

# Young People, Civic Participation, and the Internet



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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the emerging body of literature on the online civic participation of young people. Following swiftly on the advent of the internet in the 1990s, this literature emerged and expanded rapidly in the context of the ways in which Western policy makers seem to have construed young people as generally not properly motivated or skilled to participate in civic activities. Many scientific studies have also portrayed young people as inactive compared to older age cohorts or previous generations of young people. This depiction of apathy and disaffection has been particularly emphasized in regard to more traditional civic or political activities, such as voting and membership of political parties (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013).

It is against this backdrop that the widespread ‘mediatization’ of contemporary young people’s lives has prompted media and political science scholars to question whether and how new media technologies, particularly the internet, might reinvigorate civic participation amongst young people. The attribution of civic potential to internet activities constitutes the newest episode in old scholarly discussions about what civic participation envelops. The next section outlines the contours of these discussions, as well as the development of the literature on young people’s civic participation online. The section thereafter

discusses the (sometimes conflicting) forms of knowledge and insights that have been produced within four strands of empirical research on young people’s online civic participation. The last two sections consist of a discussion of directions for further research and a conclusion.

## BACKGROUND

The online activities to which civic potential has been attributed differ in nature and in form. Aside from visiting informational sites, recent forms of online participation have been described as more ‘interactive’ and include activity on online petition platforms, forums, blogs, photo sharing sites such as Instagram, video sharing platforms such as YouTube, micro-blogs such as Twitter, and social network sites such as Facebook. Studies that have investigated people’s participation in such activities have been conducted, as outlined below, in the context of wider discussions about the activities that should be considered as civic in the first place. Therewith impacting on any conclusion drawn about the manner and extent of young people’s civic participation, these discussions have formed a major thrust behind the literature on online civic activity of youth. The second part of this section discusses the historical development of this literature about young people’s online civic participation.

## **What is the Civic?**

People's participation in activities within the formal political arena has received much attention within political science research (Van Deth, 2011). Voting and activism for a political party are among the most prominent of these activities. Studies that have focused on participation in such activities have generally concluded that there is some sort of democratic 'deficit' or 'crisis' among young people in particular. Such research has, for instance, concluded that contemporary young people, compared to older age cohorts or previous generations of youth, vote less and are less knowledgeable about formal political processes (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011).

However, an increasing number of scholars have objected to the notion that non-participation in these traditional activities signifies a problem *per se*. These scholars have asserted that, for young people, such activities are often not appealing in the context of their circumstances and everyday life. Some have maintained, for instance, that young people are not attracted to politicians' communication style and that they lack the feeling that participation in traditional political activities is effective (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013a).

For these reasons, young people are presumed, by some, to have embraced various forms of issue-based participation outside the formal political arena. Some of these activities are considered as 'traditional', such as participation in demonstrations and signing petitions. Other activities are considered as more 'individualistic' or 'creative', and mainly include activities related to consumption, such as buying organic, eco-friendly and fair trade products, or the activities on the internet mentioned above. While there are evident differences between these activities, most of them have in common that they are, or can be, conducted outside formal organizational structures. These activities, in this sense, are not only 'extra-parliamentary', but also 'extra-institutional' (Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010).

## **Online Civic Participation**

The differences in the activities on which scholars have focused signify that the very meaning of civic participation has changed and been contested historically. The study of internet-based civic participation has also been through different stages. Shortly following the advent of the internet, studies began theorizing the medium's potential impact on society and democracy. These studies often foresaw extreme interpersonal and socio-political changes, either utopian or dystopian by nature. On the one hand, studies depicted the individuality of internet applications as a sure recipe for socio-political tragedy, with high levels of internet use expected to result in, among other things, diminishing levels of collective civic action, face-to-face interactivity, civil debate, or the scrutiny of political authority (e.g., Street, 1992). On the other hand, there were studies that predicted that citizens will effectively use the internet to contest political or economic authority or benefit from direct democracy (e.g., Negroponte, 1995).

Early studies continued to revolve around theoretical speculation on these issues, but were also increasingly prescriptive in nature, addressing how websites should be designed by NGOs or governmental agencies if they are to successfully improve people's attention for civic issues. Recommendations for 'best practice' in this respect concern, among other things, the organization of the personnel that produce websites and the preferred modes of communications online. A list with such recommendations comes from Stephen Coleman (2008), who prescribes, among other things, total freedom of expression; dialogic links with those in authority; and clear agreements about what involvement will achieve.

Studies that were conducted in the last decade or so, however, were increasingly based on empirical research, inquiring into whether, how and why the internet might promote civic participation. The next section provides a concise overview of the key knowledge and insights that have been

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