

Chapter 39

Becoming Citizens in the Age of Online Social Networks: Youths' Civic Engagement in China and Japan

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ABSTRACT

New media studies have attracted increasing scholarly attention as communication technologies become integrated into our everyday lives. New media provide unique contexts to share, record, and extend civic life and motivate civic commitment in the digital era. This chapter addresses the intersection of new media, culture, and political communication by exploring youths' civic engagement in China and Japan through individual voluntarism, civic participation, and political activism. It interrogates the civic use of social network sites in the digital age so as to increase our understanding of intercultural online interactions. Through the case studies of China and Japan, this research adds to the knowledge of intercultural communication in the networked society, with its potential to promote more democratic forms of engagement between citizens and states in the contexts of new media.

INTRODUCTION

New media have become important online communication venues for people across the world. A growing number of individuals, especially young people, interact, connect, explore, participate, and negotiate by using this new mode of online communication. New media and culture now have a permanent place on research agendas and in intellectual inquiry.

New media provide unique contexts to share, record, extend civic life and motivate civic commitment in the digital era. They are interrelated with civic engagement to analyze the interactive process

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concerning the transmission of information among citizens, new media, and cultures (Gastil, 2008; Moraru & Rusu, 2017; Dahlgren, 2005). Advance in communication technologies influences the ways people engage in political participation and volunteer engagement. New media have afforded novel opportunities for people to connect with each other on political issues and allow them to benefit positively from community development through participation, activism, information processing, and livelihood skills development (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Campbell, Levinson & Frederick, 2012). As Bala (2014) indicates, this digital civic engagement leads to a wide range of phenomena, from using social networks to access information to the use of digital platforms to exchange views, from the use of mobile application to access government services to organizing protests on social networks.

This research project emphasizes volunteer engagement, citizen participation, information processing, and political activism with the use of social media in intercultural communication contexts. It investigates the civic use of social network sites among youths in China and Japan so as to increase our understanding of what East Asian youths do online, by emphasizing the understudied area of their civic use of new media. Previous research has examined how social networks have been used to engage in cultural conversations, political activism, and political activities, for example, by African Americans in the U.S., youths in *Arab Spring* in Egypt and Tunisia, and people and politicians in Turkey (Brock, 2012; Carty, 2014; Sancar, 2013). Civic participation and political activism of young people have been explored in places such as Mexico, South Africa, Europe, Chile, and Spain (Malila & Oelofsen, 2016; Sloam, 2014; Rocha, Gutiérrez, & Cortés, 2017; Sola-Morales & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2017). With the rapid development of digital technologies, it is important to investigate how social networks extend the context of civic life and how participation in civic engagement looks like in the rest of the world such as countries in East Asia. In the rapidly developing digital era, young people are experiencing increasing gaps between the technological haves and have-nots, and changing social connections. Scholars have pointed out that Asian youths are experiencing digital connectivity and dis-connectivity as a result of rapid economic and technological developments (Yang, 2009; Lin, Cheong, Kim & Jung, 2010; Hommerich, 2014). Therefore, as Chinese and Japanese youths are embracing communication technologies at unprecedented rate, civic engagement in the age of online social networks remains an important area of scholarly inquiry. A qualitative analysis through interviews provides a rich and in-depth understanding of the youths' civic experiences in the contexts of new media. It adds to the knowledge of intercultural communication in the networked society by empowering political participation and relationship building in the digital age and has the potential to promote more democratic forms of engagement between citizens and states in China and Japan.

BACKGROUND

This section reviews existing literature in online social networks and civic engagement relevant to the current study. Three sets of research are presented: 1) civic engagement and new media, 2) net citizens of the digital generation, and 3) use of online social networks in China and Japan. These strands of previous literature provide theoretical foundation and important context for the current research.

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