Chapter 82
Young People's Online Civic Participation

Fadi Hirzalla
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Shakuntala Banaji
London School of Economic and Political Science, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the body of academic literature about young people's online civic participation. The authors first sketch how this literature has developed historically in the context of old and changing scholarly discussions about what civic participation and democratic citizenship more generally do or should envelop. The second section outlines how extant empirical studies on young people's civic participation online may be subdivided into four strands of research, each focusing on different questions and relying on different methods. The closing section provides a number of directions for further research, mostly calling for innovative and more pressing context-specific and people-centered research approaches.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a concise review of the development and characteristics of a body of academic literature that is devoted to the online civic participation of young people. Following fairly swiftly on the advent of the internet in the 1990s, this literature emerged and expanded rapidly in the context of socio-political developments and traditional scholarly discussions about democratic citizenship.

The socio-political developments motivating much of the literature about young people's internet-based or online civic participation primarily concern the somewhat homogenous ways in which many Western official policy-making authorities seem to have construed young people's civic life. Apparently assuming that young people – often defined and approached as a singular cohort that includes the ages between 12 and 30 – are generally not properly motivated and/or skilled to participate in civic activities, American and

British policy makers, for instance, have sought to encourage young people's civic participation through youth councils and educational projects. The Dutch government too has aimed to promote young people's civic participation through 'social traineeships', among other strategies. In Scandinavian countries, young people's civic participation has formed a major policy field, leading to various experiments with 'e-democracy'. The European Union has aimed to developed similar policies within the framework of the White Paper on Youth – "a response to the apparent disaffection of youth with traditional forms of participation in public life" (COMM206, 2005).

Scholars have discussed extensively whether or not young people are actually in need of such policies. Over the past decades, most academic studies (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; Delli Carpini, 2000) have portrayed young people as civically inactive, particularly in comparison with older age cohorts or with previous generations of young people. This depiction of apathy and disaffection has been particularly the case in regard to more traditional civic (or 'political') activities, such as voting and membership of political parties (e.g., Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Such depictions are especially alarming in the context of democratic citizenship theories, which presume that childhood and adolescence are impressionable and formative life stages during which people develop lasting attitudes and behaviors; that young people can and should articulate and safeguard their generational interests through civic participation; and that all citizens, young people included, have a 'democratic duty' to participate in civic activities if socio-political ideals in terms of equality, freedom and solidarity are to be preserved (Galston, 1995).

It is against this backdrop that the widespread "mediatization" (or digitization) of contemporary young people's everyday lives has enthused media and political science scholars across the globe, prompting theorizations and investigations of whether and how the internet might reinvigorate civic participation amongst young people. Particu-larly in developed Western countries, but also in countries in Central and Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, young people are described as having adopted new media technologies on a massive scale. Many young people seem to use the internet in particular on a daily basis, predominantly for social and leisure activities. Socio-demographic differences in technology hardware availability and internet access intensity – so-called 'digital divides', for instance, between men and women – are still present in different forms, but also seem to be diminishing gradually in various developed countries (Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

The attribution of civic potential to certain internet activities constitutes the newest episode in old scholarly discussions about what civic participation and democratic citizenship more generally do or should envelop. The next section outlines the historical contours of these discussions, as well as the development of the literature on young people's civic participation online. The penultimate section discusses the (sometimes conflicting) forms of knowledge and insights that have been produced within four different strands of empirical research on young people's online civic participation. Directions for further research will be discussed in the closing section.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE FIELD

The internet activities to which civic potential has been attributed by scholars (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Chadwick, 2006; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010) differ widely both in nature and in form. Aside from visiting websites in pursuit of civic information or news, recent forms of online civic participation have been described as more 'interactive', and include the use of online petitions and the forwarding of e-mails aimed at mobilizing popular protest for or against socio-political matters, as well as the discussion and articulation

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