How Communication Technologies Function as Platforms and Pathways to Civic and Political Engagement:
An Agenda for Research and Public Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an assessment of what we know empirically about how communication technologies are being used by young people (typically defined as those between the ages of 18 and 29) as both platforms and pathways for civic and political engagement. An overview of existing research is utilized as the basis for this investigation. Research on this topic is limited in several ways, including its failure to acknowledge the distinction between individuals who are engaged merely by using communication technologies (technology as a platform for participation) versus those who are engaged beyond the exclusive use of communication technologies (technology as a pathway for participation). Understanding this distinction can better enable scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners to develop inclusive strategies for engaging young people. The authors' analysis reveals that recent research demonstrates that new technologies can serve as both platforms and pathways for civic and political engagement, and, with this distinction in mind, they provide recommendations to policy- and decision-makers and scholars interested in this issue.

KEYWORDS

Civic Engagement, Internet, Millennial Generation, Pathway, Platform, Political Engagement, Social Networking Site, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Scholars continue to examine how communication technologies such as the telephone, television, and the Internet, including social media, influence the ways citizens interact with each other, civic organizations and the government. Each new invention raises the same question in the extant literatures: are the latest communication technologies complementing, enhancing or detracting from civic and political activities? The Internet has facilitated protests, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, as individuals participating have relied on technology-based social media to connect with one another, develop strategies and tactics, and mobilize. The study of the *potential* impact of communication technologies on levels of engagement has often predicted falling rates of political participation and declining involvement in civic organizations, especially among young people (Flanagan and Levine 2010; Levine, 2007; Putnam, 2000, 2004). Robert Putnam (2000, 2004) argues that this occurrence is associated with a decline of social capital, which he defines as the structures of social composition such as the networks, standards, and trust that make possible coordination and teamwork for mutual value. He discovered that involvement in civic associations, local affairs,

churches, schools and unions, time being with family, friends and neighbors, and charitable donating have all declined. Underlying his analysis is the assumption that engagement, whether civic or political, will enhance levels of social trust and efficacy in citizenship, thereby strengthening our democracy.

Since the arrival of the World Wide Web in the late 1990s, the "Millennial Generation" or "Generation Z" (Campione, 2014; Linden, 2015; Turner, 2015) has been at the center of the technological landscape. This generation of young people has been at the ground floor of new technology such as instant messaging, peer-to-peer file swapping, and social networking. As increasing numbers of young people use communication technologies to express themselves creatively and to connect with others, it would seem that the potential for increasing their levels of engagement strengthens (Bess and Bartolini, 2011; Ignatius and Hechanova, 2014; Young and Hinesly, 2012). These activities are part of what is called "Web 2.0," and include online applications that facilitate interactive information sharing and user-centered design such as blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Harrison and Barthel, 2009). Some recent evidence from the 2008 and 2012 Presidential campaigns suggests that youth engagement may be improving (Brewer, 2015; Brubaker, Horning, and Toula, 2015; Marcelo and Kirby, 2008). The potential of communication technologies to affect the civic and political engagement of young people may be at a tipping point and is ready for closer examination. The time is right to see if Putnam, and others, are correct – are new technologies drawing young people away from engagement, or are those technologies serving to connect young people and draw them into civic and political participation?

BACKGROUND

There is general agreement that the unprecedented growth in society's use of communication technologies has the potential to transform our civic and political existence (Kruikemeier et al., 2014; Lynch, 2011; Polat, 2005), but few researchers agree about the nature of this change (Davis, 2005; Kruikemeier, 2014; Towner, 2013).

One group believes that communication technologies have a positive impact on civic engagement in general (Farnham et al., 2013; Tseng and Hsieh, 2015; Warren, Sulaiman, and Jaafar, 2014) and political engagement (Shogan, 2010; Mossberger, and Tolbert, 2010; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal, 2008; Xenos, Vromen, and Loader, 2014)). This theory is based on technology lowering the costs of communication, association, and participation (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2011) and increasing levels of social capital (Burke, Kraut, and Marlow, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2011), including the ability of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) to strengthen civil society (Chen, 2015; Ellison, Lampe, and Steinfield, 2009), and governmental transparency (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes, 2010), and mobilize inactive populations (Spada et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2003). One of the strongest arguments to support this position focuses on the potential of new communication technologies to increase young people's levels of civic and political engagement (Brubaker, Horning and Toula, 2015; Chan and Guo, 2013; Park et al., 2009). This demographic group has been found to be the most likely of all age groups to use such technologies (Kaiser, 2010; Xenos and Foot, 2008) and so may be the most susceptible to their potential for facilitating engagement.

A second view contends that communication technologies will not have a substantive impact on levels of civic engagement ((Brooks, 2009; Bachen et al., 2008; Welch and White, 2012) and political engagement (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Boulianne Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2010; Xenos and Moy, 2007). This view assumes that the present composition of civic and political life will not be greatly impacted positively or negatively by such technologies. Some research has determined that individuals who were already engaged were more likely to use technology to enhance this behavior by

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