them, to stop the dumping from happening.*

Reaching for pre-established lines of response may be the most sensible route when a young person knows little about an issue.

As reported above, considerations of scope were less frequent than others. It may in the nature of hypotheticals to limit engagement in deep consideration of the domain of personal responsibility. However, it was striking that some respondents assumed a goal of having a wide scope of impact on the issue presented, while others were resistant to considering how they might take more responsibility for the issue and its outcomes. For civic educators, considerations of scope offer opportunity not only to mitigate risks of over-involvement, but also to help young people push their thinking on what impact they could have as individuals.

Questions underlying considerations of scope might therefore include:

- What responsibility do I want to take for this issue? What can I do? What *could* I do?
- What *role* do I want to take in tackling this issue? What roles are open to me? What roles *could* be open to me?

### **Scale: acknowledging the reality of the digital age**

*(Considering the range of the issue, of your desired impact, and in what ways you could achieve a greater impact.)*

A necessary question for young people approaching a civic issue today is: is this an issue for the local or global domain? Is this an issue I will tackle with my personal network, or with online networks? The consideration of **scale** entails thinking about these questions, and learning how to make decisions about action in a world where your 'target audience' – or potential community – could be very large, or very small.

For many of the youth participants, it was assumed that responding to a civic issue would involve influencing the ideas of people you'd never met:

*A lot of people, they tweet. They go on Twitter and tweet about certain things. Like that could be something that you tweet about. And maybe it*

*will influence certain people to think the way that you're thinking.*

(Female high school graduate, 18)

Social media sites were seen as a resource for the people-power which these civic actors knew was required to impact on any issue. A 16-year old high school student, asked how he would attract people to join in his proposed solution to illegal dumping, asked “*So, there's, like, no Facebook or anything?*”. Assured that yes, of course in this hypothetical there was, they continued:

*Okay, so first there would be like a story or something that I'd hear on the news. Then I would, for example, post that on Facebook. I'd be, like, “Look at this, people. Do you see this? Do you think this is right? Do you think you, your family and the people in the city is benefiting from this? I don't think so. So, we need to stop this.” And I'd have something like, you know, “Who's with me?” And then from there we go. ... Like, there's always a group that can be organized out of anything.*

The notable aspect of this response is the belief that the online realm offers the possibility of bringing an issue not only to the attention of one's immediate personal network, but also to anybody in the affected area (in this case, a city).

These youth actors were coming to understand the potential, by leveraging social media, for individual actors to draw large-scale attention to an issue. This is not to assume that this kind of approach is easy, or always successful; but rather that highlighting the consideration of scale is an important step towards making young people aware of the potential shape of their action. A key emphasis in the consideration for scale is to think: how big *could* I go? As noted previously, just under half of our 70 participants did not describe digital media as part of their plan for responding to a civic issue. In some cases, this can be an important strategic choice (for example, subjects reflected that some issues, such as youth violence, require face-to-face engagement). In others it might display a lack of imagination about the power of the tools at their disposal.

To activate large-scale networks calls for good **strategy** (see below).

Considerations of scale merged into considerations of strategy for those who recognized that working at scale requires careful thinking about how actions are impacting on diverse audiences. This reflection was brought out by this respondent (a college student and journalism major), considering an approach to a political campaign:

*I think with running a political campaign, I think it's important to always keep sight of the big picture – What's going to happen in the long run? How will this one action affect us generally? ... I think it's important to watch what you say because anything can get misconstrued.*

This kind of ‘Big picture thinking’ is a challenge for many young people, and was rare among our respondents (14 of the 70; 20%). But it is a vital consideration to avoid getting caught out by the fallout of engaging in unpredictable large-scale networks. Taking an etic perspective to ‘big picture’ thinking allows one to separate considerations of scale and strategy, which helps to highlight these two necessary facets.

The consideration of scale therefore, also means thinking about these questions:

- How can I take this action or issue beyond my personal networks? What are the implications of doing so? For this issue, is the attention-raising

power of social media worth the risk of backlash and the expense of energy?

- If I were to seek to increase the scale of my response and impact, in what could I do so?

### **Strategy: weighing different approaches**

*(Considering what tools and methods are available to you, and are best suited to the issue.)*

It might be assumed that online practices would play a part in any young person's strategy in the US today. But as noted above, in our sample a striking number of respondents (34) deferred to established means of intervention in response to their dilemma: leafleting their community, speaking at town hall meetings, connecting with an alderman. Arguably, these approaches may be most effective, particular for a local issue. Highlighting **strategy** as a consideration emphasizes that no particular method is best for all situations.

Our data set offers a small collection of responses which illustrate how creativity and pragmatism can come together in a strategic approach to civic solution-seeking, which may or may not involve digital media. These responses took into account a diversity of perspectives on an issue and a range of traditional and new practices as a means toward offering an innovative course of action. One such response, in this case to the problem of illegal dumping, began thus:

*I think I would focus, actually, on the economics of the problem. So, there are a lot of people who don't believe in global warming, who don't care about the environment. But most people agree that they want more money and they want to save money for their municipal governments. ...So I think I would tie the whole thing into an economic argument of look at the money we can save by recycling that waste instead of dumping it. (Female college student, 19)*

The respondent immediately focuses on how to reframe an issue to make it appeal to a different kind of audience – one whose concerns might be different from her own. She then comes up with a creative potential solution: setting aside the actual plausibility of turning illegal waste into compost, the disposition of her thinking is towards making something out of nothing, and 'closing the loop' to create a sustainable project. Her answer continues by focusing on the alignment of stakeholders that would be necessary:

*So I think that making it into an economic argument and also aligning key community leaders behind that argument, for me, would be the-- the first couple of steps ... And then having the right people lead that change effort. ... And also doing a tangible pilot project. So look, instead of dumping these plastic bottles in this river, we can recycle them and we can make this new product and we can sell it in Whole Foods market and make money for our community and donate it right to your son or daughter's school.*

We see here a disposition towards a triple-bottom-line solution, which has selling points for different kinds of stakeholders. Although this plan of action does not involve digital media, it illustrates an approach that takes account of different perspectives and is creative – the foundation on which responsible digital civic action

could build. Again, the piece to emphasize is not the actual quality of her ideas, but the type of elements they include: a priority for this respondent is taking into account the diverse needs of other members of the public realm.

Considerations of strategy reveals the impact of explicit civic learning – this sample of youth had all benefited from long-term engagement with a civic organization or network, and their learning showed. One respondent, a college senior, spoke of learning about how to “*connect [an issue] to people’s daily lives*” when building a social movement: something she had learned on a year abroad in Chile. A number of youth showed a high degree of political or media savvy. The following participant, like many others, begins by leveraging her networks:

*I always start at home. I start with family and friends. I make sure, I feel like within anybody’s family and friends, there’s always key players who have networks.* (Female college graduate, 23)

One final point to add concerns an understanding of behavior. A considerable knowledge base is building applying lessons of psychology and behavioral economics to civic and political action (Crompton, 2010). Some of the respondents showed the impact of this kind of learning in their responses:

*I think the big challenge is making changing that behavior accessible. So, if you’re asking people not to dump plastic bottles in a nearby river, making it so that they can dump plastic bottles somewhere else really easily, like at their house.* (Female college student, 19)

The list of questions that fall under the consideration of strategy could be summarized as:

- What is the appropriate communication mechanism for this domain/context?
- How can I use my networks or social capital?
- How does this issue dovetail or conflict with the concerns or priorities of politics, or of the media?
- What does behavioral science indicate as to solutions for this issue?

The questions themselves are by no means all-encompassing. The idea at the heart of strategy is that there are always a *range* of angles and methods for approaching an issue, and some may be more effective than others. The value of highlighting strategy as a consideration is to say that no civic actor should act without giving attention to this consideration of range, and ensuring that they are selecting an approach (or combination of approaches) intentionally, and in an informed way.

## Conclusion

My findings suggest that digital tools are *not* necessarily a young person’s go-to option when faced with a civic problem. This might suggest that calling for additional attendance to the impact of the ‘digital’ is unwarranted. Yet heeding this impact is not a choice: in this paper I have followed Bennett (2008) and others in arguing that we must understand social media and the internet as a key *context* for the majority of young people, and therefore for their civic lives, as opposed to just an optional set of tools.

Unlike Bennett, however, I have chosen to lay more stress on how the risks of this context call for higher-order civic thinking from young people. While it is important

that educators help young people make the most of the digital tools at their disposal, there is an equally important task of simply getting to grips with the civic responsibilities and challenges posed by a different kind of social space.

Tools for thinking - for reasoning and evaluating - remain paramount as long as ideal digital civic practices are unclear. I have sought to offer such tools in the form of a framework to support educators and young people in their thinking about civic issues, approaches and actions. Whereas existing civic education frameworks tend towards under- or over-prescription, or focus on only the online or off-line context, this framework of considerations is practice- and context-neutral. It is not limited to a list of desirable skills, but is generative in that it includes specific questions and lines of thinking to apply. The questions are drawn out to highlight both the seeking of new opportunities and methods for mitigating risks of civic action.

Alongside the framework, in this paper I offered snapshots of current employment of the considerations of sources, scope, scale, and strategy. Our interviews suggest that these four considerations are readily engaged by young people in their thinking and reasoning processes, albeit to very different extents across individuals. Where there is the least development, is in the *interplay* between the considerations. (How do questions of scale change how one thinks about strategy? How does one's level of confidence in sources change the scope of one's responsibility?) Predictably, given such dynamic considerations require a high degree of complex thinking, there was little of this kind of reasoning in responses.

By condensing and codifying types of thinking into the 4 'S's', I hope to more easily enable the complex thought involved in the *combination* of considerations.

A subsequent step would be to further explore how these considerations are engaged by young people of different levels of civic involvement, and to ascertain which 'S's' are engaged more or less often, and with what levels of sophistication; and therefore which require the most scaffolding from educators. This endeavor might contribute to an adaptation of the proposed questions for classroom purposes and for different developmental levels.

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<sup>i</sup> Generation Citizen <http://generationcitizen.org/>  
National Alliance for Civic Education <http://www.cived.net/>

<sup>ii</sup> One must here acknowledge the early precursors of communities which traversed locations – from the intellectual communities of the seventeenth and eighteenth century that has been reconstructed by historians as the ‘republic of letters’, to civil society foundations such as the boy scouts movement, not to mention political institutions such as the United Nations – however, it is in the past ten years that such connections have become accessible to every young person with access to the internet, and have radically changed in operations as new technologies enable real-time, all-the-time interaction across locations and time zones.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, despite heralding a turn from ‘Grandma civics’ to ‘Action civic’, the U.S. Federal Department of Education paper ‘Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action’ makes no mention of the word ‘digital’, and only one reference to social media, though not as a civic tool. <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/road-map-call-to-action.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> For the official summary of impact, see <http://invisiblechildren.com/kony/>

<sup>v</sup> ‘Fluency’ in this role is defined in relation to its several aspects of Personal Responsibility, Global Citizenship, Digital Citizenship, Altruistic Service, and Environmental Stewardship.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/>