Digital media shapes youth participation in politics

Social media are changing how youth involve themselves in politics. Educators also must change how they prepare students to be involved citizens.

By Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh

Oct. 11 was A Day of the Girl Child in part due to a group of 12-year-old girls in Maryland who used social media to connect with like-minded women in the U.S., Canada, and Africa. These girls, known as School Girls Unite, mobilized more than 70 girls organizations throughout the U.S. in support of a United Nations initiative to set aside one day a year to recognize the need for girls to be educated around the world. And their efforts continue. Recently, School Girls Unite delivered over 11,000 e-petitions urging action on the child marriage prevention bill being considered in Congress.

And they did it almost exclusively through email and Facebook.

Consider 18-year-old Michelle Ryan Lauto’s campaign to protest school funding cuts in New Jersey. She sent a Facebook message to 600 friends saying that students should protest threatened school funding cuts and asked them to pass her message on. Ultimately, 18,000 students accepted her invitation, staging one of the largest grassroots protests in New Jersey’s history (Hu, 2010).

Or consider the response to last spring’s release of a 30-minute video by a San Diego-based group that exposed warlord Joseph Kony’s abuses in Uganda. Within a few days of its posting, the Kony 2012 video on YouTube had been viewed more than 76 million times. A survey found that almost 60% of youth and young adults (under age 30) who knew about the video had learned about it through Facebook, Twitter, or other social media. Just as rapidly, social media alerted the public about questions about the accuracy of the video and whether the proposed actions made sense.

Outlets for youth activism and civic participation aren’t new, but two things distinguish these recent examples from traditional ones: They are peer created and directed, and they rely on social media. Almost overnight, youth civic participation has become a different ball game. Social media is a phenomenon that could dramatically change how and how much young people participate civically, including voting. Schools will continue to play a vital role in preparing students to be citizens. But educators must be prepared to play by different rules and on this different field.

To better understand these new realities, together with Cathy Cohen, Ben Bowyer, and Jon Rogowski, we surveyed 3,000 youth between ages 15 and 25 as part of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics. The Youth and Participatory Politics Survey provides one of the most complete pictures to date of how young people are using new media to engage politically.

New ways to engage

Substantial numbers of youth are engaging in political life through “participatory politics” — which is like traditional political activity because they address issues of public concern. But, unlike traditional political activity, participatory politics are interactive, peer-based, and not guided by traditional institutions like political parties or newspaper editors. Young people might start a new political group online, write and disseminate a blog about a political issue, forward a political video to their social network, or take part in a poetry slam. We found that 41% of all youth participated in at least one of these activities during the past year. This is the same percentage that said they voted, or said they intended to vote — if they were then under 18. It is just below the 45% who said they engaged in forms of politics more directly tied to institutions by, for example, working on a political campaign or donating money. In short, participatory politics are an important part of overall youth politi-
cal activity. If we ignore it, we will miss many of the ways youth are engaged.

Those concerned about the future of American politics should consider how such social media and participatory politics could change the landscape. For example, participatory politics give youth independence from traditional keepers of information and political participation such as political parties, interest groups, textbook authors, and newspaper editors. Youth can put out their own narratives about what is on traditional media and share among their networks, and their comments help shape how their peers think about the information. Indeed, we found that 45% of youth reported getting news at least once a week from family and
friends via Twitter and Facebook. This rivals the 49% of youth who reported getting news at least once a week from newspapers and magazines.

In addition, social media opens ways for youth to help shape the flow of information and to be creative. For example, a political speech used to be over when the candidate stepped down from the platform. Now, in many ways, only after the speech ends does the engagement begin. Youth can tweet about it, watch it on YouTube, circulate it, and post comments about it. Those especially supportive or outraged can also remix or mash up the original speech and create their own personalized material for distribution. Youth can (as Michelle Ryan Lauto did) reach vast audiences and mobilize many participants at no cost through their social networks. In earlier eras, they needed power holders to give them a platform.

While these practices clearly create new opportunities for voice, for agency, and potentially for influence, they create risks as well. And here’s where educators come in. We have no reason to assume that engagement with participatory politics will inevitably or organically develop in positive ways. That’s where schools come into the picture, playing their traditional role of preparing students to be citizens.

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Will those who tweet, vote?

Many worry that those who engage in participatory politics will realize voice more than influence. Indeed, some have postulated that these practices are a response to alienation from traditional politics and that youth see these practices as alternatives to traditional ways of being involved in politics (Bennett, 1998). Some worry that these practices will distract youth by focusing them on communicating with peers rather than on the corridors of power. Given these concerns, it was striking to learn that those who engaged in at least one act of participatory politics were actually twice as likely to report voting as those who did not. These participatory acts seem to supplement rather than supplant traditional political activity.

That said, rates of participatory politics, including voting, are still far lower than one would like. Educators can help youth understand the value of political activity as well as the ways (including but not limited to voting) that these new opportunities for voice can lead to influence.

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Will the digital divide foster a new form of political inequality?

The racial breakdown of youth using digital media to engage in participatory politics also holds some surprises, especially given widespread discussions of the digital divide. Young people across racial and ethnic lines have access to the Internet and regularly use online social media to stay connected. Access to the Internet varies only a fraction among the four racial groups we studied — all above 94%. Almost 80% reported sending messages, sharing links, or chatting online daily or at least once a week with friends and/or family. Moreover, blacks and Asian-Americans are frequently the most engaged in this domain. In addition, when it comes to practicing participatory politics, the difference in engagement between those with the highest rate of activity (whites at 43%) and the lowest rate of activity (Asian-Americans at 36%) is only 7%. For voting in 2008, the difference between those most likely to have voted in 2008 (black youth at 52%) and those least likely (Latino youth at 27%) was 25%. Even if one accounts for citizenship status, the difference in voting between these two groups was still 17% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

None of this means that unequal access to broadband is not a problem, nor should it diminish concern regarding unequal technology in schools. But it does mean that widespread engagement with digital media among youth can be an asset teachers can tap. Moreover, as civic education increasingly employs these media, educators must take care to ensure that all students have access to these opportunities. In prior work, we found that students in high-income classrooms were 1.5 to 2 times more likely than those in middle-income classrooms to have civic learning opportunities, such as service learning and classroom discussions of current events, that promote political engagement (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Educators must not add to this problem by inequitably delivering supports for engagement in participatory politics.

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Can Facebook cause an American Spring — or will it lead to a political winter?

Some observers argue that young people’s use of social media will help spur activism, as in the Arab Spring; others worry that social media distract youth from the world around them. What we found is somewhere in between.

Social interaction with friends on sites like Facebook — what Mimi Ito and colleagues call friendship-driven activity (2009) — was unrelated to political activity. But we also found that about one-third of young people participate every week in online communities tied to their interests in hobbies, sports, or entertainment. While in these communities, they engage in nonpolitical, interest-driven activity such as posting, linking to, or forwarding information, giving help to others or posting comments about someone else’s messages. About one in six young people are more intensely involved (e.g., organizing an online group, discussion, or web site). Those who frequently engage in these
As part of our U.S. survey, we asked young people if they thought they and their friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if online information was trustworthy. Eighty-four percent said yes. These are important questions for educators and civic leaders given the rapidly growing number of young people using online social media daily, and the increasing amount of misinformation they are exposed to online.

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Will participatory politics promote echo chambers or empty chambers?

Some commentators fear that youth are caught in an echo chamber where they choose to only connect with people holding similar views. The ability of Facebook and apps for iPads and iPhones to steer users into certain groupings might be expected to exacerbate this problem. However, in a separate study with Namjin Lee and Jessica Timpany Feezell (2011), we found that only 5% of young people reported that they interacted online only with those whose views aligned with their own. Moreover, we found that frequent engagement in nonpolitical, interest-driven online communities was associated with wider exposure with different viewpoints. Similarly, a study of adult use of social media found that 53% of adults in online groups where discussions centered on sports, entertainment, hobbies, and other interests, reported that they wound up exchanging perspectives on political issues. In addition, discussions in these nonpolitical interest-driven forums were the places where dialogues across ideological differences were the most common (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

A larger problem than the echo chamber that our survey uncovered is that of the empty chamber. Our survey found that 63% of all young people rarely or never discuss political issues with others face to face, and 87% rarely or never discuss politics online. These figures indicate that a very large number of young people aren’t interested in politics. Similarly, the National Conference on Citizenship reported that 55% of those under 30 years of age were not interested in civic/political life, and 64% of voting-age young people (18-29) said they were “not at all” interested in campaign news (2008). Disengagement is a real concern.

Clearly, civic education broadly conceived provides part of the needed response. Studies show that a variety of practices ranging from service learning to discussions of controversial issues in an open classroom climate to simulations of civic and political processes can promote greater interest and engagement (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2011). Media literacy efforts can help as well. Indeed, in a related study, we found that when teachers required students to create something online or to go online to find information or different points of view on a societal issue, students were more likely to engage in online political activity and to be exposed to differing viewpoints during their discretionary time (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012).

Information . . . or misinformation?

While democracy requires many supports in order to work effectively, citizens certainly need to be reasonably confident that they’re able to make decisions based on accurate information. How else can they assess or discuss varied arguments about key issues? And there are reasons for concern. A recent survey in England and Wales, for example, found that one-third of teens believe that if a search engine provides information, then it must be reliable and that many youth do not fact-check their online sources and “are unable to recognize bias and propaganda.” In fact, 47% of teachers reported having observed arguments within lessons or schoolwork that contained inaccurate Internet-based content they regard as deliberately packaged by the producers to be misleading or deceitful, e.g., holocaust denial (Bartlett & Miller, 2011).
percent said, “yes.” In massive numbers, youth are saying they need help. We view it as promising that young people know media literacy is an issue and an important one. Indeed, there’s a strong argument to be made that youth are more clued into the significance of digital media literacy and its relationship to democracy than adults. Media literacy is such a low priority that there is no national data on how much attention schools pay to this topic.

We don’t need to give kids coursework on how to tweet or text. If we want youth to be able to assess the credibility of what they find online and be able to produce and circulate information in ways that are thoughtful and compelling, then we must teach them the skills they need for digital media literacy. In the words of David Coleman, contributing author of the new Common Core State Standards on education, youth must learn to “read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter.”

Concluding thoughts

Rather than prevent or ignore digital media use within schools, educators should embrace the media as tools for academic as well as civic/political engagement. Moreover, while media literacy may be talked about a lot, K-12 curriculum and district/state policies rarely focus on it. This may change as states implement the Common Core State Standards since media literacy is included in the standards.

In undertaking this work, teachers and those working in after-school environments will need support as well. For example, we see a significant need to fund the development of a digital civic infrastructure — places where youth can use digital media to learn about and mobilize around regional, political, environmental or social issues. Puget SoundOff in Seattle (http://pugetsoundoff.org/), for example, is an online hub where teenagers can blog, share, and comment on digital sources and connect with friends while learning how they can act on issues together. Others have created digital resources like factcheck.org or platforms like the Black Youth Project for youth to create, share perspectives, and access information about topics that matter to them. In addition, out-of-school programs like YOUmedia enable youth to pursue their passions in a media-rich environment where they create, share, learn, and teach. The societal issues youth care about are often front and center in this effort. Such platforms are just emerging, but we believe they offer valuable opportunities, providing an authentic audience for content that youth produce as well as for dialog, networking, and information exchange.

It will be a challenge for researchers, teachers, and education policy makers to keep pace with the rapid use of digital media by youth to communicate and ultimately find ways to become civicminded. But it seems clear that the virtual world can be good for the real world.