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# Youth, New Media, and the Rise of Participatory Politics

## Abstract

New media have come to play a prominent role in civic and political life. Social network sites, web sites and text increasingly serve as both a conduit for political information and a major public arena where citizens express and exchange their political ideas; raise funds; and mobilize others to vote, protest, and work on public issues. This chapter considers how the ascendancy of today's new media may be introducing fundamental changes in political expectations and practices. Specifically, we see evidence that new media are facilitating participatory politics--interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern. While these kinds of acts have always existed, evidence suggests that new media are providing new opportunities for political voice and discussion, thus increasing the role of participatory politics in public life. In this chapter, we provide a conceptual overview of the implications of this shift for how political life is organized, emerging political practices, and pathways to political engagement. We focus our analysis on youth, who are early adopters of new media, and provide some empirical evidence to demonstrate the importance of participatory politics to their political life as well as to highlight some benefits as well as risks associated with this form of political engagement.



## Introduction

“New media” periodically transform the nature of communication with broad consequences for civic and political engagement. Franklin Roosevelt’s use of radio for fireside chats and the television broadcast of the Nixon-Kennedy debates are widely recognized as landmark moments. Commentators are in general agreement that the ascendancy of today’s new media (e.g., social network sites, blogs, video games, YouTube, and smart phones) represents another transformative period. Yet the challenge is not merely to recognize the transformation but to understand it, both in itself and also as a context for evolutions in civic and political engagement.

Some basic features of the current media transformation are widely understood:(1) new technology and associated practices, facilitate networked, many-to-many, and mobile communications; (2) online networks support both structured interactions among people and more open-ended participation in a range of activities; (3) traditional barriers to cultural production and circulation are now much lower; (4) these changes are playing a pivotal role throughout the world, in developing as well as postindustrial societies, in democracies and in more autocratic regimes.

By facilitating access to political information and by providing tools and avenues for political expression and mobilization, digital media have created new possibilities for civic and political participation (Bennett 2008; Delli Carpini 2000; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008). Consider the following:

- As of 2009, readership of the top dozen political blogs was equal to that of the *New York Times* (Hindman 2009).
- By 2009, 80 percent of the members of Congress had set up their own YouTube channels, enabling unfiltered communication to their constituents (NPR 2009).
- In the thirty-six hours following the Tōhoku, Japan earthquake and tsunami, Zynga raised more than \$1 million of in-game donations through Farmville, the popular online game (Empson 2011).
- In the 2010 election, an experimental study involving millions, showed that Facebook messages shared between friends influenced users political self-expression, information seeking, and real-world voting (Bond et al. 2012).

The ubiquitous rise of new media has facilitated cultural changes but also changes in political expectations and practices. Of the many political activities that are moving online, some, we argue, are particularly important for reshaping the landscape of political life. The goal of this chapter is to describe those activities and to provide a framework for understanding their significance. We gather together the norms and practices that we identify as shifting the political landscape under the label “participatory politics.”



Enabled by new media tools, individuals whose activities reside primarily outside of gatekeeping institutions are pursuing greater voice and influence in the political realm than the hierarchical political infrastructure has traditionally provided them opportunity for. This pursuit of voice and influence depends heavily on a particular set of practices, at the center of which are interactive peer-based acts, and the norms that accompany those practices. We focus on youth in our analysis for two reasons. First, those under 30 have been identified as heavy and early adopters of new media (Krueger 2002; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008) and rely on digital media for political information at higher rates than older generations (Kohut 2008). Furthermore, as Green and Brady (2013) note, young people are frequently among the “every day innovators” who are appropriating digital tools to serve their communications goals, as seen in studies of teens’ texting practices. Thus, we believe it makes sense to study youth engagement as a means of identifying shifts in practice associated with new media. Moreover, we learn from studying youth practices *how* expansion of this type of engagement is likely to have broader impacts on any given socio-political ecosystem.

Additionally, youth are often marginal players in many forms of institution-based engagement, and many traditional forms of engagement require skills that many youth have not yet fully developed. In contrast, youth are often experts and highly engaged with new media and, as we will detail, the affordances of new media enable youth to have political voice and influence without being 18, having money, or even being a citizen. Thus, the opportunities afforded by participation with new media may be particularly valuable for youth. They may, with appropriate supports, help counter youths’ relatively low levels of engagement with many dimensions of political life.

In what follows, we offer a broad definition of what we mean by participatory politics and then contrast our analytic usage of the concept to the more ideologically-tinged usages that have dominated its history. Following this definitional clarification, we delineate the specific set of practices that constitute a clear subset of online political activity, and which we are designating “participatory politics.” Most importantly, we highlight how a set of cultural practices is evolving and being repurposed as political practices. One of the challenges of understanding how communicative transformations impact the landscape of political life is to clarify how cultural transformation relates to political transformation, since communication is at the heart of both phenomena.

Finally, we highlight some challenges and unanswered questions related to the impact of these practices of “participatory politics” on youth civic development and youth empowerment. This permits us to achieve our own disciplinary goal: we will draw out some implications of the “participatory politics” framework for how we study youth political engagement moving forward. But it also permits us to achieve the broader goal of this volume: we identify critical choices that need to be made in our current moment concerning the cultivation of high quality socio-political relationships generally.



## What are Participatory Politics?

### A Broad Definition of Politics

Our conceptualization of politics extends beyond the electoral focus that often dominates literature about political participation and includes a broad array of activities undertaken by individuals and groups to influence how the public sets agendas and addresses issues of public concern. We include electoral activities (such as voting or campaign work), activism (protest, boycotting, and petitions), civic activities (charity or community service), and lifestyle politics (vegetarianism, awareness raising, and boycotting) in our definition (Zukin et al. 2006).

This broad definition is necessary for a few reasons. First, it acknowledges that many of the struggles to shift public attention to new issues or frames and to challenge the balance of power in public life take place outside of traditional institutions of civic and political life. Scholars like Robin Kelley (1994) and James Scott (1990) have detailed multiple ways in which individuals and groups resist domination and express their political preferences through informal and not-easily categorized actions. For example, workers in a factory will coordinate their actions on the shop floor to slow down production, thereby resisting a speed-up by management. This localized act of resistance is meant to challenge corporate power. While not a formal political or civic act, it has political implications in terms of the balance of power (see, for example, Fung and Shkabatur's discussion in this volume of "countervailing power"). Importantly, any effort to consider participation through the lens of youth engagement immediately directs attention to alternative forms of engagement since youth lack access to and may be skeptical of many governmental or institutionalized forms of participation and thus may be drawn to more accessible or informal forms of engagement (Ginwright 2009, Delgado and Staples 2007, Flanagan and Gallay 1995).

Second, this broad definition permits recognition of the political consequences of phenomena at the intersection of culture and politics. Legal and institutional structures are critical for understanding politics, but their operations are constrained and shaped by the surrounding socio-cultural context, whether one labels that context as "civil society" or the "public sphere" (Barber 1984, Dewey 1916, Putnam 2000). For example, citizens' investment in and understanding of the issues that are negotiated through electoral politics emerge out of their social ties, their discussions with neighbors and fellow citizens, their news consumption, and so forth. Their communicative interactions in social contexts help shape their engagement (or lack thereof) with political institutions and in political action. Furthermore, in the United States, the volume of public needs is far beyond what can be addressed through governmental channels, and there is a long tradition of meeting these needs through informal and voluntary associations (Tocqueville [1840]1969, Putnam 2000, Flanagan et al. 1999). Activity through private institutions that is nonetheless directed at public goods has clear public consequences but also contributes to the ongoing contestation of the boundary between private and public actors, a fundamentally political negotiation. A comprehensive picture of the political requires inclusion of this sort of activity too.



Finally, a broad definition of politics allows us to identify changes in where and how people work both to define issues of public concern and to exercise power in relation to them. Scholars have argued that new media may be facilitating a broad shift in the form and focus of politics. The shift entails a movement away from civic and political engagement that turns around issues and activities defined and structured by elites and state institutions and toward a range of more direct forms of lifestyle and expressive politics (Bennett 1998, Dalton 2008, Kelley 1994).

For example, on the 2005 Black Youth Project survey, a number of young people indicated that airing their own cable television show was a political act (Cohen 2010). Others commented that building a website and voicing their opinions was a political act. Indeed, as Zukin and colleagues (2006) and Dalton (2008) have shown, these changes are most prominent among younger Americans and thus may signal a change in what will count as “politics as usual” in the future. If our definition of politics were to lead to a focus only on traditional, long-standing institutions and practices, we would be unable to see those changes.

Our project, then, is to learn what can be said about youth engagement, in particular, and political engagement in general if we extend the concept of the political, by bringing culture and dissenting movements into the analysis, in order to capture ways people engage with the public sphere, often outside of the traditional or formal political realm.

When we use this broad conceptualization of the political to analyze contemporary youth engagement, we discern the set of practices that we have labeled “participatory politics.” They closely resemble the practices that scholars have identified as constituting “participatory culture” but are directed toward political ends. We turn now to explaining this set of practices, beginning with an account of those that constitute “participatory culture.”

## Participatory Culture

Our understanding of the “participatory” aspect of participatory politics borrows from and is rooted in Henry Jenkins’s concept of participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2009). In a participatory culture, participation is significantly peer-based, interactive, nonhierarchical, independent of elite-driven institutions, and social, that is, accessible to analysis at the level of the group rather than the individual. Participatory culture has a long history, one that includes previous efforts by grassroots communities to exert greater control over the means of media production and circulation, including amateur publishing movements in the nineteenth century, the grassroots radio movement of the early twentieth century, and various forms of underground press and radio efforts in the 1960s. That said, while participatory culture predated the Internet and often takes place independently of online engagement, the affordances of digital media appear to have made participatory cultures more common, and indeed, participatory cultures are often discussed in relation to digital practices and platforms.



Research on learning and participatory culture has highlighted four core sets of practice within the current digital mediascape. Young people are using media to:

- **circulate** (by blogging, podcasting, or forwarding links)
- **collaborate** (by working together with others to produce and share information via projects, such as Wikipedia)
- **create** (by producing and exchanging media via platforms like YouTube and Flickr)
- **connect** (through social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, or through online communities, such as game clans or fandoms).

What makes participatory culture unique is not the existence of these individual acts; instead, the increasing access to tools supporting circulation, collaboration, creation, and connection and the consequent increase in the prevalence of these acts is changing the cultural context in which people operate. Being part of a participatory culture opens up new opportunities and changes participants' expectations about how to approach a range of activities, including creative work, learning, and, we would now add, civic and political engagement. As an example of shifted expectations, take the treatment of knowledge resources. In previous eras, if one wanted to learn about a topic, one might seek out an encyclopedia or a book by an authority. Within the context of participatory culture, however, one might now "crowd-source" the answer with an open-ended Google search and then decide how to vet, and organize the collective knowledge of the group.

Jenkins has argued that new media facilitate the emergence of a more democratically organized cultural domain in which it is increasingly common for individuals to expect opportunities to influence and participate in the creation of cultural products (Jenkins et al. 2009; Bennett, Wells and Freelon 2009). Our suggestion is that the "self-actualizing" expressive power that has emerged in the cultural domain is driving similar changes in expectations for political participation.

## Participatory Politics

In theorizing how the unique affordances of networked technology might facilitate the emergence of a more participatory political domain, we have built on the framework of participatory culture. Our analysis of youth activity in a political domain that we define broadly has made visible clusters of practices that are analogues to those identified as constituting participatory culture. Thus, we have come to conceptualize participatory politics as interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern through the following types of activities:

- **Investigation.** Members of a community actively pursue information about issues of public concern. Participants seek out, collect, and analyze information from a wide array



of sources. They also often check the veracity of information that is circulated by elite institutions, such as newspapers and political candidates.

- **Dialogue and feedback.** There is a high degree of dialogue among community members, as well as a practice of weighing in on issues of public concern and on the decisions of civic and political leaders. This might include voicing one's perspective at a meeting, discussing politics with others, commenting on blogs, or engaging in other digital or face-to-face efforts to interact with or provide feedback to leaders.
- **Circulation.** In participatory politics, the flow of information is shaped by many in the broader community rather than by a small group of elites. This might include sharing information about an issue at a meeting of a religious or community organization to which one belongs or posting or forwarding links or content that have civic or political intent or impact.
- **Production.** Members not only circulate information but also create original content (such as a blog or video that has political intent or impact) that allows them to advance their perspectives.
- **Mobilization.** Members of a community rally others to help accomplish civic or political goals. This might include working to recruit others for a grassroots effort within one's community, or reaching out to those in one's social network and beyond on behalf of a political cause.

This set of practices embraces the movement from agenda-setting to opinion formation and action-taking which are at the core of all political life, but they constitute participatory versions of each of those elemental steps. Those who engage in agenda-setting, opinion formation, and action-taking through methods like the ones described above participate in "participatory politics." The more that people engage in participatory politics, the more we should expect to see a cultural shift in expectations about how to approach politics and about what is possible through politics.

Importantly, our usage of the term, "participatory politics," does not derive from the tradition of its political uses, although that history offers some analytically useful conceptual resources. The most recent resurgence of the idea of "participatory politics" can be dated to Benjamin Barber in the book, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (1984). Critiquing representative democracy, Barber identified it with "thin democracy," which in his view "yields neither the pleasures of participation nor the fellowship of civic association, neither the autonomy and self-governance of continuous political activity nor the enlarging mutuality of shared public goods of mutual deliberation, decision and work" (p. 24). To replace "thin democracy" with "strong democracy," Barber argues for a reorientation toward more direct democracy and direct participation in the institutions of politics and government.



The concept has, of course, an important earlier history as well. It was central to the student movements of the 1960s, and the Port Huron Statement produced by Students for a Democratic Society called for “participatory democracy” in which politics is “seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations.” In their argument, the statement’s authors drew on the philosophy of John Dewey, himself a link in the chain of a longer tradition of work on direct democracy and on the dependence of individual and collective human flourishing on the opportunity to participate in political and cultural life. (The tradition also includes Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill.) In the early 1970s, the concepts of “participatory democracy” and “participatory politics” were given further philosophical development by Hannah Arendt. In her 1972 essay, “On Violence,” Arendt noted that the phrase “participatory democracy” was the “common slogan of many contemporary social movements” and connected it to her own theory of action. Action, in the Arendtian account, designates the activity of the political realm, where citizens disclose themselves to others and contend in the political arena to define collective life.

Across the literature, the concept of participatory politics designates forms of political action that seek to advance peer-to-peer forms of organization and to evade elite dominance in politics, regardless of what the partisan affiliation is of those elites. While the historical usage of the term in lived political context has skewed left-ward, we believe that as an analytical category, “participatory politics” is equally good at capturing political practices that can emerge from any of a wide array of ideological or philosophical perspectives, from the Christian missionary orientation of Invisible Children (Kligler-Villenchik and Shresthova 2012) to the immigration activism of the DreamActivists (Zimmerman 2012), from the libertarian outlook of the Liberty Movement (Gamber Thompson 2012) to the progressive orientation of Occupy Wall Street.

## Participatory Politics in the Digital Age

As we have noted, participatory politics have a long history. The ancient Athenian assembly, the New England town meeting, letters to the editor, and any number of grassroots organizing efforts that predate the Internet embody the dynamics that fall within this category of political action. Moreover, careful analysis of what social practices should be identified as examples of participatory politics requires recognizing that we do not face a sharp binary between participatory and non-participatory political practices. Any given political practice may contain more or fewer participatory dimensions.

In the sections that follow, we discuss what we believe are the shifting dynamics associated with participatory politics in a specifically digital age, the opportunities and challenges that those dynamics present for youth civic engagement, and the broader questions they open up about high quality socio-political relationships. Consider a few examples:

Watching a televised presidential debate in one’s living room by oneself is not an instance of participatory



politics. Watching that same debate and then writing a letter to the editor or Tweeting about it is. Similarly, reading a newspaper story, whether online or in print, is not an act of participatory politics. However, when a reader forwards a link to the article to her friends or posts a comment online reacting to the story, expressing her own opinion or perhaps critiquing the journalism itself, she is engaging in participatory politics. That is, while seeking out political information is important, we do not regard consumption of information as a form of participation. It is when one circulates political information or shares one's perspectives on it that the activity becomes participatory. In each of these examples, participants demonstrate the highly social, interactive nature of participatory politics and exhibit a desire and ability to add their voices to or even to influence the flow of information rather than simply following an agenda set out by elites.

Frequently, acts of participatory politics tap the public's connection to popular culture. On November 18, 2011, campus police attempted to disperse an Occupy UC Davis demonstration by using pepper spray on protestors who were staging a peaceful sit-in on the campus quad. Outrage at the incident grew as video circulated over the Internet and spread to broadcast media. One Davis student posted to her Facebook wall a picture that she took of Lieutenant John Pike pepper-spraying demonstrators. One of her friends in turn shared the image on Reddit, a social news website, and shortly thereafter, other users of the site began to post their own Photoshopped versions of the photo. The "casually pepper spray everything cop" quickly became a full-fledged Internet meme. Within three days, more than a thousand altered images were in circulation, with the photo edited into a virtual tour of canonical works of art (Pike's image appearing in paintings by Seurat, Picasso, and Michelangelo, among many others) and popular culture (his spray can aimed at everyone from the Beatles to My Little Pony).<sup>1</sup> What this example demonstrates is that by mobilizing their capacity to create, collaborate, circulate, and connect, people around the world were able to sear the image of police aggression into collective consciousness and confront in their own terms the coercive power of the state. Moreover, by using playful imagery and creative expression, these activities reached many people who would not normally be drawn to political commentary or speeches.

With the resources of "participatory politics" increasingly available, we see growing opportunities for youth--and for civic actors broadly-- to exert agency in the public sphere, both as individuals and within communities of practice. By circulating content, they can influence what others are exposed to. When people are especially interested, outraged, or committed, they can comment on broadcast content, write and distribute statements, or remix content to make a point. Individuals and groups can also enter into dialogues with each other and with leaders in an effort to "talk back" and play a role in shaping agendas. Drawing on social and often digital networks, youth, as individuals or as collaborative communities, can also expand their access to audiences and opportunities for mobilization with less dependence on elite-driven institutions such as political parties or major interest groups and organizations. Indeed, we see examples of new media enabling the mobilization of cultural groups for political purposes and the mobilization of diffuse friendship networks for targeted political action. That said, participatory politics can, of course, introduce new hierarchies and leverage other types of elite-driven institutions (for



example, venture capital-backed companies), and so dynamics of exclusion as well as expansion are key to understanding emerging modes of citizen engagement.

Having identified a set of practices that appear to be playing an expanding role in political life, we now take up a discussion of several critical implications for this expanding role. We discuss how the affordances of new technology have lowered the barriers to and expanded the options for participatory politics; how online nonpolitical participatory cultures create new pathways to political activity; and how participatory politics are transforming the relationships among political, social, and cultural realms. In addition, we will also need to discuss the risks of digitally-enabled participatory politics. We proceed now to tackle those four subjects.

### Changing Relationships of Citizens to Institutions and Elites

In institutional, or, elite-driven politics, highly organized group actors—political parties, news organizations, social movement organizations, national civic organizations, lobbyists, and special interest groups—drive national conversations about which issues deserve attention; they also organize the options for action and mobilize citizens. Options for citizens to weigh in are limited to discrete moments—elections, vetted letters to the editor, and public meetings—opportunities that position citizens as the consumers of an elite-driven activity. Even activities traditionally designated as “extrasystemic” politics—protests, boycotts, and petitions—depend on social movement organizations and dedicated leaders if they are to gain traction.

As many have pointed out, the power of gate-keepers is much reduced in an era where people are highly networked, the tools of circulation and production are readily available, and it has become a norm to share our thoughts, activities, and information regularly with a wide network of friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Conversely, expectations of institutional responsiveness to citizen pressure are much increased.

Earl and colleagues have noted that the dramatically reduced costs associated with online petitions have led to an increase in their use for a whole host of causes, ranging from entertainment-related to activist to governmental issues (Earl and Kimport 2009, Earl et al. 2010). They also note that the trends in who initiates petitions may indicate a shift in power and control in the realm of activism and social movements. Whereas until recently social movement organizations were necessary to organize and circulate petitions, and thus acted as gatekeepers for identifying and promoting given causes, the availability of petition warehouse sites like Change.org makes the opportunity to initiate action accessible to the widest possible array of groups and individuals. As citizens have gained greater communicative capacity, they have begun to use these tools to hold political leaders and news organizations more accountable for their words and actions (Armstrong and Zuniga 2006). Political leaders are now speaking in front of audiences where their every utterance can be captured on a cell phone camera or digital recorder and then circulated online among a much larger audience (Winograd 2009).



These practices that shift the relations among citizens and elites are visible in a wide variety of contexts. For instance, young libertarians who are part of the growing student Liberty Movement describe new media tools as a means to develop and sustain camaraderie with other like-minded individuals, an especially important benefit since young libertarians often find it difficult to locate others with similar beliefs in their local communities (Gamber Thompson 2012). Then they use blogging, content circulation (from memes to political disquisitions), and online discussion on a range of platforms to raise concerns over the two-party political system and the efficacy of voting in the United States.

Similarly, undocumented youth are increasingly using digital media to produce and circulate their stories of coming out as undocumented through movement art and user-generated videos and documentaries, a practice they identify as “participatory storytelling” which “allow[s] immigrant youth a means for self-definition and spontaneous messaging, a form of communication, which diverges from tightly controlled movement ‘framing’” (Zimmerman 2012, 39). In this volume, Beltran describes how these young activists use social media as a “space of confrontation, creativity and self-assertion,” thereby wresting control over the immigration narrative from an older generation of activists.

In a previous era, citizens who were outraged by comments like those of Representative Todd Akin (R-MO) who said in 2012 that women’s bodies are able to prevent pregnancy in cases of “legitimate rape,” would have needed to organize physically in a common space, send letters to the editor, wait for an election to make their outrage known, or work directly with news elites to keep their message in the public eye. In the current era, Akin’s words were circulated through social networks and blogs, and as reported by CNN.com, “#Akin was still trending [on Twitter] two days after” his comments hit the airwaves. This grass-roots creation of news salience was accompanied by a decision on the part of the Republican Party to reduce support for Akin’s campaign (Basu and Welch 2012). In the Akin case, participatory politics involved a historically remarkable volume of public response to and dialogue about news stories, attentiveness on the part of elite news organization to what was circulated on Twitter and Facebook, and mobilization of political pressure on a major political party. Influence was achieved, in other words, through a combination of dialogue and feedback, circulation, and mobilization. As Zuckerman (2012) notes, “if elected officials, advocacy organizations and media ‘gatekeepers’ fought for control of agenda setting twenty years ago, the battle now includes individuals who produce and consume media, ‘the people formerly known as the audience,’ to use Dan Gillmor’s term.” New media create an opportunity for a broad public to shape the political agenda to a significant degree.

New media do not erase the role of political leaders and institutions, as Fung and Shkabatur show in this volume, but they do appear to provide opportunities to shift the relationship among several levers of power, opening up opportunities for ordinary citizens and individuals as well as new kinds of political entrepreneurs to influence what issues are discussed and addressed in the public sphere. For this stage of the argument, we accentuate the positive. We will return in a later section to discussion of the emergent risks of digitally-powered political life and to the many obvious factors that limit the applicability of this picture of agency: corporate control of platforms, government surveillance, and the tremendous



political power that accrues to wealth across most political contexts. While these powers have grown, too, thanks to the resources of technology, the evolving relationship between masses and elites includes a transformation of agency on both sides of the equation.

### Participatory Culture and Potential Pathways to Participatory Politics

The practices of participatory politics offer new routes to influence in the political realm, particularly for those outside of conventional elite groups. They also offer new pathways into political participation, thereby requiring us to re-conceptualize the developmental pathways into civic and political engagement available to young people. This involves re-examining the kinds of socializing experiences that are likely to lead youth (and others) to commit to civic and political engagement, clarifying the literacies that are necessary for success at participatory politics, and identifying the types of support that will be necessary for engagement of this kind.

In studies of participatory culture, scholars have found that many young people find their way to participatory communities through interest-driven networks, that is, networked groups of youth with common interests around arts, gaming, sports, entertainment, etc. Many youth, for example, participate in online communities that share interests in hobbies, sports, or comparable topics often associated with popular culture. This participation provides them with opportunities to create, critique, and share work while expanding their social networks and developing a variety of online participatory skills (see Ito et al. 2009, Jenkins et al. 2009). Interestingly, studies of *offline* extracurricular activities indicate that such interest-driven activities provide youth with opportunities to develop civic skills—how to speak in front of a group, how to plan collective undertakings, how to mobilize others—and productive norms of behavior within organizations and social networks. These, in turn, have been found to promote later civic and political engagement (McFarland and Thomas 2006; Otto 1976; Smith 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Youniss and Yates 1997). Since *online* interest-driven participation similarly cultivates skill development, and in particular the skills of participatory culture which translate directly into success in participatory politics, we may expect online interest-driven participation to provide a significant developmental pathway toward participatory politics.

For example, an online gaming community may begin as strictly social, but may take on civic dimensions as members negotiate norms (such as rules around critique, intellectual property, and credit) and roles (who takes on responsibility for maintenance or moderation) or take on increasingly coordinated action (organizing events, recruiting members, etc.). Additionally, their activities may not only build civic and political skills but also may provide a pathway to political engagement when, for instance, the group raises money in relation to the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami or joins other sites in a blackout in protest of SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act). This political training, which scholars like Robert Putnam (2000) argue traditionally has been provided by civic associations like bowling leagues, may take place in online



contexts in the twenty-first century (Jenkins et al. 2009 and Steinkuhler and Williams 2006).

Recent analyses of panel data produced by one author of this chapter are consistent with these qualitative findings (by Kahne, Lee and Feezell 2012). Online interest-driven activities promoted higher levels of both civic and political engagement as well as commitments to future engagement, even when controlling for prior levels of civic and political interests and activities. Thus, networked engagement with a participatory culture may well be expanding youth opportunities to develop their civic and political identities and capacities. Gaining a better understanding of how these pathways develop and support youth civic engagement will be key for helping educators, mentors and youth allies design educational settings in ways that learn from and acknowledge these new pathways. Strengthening and building on these pathways will be critical to cultivating future forms of citizenship that can counterbalance governmental, corporate, and financial power.

### Renegotiating the Boundaries of the Social, Cultural, and Political Realms

The fact that engagement in participatory culture appears to provide a pathway into engagement in participatory politics underscores how important it is to employ definitions of “politics” that are broad enough to capture the points where culture and politics intersect. Practices emerging in the cultural realm may well evolve to play an important role in the political realm. As types of activity and practice move from one domain to another, we also see transformations in the relationship of political activity to social and cultural spheres.

Sometimes, this occurs when a community engaged in a cultural activity mobilizes around a political question (e.g., an online crafting community that engages members in protesting SOPA). In such a case, we can say that the private or social association has developed latent capacity for political mobilization. When activated by a public question, that private or social association becomes also, even if only temporarily, a political association. In the past, intensive active membership in a series of organized groups or meetings would have been necessary to establish associations with large membership. The affordances of new media make the maintenance of such latent capacities arguably easier—one can keep a connection to an online social network alive with a series of small interactions, and the cost of mobilizing a group is lower than in previous eras. This means that people are more likely to find themselves routinely being asked to convert a social relationship into a political one and vice versa.

Moreover, Earl and Schussman (2007) find evidence that individuals are beginning to use what have traditionally been political tactics of social movements—for instance, petitions—to influence corporate activity. This is an expansion of the definition of the kinds of targets that are appropriate to political action, to include economic elites in addition to political elites.

The transformation in the relationship between the political and the social or cultural can also be a matter of the complex relationship between cultural creation and expression and the establishment of



communal norms and political legitimacy. Consider for example Egyptian surgeon Bassem Youssef's use of YouTube to gain viewership for his satirical program, *Al-Bernameg* (<http://www.albernameg.com/>) as a means to influence the nature of public discourse following the Egyptian revolution. Taking the *Daily Show* as inspiration and using the tools of production and circulation enabled by new media, he blends entertainment formatting and substantive political critique in order to gain traction in the public dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have similarly found evidence that youth are appropriating popular culture narratives in service of their political goals and that this blending serves a key function in their activism (see, e.g., Zimmerman 2012; Gamber Thompson 2012; Kliger-Vilenchik, forthcoming; and Brough and Shresthova 2012). As Zuckerman discusses in this volume, what appears on the surface to be a matter simply of humor or fun (playing games or circulating memes on Facebook) may in fact be an appropriation of pop culture for social change (taking advantage of the networked popularity of games and memes on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr to circulate and raise awareness of a low-resourced organization).

Just as the cultural is being blended into the domain of the political in the digital era, the political may blend into the domain of the cultural in unexpected ways as well. For instance, the act of sharing music and images were all once relatively personal and narrowly social activities between friends. However, as they move online, they can become issues of public concern. If a group of friends meeting to sew or craft in a house share copyrighted patterns, there is little public concern. If the group of friends meet and discuss and share their work (and patterns created by others) online, questions of copyright infringement and fair use come into play. Thus, in some cases, we are seeing what might have been simply an act of pursuing a hobby become public acts subject to legal regulation, opening up new areas of political concern.

Political theorists, legal scholars, and lawyers have long recognized that the boundaries between the private, social, and political realms are always being contested. The Supreme Court, in a series of decisions spanning from roughly 1970 to 1990, debated the question of whether organizations like the Jaycees, the Rotary Club, and the Boy Scouts of America are purely social organizations or part of the economic and political realm. The networked affordances of digital media are changing the nature of associationalism, and with that change come shifts in the analytical boundaries separating the political from the social and cultural.

### Risks Associated with New Media

Although this chapter focuses mainly on identifying the politically efficacious components of participatory politics, the dynamics we observe also introduce concerns about the impact of participatory politics on the quality of political life.



First, there is a risk relating to the practice of investigation. As noted above, the affordances of digital media can greatly expand access to perspectives and information, as well as options for investigation, but reduced reliance on elite and institutional gate-keepers introduces challenges associated with bias and credibility, including the insufficient vetting of misinformation and the creation of “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles,” in which people choose to attend to only like-minded perspectives (Sunstein 2007, Pariser 2011).

Second, there are risks relating to dialogue and feedback, circulation, and production. For example, the need for short powerful, spreadable messages may encourage *simplification* of complex and nuanced issues, as Parham and Allen point out in this volume (also Soep, forthcoming). It is also important to consider how participatory politics may or may not adequately facilitate *negotiation and deliberation*. One area of concern is that loosely organized groups that avoid the negativity of electoral politics may not provide sufficient incentive for youth to negotiate differences of opinion that inevitably emerge when taking action that has impact on others. The ways in which new media enable access to participatory politics—the possibility of acting with anonymity, ease of entry and exit with loosely formed groups—may also make the consequences of offending others feel less important or may make withdrawal from the conversations when small differences emerge seem like the best option.

Third, there is a risk related to mobilization itself, namely that, in the context of an increased reliance on expressive politics, political actors will cease to develop full understandings of the differences between voice and influence, perhaps contenting themselves with expression itself when they might also have achieved influence if they had focused on more traditional modes of political involvement (see Cohen et al. 2012). Henry Milner (2010) has argued, for instance, “Generations that turn their backs on politics in favor of individual expression will continue to find their priorities at the top of society’s wish list—and at the bottom of the ‘to do’ list” (p. 5). We do not want to undervalue the significance of voice itself—a point Shelby makes in this volume— especially for youth who are in the process of developing their political identities. But it is important to cultivate conceptualizations of participatory politics that make the trajectory from voice to influence explicit, accessible, and operationalizable.

Additionally, governmental, corporate, and financial power are themselves growing substantially, also thanks to the affordances of digital and social media. Thus, it is important to recognize that while digital media provide new means through which youth can weigh in on issues, they also create new technologies that can help institutions keep track of what those actions are, creating risk associated with *surveillance* (Shresthova, forthcoming). While social network sites provide their users with opportunities to investigate, dialogue, circulate, produce, and mobilize, they simultaneously generate information about average American consumer behavior with monetizable value, all of which belongs not to the individuals who produce it but to the corporations providing the platforms. As Wendy Chun points out in this volume, there are threats to civic agency from this direction as well. The digital age has brought us another chapter in the long-running contest between masses and elites (Michels 1915, Ober 1989). The future of democracy requires that we understand the new avenues for agency available to ordinary citizens through which



forms of social power may be built that can counteract elite power of diverse kinds.

Now that we have mapped out the stakes of understanding the emergence of participatory politics in the contemporary moment, as well as the positive potentialities in the practices of participatory politics, we turn to an assessment of the degree to which those potentialities are being actualized, at least among youth.

## Participatory Politics on the Ground

Study of youth practices in online environments make visible in a diverse array of contexts a suite of digitally-enabled practices that can be identified as the components of “participatory politics.” But how many young people, and from what sorts of demographic backgrounds, are engaging in participatory politics? And what are the consequences of these patterns for thinking about political and social equality and digital divides?

To answer these questions, in 2011 two of us (in partnership with Cathy J. Cohen, Ben Bowyer, and Jon Rogowski) conducted a national survey of youth aged fifteen to twenty-five (see Cohen et al 2012); the sample was large (just under three thousand youth) and evenly balanced among blacks, Asian Americans, Latinos, and whites (that is, minority groups were over-represented in comparison to their percentage of the population).

The survey asked youth about their engagement in a set of eleven indicators of participatory politics. These included both online participatory acts, such as “starting or joining a political group on a social network site” or “forwarding or posting someone else’s political commentary,” as well as offline participatory acts, such as “taking part in a protest, march or demonstration” and “being active in a group that has worked to address social or political issues.” The survey team found that 41 percent of young people engage in at least one act of participatory politics, which is roughly equal to the 44 percent who engage in other acts of politics.

This suggests that participatory politics make up a substantive part of youth political activity. Additionally, participatory politics appear not to provide an alternative model of participation but instead to expand the repertoire of activity among politically engaged youth. Only a very small percent of youth (4 percent) were engaged in participatory politics without pairing this engagement with some other form of traditional political activity. This contradicts concerns that new media might be simply creating a model of participation that is limited to “clicktivism” at the expense of other forms of participation.

The survey findings also provided support for the hypothesis that those using new media to pursue interests and hobbies from sports to technology to gaming may be gaining knowledge, skills, and networks, or what might be called “digital social capital,” which makes engaging in participatory politics more likely. Indeed, youth who infrequently engage in such interest-driven online activities reported



engaging in 1.2 political acts in the past year, while those who were highly involved in nonpolitical interest-driven activities averaged 4.5 political acts (Cohen et al. 2012).

Significantly, engagement in participatory politics was equitably distributed across racial groups (Cohen et al. 2012). Specifically, 43 percent of white, 41 percent of black, 38 percent of Latino, and 38 percent of Asian youth participated in at least one act of participatory politics during the previous twelve months. The difference between the group with the highest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—whites, at 43 percent—and the groups with the lowest rate—Asians and Latinos, at 38 percent—is only 5 percentage points. This stands in marked contrast to the demographic differences in voting rates.

In contrast, there was a big gap between how those with different levels of educational attainment engaged in participatory politics. Forty-seven percent of college graduates reported at least one act of participatory politics in the prior 12 months compared to 27 percent of those who graduated from high school but did not go on to college.

Indeed, the survey also raised a number of questions that need to be addressed through continued research. We do not yet know whether rates of engagement in participatory politics are increasing overall or relative to traditional modes of engagement among youth. Furthermore, we cannot tell from cross-sectional data whether participatory politics are simply enriching the activities of youth who are already politically engaged or whether they serve as an alternative entry point for youth who then also become involved in more traditional forms of political action.

And while it is clear that engagement in interest-driven activities is related to engagement in participatory politics, the causality is somewhat less clear. Questions remain about these relationships, especially about when, why and how frequently transitions from participation in interest-driven communities to participatory politics occur.

The survey findings with regard to education raise important additional questions about the influence of social context on access to participatory politics. Education provides both an informational and social context around youth online activity that may importantly lead them toward participatory politics. On the other hand, many youth are not currently seeking education beyond what is mandated, and the question remains whether there are structures, online or offline, that will support engagement of these youth in participatory politics.

More critically, we do not know the extent to which these forms of activities are resulting in an accompanying increase in power and influence. While youth may be drawn to participatory politics because it offers more opportunity for self-expression, the question of whether and when this voice translates into influence still needs to be answered. In this research question lies the key to understanding the future of citizenship generally.



## Conclusion

Participatory politics in the digital age create many possibilities for civic and political participation in the public sphere. They enable individuals to tap vast stores of information, consider diverse views, communicate with potentially large audiences, mobilize others, and work collaboratively for social change, all outside of formal civic and political organizations.

Lessons from history suggest that this may be a critical moment to pay attention to if we are to maximize the potential of participatory politics, especially to engage younger cohorts. As Light's historical analysis suggests (in this volume), the power of any generation's "new media" for facilitating youth civic and political engagement may be due more to its status as new, unregulated (by corporations or adults), and low cost. As we see major institutions (media companies, political parties, corporations) figuring out how to harness and make use of current technology as well as increasing battles over ownership and regulation of the Internet, we see potential for this communication technology to come under tighter control. Against this backdrop, the need to deepen our conceptual and empirical understanding of the changes now occurring is all the more pressing. With such increased understanding, we might more effectively minimize the problems stemming from those changes while also maximizing the positive potential of participatory politics to provide, in Barber's words, "the pleasures of participation, the fellowship of civic association, and the autonomy, self-governance, and enlarging mutuality of continuous political activity."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a history of the development of this meme, as well as a collection of images, see <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casual-pepper-spray-everything-cop>.

<sup>2</sup> Hartley (2010) argues that citizen disillusionment with broadcast media coverage of the political sphere due to perceived influence of political elites in controlling the narrative has led to a shift towards DIY/DWO (Do it yourself/Do it With Others) models of citizenship in which citizens are relying more frequently on communications to shape narratives than on elite guided action. Jones (2013) suggests that within such a context, satire becomes a more desirable form of "truth creation" as it allows citizens to construct critical narratives and to encourage circulation of information. Jones argues this is a particularly important form of expression in a context where "serious" political talk is viewed with skepticism, and therefore less likely to be attended to and circulated.



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