

Chapter 53

Identity, Citizenship, and Moral Constructs from the Virtual Self

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ABSTRACT

Many young people now access digital networks that include individuals very unlike them who promote different cultural, religious and ethical value systems and behaviour. Such value systems can create conflicts of expectation for young people seeking to resolve their relationship to a national citizenship in a pluralistic society, especially if they are experiencing adolescent uncertainties or a growing awareness of social inequalities. The emergence of trans-national political structures and their differing value systems, together with the rise of international tensions, have increased uncertainty about the nature of identity and entitlement to a national citizenship. This paper describes the ongoing Citizens project study of identity development in young people, using real-world scenarios to discover the values that underpin their engagement with this wider range of religious and cultural value systems and to explore personal identity, political issues and citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the common experience of previous generations, many young people in our increasingly interconnected digital world now use or belong to networks where they are continually confronted with individuals who are very unlike them in being not of the same ethnicity, culture, community, kin or tribe. Such experiences present a range of authentic but different cultural, religious and ethical value systems offering an integrated and often persuasive set of expectations that also seek to encourage their adoption. Exposure to

such pluralistic attributes can create conflicts of expectation for young people when attempting to clarify their relationship to a national citizenship in a pluralistic society, especially if they are experiencing adolescent uncertainties or a growing awareness of social inequalities.

However, such circumstances also offer an opportunity for young people to reframe their sense of association with a geographical and cultural space from a wider palette than was historically available. This raises questions of whether there may emerge a new form of globalised culture alongside existing ones that owes its origin and articulation

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to the virtual space of digital telecommunication. Does such a 'technologically processed' sense of identity create a new relationship and sense of identity between the individual and the community or is this simply a false and ephemeral notion that does not resonate with lived behaviour in the physical world? Or is it that identity is not and never can be a completed expression of the self at any stage in life and is always a continual process of modification and adaptation and that individuals will always tend to use whatever means exist in their social setting to conceive of and express relationships with others. In the latter case identity expression via digital media may be merely one element within a general process of relating to others for those individuals with access to a particular cultural communication artefact, confirming the self as "a fluid abstraction, reified through the individual's association with a reality that may be equally flexible." (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 304).

Especially during the onset of puberty and adulthood, identity is an always-evolving cycle of presentation, defence, comparison and adjustment in the face of realities that are expressed in political, cultural and social contexts (Erikson, 1950). Online social network sites therefore provide individuals with another stage on which to construct, edit and display to chosen (or sometimes unchosen) others a selective and edited portfolio of images, sounds and text that (re)present them within the social sphere. Many young people project and enable multiple aspects of their social life through such mobile, flexible technologies, which by their nature often blur the boundaries between the public and the private. By these means the individual may sever the connections between interaction and place and establish new relationships with a multiplication of spaces occupied by many individuals across a range of audiences. It is not unusual to find parents, academics and the media asking what kinds of individual these new digital affordances create or to find them expressing concern about individu-

als becoming withdrawn from 'normal' society as a consequence. The *Citizens* project has to date found that most young people manage their digital social network alongside that in the physical world without difficulty and that their online presence does not commonly produce unwanted or problematic outcomes for them, although exposure to social fragmentation and exclusion tend to decrease political involvement and civic participation (see Hedke & Zimenkova, 2012).

Young people are able to use increasingly highly defined, immersive and multi-media rich virtual spaces to interact with a wide range of environments, contexts and other individuals, both physical and virtual. Prior work has shown how such environments can facilitate the exploration of cultural and personal values for their virtual citizens (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Bisaillon, 1989; Bers & Urrea, 2000; Martin & Vallance, 2008; Martin, 2013) and some studies have concentrated explicitly on the value of multi-user environments and collaborative virtual discussion spaces (e.g. Bruckman, 1998) to show that constructionist approaches maximise the learning, content production and creative expression produced by individuals in such learning communities. In contrast to such experiences of young people online, schools are not generally able to provide access to a comparably rich resource of material and conceptual tools to support the development of workable identity prototypes and roles (Erikson, 1950; Independent, 2006). Citizenship has traditionally been conceived as a relationship between the state and the individual in which the latter gained rights and the legal status as a member of society and the former gained the benefits of the duties and obligations discharged by individual citizens. However the development of digital environments poses something of a challenge to the historical role of education in socialising emerging adults into the contemporary world, as relationships between individuals and their developing social identity are no longer mediated by traditional anchors in their immediate nation,

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