

# Online Localities: Implications for Democracy and Education

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“All Politics is Local.” (Thomas P. [Tip] O’Neill)

Localism has long been viewed as central to conceptions of democracy and civic life in the United States. Philosopher Alexis de Toqueville famously observed in his volume *Democracy in America*: “The strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people’s reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty” (Toqueville, 2000, p. 49). The notion that geographic proximity and face-to-face interactions are vital for motivating participation, for developing democratic habits and skills, and for the actual participation of citizens has maintained its relevance over the years and is central to more recent theories of democracy as well (Barber, 1984; Putnam, 2000).

Furthermore, the importance of participation in local communities is central to recent efforts in the field of civic education which stress the importance of giving young people opportunities to work with others in their schools, neighborhoods and cities to define common problems, debate potential solutions, and engage in efforts to address these issues (see, e.g., Gibson & Levine, 2003; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Schools that take this approach are using democracy in action to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for future participation in new localities and beyond. Furthermore, there is mounting evidence that this approach is effective (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2006; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2005; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Metz & Youniss, 2005; Smith, 1999; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Many things about American social and political life have changed, however,

since the days of Toqueville. The introduction of the internet and associated developments in digital media have not only created a new mechanism for communication but in recent years have made it possible for people to engage in a wide array of everyday activities (both social and practical) without ever physically leaving their homes. This appears to be particularly true for youth who, according to a national study conducted in 2005, spend on average more than 5 hours per week online (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005) and increasingly use digital technology to communicate with friends and to meet new people (Lenhart, 2009).

As people spend more time online and conduct more of their day-to-day business in this manner, scholars have begun to question what, if any, implications these trends have for participation in local communities and for the functioning of our democracy. Some political scientists worry that online activity is drawing people away from participation in local communities in ways that will ultimately harm democracy (Nie, 2001). Digital media scholars, however, point to the increasingly social nature of online activities and suggest that virtual worlds (Bennett, 2008), social networking sites (Boyd, 2007), and even networked games (Steinkuhler & Williams, 2006) can act as “third spaces” where civil society flourishes and can provide young people with opportunities to create communities.

In addition, democratic theories that have grown out of the work of Tocqueville, John Dewey, and others emphasize the face-to-face neighborhood as an essential component to the nurturing of civic commitments and capacities in young people. However, current-day scholars are challenging the primacy of geography for establishing local communities. For example, Shrager (2002) suggests that high levels of mobility, shifting geographic boundaries, and competing factions within communities require new criteria for defining local communities with an emphasis on defining community by shared interests rather than simple geographic proximity. Similarly, Delli Carpini (2000) concludes that the Internet is creating communities that are more interest-based than geographically-based. However, just as geographic proximity may not always translate into community, virtual proximity may not always produce community and particularly democratic communities. These developments raise questions about whether, from the standpoint of democratic life, the Internet may be changing what counts as local and, from an educational perspective, whether participation in online localities might require different skills or approaches than those traditionally emphasized in current civic education efforts.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to examine whether and how online communities might function as democratic communities and as gateways to broader engagement in democratic life. It also considers implications of the increasing amount of online activity for democratic education. In the first section, we highlight four qualities of local communities that we believe are central to supporting democracy. In conducting this analysis we draw heavily on the work of John Dewey, and especially on *The Public and its Problems*. This choice reflects both Dewey's importance as a philosopher of democracy and the emphasis he placed on the role of localism as a context for cultivating democracy. Indeed, *The Public and its Problems* was in many ways an effort to examine how democracy could survive and develop in an industrial era in which the centrality of local ties were diminished. As such, Dewey's framework (though far from the only possible choice) provides a useful starting point for considering ways the growth of digital media may be transforming both the nature of democratic life and the role that geographic proximity plays in its cultivation.

In the second section, we draw on examples from the literature and from our own data on youth participation with digital media to consider how online communities might play similar roles today. In the physical world, "local" tends to mean whatever is in physical proximity. In the virtual world, defining local is more complicated, as every online space is simultaneously physically near (you only have to go to your computer) and removed. Nonetheless, for the regular participants, some online communities take on qualities of being "local" while others feel distant, foreign, or unrelated. By applying the criteria we outline in the first section, it is our hope that we can begin to better understand the roles that online communities may or may not play as democratic localities, as well as the kind of research that will help us track the impact of this fast-changing technology.

In the final section, we discuss implications for civic education.

### The Role of Local Communities in Democracy

As explained above, our interest in "new localism" and online communities is based on the notion that it is in local communities that the skills, commitments, and understandings of democratic life develop and where democratic community life is most transparently enacted. Dewey (1927/1954) described democracy as a constant process of "the public"—a group of individuals who share

concerns or whose decisions affect one another—identifying itself and deciding how to best serve the needs of the individuals and groups within it. This process of discovery requires constant dialogue and deliberation. Dewey’s conception of democracy was integrally tied to life in geographically local communities. As he famously wrote, “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community” (p. 213). Indeed, Dewey (1900/1956) viewed local communities, which he initially conceived of as being geographically constrained and consisting of face-to-face relationships, as crucial contexts for developing the habits and commitments of democratic life. Though he believed that democratic dynamics could exist beyond local contexts, he saw local contexts as essential and, in many ways, more fundamental. Indeed, his commitment to democracy, broadly conceived, was central to the reasons he wanted the school to “be made a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons” (p. 14).

While Dewey believed that community was a central building block of democracy, he also saw clearly that not every group of people can be described as a community or public and that not all communities or publics are democratically organized. Dewey’s efforts to describe the conditions of democracy give us some useful tools for evaluating the role of local communities and how online communities might or might not play that role in modern society. Specifically, in the section that follows, we highlight four qualities of democratic life and the ways in which local communities can support these qualities of democratic life. This framework also enables us to reflect on how qualities of online life and online communities potentially do and do not support democratic participation.

First, Dewey emphasized the importance of an awareness of *shared consequences* to defining a group as a public. When the actions of members of a group or of organizations and institutions affect “for good or evil” more than those who are directly involved in the activity, that becomes a matter of public concern (1927, p. 35), and for Dewey it is the “lasting, extensive and serious consequences of associated activity” that “bring into existence a public” (p. 67). This quality is often not fully recognized because it is so fundamental—any group has the potential to become democratically organized. However, if the actions of each member of a group are of little consequence to the others, there is little need for a system of organizing the group or resolving issues.

Though Dewey (1927) did not make specific claims about the size or unit of a group that might be called a public, he argued that a very small and narrowly

defined group was unlikely to qualify because of the ease of resolving issues informally, and that groups that were too dispersed and distant were unlikely to be able to recognize shared consequences to an extent that would qualify as falling within the same public (p. 39). Thus, the recognition of shared consequences and shared concerns is the force that drives the need for democracy, and participation in communities where one can experience this recognition is essential for individuals' participation in democracy. Furthermore, Dewey described this process in terms of radiating or expanding networks of individuals whose behavior might be of consequence for one another (p. 47). This implies a process that begins in local communities, which then may grow beyond those communities to either address relationships between communities or issues that commonly affect the functioning of those communities.

Second, Dewey believed that members of a group needed to have a sense of responsibility for deciding the purpose and nature of community action within the group (1927, p. 147). This notion was central to the "democratic ideal in its generic social sense." Indeed, that a democratic community is marked by a sense of *shared responsibility for decision-making* helps distinguish between any grouping of people (public or private) and one that is democratically organized. In other words, as a first step, a community must have a sense of shared interest or consequences to be considered a community or public in any meaningful sense. However, to be considered a *democratic* community, members must also have a sense of shared responsibility and agency when it comes to action. While not all local communities allow individuals to play a meaningful role in identifying and deciding how to address matters of public concern, their size and the proximity that individuals within them have to each other led Dewey to believe that they were well suited to provide such opportunities.

Third, and particularly relevant for the following discussion of digital locality, Dewey believed that democratic life requires *access to the free flow of ideas and perspectives* within and between communities. Both the discovery of common concerns or conflicts of interest and the ability to contribute to decisions about how to best address these depended on "freedom of social inquiry and of distribution of its conclusions" such that members of a community have access to information to make informed judgments about matters of common concern *and* have the means to share their views with others (1927, p. 166). If members of a community or public are going to participate in addressing issues of common concern, it stands to reason that they need to have an accurate understanding of the issues at hand as well as the views of the rest of the community about the nature of the problem and the best course of action for

addressing the issue. Thus high levels of both production and consumption of information is desirable. Dewey was clear that either one, without the other, was not sufficient and would result either in well-informed but inactive citizens or active citizens sharing opinions that were either ill-informed or unduly coerced by powerful interests (p. 177).

Dewey viewed local communities as central to the free flow of information and perspectives because, in a time when communication between geographically separated individuals or groups was relatively slow and punctuated by gaps in time, the face-to-face contact in local communities enabled frequency and intensity of interaction that Dewey envisioned as vital to democracy. Again, while Dewey did believe that society in the larger sense could be democratically organized, the starting point was always the local community, and from there interactions between representatives of local communities would build outward to link the activities of the local communities to larger social groupings.

A final quality of democratic communities concerns *active engagement with a diverse range of information and perspectives* that individuals might encounter within and between the groups. In *Democracy and Education* (1916) Dewey argues that fully democratic communities are evidenced by both prevalence of shared interests within the community and the “free and full interplay with other modes of association” suggesting that engaging with others with shared interests *and* others with diverse perspectives is necessary in a democratic community. Thus, not only must democratic communities be places where individuals have access to high quality factual information and a broad range of perspectives; they must also be places where individuals actively grapple with differences of perspective as they emerge. It is not enough to simply become aware and acknowledge that different members of a community may hold different opinions about matters of public concern. If a community is to be truly democratic, it must be a place where people confront and examine and debate and synthesize and choose between these different perspectives and understandings and divergent information.

This quality overlaps in some ways with the previous quality of access to the free flow of information and perspectives. However, we suggest it as a separate quality because, as we will address in the following section, we believe it is possible to see evidence of flow of information and perspectives in a community that is not accompanied by efforts to work through differences of opinion or make decisions in the face of competing priorities. We also treat this quality of a democratic community as a separate matter because of its importance.

Indeed, commentators frequently express the concern that both online life and life in relatively homogeneous geographically local communities are characterized by infrequent engagement with diverse perspectives (Mutz, 2006). Surfacing divergent opinions, as well as information and analyses that point in divergent directions, and then working through how best to proceed when meaningful differences exist, is where the real work of democracy happens. When citizens have few chances to do this, they have few chances to participate in the work of democracy.

In the next section, we discuss each of the qualities of democratic communities or publics that we have summarized above in the context of online communities. The question of central consideration here is whether online communities can and do act as democratic localities. If a geographic locality is traditionally believed to be the central point from which a public begins to emerge and to become democratically organized, the question is whether online communities, which may look very different, have similar qualities in terms of acting as places where a sense of public emerges and democratic organization of these emerging publics is possible. Although the democratic qualities outlined by Dewey overlap, we discuss each in turn because we believe that it is possible for communities to possess some qualities and not others, and the literature on online communities presents stronger evidence for some qualities than others.

### The Democratic Qualities of Online Communities

In recent years, we have seen the online landscape become increasingly social in nature, suggesting increasing opportunities for online communities to promote the four democratic qualities outlined above. The question is whether and how frequently online interactions produce communities with the qualities of locality that Dewey and other proponents of deliberative democracy view as essential to the health and vibrancy of a democratic public.

The internet is not the first form of new technology to capture the imagination of democratic theorists. The telegraph, telephone, and television all were accompanied by both grim and euphoric predictions about their effects on democracy. However, as some point out, the Internet differs from other forms of mass media because it allows two-way communication between both individuals and groups (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008). This is of particular interest for those who take the position that community is essential for democracy because it allows the basic feature necessary for the development of

community or locality.

In the last five to ten years, the social nature of online life and the emergence of online communities have drawn quite a bit of interest. In 2001, Horrigan, Rainie and Fox (2001) concluded from a national survey of American Internet users that “the online world is a vibrant social universe where many Internet users enjoy serious and satisfying contact with online communities...who share passions, beliefs, hobbies, or lifestyles.” Indeed, in 2001, 84% of survey respondents had contacted an online group. More recent studies examining the social nature of online life reflect diversification in the kinds of social activities available online and examine the prevalence of participation in particular kinds of online social activity. For example, a recent national survey of teen and adult online activities finds widespread participation in social networking sites with the majority (65%) of teens and just over one third (35%) of adults holding profiles (Lenhart, 2009). Fox and Jones (2009) focus on the social activity that surrounds the use of online health information and find that about 25% of adults in a nationally representative sample take advantage of online social networks related to health information.

Research has focused on better understanding the content and nature of online social networks. For example, do online communities reinforce existing geographic localities or connect people to new social arrangements organized around interests, a process Wellman (2002) calls “glocalization”? Recent studies focused on this question suggest that both occur (Ito et al., 2008; Lenhart, 2009; Mossberger et al., 2008). While studies of social networking suggest that the social side of online life originates and is reinforced in face-to-face communities (Ito et al.), there is also evidence that many online users establish new relationships through their online social networking (Lenhart). Building on the evidence that there is an online social life that both reinforces existing relationships and expands social networks, research has begun to examine in greater detail the nature of people’s interactions in online communities, including the democratic qualities of online communities.

In this section, we will draw on this recently emerging literature to examine online life through the lens of the four features of geographic communities that Dewey believed were so vital to democracy—opportunities to identify shared consequences and concerns, experiencing shared responsibilities for decision-making related to shared concerns, access to free-flowing information and perspectives, and active engagement with diverse experiences and opinions. While Dewey conceived of these qualities as emerging from geographically

local communities, the emergence of online communities begs the question of whether these emerging forms of community share similar qualities and, if so, how online communities might be better recognized and serve to support the aims of civic education and the development of democratic communities. It also raises the question of whether online communities are in a meaningful sense “local.” Finally, wherever possible, we highlight studies of the experiences of youth in online communities. While the experiences of adults are obviously also important, attention to young people’s experiences is particularly so since a goal of this paper is to consider how online communities relate to the development of democratic capacities and orientations and we will consider the implications of these findings for civic educators.

### *Shared Consequences and Concerns*

Do online communities function as a public with shared concerns that might require democratic organization? In geographically situated communities, the need to address issues of common concern arises regardless of any individuals’ affinity for their neighbors. If crime increases, a big company comes to town, or zoning laws change, any individual or group affected by these developments has a potential motivation to engage in dialogue with other individuals and groups and officials about what to do. Schrager (2002) suggests that how one determines who is affected, and therefore who is local, has become increasingly complicated as geographic mobility increases. For example, individuals who work in one city and live in another potentially have interests in the decisions made in both locations. Furthermore, one’s sense of motivation to address issues of common concern in a community may depend on how long one plans to live there and whether one feels able to leave or to shop around for a better match. If the primary unit of an emerging public is a local community where people experience shared consequences (and therefore need to create a system of working together to address matters which affect them all), a key question for online communities is to what extent this happens and in what kinds of online communities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that participation within an online community *can* evoke a sense of shared consequences among its members evocative of the kinds of shared concerns that one might face in a geographic local community. In a recent example, changes made to Facebook’s privacy policy resulted in thousands of members joining together in groups to protest and pressure the company to address users’ quality of experience (Raphael, 2009a). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for members of an online community to donate monetary

or other resources to keep the community going by helping to pay for bandwidth or the host's time in maintaining the community. These kinds of reactions suggest that just as members of a geographic locality might share concerns about the maintenance of their community and the justness of the community's public policies, this can occur in online communities as well. What is not currently clear, however, is whether this is a frequent occurrence in online communities or whether it is a relatively isolated set of examples.

Online communities may also attend to issues related to life in offline communities. Examples range from online support groups to discussion boards or threads devoted to the discussion of societal issues. In such cases, while concerns are rooted in the physical world, the discovery of or opportunity to join a community with these shared concerns occurs online.

We highlight two recent studies that speak to whether online communities function in this capacity. As part of an ongoing survey study of California high school students' experiences with digital media and their civic and political commitments and capacities, we asked 2,697 high school juniors and seniors in 2006 from a diverse set of school districts about their experiences of finding others with similar concerns or views online. Among those participants, 38% of young people agreed that they had been able to connect with people who care about the same things they do, and 28% reported connecting with others who shared their views about ways to create a better world. These are imperfect indicators of the discovery of shared consequences and concerns, but they do suggest that some substantial percentage of young people have experienced connections with others with similar interests or social and political views while online.

The second study, a case study of BlackPlanet.com conducted by Danah Byrne in 2006, highlights the potential for online communities to serve as meeting places for individuals who may be minorities or marginalized in their own communities. Byrne studied use patterns in the forums over a six-month period as a way to gain some insight into the use of the diasporic online social networking site to foster civic engagement. Byrne found a consistent presence of discussions of black community issues and of current events (such as Hurricane Katrina or Darfur) and that these issues were among the five most frequent topics of threads started and responses posted. However, these discussions were far less prevalent (4%–12% of threads) than discussions of relationships (55% of threads). This suggests that online communities can serve as a place for individuals to discover or discuss issues of shared public concern

or consequence in general interest communities, but that this may not be the typical experience. Often the focus of online communities is not on activities with impact beyond those who are directly involved.

### *Shared Responsibility for Decision-Making*

In addition to assessing whether participation in online communities aids in recognition of shared concerns, it is also important to assess whether participants have and act on their responsibility to maintain and improve their community. At this point, we are not aware of studies that directly examine the extent to which individuals who take part in online communities have this experience. Some examples have emerged in the literature on digital media suggesting that there are instances of online community where the members display a level of investment in the community that suggests a sense of shared responsibility for decision-making. Jenkins (2004) used the example of the virtual world of *Sims Online* to highlight the potential of online communities to inspire a level of investment and commitment to the community that were previously thought to be reserved for face-to-face communities. He describes the hotly contested mayoral elections for the virtual city of Alphaville in which just under 1,000 of the 7,000 members voted and about which many members of the community became intensely invested in examining issues of election fairness in a manner that reflect members' concern for maintaining that city's social contract. In this case, Jenkins acknowledges that this is a game world, but points out that for many of the young members, game worlds are the places where young non-voting age voices are most likely to be taken seriously. The question remains whether that kind of experience of investment in a community occurs outside of game worlds and how typical they might be among online communities.

The Facebook protests, mentioned in the previous section, are perhaps the most well-publicized examples of members of an online community attempting to influence the organization and policies of that community. In some ways, the Facebook example is evidence of the successes of a sort of democratic participation. Users complained, and policy changed. Furthermore, Facebook built on these episodes of community activism to experiment with a more democratic approach to policy-making by opening the question of the privacy policy up for a vote (Raphael, 2009b). On the flip side, the actual voter turnout in response to this overture did little to suggest that there was widespread investment in this issue. Out of 60 million users, only about 1% actually voted on the issue during the allowed window (Inside Facebook, 2009). This suggests

that for the 1% of voters, there was a sense of investment and shared responsibility. However, for the 99% who didn't vote, one might suggest that the issue at hand did not seem very consequential or that they had little sense that their participation was necessary.

As with our discussion of shared consequences, the question of whether online communities foster responsibility for and engagement with decision making can be thought of in terms of the members' activities within online communities or in terms of whether online communities lead to greater engagement with decision-making in physical communities. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) found in their seminal study of factors related to civic and political participation, one of the most important predictors of an individual's participation is whether they are asked to do so, and more often than not these requests for participation occur through local networks of friends, family, community, and co-workers. Thus, it makes sense to consider whether online communities might facilitate recruitment into offline civic and political participation.

In 2006, we asked a sample of 205 recent high school graduates about their experiences with online and offline requests for participation in civic and political activities as well as their level of participation in civic and political activities following the 2006 off-year elections (Middaugh, Kahne, & Evans, 2008). Within our sample, participants were similarly likely to be recruited through the Internet as they were through face-to-face contact (32% via internet versus 39% in person). Furthermore, online requests were related to higher levels of engagement in civic and electoral activities, and were more strongly related to participation in electoral activities than traditional forms of recruitment. These findings suggest that online networks can play an important role in connecting people to participation in political decision-making.

Furthermore, a recent national study of Internet activity during the 2008 political campaign (Smith, 2009) suggests that online networks can facilitate the expression of shared responsibility for decision making. The study found high levels of political activity among young people occurring through social networking sites, with two-thirds of the 83% of young adults who hold social networking profiles participating in some form of political activity through these sites. This again suggests that online networks can facilitate individuals to help shape and address issues of public concern.

One of the most explicit and potentially interesting efforts to engage the public in deliberation and decision making via online opportunities is currently taking

shape. The Obama administration has launched the “Open Government Directive” which aims to make government more transparent, participatory, and collaborative. This initiative provides opportunities for the public to draft, discuss, and modify policy proposals tied to issues of public concern. It is, in many respects, an effort to create an online version of the kinds of opportunities for deliberation and policy development that might occur in local communities. How well this process will work and whether the results of this deliberation will become a meaningful element of public policymaking is still far from clear. Efforts like this are worthy of substantial study as they gesture towards the possible ways online affordances might be mobilized to recreate some of the kinds of opportunities long associated with local communities.

*Access to the Free Flow of Information and Perspectives*

Perhaps one of the greatest changes brought about by the introduction of online technologies has been the rapid increase in both the pace of exchanges of information and the availability of information. Increasingly, both teens and adults have come to rely on online sources for information of all kinds. Smith (2009) finds that 55% of a nationally representative sample of adults went online to find information about the 2008 election. Fox and Jones (2009) find that 61% of adults go online to find health information. At the end of 2008, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that adults in their sample were more likely to find information online than through print newspapers. Young adults cited online sources as often as television as their primary source of news. Furthermore, studies suggest that people are increasingly using online forums to express their perspectives and engage in conversations on a variety of topics. Lenhart (2009) reports that currently 27% of teen Internet users keep a blog or online journal, 18% have visited a chat room, and 11% have a web site.

The increasing tendency to seek and share information online suggests both possibilities and reasons for concern related to the quality of information available *and* to the kinds of conversations that take place online. The quality of information is an essential consideration for those who believe that members of a public need to be well informed about issues that face the community. On one hand, digital media scholars are quick to tout the increased flow of information and perspectives, particularly the ability of members of all ages and levels of expertise to share their experiences and points of view. For example, Fox and Jones’s (2009) finding that many adults read the opinions and experiences of others related to health issues and share this information in turn led

the authors to tout the potential of technology to “accelerate the pace of discovery, widen social networks, and sharpen the questions someone might ask when they do get to talk to a health professional.” On the other hand, if the purpose of free-flowing information and perspectives is to improve community members’ understanding of issues of public concern, issues of quality and factual accuracy of information must not be ignored. Levine (2005) highlights the ways in which establishing the credibility of online information can be challenging. For example, he points out the ways in which online sources can quickly spread misinformation—as in the case of web sites which argue that HIV does not cause AIDS—and that consumers of online information appear not to employ strategies to establish the credibility of online information.

In terms of the quality of online conversation, scholars point out that some of the unique features of online communication allow for a more egalitarian flow of information. For example, Jenkins and others have called attention to the ways in which online interactions are less likely to be marked by obvious indicators of status (Jenkins, 2004). Jenkins and Thorburn (2003) contrast traditional forms of political communication which they view to be marked by top-down communication from officials (such as “fireside chats” and Nixon-Kennedy debates) and suggest “the current diversification of communication channels, on the other hand, is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority. Networked computing operates according to principles fundamentally different from those of broadcast media: access, participation, reciprocity, and many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication” (p. 2).

Jenkins and Thorburn are quick to recognize, however, that the reality of networked communication may not realize these ideals and principles. For example, while the Internet potentially enables communication about political and social issues at many levels, unless people are motivated to have those conversations there may be little reason to expect much to change in our practice of democracy. Currently, it is not clear whether the increasing ubiquity of online life has resulted in increased or more egalitarian political conversation. While there are plenty of examples to be found of people taking advantage of the increased access to a wide audience and means of communication to discuss political and social issues and organize civic and political actions, the prevalence of this type of activity is unknown. Studies that look at representation (who participates) and quality (reciprocal nature) of online *political* communication compared to offline (current or previous) would be helpful in teasing

out whether the potential of online communication is being realized. It would also be helpful to continue to study the ways in which individuals establish the credibility and accuracy of online information, particularly as it relates to learning about civic and political issues.

### *Diversity of Experience and Opinion*

One of the earliest concerns raised regarding the social and democratic implications of the expansion of digital media was that the ability to seek out like-minded individuals would result in a narrowing of experience and opinion (Longford, 2005; Luke, 2002; Sunstein, 2001). If most people who engage in social activities online take advantage of the customization offered by the internet (Longford), there is reason to be concerned that tailoring one's social experience in this way could result in the "echo chamber" which Sunstein warns results when like-minded people only interact with each other and thus end up with more extreme and polarized viewpoints and a decreased ability to understand alternative viewpoints (Van Huelven, 2007). In a related argument, Winner (2005) points out that in addition to the availability of options, some of the structural features of online communication, particularly the ability to remain anonymous in discussions and thus to engage in aggressive or uncivil discourse without consequence, discourages engagement with diverse perspectives. He notes that "when diverse viewpoints do emerge, there is often a nastiness characteristic of online discussion. People stay around long enough to deliver a few shots and then vanish, a luxury that the Internet allows, but that geographically situated communities often make less likely because one has to get up the next day and face one's neighbors" (p. 129).

On the other hand, some scholars have pointed to the positive potential for online communities to broaden social networks. While online communities may hold the marks of being narrowly defined in terms of interest—for example, there are active communities dedicated to driving and maintenance of cars divided out by make and model—they may be considerably more diverse in other ways. Homogeneity of one sort may indeed increase diversity of another. In line with this argument, Rheingold (2000) argues that, because those who share a given interest are in other respects often quite different and because many people in a given geographic community are often quite similar, online communities are often more heterogeneous with respect to race, gender, and age than are face-to-face communities. Consistent with this argument, Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick (2004) found that, controlling for education and other influences on political knowledge, Internet use was associated with

greater exposure to diverse political views.

Furthermore, scholars have pointed to the ways in which the ease of communication has provided a mechanism for face-to-face communities and organizations to increase the diversity of their membership. Mossberger et al. (2008) point out that those who joined political networks were brought together with neighbors that they would never have met otherwise through the organizing of “meet-ups.” Jenkins and Thorburn (2003) note that political campaigns have relied on internet technology to increase representation of youth, as in Ventura’s gubernatorial campaign. In a related argument, Winner (2005) finds that, even when communities are highly customized, they can serve to diversify the larger community by giving voice and opportunities for coalition-building among marginalized individuals.

At this point, much of the arguing about the diversity of online communities is based on theoretical arguments, anecdotal evidence, and case studies. There are relatively few systematic studies that examine whether experiences with online communities are associated with greater or less exposure to diversity of opinion and experience and what kinds of online communities are more likely to provide this kind of exposure. A recent large ethnographic study of youth experiences with online networks conducted by Mizuko Ito et al. (2008) found that online networks served primarily to facilitate and reinforce existing face-to-face relationships among youth in their sample, suggesting they are unlikely to be characterized by members with more or less diversity of experience than in physical communities. Ito et al. did find that a smaller group of youth spent more of their online time in interest-based networks (networks organized around a hobby, interest or skill). This sort of arrangement could potentially inspire connections with others from diverse backgrounds that happen to share the same interest. However, Ito’s report did not address whether participation in these groups was associated with encounters with diverse viewpoints outside of the shared interests around which the groups are organized.

In the 2006 survey study of high school students we referenced earlier in this chapter, we also asked participants about their experiences with diverse opinions and perspectives online. Within our sample of California high school juniors and seniors, many had encountered diverse experiences and perspectives. For example 48% agreed with the statement “I’ve had online conversations with people who are very different from the people I spend time with in person,” and 30% agreed with the statement “I feel I’ve gotten new perspectives on societal issues because of my online activities.” While this is encourag-

ing, these findings shed more light on whether young people encounter diverse opinions and perspectives online than on whether they have the experience of working through differences of opinion in online communities. In general, we have not found studies that have systematically examined the kinds of discussions and actions that result when diverse perspectives are shared online.

## Discussion

Digital media and online life are now central to communication and information access, especially for young people. Indeed, digital media is and will increasingly become key to many aspects of civic and political life including how people get news and information on issues, how funds are raised for candidates, where and how perspectives on issues and candidates are communicated and shared, and how people are mobilized for some kinds of issues and political campaigns. At this point, research has just begun to examine the extent and implications of these trends, and the dynamics associated with the impact of these changes are uncertain. Within this broader context we have focused on the question of the extent to which online life provides opportunities that many have historically associated with geographically based localism. We've asked: Will online communities play the role that historically many have ascribed to localities as the gateway to democratic life?

With respect to this question, the answers are mixed and, in some important ways, uncertain. In the literature to date, online communities have been described as enhancing the functioning of geographic localities and as providing alternative localities. In both cases, but especially the latter, the adequacy of online communities to serve as "building blocks of democracy" is contested—with conflicting hypotheses and in some cases conflicting evidence being advanced. There is some reason to think that online communities can generate a sense of shared concern, but also reason to question how pervasively or commonly this occurs. There is no doubt that online opportunities expand citizens' access to information, but serious questions have been raised about whether the less mediated access to information and perspectives is desirable (non-hierarchical, etc.) or undesirable (less dependable), for example. Concerns have been raised that digital media will lead individuals to hear only from those with whom they agree and others have expressed the sense that online life may expand users' access to a wider range of people and perspectives. Of course, online experiences vary enormously and new forms of engagement are being created rapidly. It is unlikely that there is a generic and universal answer to

these debates. It is far more likely that some forms and qualities of online life may foster identification of and engagement with a community while others may hinder such identification and engagement. Thus, as Lupia and Philpot (2005) argue, it is important to identify when, why, and for whom different kinds of experiences with networked media foster different outcomes in relation to providing local experiences.

Unfortunately, as detailed in the review above, there is currently a relatively limited research base available to answer questions about whether and how online communities might currently function as local democratic communities. While there is some evidence that online networks *can* have each of the four qualities of democratic localities that we outline above, there is very little research focused on examining the prevalence of these qualities. Furthermore, to the extent that research does allow us to examine the democratic qualities of online communities, there is more evidence available at this point related to their ability to augment or supplement the democratic functioning of physical communities than there is related to the qualities of online communities themselves.

What we have tried to do with this chapter is to present a conceptual framework and to point to ways in which future studies might examine the democratic potential of online communities. For example, there is a significant need for studies that question when and why various online communities function as units of vibrant public life, marked by a sense of shared concerns and responsibilities between members. We also hope to see greater attention to both the potential and the challenge of promoting democratic qualities of online communities and to the ways both education and the design of networked systems and online opportunities might foster desired outcomes.

Clearly, there are considerable opportunities afforded by the increased access to information and other individuals. Members of online communities (or members of geographic communities with access to online information) have potentially more resources and more outlets for democratic participation. On the other hand there are new challenges in terms of establishing a community, assessing the credibility of information, and identifying and negotiating differences of opinion.

In the final section, we make tentative suggestions for civic education. While recognizing that far more information is needed about the nature and functioning of online communities, we feel that their growing prevalence requires they

be acknowledged and addressed in civic education, as some programs are beginning to do already. Our suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive, in part because of the considerable research left to be done on the topic and in part because to do so would require a second paper dedicated to applying the framework we have laid out here to the examination of civic education. However, we try to take advantage of what we do know about online localities and to highlight how some educators have begun to incorporate digital media in their work with youth and how this may apply to civic education.

### Implications for Civic Education

#### *Discovering the Public through Online Communities—Identifying Shared Concerns*

In civic education, it is not uncommon for teachers and facilitators to encourage young people to spend time thinking about how they define a community and to engage in community mapping through which they identify the communities to which they belong and conduct needs assessments to determine shared concerns within their communities. These assessments often serve as a starting point for determining how they may become civically engaged. In recent years, online youth civic engagement initiatives have emerged that are designed to facilitate the development of online communities where young people can identify others who share their concerns and discuss ways in which they might address these concerns. For example, the *Global Kids Digital Media Initiative* has developed the Online Leadership Program through which teens learn to use new media as tools for learning about addressing global issues. Youth, with the support of the program staff, host Global Kids Island in Teen Second Life, a virtual world where “teenagers from around the world participate in online activities to develop their understanding of global issues, commitment to civic participation, and leadership skills” (<http://www.globalkids.org/?id=30>). Young people in the program also engage in the design of serious games—such as the *Cost of Life*, which focuses on the relationship between poverty and education—to educate themselves and others about global issues.

Using a different format, YouthNoise (<http://www.youthnoise.com>) hosts online forums organized by social cause to enable young people to identify others who share their concerns. Many of these programs are beginning to be used as part of after school and in school programs. We believe these hold significant promise for civic educators who may encourage youth in their programs to take advantage of these resources or make direct use of these

resources as part of their curriculum.

*Taking Responsibility—Online Communities as Facilitators of Civic Participation*

In the last decade, a number of online resources have emerged to connect youth to resources that might facilitate their civic and political participation. Rock the Vote (<http://www.rockthevote.com/act-out/>) provides materials and guides for young people to get involved in political campaigns. YouthNoise provides toolkits to facilitate youth participation in a large variety of civic and political activities so that they can act on the issues they care about. In the 2008 presidential election, YouTube and Facebook played a role in facilitating local meet-ups and campaign activity. These kinds of resources can provide valuable supports for civic education efforts. These resources focus primarily on ways that online communities can help facilitate civic and political participation that extends beyond the specific online communities. As discussed earlier, the online community itself may also provide an important location for civic life. Civic educators therefore might want to draw on early efforts such as Howard Gardner's Good Play Project (<http://www.goodworkproject.org/research/digital.htm>) and Henry Jenkins's Project New Media Literacies which are working together and separately to develop curriculum to help youth consider the ethical dimensions of their online activities and, more broadly, to develop "the social skills and cultural competencies required to become full participants in an emergent media landscape" (<http://newmedialiteracies.org/>).

*Free Flow of Information and Perspectives—Becoming Responsible Producers and Consumers of Civic and Political Information*

We have argued here that a democratic community requires that members of the community have access to a broad spectrum of information and to the opinions of others related to issues of shared concerns, are able to assess the quality of information available, and have means of sharing their own opinions and information with others in the community. The skills needed for this kind of free flow of information and perspectives have changed as more and more of our information and communication is mediated through digital networks. Some programs have emerged to support the development of these skills in young people. One such example is the Urban Education Institute's Digital Youth Network (<http://www.iremix.org>) that provides programs to orient youth to the different modes of communication available through multiple forms of media, with an emphasis on digital media. It engages youth in the process of using these modes of communication and encourages them to be

critical consumers of new media. For example, in DYN's digital storytelling curriculum, 7th grade students learn to analyze different forms of media for their intended message and audience and to create their own new media (podcasts, video trailers, short films) as well. DYN's after school programs engage young people in production of a variety of media—digital music, gaming, TV, graphic design—through which young people become technically proficient as producers of varied information and gain a better understanding of how others use digital media for such purposes as storytelling, persuasion, and expression of identity. DYN also hosts an online social networking site for young people to share media and exchange ideas, with some design features embedded to encourage media critique. These kinds of strategies can be incorporated into civic education programs as young people engage in the process of researching and presenting facts and their perspectives related to civic and political issues. This process requires that young people not only learn how to gain access to information and to think critically about the sources of information (both in its factual basis and its representation of perspective), but that they also develop clear and compelling ways to represent their own point of view.

*Diversity of Experience and Opinion—Negotiating Differences of Opinion in Online Discussion*

Finally, as detailed above, members of a democratic community need to find productive ways to work through differences of experience and opinion as they determine what issues are most important to the community and how to best address them. Indeed, few skills are more important in a democracy than the ability to engage productively and respectfully with those who hold divergent views. This goal, while endorsed by many educators, is often not fully pursued. At the same time, a good bit has been learned about ways teachers can help students to thoughtfully engage with others—even when they do not agree (see Hess, 2008 for a review). The digital world creates many new opportunities for individuals to engage with those who hold divergent views. Thus, in addition to preparing youth for face-to-face discussions of controversial issues, civic educators can provide a vitally important service by helping youth reflect on how they negotiate conflict in online contexts and by providing youth with opportunities to discuss and develop skills and perspectives regarding online discussions of controversial topics.

*A Final Note*

The majority of the examples above conceptualize online communities as

facilitating participation in face-to-face or physical communities. As a final idea, we would like to propose that civic education might begin to engage young people in discussions about whether the online communities in which they participate might be important locations of civic and political participation in and of themselves. To the extent that young people are spending time socializing online—either with their geographically local networks or with interest-based networks—the quality of those online communities is important. Learning to identify ways in which members of an online community might want to see the community change or develop, and what role a young person might play in that process, could be increasingly important if more and more of our social and business life is conducted online.

#### *Authors' Note*

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