

E-Civic Engagement and the Youth: New Frontiers and Challenges for Urban Planning

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how community-based organizations working in low-income residential neighborhoods of U.S. cities employ e-tools and social networking platforms to engage the youth. The authors interviewed representatives of community organizations that work with young adults from lower-income groups in Chicago to comprehend their actual usages and perceptions of electronic tools. These organizations facilitate a wide-range of initiatives including political and after-school education, gang-free spaces, crime intervention and prevention, and arts and media. They found that the organizations have internalized the idea of employing e-Engagement techniques to enhance communication with their constituents but use new technologies and social media in multiple ways. Many respondents posit that the presently available e-tools enable certain forms of civic engagement but require sustained resources. Also stressed is the roles of face-to-face communication, offline-meetings, and other traditional means of interaction to ensure the commitment and quality of effective engagement in this age of e-participations.

Keywords: Community-Based Organizations, E-Civic Engagement, E-Tools, Urban Politics, Youth

INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement is a main pillar of democracy. Rather than increasing as would be expected of mature democracies, recent research points to its steady decline in countries such as the US, UK, and Australia, often hailed as the epitome of democracy, volunteerism, and civic

life (Holdsworth et al., 2006; Putnam, 2000). This situation calls for renewed efforts to re-invigorate democracy by turning these trends around. Along these lines, many governments and community-based organizations are making new commitments to the inclusion of young people from all ethnic backgrounds so that they freely express themselves, take part in a full range of activities and governance processes, and contribute to building a better connected community.

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Many governments and agencies are also formulating strategies to empower youth with needed skills that support their civic engagement locally and across governmental and community-based organizations. For example, the Australian city of Melbourne has initiated coordination mechanisms between existing and emerging organizations dealing with youth's civic engagement in order to bring them together to share information and organize programs. These mechanisms are meant to help sustain a city-wide involvement and participation in relating collective issues to formal social and political structures within the city. Exhibiting genuine commitment, Melbourne has not only allocated dedicated funding and staff but also taken a leadership role in the establishment of networks to augment youth participation (Holdsworth et al., 2006).

The revolution in e-technology has been hailed as a unique opportunity to increase engagement across the social spectrum including the youth. Often cited examples include the e-engagement of youth in Barak Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and the electronic media's role in the recent Egyptian uprising that brought down the Mubarak regime. As more people turn to e-media for communication, the possibilities of global community's real time information exchanges and participation in debate and social change appear plausible. The case of teenagers and young adults is particularly intriguing since they are increasingly participating in social and community life through virtual tools, multimedia, and interactive technologies. Traditional means of engagement incur the burden of traveling in order to meet people. In contrast, new e-communication tools allow users, including the youth, to virtually travel "unlimited" distances, facilitate greater opportunities to meet larger number of people, freely pick the engagement time, and read materials interactively through multi-media settings (Saggers et al., 2004, p. 109).

"Youth engagement in politics and community affairs has quietly been taking on new life and a dynamic new look, thanks to the Internet.

Scarcely audible above the hubbub over piracy and pornography and the clamor of the media marketplace, a low-profile civic upsurge – created for and sometimes by young people – has taken root on the Net. Hundreds of websites have been created that encourage and facilitate youth civic engagement, contributing to an emerging genre on the Internet that could loosely be called 'youth civic culture.'" (Montgomery et al., 2004, p. 1)

Research indicates that youth's free time has decreased by an estimated nine hours per week while the time they spend on some form of electronic media has increased by six and a half hours in the last 25 years (Poirier, 2011). Despite the widespread optimistic sentiment about the purported transformative power and potential of new electronic technologies, or perhaps because of the presumed belief in their value, actual usage and effects on the ground have not been adequately explored. Indeed, the dramatic commercial success of e-technologies such as Twitter, smart phones, or Facebook may have adversely resulted in neglecting critical applications and implications of e-tools for the purpose of civic engagement. Certainly, the decline in civic engagement appears to contradict the possibilities and reach of e-media calling for special efforts to assess its potential on this front, and most importantly to seek ways to redirect it towards education, socialization, and community building. This is critical for new generations if we are to reinvent civic and political participation and counter recent trends.

How do community-based organizations working in lower-income residential districts of US cities employ e-tools and social networking platforms to engage the youth? Intrigued by this question and driven by aforementioned concerns and preoccupations, we carried out an exploratory inquiry to determine how community-based groups use e-tools and social networking platforms to connect disadvantaged youth to political and civic causes, increase their public voice, and encourage their participation in community building. Our research involved detailed investigation of ten organizations

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