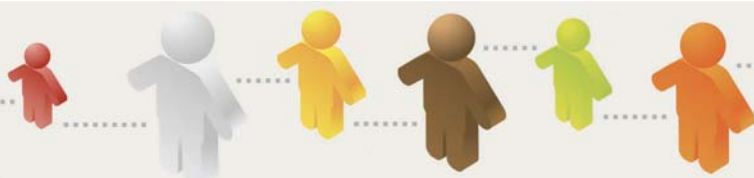


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*Civic Learning Online*



# Communicating Citizenship Online: Models of Civic Learning in the Youth Web Sphere

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February 2009

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**Abstract**

For many observers, the Internet offers exciting possibilities for reconnecting young people with civic life. Various studies have examined civic websites designed for youth, but no systematic framework has emerged to assess and compare how those sites define citizenship or what civic skill development they offer. This study develops a framework of basic categories of civic learning grounded in research on civic education. That framework is then expanded to address changes in styles of citizenship and related youth communication preferences for participatory digital media technologies. The resulting model of citizenship styles and related learning activities is applied to the analysis of 90 of the most-trafficked U.S. youth civic engagement websites, selected to represent different types of civic organizations with online presences. We find that conceptions of citizenship and related civic skill offerings are unevenly distributed across different sectors of the youth civic web. Youth communities that exist only or primarily online are most open to emerging youth civic styles and offer the broadest range of civic learning opportunities. Most conventional civic organizations have not embraced the communication and social networking potential of digital media. These findings have implications both for the capacity of conventional organizations to adapt to online settings, and for how digital technology can be used more effectively in communicating with young citizens.

This research was made possible through generous funding from the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Program

## Communicating Citizenship Online: Models of Civic Learning in the Youth Web Sphere

Two narratives have dominated scholarly debate about the importance of communication for youth political participation. One story flows from Putnam's (2000) claims that the rise of passive television culture and the decline of social memberships have created a 'generational displacement' from politics and public life. This view regards online relationships as unlikely to restore a lost civic culture due to the challenges of building social capital in loosely tied, often anonymous networks that may provide little sustained face to face interaction. Another narrative has it that young people are 'digital natives' at the forefront of innovations in participatory media and networked communication that offer means of building trust, credibility and engagement in public life (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Palfry & Gasser, 2008). Both narratives have been challenged. Witness, for example, the spectacular uses of social networking technologies in the 2008 Obama campaign to mobilize a disproportionate share of young and first-time voters. At the same time, there is growing research questioning the notion that all, or even most, young people are technically proficient (Bennett, et al., 2008; Hargittai & Walejko, forthcoming). Despite these and other lacunae, both narratives continue to warrant attention. Consider, for example, research findings showing that news consumption and political information levels continue to fall for younger demographics (Pew, 2007; Wattenberg, 2007). Contrasting evidence suggests that open source tools and low cost youth sites have created new opportunities to form networks that address many issues directly (Benkler, 2006; Coleman, 2008).

Proponents of these competing views often talk past one another, having differing implicit assumptions about what constitutes engagement, civic spaces, and even citizenship. For example, a forum of leading communication and youth engagement scholars debated whether World of Warcraft and Harry Potter fan sites constituted civic experiences. There was even debate about whether commonly accepted measures of civic engagement make sense in a world shaped by spin and insider influence. The focus of academic measures of engagement is on participation in government and news knowledge of political issues and facts, which seem to fly in the face of popular disdain for traditional institutions of government and the press, particularly among younger demographics (MacArthur Online Discussions on Civic Engagement, 2006; Bennett, 2008).

In order to better assess the potential of the Internet and digital technologies for engaging young people in politics and public life, it is important to establish a framework for thinking about the diverse conceptions of citizenship and engagement that occur in different online settings. The dazzling array of sites that may touch on politics -- from Facebook, to World of Warcraft, to Rock the Vote -- makes it challenging just to find a starting point. As a first cut at this diverse online landscape, we put the focus on sites explicitly aimed at youth civic engagement for two reasons: 1) they are designed with citizenship and civic skills at the forefront, and thus offer a look at the range of different conceptions being advanced by those most centrally involved in promoting youth civic engagement, and 2) the population of such sites offers an impressive range of differences, tempered with enough thematic coherence to inform a preliminary analytical framework. Thus, while MySpace or Harry Potter fan sites may offer episodic experiences with protest, petitioning, or content sharing that touch on politics, such

online communities are not explicitly designed to promote or sustain particular civic models. Even narrowing the focus to more explicit youth civic sites such as Rock The Vote, OutProud, Battle Cry, YMCA, Taking IT Global, or Youth Noise presents considerable challenges in assessing the varying assumptions about citizen identity and the related civic engagement skills being communicated.

While earlier studies (reviewed in the next section) offer broad site-by-site characterizations of activities and technology affordances, we are interested in making more systematic comparisons based on the models of citizenship and related opportunities to acquire civic skills available across the youth civic web sphere. Yet it is clear that even the youth civic web is not characterized by uniformity either in conceptions of engagement or in related uses of interactive technologies (Montgomery, et al., 2004; Xenos and Foot, 2008). Thus, we propose to sample the youth web to include different types of youth engagement sites: 1) *traditional interest groups* with youth programs such as the Sierra Club, 2) *brick-and-mortar youth organizations* such as the YMCA that have some online presence, 3) *government agencies and political campaigns* that have some web presence with youth messaging, ranging from the Peace Corps to BarackObama.com, and 4) *online-only youth civic communities* that have little or no offline presence, such as Do Something and Taking IT Global. These different organizational types may reveal tensions in traditional hierarchical organizations that are less inclined to develop interactive and informal relationships with user populations, particularly when contrasted with organizations that exist predominantly online, and may embrace different organizational designs featuring more open and interactive relationships with users. Such patterns would be consistent

with predictions made by Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2005) in their theorizing about how different organization types adapt (or fail to adapt) to loose-tied digital networks.

By way of guiding hypotheses, we expected to find appeals to more traditional forms of citizenship (based on duty, obligation, and individual leadership development and action) communicated by traditional youth organization, interest group and government sites. We also predict that civic skills on those sites will be characterized by more authoritative one-way transmission of knowledge, more conventional forms of public expression such as directing e-letters or emails to officials, and more constrained opportunities to join membership-type organizations and take actions prescribed by site managers. By contrast, we expected online-only sites to appeal more to self-actualizing or socially expressive citizen styles (described in more detail below) by using Web 2.0 technologies to encourage social networking, along with peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. We expect that civic skills offered in the online-only sites will enable expression via participatory media such as blogging, along with opportunities for peer-initiated groups and action networks, reflecting fewer preconceptions about what citizenship is, or what civic expression ought to look like. Exceptions to these patterns are equally instructive: the uses of interactive and participatory media in the 2008 Obama campaign may explain a good deal about how it energized young voters, in contrast to well-documented tendencies for most campaign and government sites to under-utilize the distributive networking and content sharing capacities of digital media (Xenos and Foot, 2008).

The elaboration and measurement of this civic web framework entails first establishing a baseline for describing and measuring the types of civic skills commonly communicated in the socialization of young citizens. For this we draw upon civic education research on schools,

which have traditionally been looked to as the primary public spaces where development of young citizens takes place. In addition, given the evidence of many young citizens are pushing the boundaries of these conventional models, in part through creative uses of digital media, we temper these civic education models with some theorizing about the changing nature of civic life in the digital age (Bennett, 1998, 2007, 2008). This enables us to develop an expanded analytical framework that combines conventional understandings of citizenship and civic skills with emerging styles of expression, knowledge sharing, and associational practices increasingly found in online communities using web 2.0 technologies. We then use this framework to measure and map the distribution and frequencies of different citizenship and civic learning opportunities in a broad sample of the U.S. youth civic web sphere.

## **Models of Citizenship and The Youth Civic Web**

A number of earlier studies have offered largely inductive assessments of the potential for civic learning in online youth environments. In one of the earliest such studies, Montgomery and her colleagues (2004) examined hundreds of youth engagement sites. They demonstrate the incredible range of civic organizations and projects appealing to youth online, and the creative potential of online learning—as well as the fact that the potential is not often fulfilled. They also contemplate how to measure the effectiveness of civic youth websites, and conclude with a call for more concrete criteria to assess websites' civic learning potential (Montgomery et al., 2004).

Other studies have looked at whether youth civic engagement sites typically offer the kinds of interconnected and interactive experiences that are commonly associated with the interactivity and hyper-linked nature of more general online experience. For example, Bennett and Xenos (2004, 2005; Xenos & Bennett, 2007) found that online youth sites in the U.S. tend to

be built as silos that offer little hyperlinking to other sites and relatively few opportunities for interactivity compared with more popular social networking and media sites, and that election sites offered relatively few images or appeals aimed at young voters. Xenos and Foot (2008) showed that pre- Dean and Obama election sites aimed at young voters offered few of the interactive (Web 2.0) features found on social networking sites, and continued to lag behind more popular youth sites in terms of both technology and content. A broad study of European Union youth engagement sites showed that these technology lags in the youth engagement sphere were common across all of the seven nations studied (European Commission, 2007).

While this research suggests that youth engagement sites typically lack the technology affordances that make social networking sites so popular, prior studies have not substantially addressed underlying questions about the conceptions of citizenship that various sites may be projecting, or the associated civic skills offered to user populations. A deeper analysis along these lines might help explain the reasons for the notable technology lags in the youth civic sphere. For example, if sites that are least likely offer social networking or interactive features are mainly sponsored by traditional hierarchical organizations such as political parties or interest groups, the lack of interactive or social networking affordances may be the result of efforts to maintain old organizational definitions involving more controlled relationships with prospective members, while trying to capitalize, however ineffectively, on the appeal of the Web (Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl, 2005).

As noted above, we suspect that the youth sites offering more networking and participatory media sharing are less likely to be operated by conventional interest groups, youth organizations, or government agencies. Such organizations are more likely to embrace models of



citizenship and engagement that do not adapt easily to the distributed power and information sharing affordances of advanced digital technologies. Coleman (2008) offers support for this suspicion. He looked at the degrees of freedom offered to young users in a handful of civic environments and found an intriguing division between activist (largely youth-built) sites, which were more likely to give young users *autonomy* in their actions through the site, and institutional or governmental sites, which heavily *managed* the experiences of its users. In Coleman's reading, the differences in the presentation of civic models reflected not superficial design choices, but deep philosophical differences about whether young citizens are fully formed, active citizens or "citizens in training" in need of democratic education (Coleman, 2008). Wells (2007) extended this work by explicitly connecting Coleman's (2008) communication styles with different models of dutiful vs. actualizing citizenship identified by Bennett (2007, 2008), showing that in a sample of US and UK sites, communication and citizenship styles co-varied systematically, with more managed sites projecting conventional models of dutiful citizenship (Wells, 2007).

A next step here is to put the citizenship models inscribed in youth sites together with the kinds of civic engagement activities and skills those sites offer to users. In a promising step toward developing more specific understandings of how and what young citizens might be learning online, Bachen et al. (2008) investigated 73 youth engagement sites to gauge the incidence of interactive opportunities and civic pedagogy across different kinds of sites. They found generally low levels of both interactive features and active pedagogical styles (i.e., explicit efforts to convey specific civic skills), with sites run by nonprofits—and particularly activist groups—being more likely to offer them than those run by government (Bachen et al., 2008).

These findings are useful for beginning to identify civic learning opportunities in online environments. A next step is to understand how civic learning models differ across sites that do have civic pedagogies, and what underlying assumptions are being made about citizenship in the process. The next section develops a baseline scheme of categories of civic learning drawn from the extensive literature on civic education. We then review work on young citizens' changing orientations toward civic life, communication, and learning to help expand the kinds of civic learning that may be offered in sites operating with different conceptions of citizenship.

## **Communicating Civic Skills**

Most exploratory studies of the youth civic web have so far lacked a clear definition of what, exactly, is meant by citizenship or related civic learning. This is no fault of the researchers exploring civic learning online. Even in the offline world, definitions of citizenship seldom problematize the concept, and there is hardly a unified set of learning goals to which most educators subscribe (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Indeed, a review of the civic education literature revealed dozens of different desirable outcomes of civic learning (Bennett, Wells, and Rank, forthcoming). We have thus undertaken a synthesis of civic learning goals with the aim of being specific enough to be reliably measured in diverse online environments while remaining true to some recognized markers of citizenship found in formal civic education approaches.

A helpful resource for reducing the voluminous literature on civic learning goals and outcomes was the Civic Mission of Schools report, released by CIRCLE and the Carnegie Corporation in 2003 (Gibson & Levine, 2003), and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of

Schools (CCMS), an ongoing effort to implement the report's recommendations (CCMS, 2008).

Among other things, the scholars and practitioners who worked on the report compiled and agreed upon a set of 40 "civic competencies" necessary for effective citizenship. With the exception of dispositions such as trust and efficacy and some critical analysis skills (which cannot be easily assessed on civic web sites), these competencies seem to sort nicely into four categories:

- the *Knowledge* necessary to be an effective citizen
- the *Expression* skills needed to communicate effectively
- the skills needed for *Joining Publics* (groups or networks) that can emerge, coordinate, and organize around an issue or candidate
- the skills needed to *Take Action* on a public matter

Since the skills making up these general categories have varying meanings across different studies, we reviewed those studies to capture the essential elements of each. For example, **knowledge** is variously defined to encompass: information about history, the Constitution, the founding fathers, wars and other events (CIRCLE, 2006; Niemi & Chapman, 1998); understanding how government and democracy work (CIRCLE, 2006; Gibson, 2001); and identifying specific officeholders (McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2007) and candidates' positions on specific issues (Pasek et al., in press). **Expression** typically includes: discursive, cooperation, negotiation, and persuasion skills (Gibson, 2001; McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2004; Feldman et al., in press; Levine, 2008; Syvertsen et al., 2007); and communication tools (such as writing letters) that citizens may need to express themselves in public contexts (e.g., Student Voices, 2008). Knowing how to be **effective group members** includes: organizing

political events, running meetings, and finding consensus within groups (CCMS, 2008); leadership skills (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; Gibson, 2001); experience with community groups (Andolina et al., 2003); and understanding what groups do (CCMS, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002). **Taking civic action** is a culminating point for engagement (e.g., Zukin et al., 2006) that typically includes: voting (e.g. Pasek et al., 2008) or developing positive intentions to vote (Hooghe et al., 2006); understanding reasons to affiliate with a political party or social movement (Torney-Purta, 2002); fundraising, campaigning, or intending to run for office (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Some attention is also paid to consumer actions (CCMS, 2008) and controversial activities such as protests or political graffiti (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

Research shows that formal civic education does make a difference in how young people think and feel about public life (Niemi and Junn, 1998). However, success in schools often depends on whether students are actively involved in choosing and debating cases that have some real-world credibility (Campbell, 2005; Gibson & Levine, 2003; McIntosh et al., 2007; Pasek et al., 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002). Relatively few American (and other national) public schools offer students opportunities for realistic engagement, instead more often presenting civic content in a top-down, academic form (Torney-Purta, 2002). Curriculum structured in this way has actually been shown to decrease students' interest in civic affairs (Syvertsen et al., 2007).

The growing evidence of poor school-based outcomes on many conventional measures may be explained in part by the possibility that styles of citizenship and related engagement skills are changing in youth populations, meaning that much civic education is out of step with important aspects of the lived experience of younger citizens (Bennett, Wells, and Rank, forthcoming). Most of the civic education practiced in schools is anchored in a model of *dutiful*

*citizenship* involving participation through civic and political membership organizations and receiving information from authoritative gatekeepers such as the press and group leaders. This model dates from the progressive era of the last century (Schudson, 1998). Bennett (2007, 2008) has proposed augmenting this model with emerging conceptions of more expressive and networked *actualizing citizenship* styles that involve more personalized forms of information sharing, expression, social networking, and action.

## **Expanding Civic Skills Sets to Address Shifting Citizen Identity Patterns**

The condensed version of this ongoing citizen identity shift goes like this: Social and economic changes of the late twentieth century have fragmented the “modern” civic order—composed largely of membership based civic groups, institutions and organizations such as political parties, unions, churches, and interest groups—that dominated public life through much of the past hundred years. While the cultural seeds of actualizing citizenship were surely sown in the counterculture politics of the 1960s, the fragmenting forces of globalization rapidly cast entire generations loose from the social membership institutions of civil society that once marginalized countercultural factions. Large numbers of young adults entered a society that was increasingly bereft of the social memberships that once provided the resources for constructing political identities, and embarked on personal searches for self-expression. The first generation wandered through the social and economic wilderness under the label of GenX at the end of the mass media age. The importance of reality TV for sharing this identity search cannot be underestimated (Jenkins, 2006; Coleman, 2007). The convergence of digital social networking media and blurring information genres began to offer increasingly expressive and low cost paths

for individual engagement with a host of global problems and crises. For example, music fans may have received the word about economic justice from Bono or Coldplay rather than through more conventional news sources, which were at the same time growing increasingly less authoritative and credible. The result has been a gradual generational return to public life via loosely linked networks of interests rooted in consumer habits and other lifestyle self-expression patterns such as fair trade activism, animal rights, and environmental direct action (Bennett, 1998). The radical swing of young voters in the U.S. toward Democratic campaigns in the elections of 2004 and, even more markedly, in 2008 suggests the importance of mixing actualizing forms of engagement such as personalized social networking technologies with activities such as voting that were formerly regarded as motivated more by duty and obligation (Bennett, et al., forthcoming).

Actualizing civic styles are particularly suited to participation in loosely tied online communities that depart from conventional membership in hierarchical political organizations by permitting greater levels of peer initiated information sharing, organization, and action. This raises the possibility that in contrast to the slow-changing hierarchical world of formal civic education, some sectors of the online world may offer the potential to better accommodate new forms of citizenship and engagement. This study aims to see whether, where, and how this potential may be realized.

The first step is to employ our broadened conception of citizen identity to think about how to expand the baseline learning outcomes that we derived above from the civic education literature. This expanded model of citizenship styles and related social and communication skills provides the framework that we will use to measure and map different sectors of the (primarily)

U.S. youth civic web. The connection between these citizenship styles and new forms of civic learning becomes clear when thinking about growing youth preferences for digital media.

Jenkins (2006) argues that young people growing up in a world of digital media are developing media habits quite different from their parents and grandparents. He points to the blurring of the lines between media production and media consumption. In contrast to the one-to-many mass communication media experienced by their teachers, parents and grandparents, it is not unusual for many young people to rearrange, comment on, and/or pass along information they encounter on the internet (Jenkins, 2006; Pew, 2007).

Among other implications, these views of shifting civic and media preferences suggest that learning to become effective citizens may look different than in earlier eras. To bring the two conceptions of civic media together, it seems useful to combine Bennett's citizen identity paradigm with Jenkins' work on youth media preferences. The result is a preliminary framework outlined in Table 1 that illustrates how Dutiful and Actualizing citizens tend to view civic action and how they approach communication. This sets the stage for thinking about an expanded set of civic learning skills suited for analysis of online civic communities.

(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)

The Dutiful/Actualizing distinction encourages us to see that the core categories of civic learning based on models of individual civic duty are not so much outdated, but may need to be expanded to accommodate different ways that learning environments (whether formal such as schools, or informal such as online political campaigns) may create opportunities to engage new citizenship styles. The AC/DC dichotomy should not be thought of as absolute or polarized, but as ends of a continuum that contains different mixes of civic styles and communication forms

that may be found at both individual and organizational levels. Just as individuals may be motivated by a mix of duty and creative social expression in deciding to vote, campaigns may offer a mix of hierarchical, one way appeals via targeted TV or web ads, while encouraging online blogging or viral video sharing online that results in content not fully controlled by the political organization.

What seems clear from this emerging typology is that the core standards of formal civic education that defined the learning outcomes described earlier are almost entirely aimed at creating dutiful citizens. Thus, to develop a more comprehensive civic learning typology, we need to include skills more suited to actualizing civic styles, particularly since those styles seem better suited to web 2.0 environments. For example, we can augment conventional notions of one-way authoritative transmission of knowledge from sources such as the press, teachers, or other authorities, to add the possibility of peer knowledge sharing of the sort developed by Wikipedia. In this fashion, we have developed the framework in Table 2 for thinking about civic skills that span the range of AC and DC civic learning. This framework provides a basis to operationalize and measure the distribution of citizenship styles and related learning opportunities in different sectors of the youth civic web.

(INSERT TABLE 2 HERE)

## **Research Question and Methods**

Recall our core research question from the above discussion: How are the varieties of citizenship and civic learning communicated and distributed over different types of sites in the youth web sphere? Drawing on the work of Coleman, Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl and others discussed above, we expect that more traditional social and political organizations will signal primarily to



dutiful citizens about kinds of engagement that offer relatively little autonomous use of interactive affordances for sharing knowledge, expressing views, creating groups or networks or proposing action. This suggests several hypotheses about where we expect to find civic skill development aimed at different citizenship styles:

**Hypotheses:** **(H1)** Youth engagement organizations that exist primarily or only in online forms will display a disproportionate share of the actualizing learning opportunities in the youth civic web sphere. **(H2)** Conversely, organizations that exist primarily in conventional offline forms of membership-based, hierarchical organizations (such as traditional community youth organizations and interest groups with youth branches) should signal less to actualizing citizens by offering learning opportunities more characteristic of the dutiful forms of knowledge, expression, joining and action. **(H3)** Given the emergence of more social networking in political (particularly Democratic) campaigns in 2008, we anticipate a somewhat greater degree of actualizing learning opportunities in the government and campaign category, driven mainly by these campaigns. More broadly, in addition to assessing these hypotheses, we propose to explore the distribution of each type of citizen orientation and related civic learning opportunities in different sectors of the youth civic web sphere.

## **Methods**

### *The Sample.*

We cast a wide net across the U.S. youth civic web sphere (including international organizations with U.S. outreach), and then chose a selection of most trafficked sites of different organization types. To assure continuity with other studies, we first assembled the sites found by Montgomery et al. (2004), resulting in 348 sites that passed an automated test of still being online (though

many eventually proved to be inactive). From Bennett and Xenos (Bennett & Xenos, 2004, 2005; Xenos & Bennett, 2007) and Wells (2007) we drew an additional 70 sites. We then checked all the sites manually, eliminating 161 sites that were duplicates, or had not been active for a year or longer, or were no longer available. Next, to improve our sampling of major nonprofit organizations, we conducted Google searches using the names of the U.S.'s 100 biggest nonprofits (Clolery, Paul, & Hrywna, Mark, 2006) paired with the search terms 'youth,' 'student,' 'college,' and 'social networking.' This yielded 22 additional sites. Finally, we undertook a broad-ranging search to identify important youth engagement environments involving contemporary issues, and political or religious ideologies not uncovered by the above methods. Those searches included 54 key terms<sup>1</sup> each combined with the youth related search terms above. This yielded 88 further sites.

Our initial catalogue of living websites totaled 367. This population was then screened for sites (or sections of sites) having a primary focus on youth civic engagement.<sup>2</sup> The 264 sites that met those criteria were then categorized according to the type of organization that created them: 56 sites fell in the *Online Only* category; 28 in the *Government/Candidate* category; 84 in the *Community/Service* category; and 98 in the *Interest/Activist* category. These clusters were then adjusted and to make sure that we included organizations that a) represented local levels of large multi branch national organizations, or b) might have eluded the mechanical search terms

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1 Key categories included: political positions (e.g. 'libertarian,' 'socialist'), political issues ('gay rights,' '2nd amendment'), current issues of concern ('sustainability,' 'Darfur,' 'media literacy'), ethnicities ('African American,' 'Latino'), and religions ('Christian,' 'Muslim').

2 Our process involved looking first on the homepage, then on an 'About' page, for evidence that the site was for youth (e.g. references to 'youth,' 'students,' 'kids,' 'any age ranges under 30') and that it involved some form of public engagement (e.g. 'getting involved,' 'improving one's community,' 'speaking out,' 'activism').

as primarily youth oriented, but that offered clear opportunities for youth engagement (e.g., election campaign organizations or interest groups such as Sierra Club that are not youth-specific but that have youth outreach).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, we used <http://www.compete.com> to obtain rough estimates of comparative traffic levels on the sites, and constructed a preliminary list of the most-trafficked sites in each category. Based on the size of the coding challenge, we cut off our sample at 90, with an oversample of 35 in the Online Only category (in order to accommodate the great diversity of sites in this category), 15 in the Government/Candidate category (reflecting the smaller numbers and more limited youth focus in this category), and 20 each in the Community/Service and Interest/Activist categories.<sup>4</sup> The proportional differences in subsample sizes were controlled for in all data analysis and reporting

### *Coding*

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3 First, to include the kinds of local, community sites that most youth would be likely to interact with, we replaced the sites of national-level organizations in the Community/Service category with the sites of local branches, selected based on searches using randomly generated zip codes. For the Girl Scouts we drew the site of a Madison, Wisconsin chapter; for the Boys and Girls Clubs we drew the site of Metropolitan Denver's clubs; and for 4H we drew the site of 4H in North Carolina. Second, even though they are not focused primarily on youth, we added the 2008 political campaign sites of McCain, Obama and Clinton to assess any differences in the way they communicated engagement to young voters. Finally, we added to the sample a number of major interest organizations that eluded our search for organizations that had an explicit focus on youth, but that offered youth sections on their websites. This included the ACLU, NRA, and Sierra Club.

4 The online only category includes: [idealist.org](http://idealist.org), [youthnoise.com](http://youthnoise.com), [battlecry.com](http://battlecry.com), [declareyourself.com](http://declareyourself.com), [rockthevote.org](http://rockthevote.org), [takingitglobal.org](http://takingitglobal.org), [itsgettinghotinhere.org](http://itsgettinghotinhere.org), [dosomething.org](http://dosomething.org). The government/campaign category includes: [libertarianrock.com](http://libertarianrock.com), [bostonyouthzone.com](http://bostonyouthzone.com), [peacecorps.gov](http://peacecorps.gov), [collegerepublicans.org](http://collegerepublicans.org), [hillaryclinton.org](http://hillaryclinton.org), [johnmccain.com](http://johnmccain.com), [go.barackobama.com](http://go.barackobama.com). Community organizations include: websites for local chapters of Key Club, YMCA, Girl Scouts, Jewish Service, and 4-H. Interest group/activist organization sites included: NRA, ACLU, Sierra Club, Feminist Campus, Out Proud, and Students for a Free Tibet.

Coding was divided into two general sets of activities, each conducted by a different team of coders to avoid confounding the identification of whether a site page contained a civic learning opportunity (knowledge, expression, joining, acting) with what civic style (actualizing or dutiful) that opportunity represented. Thus, each site was coded in two steps: a *page selection* process, in which coders determined which pages contained general learning opportunities, and next, a different set of coders determined whether *dutiful* and/or *actualizing* forms of each learning goal were present on the pages selected. (The coding allowed for sites offering both types of civic learning, consistent with the idea that the citizenship types are continuous rather than mutually exclusive).

*Page Selection.* In the *page selection* process, three coders independently evaluated each site for the presence of each learning goal, and noted the specific pages on which each learning goal was offered. Coders used the following process to determine the presence of each learning goal on each site: navigating from the home page, they looked at each page linked from the main menu bars. (The main menu bars were defined as any prominently displayed links in a top row or left column, or, if there were no top or left menu bars, the right and bottom menu bars.) The coders were thus limited to pages one link from the homepage, a choice that took the potential for randomness out of searching differently designed websites while making searches through often voluminous sites manageable. This also provided a quick screening for the importance of civic skills offerings to the organizations sponsoring the sites, as pages one link from the homepage were assumed to be the most likely to be found and visited by users. (Full code sheet available upon request.)

Coders were instructed to select up to 3 pages for each learning goal found on the site (some sites offered multiple opportunities to become informed, express views, etc.). Multiple pages per learning goal enabled a greater chance to see if a site offered both dutiful and actualizing opportunities for learning a particular civic skill type. The percent agreement across 3 coders for the presence of a learning goal was 84.4% for all goals combined, broken down to: 83.9% for Knowledge, 82.1% for Expression, 82.0% for Joining Publics, and 89.7% for Take Action. Agreement on particular pages containing those goals was also very high, with some falloff from the first to the third page, as might be expected.<sup>5</sup> The cases in which coders differed were resolved by consensus discussion to produce a common set of up to 3 pages per learning category per site to turn over to the second team of coders. As Bachen et al. (2008) note, such pairwise percent agreements are above the accepted level for this kind of analysis.

*Dutiful and Actualizing Coding.* A different team of 4 coders was then trained to code the selected pages to determine whether the learning opportunities they contained were addressed more to dutiful or actualizing civic styles. Each page was examined for the presence of any of the following features (multiple codes were permitted for each page). Knowledge: coders were asked to distinguish page features that presented users with information from one-way, authoritative sources such as site sponsors, news stories, public officials, or other external sources (coded as DC forms of Knowledge), or whether site users were offered opportunities for peer knowledge-

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<sup>5</sup> Following agreement that a learning goal was present on a site, agreement on the first page selected was as follows: Knowledge, 91.6%; Expression, 96.9%; Joining Publics, 97.8%; Take Action, 95.6%; with total first page agreement at 95%. Looking at the second most-selected page, though slightly lower, the agreement is acceptable: Knowledge, 79.6%; Expression, 75.0%; Joining Publics, 89.7%; Take Action, 73.9%. Coders only selected three pages for single learning goal on a site if all coders agreed, following deliberation, on all three pages.

sharing (coded as AC).<sup>6</sup> Expression: coders were instructed to decide whether pages offered communication training to produce content aimed at institutions or authorities, such as tips on how to write good letters or effectively telephone an elected official (DC), or whether they offered training in digital participatory media, such as how to create a podcast, design a video, or effectively communicate with a blog (AC). Joining Publics: coders looked for variously described membership or joining opportunities on the page. Pages with groups that were hierarchical, or created and defined by the site or an affiliated organization were given a score that was later converted as DC, whereas opportunities for users to define their own groups, or join groups or networks created by peers, were scored with codes later converted to AC. Finally, selected pages were screened for Take Action learning opportunities, with actions organized and managed by site sponsors or affiliated organizations and authorities scored in terms that counted as DC, while peer generated actions suggested or reported upon by site users coded in terms that were later counted as AC.

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6 Here is the coding instruction for Knowledge from the codebook. Positive scores on the a) code were scored DC, and positive scores on the b) code were scored AC:

Some sites want users to be able to find out more about issues or related matters when they are on the website. Some sites have pages that are specifically for this purpose. Looking at the pages selected from this site:

a) Do any of the pages contain a listing of facts or background reports (on issues, problems, or how some political process works) produced by experts or by the operators of the site?

For example, some sites might have sections such as “what they never told you”, or “inform yourself on important issues,” or “what you should know about X (e.g., global warming)”

b) Do any of the pages encourage users to share what they know about community or public issues or related matters with other users?

For example, some sites enable users to post their own reports and projects in order to share they have learned about a particular problem with other users.

*Reliability.* After the four coders were trained to identify those forms, a randomly-drawn 16-site subsample was set aside for a reliability test. The reliabilities (pairwise percent agreement for four coders) were: 100% for DC Knowledge (this was the most prominent form of learning, as every site had some form of DC Knowledge); 78% for AC Knowledge; 92% for DC Expression; 81% for AC Expression; 84% for DC Joining Publics; 94% for AC Joining Publics; 98% for DC Take Action; and 91% for AC Take Action.<sup>7</sup> The overall reliability for all eight forms of learning was 91%. Disagreements were resolved by deliberation among the coders. Once again, in line with the criteria proposed by Bachen et al. (2008), these reliabilities exceed acceptable levels.

Figure 1 illustrates how the coding process was applied to one particular page. This page is from <http://dosomething.org>, a site from the Online Only category, and was selected in the page selection process as presenting Take Action learning both because the site chose to name it ‘Projects’ and because it clearly presented different actions for users to take. In Dutiful/Actualizing coding, the coders determined that an actualizing opportunity to Take Action learning was present, because users could see actions peers had taken, and suggest their own actions. Likewise, no coders determined that any dutiful action forms were present, as there were no action opportunities that originated from site sponsors or external organizations or authorities. In sum, the page was coded as presenting the Take Action learning goal, and only in an actualizing form.

(INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE)

## Results

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<sup>7</sup> One coder’s results in the reliability subsample were significantly different from others’ on AC Take Action (that coder did not record any Take Action codes). Leaving these systematic errors out made the DC Take Action agreement 97%, and the AC Take Action agreement 100%.

The sample of 90 sites produced a total of 255 civic learning opportunities, with 76 percent of those aimed at dutiful citizen styles. As predicted, the majority of actualizing learning opportunities (53%) occurred in online-only site types, although those sites constituted only about a one third of the total sample. Also as predicted, different types of organizations signal different models of citizenship, as illustrated by the frequencies and civic styles of the learning opportunities on the sites. Figure 2 illustrates these differences more clearly, showing that online only youth sites have several notable qualities absent in sites produced by more conventional civic organizations: a greater balance of the four major categories of learning, a better mix of AC and DC learning opportunities, and by far the greatest opportunity to learn how to participate in peer-to-peer actualizing forms of knowledge sharing and public expression. Indeed, opportunities to learn any form of public expression are surprisingly scarce in conventional community, interest, and government organizations, which are aimed disproportionately at getting young people to engage with managed (site produced) activities. By contrast, nearly 70 percent of the sites in the online only group offer some expression training, and most of those provide either a mix of AC and DC expression skills or exclusively AC skills. It seems clear that conventional civic organizations overwhelmingly regard young people as subjects to be managed, or, to extend Coleman's idea, as dutiful citizens in training who should be told what to do by authoritative external sources.

(INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE)

Also in keeping with our predictions, the government and campaign category offered slightly greater opportunities for actualizing civic learning, particularly when compared to community organizations, and, to some extent, compared to interest/activist groups. Also as



predicted, this was driven almost entirely by Clinton and Obama campaign affordances for sharing knowledge, blogging, and forming personal support groups. This trend is likely to grow in future elections in light of the staggering Obama youth vote margin in 2008 (a sixteen percent gain in under 30 vote share compared to the Kerry vote in 2004).

A striking similarity across all four organizational types that we did not fully anticipate is the tendency to offer highly managed opportunities for taking action, even in online only youth communities. When it comes to enabling young citizens to act, it seems that site operators are generally not inclined to empower young people to create and promote their own activities. In part, this may be due to a sense of clear political goals on the part of sponsoring organizations, and, in part, it may reflect an implicit sense that young people are incapable of engineering their own effective civic action plans.

The data also cast new light on our earlier concern that formal civic education in schools may offer a learning menu far too skewed toward the DC skills spectrum to appeal to many young citizens. With the exception of the taking action category discussed above, our findings support the idea that online environments have the potential to create a more balanced set of learning opportunities. But it is equally clear that most online environments fail to develop that potential. Online-only sites offered an average of 1.2 actualizing learning opportunities per site, while Government/Candidate sites presented 0.5, and Community/Service and Interest/Activist sites presented only 0.2 and 0.4 opportunities per site, respectively. Figure 3 illustrates this disparity, showing that even after adjusting for subsample size differences, online-only sites produced more than half (53%) of the Actualizing opportunities in the youth civic web.

(Insert Figure 3 Here)

At the same time, dutiful citizen models dominate the youth civic web when taken as a whole. Figure 4 shows the distribution of all forms of civic learning throughout the sample. Fully half (51%) of all learning opportunities observed were either Dutiful Knowledge or Dutiful Take Action, and in total, 76% of all learning opportunities were aimed at creating dutiful citizens.

(INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE)

## **Discussion**

One obvious conclusion from the data is that conventional community and interest/activist organizations overwhelmingly reproduce their offline models of citizenship and civic engagement in their online sites. In one sense, it is not surprising that organizations believe that their online presence should extend existing organizational functions. However, as many observers have noted, conventional civic organizations face shrinking memberships precisely because younger generations are not inclined to enter into formal membership relations (Putnam, 2000; Bimber, Flanagan & Stohl, 2005). It appears that only organizations that exist primarily as online communities have shed conventional civic missions and hierarchies enough to signal different kinds of relationships to user communities by offering them appropriately different civic skill sets. There are lessons here for both conventional organizations and for policy makers and funders looking for places to invest resources: the potential of online engagement to reach a broader population of younger citizens is barely being achieved. Among conventional hierarchical civic organizations, it seems that some election campaigns have begun to realize that potential, but it remains to be seen whether the war room command and control model of campaigning will ultimately yield much more ground to the potential for social networking for fear of losing control of messages and organizations.

Another interesting implication of our findings is that while organizations that exist only or mostly as online presences tend to offer the most balanced mix of knowledge and expression opportunities, they look much like other kinds of organizations when it comes to opportunities for joining publics and taking action. Indeed, in order to capture the extent of joining and acting across the entire sample, we had to lower the bar considerably to count opportunities to join and act that were not accompanied by some formal skills training. While some interest and activist groups do offer training kits on how to organize and act, such formal learning opportunities are rare. As noted earlier, the group formation and action end of the civic skills spectrum was far more programmed and bereft of formal training. This is consistent with the overall low levels of civic pedagogy reported by Bachen et al. (2008). However, since we wanted to capture the spectrum of engagement in these organizations, we relaxed the learning skills requirements in these areas in order to capture the full range of engagement opportunities. Looked at in one way, the lack of much formal civic pedagogy in aiding group formation and action makes sense because the mission of many community, interest/activist, and campaign or government sites is to encourage young visitors to join their organizations and do what they recommend (e.g, join the Peace Corps, form an Obama group, vote for Obama). These site operators arguably have little reason to offer more abstract lessons in why and how to form groups or how to think about effective action when programmed options are the main point of the site. However, the similar scarcity of networking and advocacy training in online only sites suggests that something deeper may be going on: what Coleman referred to as an underlying lack of confidence in the capacity of young citizens.

Nonetheless, our finding that online only sites differed systematically in two important learning categories (knowledge and expression) adds a different theoretical understanding to Bachen et al. (2008), who found that nonprofit sites offered richer and more interactive learning opportunities than either government or commercial sites. Our site typology shows that when we begin to define learning in more specific terms, nonprofits are far from a uniform category, with more conventional nonprofits (in the Community/Service and Interest/Activist site groups) offering the fewest actualizing civic experiences, particularly in comparison to online only sites. Moreover, we find that the online only sites encompass a diverse range of sponsors—corporate, nonprofit, individual, and otherwise. Thus, it appears that organizations of differing types in the brick and mortar world are likely to transfer their hierarchical structures and missions online. By contrast, sponsors of different types who develop primarily online youth communities are more likely to employ interactive, networking, and participatory media affordances.

Our civic learning framework offers a useful starting point for thinking about what different organizational models of citizenship and civic engagement look like, and what forms they take online in communicating models of citizenship to young users. One clear implication of this study is that site designers may not be aware of the significant distance between the citizenship ideals inscribed in their sites (or in the sponsoring organizations), and the broader range of young citizen's preferences for civic engagement and learning. Every site doesn't need to become a free-for-all of users producing unstructured content or proposing unrealistic actions, but there is room for more ways to offer actualizing opportunities for learning, particularly in the area of advocacy and public networking skills. Young people with creative and expressive inclinations might benefit greatly from being offered more tools—of both digital and

conventional forms—to develop these civic styles more effectively. We hope that our framework for capturing civic learning online, built from the extensive literature on civic education, offers a foundation for thinking about how citizenship is communicated to young people that is useful both for scholars seeking to understand civic learning online, and for practitioners working to develop more effective environments for youth participation.

**Tables and Figures**

	<b>Civic Style</b>	<b>Communication Logic</b>
<b>Dutiful</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oriented around citizen input to government or formal public organizations, institutions &amp; campaigns</li> <li>• Rooted in responsibility and duty</li> <li>• Channeled through membership in defined social groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primarily one way consumption of managed civic information (news and political ads)</li> <li>• Individual content production is not the norm. When it occurs, expression is aimed at specific institutional targets (contacting elected officials, letters to newspapers)</li> </ul>
<b>Actualizing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open to many forms of creative civic expression, ranging from government to consumer politics to global activism</li> <li>• Rooted in self actualization through social expression</li> <li>• Personal interests channeled through loosely tied networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lines between content consumption and production blurred</li> <li>• Expression, interaction and sharing over peer networks important to citizen identity and engagement. (This may occur within more formal political contexts such as viral video sharing in political campaigns)</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Dutiful and Actualizing Styles of Civic Action and Communication**

	<b>Knowledge</b>		<b>Expression</b>		<b>Join Publics</b>		<b>Take Action</b>	
<b>Definition</b>	Information that citizens should know		Training in effective public communication skills		Learning how to connect to others through networks and groups		Actions that engage citizens with specific public issues or campaigns	
	<b>Dutiful</b>	<b>Actualizing</b>	<b>Dutiful</b>	<b>Actualizing</b>	<b>Dutiful</b>	<b>Actualizing</b>	<b>Dutiful</b>	<b>Actualizing</b>
<b>Description</b>	Information provided by authorities (e.g., teachers, officials, press)	Information created and shared by peers	Training for traditional forms of public address to institutions & authorities (e.g., letters to newspapers, petitions to public officials)	Training for self-produced and distributed digital media (e.g., blogs, election videos, culture jams)	Membership in defined, structured organizations	Membership in self-defined networks and groups	Activities defined and managed by formal organizations or authorities	Activities generated and endorsed by peers

**Table 2: Dutiful and Actualizing Forms of the Four Learning Goals**

Figure 1: Coding process example

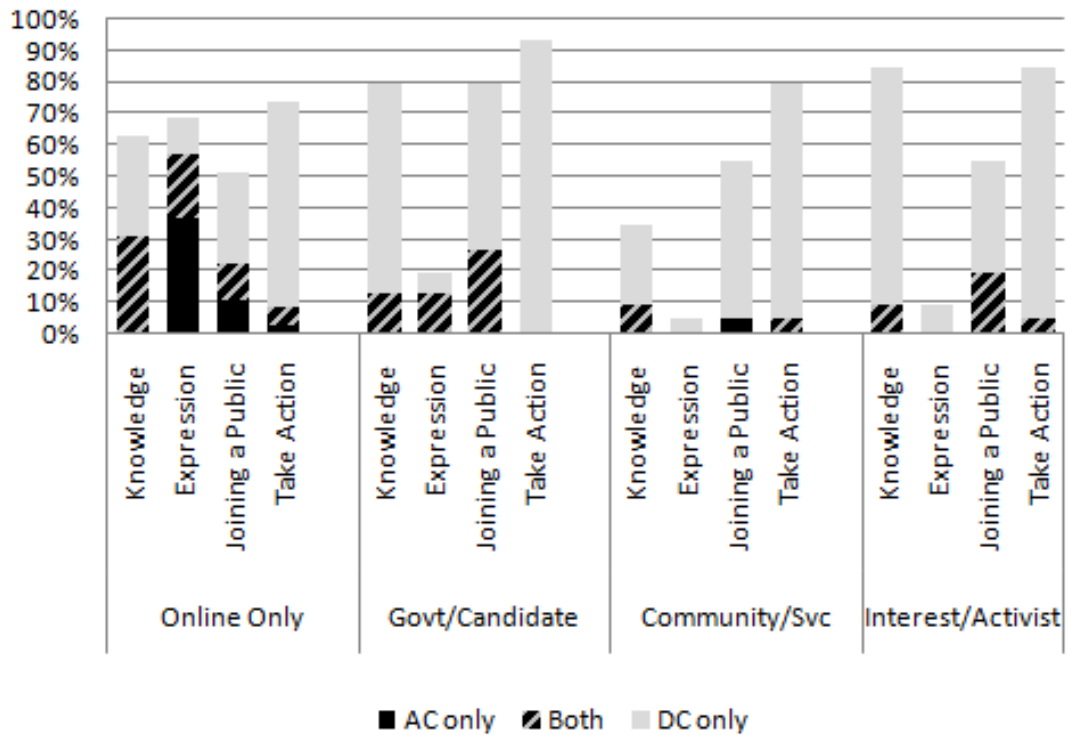


Site type: Online only organization category. Organization name: Do Something.

Learning category: take action. Citizenship style type: actualizing.

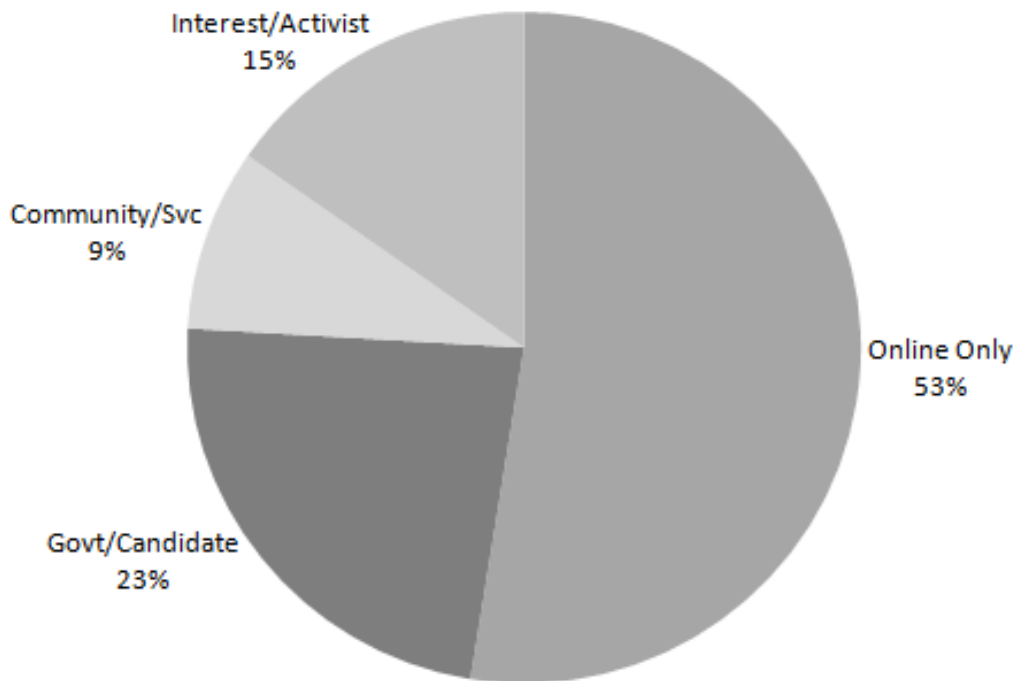


**Figure 2: Distribution of learning opportunities**



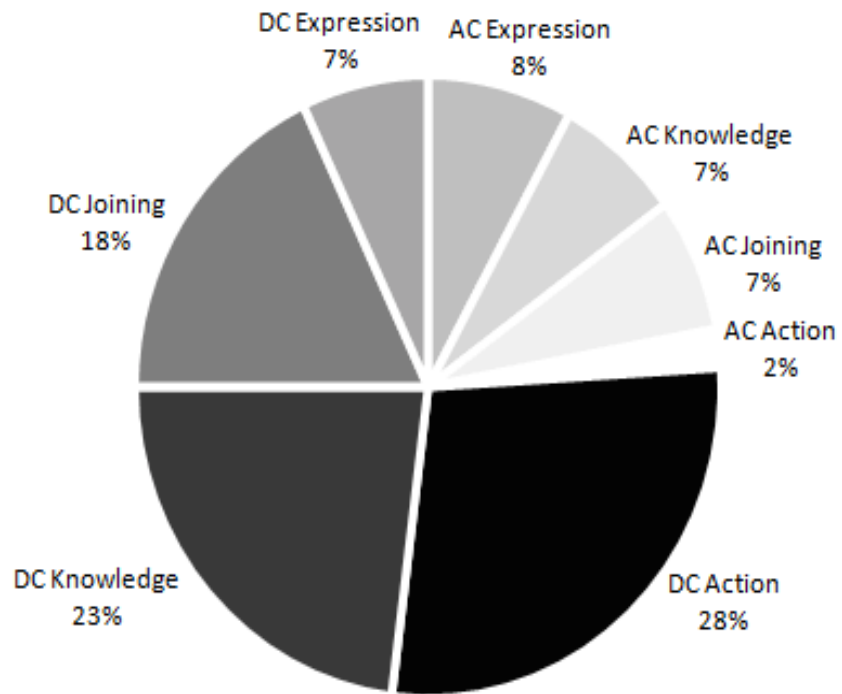
Actualizing and Dutiful Civic Learning Skills by Type of Website

**Figure 3: Distribution of AC opportunities among the site categories (N=61 AC opportunities)**



Note: Proportions have been corrected for the number of sites within each category

**Figure 4: Breakdown of all learning opportunities (N=255)**



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## NOTES

1 Key categories included: political positions (e.g. 'libertarian,' 'socialist'), political issues ('gay rights,' '2nd amendment'), current issues of concern ('sustainability,' 'Darfur,' 'media literacy'), ethnicities ('African American,' 'Latino'), and religions ('Christian,' 'Muslim').

2 Our process involved looking first on the homepage, then on an 'About' page, for evidence that the site was for youth (e.g. references to 'youth,' 'students,' 'kids,' 'any age ranges under 30') and that it involved some form of public engagement (e.g. 'getting involved,' 'improving one's community,' 'speaking out,' 'activism').



3 First, to include the kinds of local, community sites that most youth would be likely to interact with, we replaced the sites of national-level organizations in the Community/Service category with the sites of local branches, selected based on searches using randomly generated zip codes. For the Girl Scouts we drew the site of a Madison, Wisconsin chapter; for the Boys and Girls Clubs we drew the site of Metropolitan Denver's clubs; and for 4H we drew the site of 4H in North Carolina. Second, even though they are not focused primarily on youth, we added the 2008 political campaign sites of McCain, Obama and Clinton to assess any differences in the way they communicated engagement to young voters. Finally, we added to the sample a number of major interest organizations that eluded our search for organizations that had an explicit focus on youth, but that offered youth sections on their websites. This included the ACLU, NRA, and Sierra Club.

4 The online only category includes: idealist.org, youthnoise.com, battlecry.com, declareyourself.com, rockthevote.org, takingitglobal.org, itsgettinghotinhere.org, dosomething.org. The government/campaign category includes: libertarianrock.com, bostonyouthzone.com, peacecorps.gov, collegerepublicans.org, hillaryclinton.org, johnmccain.com, go.barackobama.com. Community organizations include: websites for local chapters of Key Club, YMCA, Girl Scouts, Jewish Service, and 4-H. Interest group/activist organization sites included: NRA, ACLU, Sierra Club, Feminist Campus, Out Proud, and Students for a Free Tibet.

5 Following agreement that a learning goal was present on a site, agreement on the first page selected was as follows: Knowledge, 91.6%; Expression, 96.9%; Joining Publics, 97.8%; Take Action, 95.6%; with total first page agreement at 95%. Looking at the second most-selected page, though slightly lower, the agreement is acceptable: Knowledge, 79.6%; Expression, 75.0%; Joining Publics, 89.7%; Take Action, 73.9%. Coders only selected three pages for single learning goal on a site if all coders agreed, following deliberation, on all three pages.

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