

Chapter 21

How Young People are Using Communication Technologies as Platforms and Pathways to Engagement: What the Research Tells Us

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ABSTRACT

This chapter 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 the current research concerning the relationship between communication technologies and civic and political engagement is used as the basis for this investigation. Previous research fails to acknowledge the difference between individuals who are engaged only 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). This distinction will better enable government officials, agencies, and practitioners to develop comprehensive strategies for engaging young people based on what we know about how technology is being utilized. The analysis reveals that technology can serve as both a platform and pathway for political engagement. Whether the same is true for civic engagement is unclear. The authors also provide recommendations to policy and decision makers based on the results of their analysis of the extant literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars continue to examine how communication technologies such as the telephone, television, and Internet affect the way citizens interact with each other, civic organizations, and the government. Each new invention raises the same question in the extant literature: are the latest communication technologies complementing, enhancing, or detracting from civic and political life? The investigation of the *potential* impact of communication technologies on levels of engagement has been prompted by falling rates of political participation and the decline of involvement in civic organizations especially among young people (Delli Carpini, 2001; Levine, 2007; Putnam, 1995, 2001). Robert Putnam (2001) argues that this phenomenon is connected to a decline in social capital, which he defines as “the features of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 66). This approach assumes 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” (Gambone, 2001; Leonard, 2000), has been at the center of the technological landscape. This generation of young people has been at the ground floor concerning the use 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, the likelihood of increasing their levels of engagement strengthens. These activities are part of what is called “Web 2.0.” This includes online applications that facilitate interactive information sharing and user-centered design such as blogs and social networking sites (Harrison and Barthel, 2009). Some recent evidence from the 2006 and 2008 campaigns suggests that youth engagement may be improving (Kirby

and Marcelo, 2006; Marcelo and Kirby, 2008). The potential of communication technologies to affect the civic and political engagement of young people is at a tipping point and is ready for closer examination.

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 (Polat, 2005; Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2003), but few researchers agree about the nature of this change (Davis, 2005; Katz and Rice, 2002; Norris, 2001). One group believes that communication technologies have a positive impact on civic engagement (Lin, Cook, and Burt, 2001; Gibson, Howard, and Ward, 2000; Hampton and Wellman, 2001, 2003) and political engagement (Barber, 2001; Hagen and Mayer, 2000; Krueger, 2002; Vettehen, Hagemann and Van Snippenburg, 2004). This theory is based on technology lowering the costs of communication, association, and participation; and the potential of “wired” communities to strengthen civil society (Franzen, 2000; Howard, Rainie and Jones, 2001) and mobilize inactive populations (Barber, 2001; Krueger, 2002; Weber, Loumakis and Bergman, 2003). One of the strongest arguments to support this position focuses on the potential of these communication technologies to increase young people’s levels of civic and political engagement (Delli Carpini, 2000). 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).

A second view contends that communication technologies will not have a substantive impact on levels of civic engagement (Gross, Juvonen and Gable, 2002; Katz and Aspden, 1997; Kohut, 2000) and political engagement (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Ward et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2000). This view assumes that the present composition of

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