

The Digital Citizen

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to sketch out the profile of the digital citizen. The premise for this article rests upon utopian views that embrace new media technologies as democratizers of postindustrial society (e.g., Bell, 1981; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998; Rheingold, 1993) and cautionary criticism that questions the substantial impact new media could have on reviving a dormant public sphere (e.g., Bimber & Davis, 2003; Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Jankowski & van Selm, 2000; Jones, 1997; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Concurrently, declining participation in traditional forms of political involvement and growing public cynicism (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1993, 1996) position the Internet and related technologies as vehicles through which political activity can be reinvented. Still, conflicting narratives on civic involvement, as articulated by the government, politicians, the media, and the public, create confusion about the place and role of the citizen in a digital age. The digital citizen profile, therefore, is defined by historical and cultural context, divided between expectation and skepticism regarding new media, and presents hope of resurrecting the public sphere and awakening a latent, postmodern political consciousness. This article outlines these conditions, reviews perceptions of the digital citizen, and proposes a digital citizen role model for the future.

BACKGROUND

Any discussion of political consequence new media is preceded by discussion of the following four predominant and overlapping trends in civic participation, as presented in relevant research: (a) nostalgia for past forms of political engagement, articulated within public sphere rhetoric; (b) the aggregation of public opinion within representative democracy models; (c) the growth of public cynicism and disillusionment toward politics and the mass media; and (d) declining civic participation through formal channels of political involvement.

First, retrospective examinations of public engagement frequently evoke the ideal of the public sphere, as

articulated by Habermas (1989), who viewed the public sphere as a domain of our social life in which public opinion could be formed out of rational public debate, leading to public agreement and decision making, thus epitomizing democratic tradition. According to this view, mass media have rendered these forms of democratic involvement in politics extinct. Critics of the Habermasian viewpoint argue that anarchy, individuality, and disagreement, rather than rational accord, lead to true democratic emancipation (Lyotard, 1984). They also find that Habermas's examples of past, romanticized public spheres excluded women and nonpropertied classes and propose a postindustrial model of coexisting public spheres or counterpublics, which form in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate (Fraser, 1992). These multiple public spheres, not equally powerful, articulate, or privileged, exist and give voice to collective identities and interests. Schudson's (1998) reviews of political activity reveal that the evidence a true ideal public ever existed is sparse, and that public discourse is not the soul of democracy, for it is seldom egalitarian, may be too large and amorphous, is rarely civil, and ultimately offers no magical solution to problems of democracy. Perhaps it is more meaningful to view the public sphere as an impossible ideal worth striving toward, rather than an extinct form of political interaction.

Second, congruent to the demise of the public sphere in modern society is the trend to aggregate public opinion. Several conditions associated with the postindustrial condition, especially mass society, urbanization, and the orientation of mass media have led government, politicians and the mass media to rely on aggregations of public opinion obtained through polls. This trend, which Herbst (1993) refers to as "numbered voices," exchanges the individuality, detail and authenticity of personal opinion on public affairs for a concentration of opinions that fit into predetermined question and answer sets reported in aggregation. The tendency to group and categorize public opinion, therefore, limits the opportunities and the scope of discussion on public affairs, as citizens are not called upon to deliberate, but merely to report agreement or disagreement with certain questions. This phenomenon compromises the depth of the public sphere and restricts civic involvement with public affairs.

Third, a parallel development of growing public cynicism and disillusionment with politics and the mass media

keeps citizens from becoming actively involved with public affairs. Research conducted on the effects of cynicism consistently reveals that cynical language employed by politicians and the media, as well as the tendency to focus on discussing/reported insider goings-on instead of important issues, leads skepticism about the impact political, media, and citizen action could have on improving public affairs (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1993, 1996). As the prospect of civic participation influencing governance appears grim and as this skepticism is reinforced through negative or cynical coverage in the mass media, growing cynicism spreads in a spiraling manner (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, 1997).

Fourth, all these trends are reflected in growing reluctance to participate in politics through formal or conventional channels of civic engagement, such as voting, community involvement, and volunteering. Despite the fact that the modern public sphere attempts to not draw distinctions based on gender, class, or race, the democratic model practiced in modern societies leaves little room for citizen involvement. Representative democracy, the prevalent mode of democracy at present, allows citizens to elect officials who deliberate and make decisions for them. Efficacy of governance in a mass society is thus secured, but public deliberation of civic affairs is compromised. Compounding forces place additional restrictions. Carey (1995), for instance, argued that the privatizing forces of capitalism have created a mass commercial culture that has replaced the public sphere. Putnam (1996) attributed the disappearance of civic America to the omnipresent television, suggesting that television occupies all time previously devoted to civic affairs and induces passive outlooks on life. Hart (1994) argued that some media, such as television, “supersaturate viewers with political information,” and that as a result, “this tumult creates in viewers a sense of activity rather than genuine civic involvement” (p. 109). In the same vein, in a striking comparison of civic disengagement among over the past 30 years, Delli Carpini (2000) described young Americans as less trusting, less interested in politics or public affairs, less likely to feel a sense of obligation associated with citizenship, less knowledgeable about the substance and processes of politics, less likely to read a newspaper or watch the news, less likely to register to vote, less likely to participate in politics beyond voting, less likely to participate in similarly minded community organizations, and less likely to engage in traditional forms of civic engagement.

Within this context, new media are viewed as vehicles through which these conditions can be amended. For instance, the Internet could serve as a virtual sphere or revive the public sphere, provide a forum through which individual, not numbered, voices can be heard, host

political discussion that focuses on issues and not strategy, and encourage deliberative or direct models of democracy. Digital media, including the Internet, set the state for a digital citizen to function, a stage in which several of shortcomings of past modes of civic participation can be overcome.

THE DIGITAL CITIZEN

As an entity in modern society, the digital citizen is defined and reified through his/her use of digital media. This means that the digital citizen observes, monitors, and becomes involved in civic affairs through digital media and implies that the digital citizen can be both empowered and restricted through use of digital media. The Internet, the primary medium for this type of citizen, as it converges and sustains several operative digital technologies, becomes an asset or a detriment, depending on how it is put to use.

While the Internet and surrounding digital technologies provide a public space for the digital citizen to function, they do not necessarily provide a public sphere. The possibility of information access enabled by emerging media has not been associated with increase in political participation or civic engagement (Bimber, 2001), and has not been identified as a factor in reducing voter cynicism (Kaid, 2002). Moreover, entertainment uses of the Web tend to prevail over more informational ones, and do not generate substantial social capital (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). A new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere, in that a virtual space simply enhances discussion; a virtual sphere should enhance democracy.

As a virtual public and political space, the Internet is plagued by lack of universal access, discussion that sometimes unites and often divides further, and growing commercialization that threatens to marginalize alternatives uses of digital media. The advantages of the Internet as a public space can be enjoyed only by the select few who have access to it, thus harboring an illusion of an open public sphere (Pavlik, 1994; Williams, 1994; Williams & Pavlik, 1994). While digitally enabled (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988; Grossman, 1995; Jones, 1997; Rash, 1997), this citizen operates within an online sphere that reproduces the class, gender, and race inequalities of past public sphere incarnations (Hill & Hughes, 1988). Discussion online also bares the potential of connecting citizens or further emphasizing insurmountable differences (e.g., Mitra, 1997a, 1997b; Schmitz, 1997), and can suffer from the same conditions present in traditional media or forms of involvement. Specifically, digital citizens may express opinions online, and do so loudly, but

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