

Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age

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Democracy is not a sure thing. Governments and party systems often strain against changes in societies, and some fall prey to corruption and bad policies. Under the right conditions, people may reassert their rights to govern, and produce remarkable periods of creative reform, realignment, and change. In these times, politics becomes a focus of personal life itself, restoring the sense that participation makes a difference. The challenges of influencing the course of nations and addressing global issues may inspire creative solutions from the generations of young citizens who have access to digital communication tools. The cascading advance of media platforms and social software enables unprecedented levels of production and distribution of ideas, public deliberation, and network organization.

It is clear that many young citizens of this digital and global age have demonstrated interests in making contributions to society. Yet the challenge of engaging effectively with politics that are linked to spheres of government remains, for most, a daunting prospect. The reasons are numerous. A casual look at world democracies suggests that many of the most established ones are showing signs of wear. Parties are trying to reinvent themselves while awkwardly staying the course that keeps them in power. In the press, in everyday conversation, and often from the mouths of politicians, politics has become a dirty word rather than a commonly accepted vocabulary for personal expression.¹ Perhaps most notably, younger generations have disconnected from conventional politics and government in alarming numbers. These trends in youth dissatisfaction with conventional political engagement are not just occurring in the United States, but have parallels in other democracies as well, including Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.² The pathways to disconnection from government are many: adults are frequently negative about politics, the tone of the press is often cynical, candidates seldom appeal directly to young voters on their own terms about their concerns, politicians have poisoned the public well (particularly in the United States) with vitriol and negative campaigning, and young people see the media filled with inauthentic performances from officials who are staged by professional communication managers.³ Paralleling these developments has been a notable turning away from public life into online friendship networks, gaming and entertainment environments, and consumer

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pursuits. Where political activity occurs, it is often related to lifestyle concerns that seem outside the realm of government.⁴

Many observers properly note that there are impressive signs of youth civic engagement in these nongovernmental areas, including increases in community volunteer work, high levels of consumer activism, and impressive involvement in social causes from the environment to economic injustice in local and global arenas.⁵ Some even ascribe civic engagement qualities to many activities that occur in online social networking and entertainment communities. For example, Henry Jenkins, Cathy Davidson, Mimi Ito, and Jochai Benkler argue that many forms of shared activity online (from blogging, to conflict and protest behavior in gaming, fan and entertainment sites) represent forms of civic or media engagement.⁶ The chapter by Earl and Schussman in this volume makes a good case that online petitions to entertainment and media corporations constitute a kind of social activism that displays skills mirroring social movement repertoires of action.

Many of the spontaneous and creative forms of collective expression online seem more appealing than the options typically offered in youth engagement sites sponsored by governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in efforts to invigorate public life for young people. In Coleman's concluding chapter in this volume we learn that many well-intentioned youth engagement sites have clear ideas about what constitute proper citizen activities. As a result, these *managed* environments seem inauthentic and irrelevant to many young people. Indeed, Coleman's survey of *managed* (government- and NGO-built and -operated) and *autonomous* (youth-built and -operated) sites in the U.K. suggests that young citizens find more authentic experiences in edgier political sites and in entertainment media and games. The dilemma is that many of the political sites that young people build and operate themselves may avoid formal government channels for communication and action and may lack the resources needed to sustain and grow them.

A key question thus becomes how to nurture the creative and expressive actions of a generation in change, while continuing to keep some positive engagement with government on their screens.

Two Paradigms of Youth Engagement

One goal of this chapter is to note and explore the sharply differing views of what constitutes civic engagement and citizenship for young people both on and off line. Indeed, there seem to be two different paradigms that contrast young citizens (roughly in the fifteen to twenty-five age range) as either reasonably active and *engaged* or relatively passive and *disengaged*. Like all paradigms, each foregrounds different core organizing values and principles, prompting proponents to weigh and select different sets of supporting facts and reasons. Each paradigm thus comes equipped with its own arguments and evidence, making it convincing to adherents and elusive and often maddening to those operating from the other constructed reality.⁷

The *engaged youth* paradigm implicitly emphasizes generational changes in social identity that have resulted in the growing importance of peer networks and online communities. In this view, if there is an attendant decline in the credibility or authenticity of many public institutions and discourses that define conventional political life, the fault lies more with the government performances and news narratives than with citizens who cannot engage with them.⁸ In an important sense, this paradigm emphasizes the empowerment of youth as expressive individuals and symbolically frees young people to make their own

creative choices. In the bargain, the engaged youth paradigm also eases the overriding duty to participate in conventional government-centered activities. In many cases, researchers in this school are only dimly aware of (and may tend to discount) research on declines and deficits in more conventional political participation among young citizens. As a result, the *engaged youth* paradigm opens the door to a new spectrum of civic actions in online arenas from MySpace to *World of Warcraft*. By contrast, the *disengaged youth* paradigm may acknowledge the rise of more autonomous forms of public expression such as consumer politics, or the occasional protest in MySpace, while keeping the focus on the generational decline in connections to government (e.g., voting patterns) and general civic involvement (e.g., following public affairs in the news) as threats to the health of democracy itself.

A typical exchange in a series of online discussions that accompanied the development of this volume found Jochai Benkler listing a variety of sites as examples of engaged youth, including the Harry Potter fan publication of the fictional wizard newspaper, the *Daily Prophet*. He also offered as evidence a Pew study showing that a majority of bloggers are under thirty, and roughly one third of them think of what they are doing as journalism. In his view, a faculty-student network for providing medicines to poor countries “must have missed the memo about lack of political engagement in today’s youth.”⁹ In response, Ulises Mejias acknowledged the existence of some forms of civic life on the Web but expressed the following concerns: “If voting and reading the newspaper are deemed antiquated forms of civic participation, what kind of public sphere is being created by new forms of participation such as blogging, news aggregating, etc.? . . . the question is: what participant interests mold democracy’s new architecture of participation? . . . Yes, there are important alternative spaces, but as the Pew study that Yochai cites points out, while a minority is interested in exploiting these uses for pro-social political action, the majority of users are content to view the technologies as means for individual expression (articulated through consumer choices).”¹⁰

This exchange, along with many others, show that the same evidence can be interpreted differently when placed in different paradigm frames. One root of the difference is that the two paradigms reflect different normative views of what the good citizen ought to do when she grows up. The *engaged youth* viewpoint, in a sense, empowers young people by recognizing personal expression and their capacity to project identities in collective spaces. As Cathy Davidson noted in the online discussions, “. . . I think we have a unique opportunity to take advantage of peer-to-peer sites for creative, imaginative, activist learning purposes. That is a lot harder mission than critiquing the young. . . . I want to be attuned to what youth themselves say about the alternative forms of learning and social networking afforded by Web 2.0.”¹¹

By contrast, those who lean toward the disengaged youth perspective often worry about this very personalization or privatization of the political sphere and focus more on how to promote public actions that link to government as the center of democratic politics, and to other social groups and institutions as the foundations of civic life. As David Buckingham (editor of the MacArthur series volume on identity) put it:

Part of me would agree that we do need to be worried, although I would accept that disengagement is a fairly understandable response to what currently seems to count as “public affairs.” Yes, new media may be offering new possibilities for civic participation, at least for some—although we need to know if this is just for the “usual suspects.” . . .

But the point that worries me a little is the Harry Potter anecdote. OK, young people may well be participating and engaging in all sorts of very active and interesting ways online; and we could probably think of many other examples. But in what ways is this CIVIC engagement? . . . “media engagement” is

not necessarily the same as “civic engagement.” I would accept other people’s comments to the effect that this term “civic” is a little worthy and moralistic... but how, in the end, are we defining what counts as “civic,” and what doesn’t?

I would suggest that “civic” implies some notion of the public (the polis or the public sphere, even)—by which I suppose I mean an open debate about issues of general social concern between people who may not agree with each other. In this respect, there are certainly tendencies in the internet towards an individualisation, or at least a fragmentation, of social/political debate (a settling into established niche groups). So there may be ways in which the internet promotes participation, but undermines the “civic.”...¹²

And so the debate goes, often with real consequences in the worlds in which young people work, play, learn, and vote. As Cathy Davidson, Peter Levine, Howard Rheingold, and Henry Jenkins, among others, have pointed out, the disengaged youth viewpoint leads to something of a narrative of despair or decline about young citizens, one that travels all too easily in the news and leads to overlooking the many innovations that young people have brought to our public communication spaces.¹³ At the same time, Lew Friedland, Michael Delli Carpini, Zephyr Teachout, Peter Levine, and others have noted that traditional activities such as voting continue to matter, and young people hold the future of our democratic life insofar as citizens can still shape their political institutions. Some of these observers, including this author, straddle the two perspectives while seeking to bridge and transcend them. For example, Peter Levine has contrasted the core elements of the two narratives about young people, beginning with what the decline story often leaves out:

- 1 The narrative of decline overlooks creative developments, often led by youth, that may be building the foundations of civil society in the twenty-first century.
- 2 The decline story overlooks ways that various subpopulations engage on issues of special concern to them. For example, African American youth may be well informed about Katrina. (. . . African American youth are generally more politically engaged than White American youth, across the board).
- 3 It overlooks certain positive trends in youth engagement, such as a steep rise in the volunteering rate in the United States.
- 4 It focuses narrowly on youth, without recognizing that many declines in participation are evident among all age groups.
- 5 It treats a withdrawal from major institutions (such as elections and the press) as a decline, when these trends may actually reflect growing sophistication. Perhaps youth are deliberately and wisely choosing not to endorse forms of participation that are flawed.

The last point underlines the fact that “civic engagement” is a deeply normative concept. It is impossible to decide whether recent trends in engagement are good or bad—or important or meaningless—without developing a full-blown political theory.

I think that there is a problem with youth civic engagement, but it is not located inside young people’s heads. Institutions are also at fault. Telling young people to participate in bad institutions is mere propaganda. On the other hand, young people need to be taught and encouraged to take part in reform efforts and other aspects of politics. Political participation does not come naturally, nor do powerful institutions have incentives to encourage it. In short, we must not only prepare citizens for politics but also improve politics for citizens.

From my perspective, several trends in youth civic engagement are troubling. These trends are symptoms of institutional failure, poor civic education, and cultural forces that work against democratic participation. Selected survey results (see box for details) for U.S. residents, age eighteen to twenty-five show:

- 1 A decline in face-to-face, local participation—except volunteering. This decline precedes the rise of the Internet. The increase in volunteering is often attributed to service programs and requirements in high schools and colleges.
- 2 A big decline in all forms of election-related participation and protest until 2004, when there was a substantial increase.
- 3 A big decline in interest in the news and public affairs, accompanied by falling trust in the press—both of which occurred before the rise of the Internet. (I would blame the press, rather than youth, for this trend.)
- 4 A big decline in trust for other people, but no change in beliefs about government's responsiveness. (Also, young adults are somewhat more confident in the government than their elders.)¹⁴

These divergent views of youth engagement shape the thinking of policymakers and educators concerned about getting young people involved in civic life. When set side by side, the broader picture seems to point to changing the institutional and communication environments in which young people encounter politics, rather than somehow fixing the attitudes of youth themselves. Yet the institutional and communication environments themselves are politically contested, and often produce anemic and restricted (what Coleman would call heavily managed) experiences with credible or authentic politics. How many textbooks (or classroom teachers, who are monitored by school officials and parents) acknowledge that it makes sense for young people to follow the political lead of a rock star, such as Coldplay's Chris Martin, who encouraged concert goers to join Oxfam's *Make Trade Fair* campaign? Yet many Coldplay fans actually connected with government on their own: the band's 2003 U.S. tour included Oxfam workers at concerts gathering some 10,000 postcards to send to President Bush, asking him to stop dumping subsidized exports such as rice on poor countries where farmers could no longer profit from growing the same crops.¹⁵ For those who were not at the concerts, a visit to the band's Web site contained a link off the home page to the fair trade campaign materials.

Such pathways to political engagement are often not accommodated in traditional civic education and or government sponsored e-citizen sites, leaving many young citizens at odds with brittle conceptions of proper citizenship imposed upon them by educators, public officials, and other institutional authorities. Even when more creative civic education and engagement approaches enable young people to trace their own personal concerns through the governmental process, the end result may crash against the palpable failure of governments, parties, and candidates to recognize the communication and identity preferences of young citizens, as illustrated so clearly in the chapter by Xenos and Foot in this volume.

An important task of this chapter and the volume as a whole is to clarify the different assumptions about citizenship and engagement that underlie the often-competing views of the political and civic lives of young citizens. Clarifying and building bridges between the paradigms is necessary in order to better promote constructive dialogue among researchers and clearer policy and practice among educators, youth workers, parties, campaigns, and public officials.

Engagement Patterns of Young Citizens, Age 18–25

I. Participation in civil society, mostly local

Attend a club meeting (DDB Life Style survey): down from 49 percent in 1976 to 23 percent in 2005, with most of the decline in the 1980s.

Member of at least one organization (General Social Survey [GSS]): down from 63.5 percent in 1976 to 54 percent in 2004.

Work on a community project (DDB) down from 29 percent in 1976 to 21 percent in 2005. (The decline among older people is much steeper.)

Volunteer (DDB): up from 39 percent in 1976 to 41 percent in 2005.

Membership in extracurricular school groups such as student governments, school newspapers, and music clubs: down between 1972 and 1992, according to four waves of federal adolescent longitudinal studies.

II. Social trust

Believe that other people are generally honest (DDB): down from 64 percent in 1976 to 38 percent in 2005, with most of the decline in the 1980s.

Believe that most people can be trusted (GSS): down from 37 percent in 1976 to 25 percent in 2004.

III. News consumption/interest

Follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time (National Election Survey [NES]): down from 24 percent in 1976 to seven percent in 2000, then slightly up to 10 percent in 2004.

Read a daily newspaper (GSS): down from 44 percent in 1975 to 19 percent in 2002, but then back up to 28 percent in 2004.

Watch the TV news at least twice a week (NES): down from 79 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 2004.

IV. Knowledge about government (or confidence in one's knowledge)

Feel that you can understand government (NES): up from 26 percent in 1976 to 34 percent in 2004.

Able to identify Republicans as the more conservative national party (NES): up from 49 percent in 1976 to 78 percent in 2004 (all the increase is recent).

Know the name of your own candidates for U.S. House (NES): down from 25 percent in 1978 to 16 percent in 2000.

V. Political participation

Vote in presidential election (Census surveys, self-report): basically unchanged from 43 percent in 1976 to 42 percent in 2004, but there was a deep decline in the 1980s and 1990s.

Been contacted by a party or candidate (NES): up from 49.5 percent in 1984 to 66 percent in 2004.

Persuade other people to vote a certain way (NES): up from 37 percent in 1976 to 56 percent in 2004, but the big increase in 2004 followed decades of modest decline.

Protests involving young people: down by about 50 percent according to Soule and Condo, using a database of news articles.

VI. Efficacy/trust in institutions

My vote matters (NES): basically unchanged from 88 percent in 1976 to 84 percent in 2000.

People like me have a say in government (NES): basically unchanged from 58 percent in 1976 to 55 percent in 2004 (with modest changes in between).

Trust the government in Washington to do the right thing most of the time (NES): basically unchanged from 42 percent in 1976 to 36 percent in 2004, with 45 percent recorded in 2000.

Confidence in the press (GSS): down from 32 percent in 1976 to 13 percent in 2004.

VII. New media

In 2005, according to the DDB Life Style survey, 20 percent of 18–25s had read a blog at least several times during the past year, compared to 32 percent of the whole population.

Thirty-three percent of 18–25s had regularly participated in online forums or chatrooms, compared to 36 percent of the whole population.

Source: Peter Levine, from MacArthur Online Discussions on Civic Engagement (http://spotlight.macfound.org/resources/Civic_Engagement-Online_Discussions'06.pdf, pp. 16–18. See also <http://depts.washington.edu/ccce/civiceducation/mdlp.html>).

(Mis)Communicating with Young Citizens

Perhaps one of the most obvious factors contributing to the relatively passive, disengaged stance of many young people toward government and formal elements of politics is the withering away of civic education in schools. Not only have civics offerings been in decline, notably the United States, but, where offered, the curriculum is often stripped of independent opportunities for young people to embrace and communicate about politics on their own terms. (I shall return to this important problem later in the chapter.) The result is that there is often little connection between the academic presentation of politics and the acquisition of skills that might help develop engaged citizens. A massive International Education Association (IEA) survey of 90,000 fourteen-year-olds in twenty-eight nations suggested that civic education, where it is offered, remains largely a textbook based experience, largely severed from the vibrant experiences of politics that might help young people engage with public life.¹⁶

Even in nations that do reasonably well at imparting some basic civic knowledge to young citizens, there are signs of relatively little carryover to participation in public life. For example, a study of Australian civic education in the late 1990s concluded that “the importance of civic knowledge has been well established. . . Yet knowledge itself will be of little relevance

if it does not lead to action in the civic sphere. . . .”¹⁷ What emerges from different national surveys is something of a generational shift in which young citizens tend to express areas of interest and concern but often see those interests as unconnected, or even negatively related, to government. For example, the Australian survey associated with the IEA project assessed the political and social attitudes of 3,000 students in 150 high schools. The students were largely disinterested in government, while interested in a brand of civic engagement that the researchers described as a “social movement citizenship.” Youth orientations defined under the category “conventional citizenship” were not encouraging: 83 percent who felt that it was not important to join a political party, only 55 percent thought it was important for a citizen to know about the country’s history, a bare 50 percent thought it important to follow issues in the media, and fully 66 percent found it unimportant for citizens to engage in political discussions. The “social movement” citizen profile presented an interesting contrast: 80 percent regarded participating in activities to benefit others as important, 74 percent regarded it important to act to protect the environment, and 68 percent were concerned about human rights.¹⁸

Broadly similar patterns were found among young people in a survey of political attitudes of Americans at the turn of the millennium.¹⁹ Beyond the mixed attitudes toward political engagement, the American sample revealed interesting signs of generational cohesion among those immersed in digital media. The so-called *dotnet* generation (born between 1977 and 1987, ages fifteen to twenty-five at the time of the survey) expressed a strong sense of generational identification, in contrast to so-called generation X (1965–1976, ages twenty-six to thirty-seven) who came of age amidst the social and economic turbulence of the global economy of the 1980s and 1990s, but did not find their early social bearings online as did the *dotnets*.²⁰ A subsequent survey released in 2006 indicated that while levels of *dotnet* identification had declined as the shock of 9/11 faded (from 69 to 56 percent of the same cohort indicating strong generational identification), the level of generational coherence remained strong.²¹

We know that digital media provide those young people who have access to it an important set of tools to build social and personal identity and to create the on- and offline environments in which they spend their time. However, as Howard Rheingold notes in this volume, many young people live online, but they may lack the skills to communicate their common concerns in effective ways to larger (public) audiences. Rheingold suggests building a public communication digital media skill set. Peter Levine then discusses the importance of finding audiences that recognize those public expressions once the communication skills have been sharpened.

Perhaps the major puzzle running through all of this is how to create the media environments in which online communities can build the kinds of social capital—those bonds of trust and commitment to shared values—that lead to participation in civic life and the political world beyond. Every chapter in this volume explores some aspect of this puzzle, from the online environments available in elections (Xenos and Foot), youth engagement sites (Montgomery, Raynes-Goldie and Walker, Coleman), civic education programs (Rheingold, Levine, Bers), and entertainment sites (Earl and Schussman) to the overarching policy issues that may keep the internet free and viable for noncommercial civic spaces to continue to emerge (Montgomery).

As suggested by the two paradigms of youth engagement, there is a distinct possibility that the entire question of civic engagement is confounded by how one chooses to define citizenship itself. Should young citizens be like the generations before and have an ingrained

sense of duty to participate in forms such as voting? But what if young people have grown up under conditions that simply do not produce and reinforce such dispositions? These children of the new millennium may well come to politics, but through different routes than their parents and grandparents did. Their brands of civic engagement may seem unfamiliar. Above all, their sense of how to reform creaky political processes may not yet be imaginable. What may be most important for politicians, educators, and young people themselves to learn is how to use the media that are now so richly developed for social and entertainment purposes to build civic and political communities. The lessons involved here are likely to strain, and ultimately expand, political comprehension within and across generations. The learning required to encourage the creative involvement of young people in politics will be the most difficult for those older gatekeepers who continue to live in different political, social, and media worlds. Yet all of those involved with processes that affect involvement with public life must be encouraged to learn a few lessons in common. Researchers play an important part in documenting what those common lessons are and demonstrating why they matter. In this process of designing research and policy that address and reconcile the different stories about young citizens, the competing paradigms may be transcended.

Signs of Political Life in the Digital Age

The future of democracy is in the hands of these young citizens of the so-called digital age. Many young citizens in more economically prosperous societies already have in their hands the tools of change: digital media, from laptops, pagers, and cell phones to the convergences of the next new things. These new media reposition their users in society, making them both producers and consumers of information. Perhaps more important, they enable rapid formation of large-scale networks that may focus their energies in critical moments, as Rheingold has discussed in describing what he calls Smart Mobs that used cell phones and pagers and other digital devices to coordinate decisive protests that sped the fall of corrupt regimes in the Philippines and elsewhere.²²

Sometimes those technologies enable large and more sustained political networks, as in the formation of Indymedia, a global political information network. Indymedia was created through the distribution of open source software enabling the production and sharing of information by young activists under the motto: Be the Media. This network began during the now iconic Battle of Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999 as a means for protesters to communicate among themselves and produce their own news coverage to counter what they perceived as the filtering of corporate media aligned with the targets of protest. Other, more issue-specific networks have emerged via the application of networking technologies to spark protests such as those that emerged around the world against war in Iraq on February 12, 2003. Estimated at between thirteen and twenty million participants, they were the largest coordinated protests in human history. They were organized in a matter of months through the integrated use of on- and offline network mobilization.

Digital media also show signs of successful adaptation to the work of conventional politics, as happened with the American presidential primary campaign of Howard Dean, whose early followers (many of whom were not so young) organized online networks to share their perceptions of the candidate. They eventually created unprecedented levels of bottom-up communication within the notoriously centralized *war room* communication model of election campaigns. However, the growth of semiautonomous supporter networks, with their

pressures for some degree of bottom-up steering of the campaign ultimately clashed with the centralized bureaucracy of the professionally managed campaign. The cautionary tale here is that the integration of horizontal digital networks with other organizational forms is not always seamless.

In other cases, applications of digital media do seem to bridge, and at times, transcend the conventional boundaries between different kinds of political organizations such as parties, interest groups, and social movements.²³ This boundary jumping happened, for example, when the (mostly) online networking operation MoveOn.org became involved in Democratic Party politics in the United States, acting as a check on the party, and even running its own commercials. In other configurations, MoveOn acts more as an interest organization, mobilizing pressure on specific issues moving through legislative processes. In other moments, the organization joins many issue constituencies in protest actions as might happen in a social movement. The attractiveness of these loosely tied organizational forms to young people has not been lost on many conventional political organizations as they witness the graying of their conventional membership rosters.²⁴

Despite these and other signs of potential to revive and perhaps reinvent politics among next generation citizens, two overall trends seem to hold:

- The majority of those communicating with young people about conventional politics continue to do so in tired top-down, highly managed ways that most young people find inauthentic and largely irrelevant.
- What young people do online tends to be largely social and entertainment oriented, with only tangential pathways leading to the conventional civic and political worlds.

These two patterns are most likely related to each other. For example, in order to learn how to expand youth involvement in aspects of public life pertaining to governance, politicians, policymakers, and educators need to communicate differently with young citizens. And in order for young citizens to feel comfortable engaging in more conventional politics, they need to feel invited to participate on their own terms, and to learn how to use their digital tools to better express their public voices. This chapter and the book as a whole explore what young people are doing online, why social and political authorities often misperceive these activities, and what all parties can learn that might help better integrate young people in all aspects of politics. Resolving dissonant perceptions of proper citizenship and participation, while suggesting ways in which digital media may help better connect young people to public life, may enable future generations to reinvent their democracies.

Where Are They? What Are They Doing?

The news headlines signaled a battle raging between television networks and Nielsen, the company that provided the audience ratings on which their income depended. In releasing their fall ratings sweeps for 2005, Nielsen reported a shocking trend. It was so shocking that the TV networks disputed it, as it seemed to make no sense to them. Moreover, they would lose huge amounts of ad revenues for their fall programs. The young male demographic was missing. The much sought after eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old male demographic (only 12 percent of the total audience, yet accounting for \$4.1 billion in ad revenues) had dropped nearly 8 percent from TV viewing the year before, with an even larger drop in prime time. Every minute less TV watched by this group meant a \$77 million loss in revenues across broadcast and cable. It was a trend that had been developing slowly for a dozen years, but

suddenly soared to crisis levels for the television industry. Where did the young men go? It turned out that many of them were still watching TV, but they were more likely to be playing an Xbox on it. This same demographic group accounted for more than half of video game sales in a booming multibillion dollar market.²⁵ Creating and interacting with one's entertainment programming was just more interesting than watching it passively.

Gamers are joined by even more young people who gravitate to social network environments that change almost as quickly as adults can learn their names: Friendster, Facebook, MySpace. When media mogul Rupert Murdoch saw the writing on the wall, he hedged his bets on the television networks that had been aimed at young audiences and bought MySpace, then the largest recorded social networking site, attracting upwards of sixty million youth. Early on, large online communities also formed around music file-sharing sites that indicated the creativity with which young people approached digital media, all because, as Benkler put it, "a few teenagers and twenty-something-year-olds were able to write software and protocols."²⁶ Montgomery in this volume discusses the potential for social communities such as MySpace to incorporate more central civic aspects, while cautioning that heavily commercialized online communities may be at odds with public interest content.

A quick visit to any of the social sites suggests that what happens there mainly revolves around the formation of loosely connected networks dedicated to sharing music, movies, photos, and, above all, current and prospective friends. In what may be an eternal generational response, many older observers look disapprovingly on all this, seeing these environments as dangerous magnets for sexual predators, and as outlets for young people to indulge in inappropriate and edgy displays. The dangers of regulating and restricting these sites based on poor understandings of their importance are explored by Montgomery in Chapter 2. Regulators must proceed with caution in attempting to control the online experiences of young people. The importance of these networks for forging generational identity and solidarity cannot be underestimated. Moreover, lurking just beneath the surface is the potential for vast networks of public voice on contemporary issues. This potential has barely been tapped. Surprisingly large demonstrations against congressional immigration legislation in the spring of 2006 spread through organizing networks within MySpace. And, the recognition by the Dean campaign that supporters were gathering in Meetups quickly moved the Dean network (which attracted a broad age demographic) past Chihuahua owners and Elvis fans to become the most populous Meetup. Presidential candidates in 2008 gathered friends in MySpace.

A challenging question is how to better integrate the social and public worlds of young people online. Unlike classic accounts of civil society in which social bonds strengthened political participation in the golden age of dutiful citizens,²⁷ the separation of the social and the civic in the youth online world often seems stark. There are, however, some curious signs of the integration of politics and social experience within these virtual worlds. For example, there have been reports of political protest in game environments. *World of Warcraft* was disrupted by demonstrations over vaguely defined class issues facing the warriors, resulting in protesters being banned under game rules established by Blizzard Entertainment, owner of the game.²⁸ Benkler discusses a "tax revolt" that occurred in *Second Life*, as players stacked tea crates around an image of the Washington monument to protest rate increases.²⁹ And, early on, music file sharers raised property ownership and copyright issues that eventually brought legal sanctions, and in many ways changed how file sharing was regulated and used. And Earl and Schussman in this volume raise interesting questions about the adaptation of behaviors from the social movement repertoire by young people pressuring entertainment corporations about the management and distribution of products.

As noted by Lessig and Benkler, among others, the very ways in which people use digital media present fundamental challenges to established understandings of property, which in turn, lie at the foundation of the political order.³⁰ For these and other reasons, it is important to expand our conception of politics and the political, as young people, both wittingly and unwittingly, push those bounds through their applications of digital technologies. In what ways are these activities political? Do the communication skills involved transfer to more conventional areas of politics? Do political and legal responses concerning ownership and copyright enforcement make for formative early contacts between young people and the often distant world of power and government? These are among the important questions that abound in the grey zones of digital life.

Yet for all the tangential incursions of politics into the social and play environments of digital media, the sphere of more explicitly youth-oriented politics remains comparatively isolated and underdeveloped. Youth sites often seem less social, more moderated, less open to posting and sharing media content, and more top-down compared to those pertaining to dating, friends, games, music, or video. There are, of course notable exceptions, including TakingITGlobal, as discussed by Raynes-Goldie and Walker in this volume, along with examples discussed by Montgomery both here and elsewhere.³¹ Many questions arise when contrasting youth politics sites with more social or entertainment sites: How much traffic do they really get? Can they be sustained in the absence of commercial or equally restrictive foundation or government subsidies? Are they likely to grow and become connected in large and stable enough networks to stimulate effective political behavior? The problems and prospects of this youth political Web sphere are central to the chapters by Xenos and Foot, Montgomery, Coleman, Levine, and Raynes-Goldie and Walker in this book.

Finding productive answers to the many questions about better integrating the public and private worlds of youth involves different kinds of learning for different kinds of players:

- 1 The politicians and public officials who represent the official world of politics to young people must learn more about their citizenship and communication preferences and how to engage with them.
- 2 The educators and other youth workers who design civic education programs, often based on unexamined assumptions about what citizenship should be, can benefit from learning how generational social identities and political preference formation are changing so they can design more engaging civic education models.
- 3 The government agencies, foundations, and NGOs that design and operate youth engagement communities online can benefit from learning more about how those sites may be networked and how they may be opened to partnership with young people who must see them as authentic if they are to participate in them.
- 4 News organizations and other public information producers can learn how to develop information formats that appeal to the young citizen's interest in interacting and coproducing digital content and in better integrating the information and action dimensions of citizenship.
- 5 Young people themselves can better learn how to use information and media skills in ways that give them stronger and more effective public voices.
- 6 And academic researchers can learn how to bridge the paradigms in order to better motivate and inform all of these players.

Understanding Changing Citizenship across Paradigms

Learning about communities, networks, and civic life can take place at different levels and in different ways among the groups of key players in youth civic engagement identified above: politicians and public officials, educators and youth workers, operators of youth engagement communities, information producers, young people searching for public voice, and researchers trying to understand how these players can interact more effectively to promote engagement that is both personally satisfying and mindful of democracy.

A starting point for civic learning among all of these groups is to recognize the shifts in social and political identity processes resulting from the last several decades of global economic and social change. The story here is a familiar one, so I will keep it short. (The reader may also want to consult the version offered by David Buckingham in the introduction to the identity volume in this series.) The collection of nations once known as the industrial democracies have gone through a period of rapid and, in some cases, wrenching economic change, with the result that they may now more properly be called postindustrial democracies. Manufacturing is moving to the periphery of economic focus, as design, distribution, marketing, and management of information have come to the fore. Several results of this process, among others, include careers have changed from relatively secure life-long bonds with a single employer and type of work to several different employers and kinds of work; women have become fully engaged in the work force, changing the organization of family life; more work and more working parents means less discretionary time and more stress for most members of families. As a result, the experiences of childhood and transitions to adulthood are different for recent generations. One casualty associated with these changes is that the group based society that was the foundation of Putnam's fabled pluralist civic life³² has transformed into a network society in which individuals seek various kinds of support and recognition based on different conceptions of membership, identification, and commitment.

In the network society, individuals may belong to many loosely tied associational chains that connect them to their social and occupational worlds. A major consequence of the uprooting from the broad social influence of groups is that individuals have become more responsible for the production and management of their own social and political identities. Contemporary young people enjoy unprecedented levels of freedom to define and manage their self-identities in contrast with earlier generations' experiences with stronger groups (denominational church, labor, class, party) that essentially assigned broad social identities to their members. This transformation of the relationship between individual and society places increasing strains on parties and governments to appeal to highly personalized political preferences that are more difficult to address, much less satisfy, than the broad group or class interests of an earlier era. At the same time, individual citizens—particularly younger generations who have grown up in this new social and economic matrix—feel that their personalized expectations of politics are perfectly reasonable (reflecting who they are) and often find that politics and politicians either ignore them or are far off the mark in their communication appeals.

As politicians and parties use marketing techniques to target ever more refined demographics, the democratic result is that ever larger groups of citizens are excluded from the discourses of elections and policy as they are deemed unnecessary by consultants. Young citizens are among those most blatantly excluded from the public discourses of government, policy arenas and elections. The result is that the world of politics and government seems distant, irrelevant, and inauthentic to many citizens, particularly younger demographics.

Table 1

The Changing Citizenry: The Traditional Civic Education Ideal of the Dutiful Citizen (DC) versus the Emerging Youth Experience of Self-Actualizing Citizenship (AC)

Actualizing Citizen (AC)	Dutiful Citizen (DC)
Diminished sense of government obligation—higher sense of individual purpose	Obligation to participate in government centered activities
Voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism	Voting is the core democratic act
Mistrust of media and politicians is reinforced by negative mass media environment	Becomes informed about issues and government by following mass media
Favors loose networks of community action—often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies	Joins civil society organizations and/or expresses interests through parties that typically employ one-way conventional communication to mobilize supporters

The challenge for civic education and engagement here is to begin by recognizing the profound generational shift in citizenship styles that seems to be occurring to varying degrees in most of the postindustrial democracies. The core of the shift is that young people are far less willing to subscribe to the notion held by earlier generations that citizenship is a matter of duty and obligation. This earlier sense of common commitment to participate at some level in public affairs was supported, indeed forged, within a group- and class-based civil society. The underlying sense of citizenship has shifted in societies in which individuals are more responsible for defining their own identities, using the various tools offered by social networks and communication media.

In short, there is a broad, cross-national generational shift in the postindustrial democracies from a *dutiful citizen* model (still adhered to by older generations and many young people who are positioned in more traditional social settings) to an *actualizing citizen* model favoring loosely networked activism to address issues that reflect personal values.³³ In some cases, this brand of politics may be tangential to government and conventional political organization, and may even emerge in parallel cyberspaces such as games. This citizenship transformation is by no means uniform within societies. Where traditional institutions of church or labor remain strong, more conventional patterns of civic engagement prevail, and moral conflict may erupt. Other citizens lack the skills and background to engage civic life at either the group or the individual level, and actively avoid politics altogether.³⁴ However, two broad patterns do seem to mark a change in citizenship among younger demographics coming of age in the recent decades of globalization. Table 1 illustrates some of the defining qualities of this shift in citizenship styles.

Bridging the Paradigms: Six Learning Scenarios

The tendency to either explicitly or implicitly anchor political opportunities and offerings to young people in one conception of citizenship or the other helps to explain the rise of the two paradigms of youth engagement discussed earlier. Those paradigms support our dissonant public conversation about whether young people are engaged or disengaged. Given their value premises and empirical references, the paradigms are (by definition) both right, but they are also equally responsible for confounding much of our theoretical, empirical and practical approaches to youth engagement in the digital age.

Trying to keep both the actualizing citizen (AC) and dutiful citizen (DC) clusters of citizenship qualities in mind when we discuss learning goals for different players may help bridge the paradigms, while helping all of the players in the civic engagement process think about youth engagement in a more holistic way. In other words, recognizing the shift in emphasis from DC to AC citizenship among younger citizens, and then deciding how to accommodate both dimensions of citizenship in theory and practice may have important implications for what the various players in citizenship production can (and, dare I say, should?) learn about youth civic engagement in the digital age.

What Can Politicians and Government Officials Learn?

Politicians often appear to be faking it in the eyes of young citizens, who are finely tuned to media performances. Indeed, there is reason to think that some of the popularity of reality TV shows over news and other political fare may have something to do with the blatantly staged and marketed aspects of politics. By contrast, reality programs often involve young people in emotionally resonant situations.³⁵ Not only is the heavily marketed and staged nature of politics off-putting but the even deeper problem is that much formal political communication seems to ignore young people, as discussed in the chapter by Xenos and Foot in this book. Young voters are generally regarded by consultants as a poor investment of communication budgets because they tend not to vote, and they are hard to reach through common media channels (recall the earlier discussion of the lost demographic). The result is that there has developed a political culture in many nations in which young people are not asked to participate, and, when they are asked, the language and issues are not convincingly presented. An exceptional case here proves the rule: the 2004 presidential election in the United States witnessed one of the largest mobilization efforts ever aimed at young voters, and turnout in the difficult eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old bracket was up dramatically over previous elections.

The deeper implication of a political culture in which rituals and discourse are managed increasingly by professional communications consultants is that the importance of broad and inclusive communication for democracy has all but been pushed aside.³⁶ A case in point involves an address I gave to a convention of international political consultants. The time was just at the turn of the millennium, when digital media strategies were becoming recognized as useful means of targeting hard to reach demographics. I spoke about the growing fragmentation of societies and the resulting democratic dilemma of communication strategies that exclude particular demographic groups, most notably young people. During the question period following the talk, the first person to stand was one of the founders of professional political communication consulting going back several decades. He remarked that most of what I said about targeting and exclusion was true but that I had missed a crucial point: the obligation of hired consultants was not to promote democracy but to get the client elected, or win the client's policy battles.

Governments that continue to exclude future citizens through their communication strategies only perpetuate the divided sense of citizen identity that leads young people to find political outlets outside government. Given the low costs and potentially broad reach of digital media, there is much that could be done to improve the daily communication outreach of politicians. As Foot and Xenos observe in this book, the design of campaign Web sites and the presentation of issues on them could be much more tuned to take advantage of the interactivity, networking capacity, and other affordances of digital media that young people experience in social networking sites, blogs and games. The ultimate dilemma, as

noted earlier, is the reluctance to yield some degree of control over political communication content to the audience. The top-down, one-way model of communication was much more in tune with the DC citizenship style. It simply does not work with AC citizens. This is the central point of Coleman's concluding chapter.

In addition, public officials must move beyond the posturing that brands youth social sites as magnets for predators, and showcases for other undesirable behaviors. Such positions may make news, but they stigmatize young people and undermine the authenticity of the places where they gather online. As Montgomery notes in the next chapter, a more productive policy concern is to ensure what has become known as "net neutrality." The very future of public information traveling over digital networks is threatened if service providers can impose restrictions on categories of noncommercial content.

What Can Educators, Policymakers, and Community Youth Workers Learn?

The groups that may be both the most important and the most out of touch with the shifting citizen identity patterns of youth are educators and education policymakers. Most of those who preside over curriculum decisions and policies continue to be older-generation DC citizens who assume that their model of citizenship needs to be acquired by future generations. Added to this common misperception are the intense political battles over the moral and political content of school curricula of recent years. The politicization of education on many fronts reinforces a conservative and actively off-putting approach to civic education found in many and perhaps most public schools, particularly in America. Indeed, it is probably not too big a stretch to propose that the majority of school civics experiences for those coming of age in contemporary society fall into one of two categories: (1) little or no civics content or (2) courses that stick to academic coverage of basic government functions and present unappealing perspectives on the subject. Most courses in public schools are thoroughly cleansed of the kinds of political issues and active learning experiences that young people might find authentic and motivating.

Consider some evidence for these generalizations.³⁷ A study of the top three high school civics texts indicated that they contained references to few political issues. Moreover, protest politics was presented as an historical throwback to days before people won their civil rights. And government was idealized in terms of its representative and responsive capacities.³⁸ One could not design an experience less likely to be believed, and less likely to engage with the preferences of AC citizens for personal contact with important issues and shared peer-to-peer communication about them.

The alternative to such ideologically rigid DC education appears to be no civics education at all. It is noteworthy that No Child Left Behind has left citizenship standards far behind math and reading in the priorities of schools. Many school systems have no standards for civic knowledge, much less, guidelines for the acquisition of citizen skills that might aid participation later in life. This trend has developed over the last several decades. A Carnegie/CIRCLE report on the Civic Mission of the Schools noted that in 1949, a course called "problems of democracy" appeared on 41.5 percent of high school transcripts. Students in those courses typically learned about government by discussing contemporary issues, often supplemented by newspaper reading assignments. That course appeared on fewer than 9 percent of transcripts by the early 1970s, and has by now almost completely disappeared.³⁹

Another telling sign of educational policy neglect and misdirection is that the principal national assessment guide for civics (National Assessment of Educational Progress) almost

exclusively measures historical and constitutional knowledge. There is little or no attention to student civic orientations, engagement levels, or skills that might enable the discussion of real political issues. As Peter Levine has noted, the predominant approach of government civic education policy and funding is to avoid controversy, active student engagement, and even voter registration.⁴⁰

This profile of contemporary civic education is bleak, particularly in light of the information and communication opportunities afforded by digital media technologies that are already familiar to most young people. In many cases, it is unclear whether having no curriculum is better or worse than having one that actively clashes with young people's sense of political reality and meaningful personal expression. There are, of course notable exceptions to these trends, and many foundations and progressive educators are experimenting with creative alternatives. The chapters in this volume by Bers and Rheingold illuminate the kinds of interactive, communication-driven curricula that might better engage the political identities of young citizens.

There is need for caution and considerable creativity in thinking about implementing more creative approaches to engage young people in communication with each other about real political concerns. For example, a civic education project that I operated in Seattle aimed to offer young people direct experiences with issues in their communities.⁴¹ The idea was to combine community issue surveys and face-to-face meetings with policy officials, while introducing students to communication skills such as classroom deliberation, all in the context of an information rich online news environment. Students were also invited to participate in chats and to design other networked communication applications to develop a public voice about their newly defined issues. It soon became apparent that the more progressive private schools were already doing much of this in one way or another, and most of their students even had their own laptops. At the other extreme, the poorest of the public schools presented infrastructure obstacles for even getting a single computer in some classrooms. In addition, many teachers faced pressures to teach conservatively from textbooks, due to the lack of time and resources needed to fashion community projects for their classes. In settings less progressive than Seattle (and, not infrequently, even there), teachers also face added pressures from parents who are suspicious of bringing many public issues into the schools. To top it off, students in the lowest achieving schools typically had the strongest antipathy toward politics and government, many having experienced them only in negative ways involving law and social service encounters. Yet the at-risk students and their teachers who managed to navigate these obstacles typically produced some of the most powerful projects proposing actions to address their community issues. These students developed impressive public voices using a variety of digital media, from interactive Web sites to streamed video public affairs programming.

In subsequent years I have followed the Student Voices project as it has been put on self-sustaining footing in the schools. What seems to stick for all but the most dedicated teachers are the free curriculum downloads. The core community project and peer-to-peer communication experiences have withered due to lack of time, technology resources, and other support. The encouraging lesson from this project is that it is possible to engage even the most challenging at-risk populations, and raise civic skill levels. The discouraging lesson is that the obstacles facing those populations and their schools often prove hard to overcome.

The lesson of formal civic education is often that the civically rich get richer and the poor become discouraged. These realities make the kinds of civic communication skill sets

recommended by Rheingold in this volume seem flexible and relatively low-cost additions to current educational approaches. They also make it wise to attend to the cautionary notes sounded by Levine. Even if young people are given the skills and resources to build networks for themselves, there is the important question of “if they build it, will they come?” Levine discusses the potential for discouragement among young people who develop blogs and other networking technologies only to discover that they receive little reaction from the outer world. At the same time, this possibility must be weighed against the distributed and hyperlinked properties of digital networks that Benkler regards as keeping even potentially isolated nodes in easy range of activation and inclusion. The capacity for broad linking of content gives even obscure sites the potential to reach large numbers of people and to jump media strata, sometimes, even pushing content from the personal level to large audience media. Still, we need to learn how to help the majority of solitary young bloggers and content producers join their voices more effectively with others.

What Can Operators of Youth Engagement Networks Learn?

An early survey of youth electoral engagement sites in the United States found that the often well-intentioned operations funded by foundations and other public interest organizations suffered several notable digital deficits: the sites tended to be sticky rather than encouraging networking, the kinds of interactive affordances lagged far behind what was then available outside the political media sphere, and perhaps most notably, there was a disconnection between the often vibrant youth sites and the election candidate and campaign sites that lay disturbingly out of reach.⁴² Some of these problems have been remedied, as demonstrated in the far greater networking among youth sites in recent elections. However, the curious disconnect between the youth engagement sphere and the sphere of elections and government remains a stubborn problem. In part, the problem is due to the earlier mentioned combination of neglect and misapprehension of young people and their communication preferences by politicians and government. Perhaps until politicians and governments find ways to communicate a politics that seems authentic and inviting to young citizens these disconnections will persist.

These concerns aside, there is a growing and, in many ways, thriving collection of youth political engagement opportunities online. Montgomery and her colleagues have documented the evolution of many of these sites and networks here and elsewhere.⁴³ However, there are important issues that remain to be addressed so that those who design and operate the youth engagement sphere may better learn what works and what doesn't. To begin with, there remains an often alarming gap between government and foundation operations and youth-built networks in terms of the communication affordances, the content, and the degree of control offered to youth. This is the focus of Coleman's chapter in this volume. The key seems to be recognizing the changed citizenship styles of young people, and their growing preference for relatively nonhierarchical networks that enable free exploration of ideas. Government and foundation sponsored sites are often reluctant to allow young visitors to define and expand the bounds of politics.

When success models for youth civic networks are identified, they need to be studied and shared. This book includes a detailed look at one of the largest and most successful youth civic networking and communication operations, TakingITGlobal. In their chapter Raynes-Goldie and Walker discuss various youth engagement sites in contrast to social sites such as MySpace, and discuss issues of sustainability, growth, mission, and limits on control and content in a successful youth engagement network.

What Can News Organizations and Information Producers Learn?

Surely one place to begin reconnecting AC citizens to government is rethinking the learning process surrounding the uses of political information. In this digital society, the axiom that information is power is more appropriate than ever. Yet, given prevailing AC attitudes about conventional *dutiful citizen* politics, it is not surprising that there is correspondingly little interest among young citizens in following current issues and events in the news—at least as the news is typically constructed and presented. Most young people simply do not believe that following and learning about various issues will translate into the power to help decide them. Strong (daily) levels of interest in politics are expressed by barely 13 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, compared to more than twice that level among those over fifty-five. Interest levels in the news reflect interest levels in politics.⁴⁴ Only 17 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old women say they follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, compared to nearly half of women over fifty.⁴⁵ Twenty-eight percent of men in the younger demographic bracket claim to follow political news, but more than 60 percent of men over fifty say they actively follow politics. The important point here is not just that there is a generation gap in connecting to conventional politics but also that it has grown steadily over the past several decades.⁴⁶ Young people are more tuned out than were their corresponding peers at any point in the last half century. Even in political systems with strong commitments to high quality public service radio and TV news, and cultures of strong adult engagement, the arrival of commercial television—with its cheap news formulas of mayhem, scandal, and crime—quickly drew young audiences. And those young commercial news viewers put politics and government affairs near the bottom of their attention ladders, well below crime, accidents, sports, and weather.⁴⁷

Part of the problem here is surely that conventional news is designed for DC citizens. At its best, it is generally information rich, but also filled with the views of officials and government authorities, and it generally lacks much in the way of citizen voices or action ideas. The DC citizen is the “informed citizen,” an ideal that dates from the progressive model of objective reporting and informed citizenship that emerged in the United States nearly a century ago.⁴⁸ The informed citizen is supposed to take abstract, impartial information and then decide how to apply it. This model simply doesn’t work for AC citizens. They are skeptical of official versions of events. They prefer to help assemble and deliberate about information. And above all, they seek information that is attached to values and activities they know and trust. The AC citizen is more inclined to seek integrated information that comes with action options, and to participate in the evaluation of information on which decisions about action are based.

There are many lessons to be learned about how to create news and information for AC citizens, and they tend to begin with involving the audience in the information process itself. Part of the solution is to make information interactive, and to involve the audience in the rating, editing, evaluation, and commentary processes. There are models from the early days of Internet news suggesting that this can be done effectively within narrow communities of interest and among activist networks: Slashdot uses a collective editorial and rating technology that produces high-quality information as viewed by its audience; Plastic pioneered a blog-driven news format; and Indymedia introduced an audience-produced, but generally unedited, news-commentary-action format. Many experiments now exist with collective editing and quality control involving the audience in the information production process. Many of these information experiments raise issues of credibility that are explored in the volume edited by Metzger and Flanagin on that subject in this series.

The paramount issue in assessing the credibility of more engaging news formats should not be to compare them to the current DC standard of balanced, politically neutral, “objective” news that is disconnected from action opportunities. That standard, like the style of citizenship on which it is based, is fading. News of the future is more likely to follow the logic of the BBC experiment *ICan*, which anchors the news in civic networks organized around issues as defined by news audiences themselves.⁴⁹ The resources of the news organization in this model are aimed at helping citizens organize effectively on issues they care about. Perhaps much of the news agenda of the future will be driven by such audience affinity networks. On the downside, the BBC project tends to be aimed at connecting citizens to government, and it is not particularly well suited to the more diffuse kinds of activities that may cluster in AC politics. Moreover, there is little specific communication with younger citizens on their own terms, making it unclear whether such information formats can help young people engage effectively with conventional political processes. Perhaps the ultimate question in this chain of possibilities is whether those who hold power in government and business will be receptive to sharing power when younger citizens eventually challenge it, as they probably will.

What Can Young People Learn?

A theme running through many of the chapters in this volume is that young people can better learn how to transfer skills they are already using in other online experiences to more conventional arenas of politics. They can also be encouraged to acquire additional skills that actively enable the formation of public voice both in their social networks and in more explicitly political contexts. Given even minimal learning opportunities, the core AC citizenship concerns seem strong enough among enough young people to motivate the continued creation and growth of impressive youth engagement networks focused on issues such as environment, global justice, and human rights. The connections to conventional politics and government, however, may continue to be thin. The embrace of the traditional core of politics—elections and interest representation in policy processes—may not come easily for generations with such deep skepticism toward politicians and parties. It might help if those offering DC approaches to civic education, community participation, or news more often included protest, governmental reform, and activism as legitimate considerations.

Young people may be right in sensing that politics in nations such as the United States is an insider game requiring money and connections, and, thus, not for them. However, the opportunities to apply considerable political pressure for reforms are now available through digital media networks. Perhaps those networks can be dedicated to the task of political reform. The next social movement may well launch demonstrations from desktops and cellular phones. It may write its own news and gain large audiences for it. Indeed, early efforts to mobilize large-scale protests targeting particular governmental actions (war, media deregulation, and immigration reform) have shown the power of networks in action. The question is whether generations as distant from government as recent ones will find the time, energy or relevance to reform the system.

What Can Scholars Learn?

Many scholars have discovered a shift in value patterns in postindustrial democracies in which people (particularly younger citizens) are more inclined to become interested in personally meaningful, lifestyle-related political issues, rather than party or ideological

programs. These AC citizens seek public commitments and issues that fit with the values at the center of personal lifestyles, giving rise to sharp trends in consumer politics, for example.⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, scholars and researchers who tend to focus on more personally expressive aspects of youth politics tend to resonate with the engaged youth paradigm. Meanwhile, scholars who continue to emphasize the importance of various government-centered activities such as voting and following public affairs tend to embrace the disengaged citizen paradigm, even as they may recognize the rise of alternative forms of political action among young people.

What is needed is research that combines principles underlying both citizenship styles. That is, research aimed at identifying and assessing strategies of engagement that appeal to AC citizens while creating connections to government that help promote DC democratic ideals. Research that leans too heavily on one side or another of the citizenship divide will only contribute to sustaining the paradigm conflicts that cloud our understanding of civic engagement.

Conclusion: Two Scenarios of Youth Engagement

Depending on how the above learning scenarios play out, there are several different scenarios for future youth engagement. It is important to understand that these developments need not be left to their own evolution or devolution. In the process of synthesizing what we know about youth engagement we—academics, educators, educational policymakers, NGOs, journalists, foundations, public officials, and young people—can make choices about what outcomes are desirable and how to nurture them.

If nothing is done to bridge the paradigms, the default scenario will likely be persistent youth disconnection from conventional politics, with little reconciliation of the gap between AC and DC citizenship styles, and continuing unproductive paradigm battles in the academic world. The flip side of this scenario is the continued growth of youth (AC) politics “by other means”: political consumerism, pressures on entertainment product ownership and distribution, and issue networks spanning local and global concerns. This scenario will do little to bring young citizens meaningfully back to government, and it will continue to provoke unproductive debates about engagement and disengagement that talk past each other in academia, education, foundations, and government policy circles.

A second scenario utilizes the possibilities for convergence of technologies and political practices to bring vibrant experiences of politics into classrooms, youth programs, and yes, even elections, showing young people how their concerns can gain public voice within the conventional arenas of power and decision making. This scenario requires more creative research paradigms that combine AC and DC citizen qualities into realistic scenarios for engagement that can be implemented and assessed.

The most important question before us is: What kind of democratic experiences would we choose for future generations? This is a properly political question, yet it is one that often chills creativity among government officials, educators, and NGOs—the very players with the capacity to make a difference in the political futures of young people. The outcomes for youth engagement, insofar as they involve the restoration of positive engagement with government alongside creative and expressive personal communication, depend importantly on the adults who shape the early political impressions of young people. Are politicians, parents, educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers willing to allow young citizens to more fully explore, experience, and expand democracy, or will they continue to force them to just read all about it?

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