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

by Lindsay Pettingill

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

Introduction

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

Using insights from democratic theory and participatory culture, I propose that a critical approach bridging Political Science and Media Studies is necessary to understand the democratic potential of the NDM. Traditional measures of civic engagement should take note of the flurry of cultural production taking place in the NDM. A contemporary model of civic engagement suggests that the NDM represents a new space for political change – a space that has been ostensibly off the radar of political scientists.

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Traditional Civic Engagement and Democratic Practice

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

Youth civic engagement typically clusters around three important dimensions: intent, membership, and commitment (Kirlin, 2003). The term “civic engagement” most generally defines public actions *devoted to a common good* (intent), achieved through *sustained participation* (commitment) in a *group or association* (membership). Membership in civic engagement is cooperative, facilitating solidarity through the consensus of many to achieve a goal. Civic engagement includes such activities as volunteering, belonging to an organization (from a sporting team to Rotary Club), and/or supporting an organization through a fundraiser.

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

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

In terms of attitudes, young people learn how to be members of communities through membership in organizations. They begin to see themselves as not just an individual, but as a part of a larger public. An attitudinal shift of this kind makes the collaborative work of democracy much more feasible. Social trust is another oft-mentioned attitudinal by-product of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993). Social trust allows a group to accomplish much more collaboratively than individuals could accomplish alone and reinforces solidarity.

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

Flaws in the Traditional Model

I argue that young people are gaining the above-mentioned benefits of civic engagement through their activities with the NDM, but that their methods of doing so are typically overlooked in the traditional model of civic engagement. While an in-depth analysis of the apparent decline in youth civic engagement over the past 30 years is beyond the realm of this paper, I argue that the existing model itself is at least partially at fault, for it under-predicts engagement. The traditional model suffers from three crucial shortcomings: an inflexible model of organizational commitment, an antiquated understanding of contemporary group membership, and the assumption that nearly all forms of engagement are equal in the sense of the efficacy they convey to

participants.

The traditional model of civic engagement rests on the principle of an organizational commitment that is sustained over time. Time is important in the traditional model because it is assumed that over time social trust will be built between members, and that sustained commitment will carry over to influence later political behaviors. Committed participants are then assumed to be better democratic citizens. While some participants may indeed be better citizens, a sole focus on time committed to an organization obscures distinctions of quality of participation. Considering a political economy of traditional civic engagement may be helpful to this discussion. Commitment for some participants may mean active organizational participation, while for others it may simply be presence in a group. Such free-riders may keep an organization technically alive, but assuming they receive the same civic benefits is an insult to active contributors and detrimental to democratic *practice*. In a recent book exploring the decline in youth activism, Daniel Brook (2007) argues that a persistent and growing income gap, paired with spiraling educational costs, leaves many aspiring activists so overworked and indebted that engagement gets pushed aside in order to make ends meet. The NDM may provide alternate spaces for engagement for people with too much debt to work as activists, or not enough time to volunteer. This is not to suggest that time is not a crucial factor in involvement, or that the NDM do not require sustained engagement – quite the contrary. Any youth who has created a political mash-up or organized a strike in Second Life can attest to that. Instead, I suggest that the traditional model of civic engagement is limited because it undervalues, *ex ante*, activities that do not fit its model of sustained engagement.

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

Finally, the traditional model of civic engagement makes little distinction between particular types of activities and the efficacy that they respectively endow. The distinction between “instrumental” and “expressive” organizations has been replicated in many studies, but there has been little research on the differences between activities *within* the categories of instrumental and expressive. For example, serving on a prom committee and organizing tenants for rent control are weighted equally in terms of impact on future civic and political behaviors (both are “better” than a drama club, for example). A crucial, yet lacking, variable in the qualitative distinctions between types of engagement is some measure of efficacy. All political actors need reassurance that they have a political voice and that their voice can make a difference. The interactivity and network of affiliations of the NDM make such reassurance – and therefore efficacy – an integral part of participants’ experiences. As Jenkins (2006b) argues, “the step from watching television news and acting politically seems greater than the transition from being a political actor in a game world to acting politically in the ‘real world’” (p. 10). A focus on efficacy rather than type of engagement reduces the normative bias in the traditional model of engagement that currently discredits activity in the NDM by labeling it “virtual” and therefore of little value in the “real” world.

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

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Insights from Participatory Culture

Participatory culture describes the background in which a new form of civic engagement is taking form. A participatory culture is one where low barriers to expression and engagement are matched with strong support for sharing creations in an environment of informal mentorships. Furthermore, the beliefs that anyone can contribute, and that such contributions matter, are intrinsic in a participatory culture. Participation in a participatory culture takes the form of *affiliations* in online communities such as Facebook, or game clans; *expressions* of art like fan fiction writing and mash-ups; *collaborative problem solving* to complete tasks and develop new knowledge such as Wikipedia; and *circulations* of media such as blogging or podcasting (Jenkins 2006b).

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

In terms of organizational commitment, it is not time or tenure that is important in delivering civic benefits in a participatory culture, but rather participation (in the forms outlined above). The shift from a time-based system of commitment to a participation-based one can be understood through the political economy of civic engagement and low barriers of entry to the NDM. Previously cited statistics about participation indicate that the NDM may serve as an attractive use of scarce time, particularly when compared to traditional civic engagement. One hypothesis for the choice to participate in the NDM is the low barriers to entry, which encourage users of all skill levels to contribute in the NDM. Low barriers to entry in a participatory culture suggest that with access to a computer (which is increasingly common), any participant can use entry-level computing skills to participate in an environment of exchange and sharing. Furthermore, a participatory culture is built through numerous forms of participation, leading to multiple roles for participants. Beyond a simple dichotomy of contributors or free riders, participants are reinforcing the notion that a participatory culture is built by their sundry productions. Indeed, a participatory culture may endow participants with a sense that their contributions have an impact on others that is not available through traditional forms of civic engagement. The ensuing sense of efficacy is a decisive factor in future political behavior.

A participatory culture exists only if people contribute to it, for it is sustained through the interaction of participants with their and others' creations. A participatory culture cannot be mandated; it requires neither formal membership nor face-to-face meetings between participants. To this point, a few words about the potential for social connection in virtual networks are necessary. While the web is anecdotally seen as a place where "no one knows you're a dog," participants in the NDM are not so naïve as to be completely ignorant of the presence of dogs (or non-dogs for that matter) online. Gee's (2003) notion of an "affinity group" is helpful here:

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

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

A structured group or parent organization is not necessary to ensure access to capital such as knowledge, production tools, or distribution channels in the NDM. In a culture that promotes informal mentorships

and exchange, with low costs associated with most cultural productions, membership is not about a parent organization. Rather, it is about the virtual networks that one sustains and develops and how those networks are utilized. Consider *The Daily Prophet*, an online Harry Potter fan club and fan fiction website. After Warner Bros. acquired the rights to the Harry Potter films, the firm began to send “cease and desist” letters to young fans who wrote fan fiction for *The Daily Prophet* website, accusing them of copyright violations. The young Harry Potter fans organized themselves in defense of their creative works, and Warner Bros. eventually lifted the restrictions (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 186-188). The young fans were not members of a “formal” organization; they were just networked young people, bound together by an abiding and common interest. The popularity of the fans’ fiction and websites allowed their collective presence to be noticed. The writers were organized (as a network) rather than atomized, and as a result, they had an impact that rebuffed one of the largest entertainment companies in the world.

Towards Engagement 2.0

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

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional civic engagement and Engagement 2.0

| | Traditional civic engagement | Engagement 2.0 |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Intent | outward-focused | outward-focused |
| Commitment | time-based | participation-based |
| Membership | group, face-to-face | networked, virtual |
| Efficacy | Dependent on structured activities | Interactivity, networked affiliations |

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

Conclusion

The scholarship on civic engagement indicates that civic activities outside the political sphere can have positive impacts on democratic practice. Building off of this, I suggest that the traditional model of civic engagement does not capture the distinctive engagement by many young people today and that a new model inspired by participatory culture is necessary.

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

I do not want to imply that participation in the NDM is a substitute for traditional civic engagement. Instead, participation in a participatory culture should be understood as revealing a new model of civic engagement that organically arises out of an understanding of contemporary youth practice. The traditional model of civic engagement should not be grafted onto young people. Young people have the energy and desire to contribute to democratic practice, and they should be encouraged to do so. The NDM, in some ways, offers the path of least resistance to young people. While online, young people can come and go from sites as they please, and they can make the best use of their time by multi-tasking – talking to friends, writing emails, and checking the sports scores, all while a video they are contributing to a local news site or YouTube is uploading. They don't have to leave the house, and they don't have to put down the things they are tethered to. Rather than see these “social facts” as debilitating to democracy, they should be leveraged to get the most out of young people's desire to be active and feel a part of something beyond themselves.

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