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**Digital Opportunities for Civic Education**

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The collected papers for this conference can be found at <http://www.aei.org/event/100440>.

*I'm 16 and I thought that you'd be mine.  
I used to tweet you and text you and call you and hit you on Facebook all the time.  
Can't believe that you did me wrong.  
We were on iChat all night long.*

-- "Baby" (Acoustic Version) by Justin Bieber  
[underlining added]

*Every generation needs a new revolution.*

-- Thomas Jefferson

Picture a university lecture hall, filled with first-year college students. In walks the philosophy professor who, unfortunately, has not had the chance to prepare for her Introduction to Philosophy class. However, she has a solution – she will pose a provocative question and then facilitate the conversation. She asks, “Which is worse: apathy or ignorance?” The class is silent for a moment before a boy in the front row sleepily replies, “I don’t know. And I don’t care.”

To some, this situation summarizes what’s wrong with our democracy and, especially, why educators need to get much more involved: there is simply too much apathy and too much ignorance. On one level, these concerns seem warranted. The youngest generations participate the least in civic life, with a full 55 percent of those under thirty recently judged as civically and politically “disengaged” in a report by the National Conference on Citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Close to two-thirds (64 percent) of young adults aged 18-29 say that they are “not at all” interested in campaign news and while the 2008 presidential election generated a great deal of press because of higher than average youth participation, numbers from the recent 2010 midterm election do not reflect that continued upswing.<sup>2</sup> Judged by traditional measures, current levels of youth civic knowledge and participation are problematic.

In what follows, we argue that civic educators' ability to address this situation productively requires increased attention to the civic and political dimensions of digital media. We say this for two reasons. First, civic and political life has moved online. If youth are to participate, educators must help youth learn to employ these online forms of activity. Second, there are many ways educators can take advantage of youth engagement with digital media to foster youth civic and political engagement and development.

Below, we discuss these points. Then, in section two, we summarize several recently completed studies that highlight possible ways civic educators can take advantage of youth engagement with digital media to support civic engagement. The paper concludes with a discussion of ways policymakers can support these educational efforts.

### *Civic and Political Life Has Moved Online*

*The Internet is where young people get much of their political information.* Half (50 percent) of 18-29 year-old Internet news consumers say their voting decisions are influenced by what they learn online<sup>3</sup> and 37 percent of those ages 18-24 obtained 2008 campaign information from social networking sites, compared to only 4 percent of 30-39 year olds.<sup>4</sup> Online spaces are regarded as convenient spaces by American youth. Three out of five (61 percent) voters aged 18-29 who get their election news from the Internet reporting going online because it is more convenient than other methods of accessing political information.<sup>5</sup>

*The Internet is often where young people hear and voice perspectives.* Seventy-five percent of American young people are active participants in social networking via Facebook.<sup>6</sup> Networked spaces allow for conversation, debate, and information sharing in an unprecedented way. Further, in terms of personal expression, 64 percent of teens report creating online digital

content, and 28 percent have written and designed an online journal or blog.<sup>7</sup> At their best, online communities serve as the “town squares” of yesteryear for young people, allowing them to grapple with their fears and hopes and providing a significant space for political commentary.

*The Internet provides opportunities to learn participatory skills and norms.* Youth are increasingly engaged in informal online communities that define themselves around shared interests and that often center around expressive activities, such as the sharing of fan fiction, collaboration around a video game, or the production of YouTube videos. These online activities may function similarly to offline, extracurricular activities which have been found to provide youth with opportunities to develop both civic skills – such as how to plan collective undertakings or mobilize others – as well as productive norms of behavior within social networks and organizations.<sup>8</sup>

*The Internet is where funds are raised and individuals are mobilized.* Just as online spaces provide a convenient way for young people to learn about global issues or disasters, they also allow concerned individuals to rally to a cause and contribute both opinions and financial assistance with great ease. Indeed, Americans under the age of forty were just as likely to donate to the recent Japan tsunami relief efforts through electronic means (online, through text messaging, and through email solicitations) as through more traditional means, such as by phone or mail.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, given the ease of sending mass email solicitations, or including a “call to action” as part of a website’s homepage, online spaces are increasingly used for recruitment. Recent survey findings suggest that youth under twenty-five are more often recruited for civic or political activities online than through other methods and when compared to their older counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Young people can also be rallied through their mobile phone applications and alerts. As youth digital media saturation evolves, we suspect that this shift toward computer-

based and Smartphone-based recruitment will also show exponential increases.

*The Internet presents risks as well as opportunities.* While many aspects of civic and political life increasingly occur online, these changes create risks and challenges as well as opportunities. For example, it is often difficult to judge the quality of information found online, individuals may choose primarily to read viewpoints and engage with those whose views align with their own, the distribution of media access and participatory habits may exacerbate inequalities in civic and political voice, and online communities may, at times, be characterized by a disturbing lack of civility. Thus, in addition to recognizing the many ways civic and political life rely on digital media, it is important for civic educators to think about risks and challenges as they consider ways to engage with the digital dimensions of civic education.

#### *Educators Can Take Advantage of Digital Media to Foster Desired Forms of Civic and Political Engagement and Development*

While youth participation with many different dimensions of civic and political life are low, youth engagement with digital media is high. Ninety-five percent of teenagers aged 14-17 and 93 percent of young adults aged 18-29 use the Internet and almost a quarter of the Smartphone market is held by teenagers and young adults, aged 13-24.<sup>11</sup>

Civic educators can foster youth civic and political engagement by meeting youth where they are: in online and digital spaces. As we will discuss, bridges to civic and political issues arise in these contexts and, in addition, the participatory nature of much online activity often parallels the demands and dynamics of civic and political life. By tapping the power of video games and the compelling nature of social networks and online interest-driven communities, it may well be possible for civic educators to foster desired forms of youth civic and political

activity and development.

### *Charting a Strategy*

This new territory does not come with a road map. There is still much to learn about how online opportunities are influencing the quality, quantity, and equality of civic and political participation and much to learn about ways civic educators can leverage the affordances of these media to promote desired outcomes. In the following section, we present four studies we've conducted that provide directions for educators. Some of our findings may be surprising – calling into question what for many has become conventional wisdom. In particular, we share findings related to the civic impact and potential of online participatory communities, ways digital media may foster or constrain exposure to diverse perspectives, needs related to digital media literacy, and opportunities associated with video game play. Drawing on this discussion, we conclude by highlighting several steps policymakers can take to support digital dimensions of civic education.

### **Our Research**

Between 2006 and 2010, we<sup>12</sup> conducted a series of studies to examine whether either media literacy efforts or different forms of participation with digital media might influence youth civic and political development and activity. The first three studies we discuss drew on surveys conducted with a diverse group of roughly five thousand California high school students from more than twenty-one school districts from across the state. We were able to follow a sub-group of 435 youth for up to 3.5 years as they progressed into early adulthood and we have follow-up data from this group.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on a framework developed by Ito and colleagues, we also examined differing ways youth participated while online.<sup>14</sup> We examined how often youth

participated in politically driven online activity (getting or sharing political information and perspectives), interest driven online activity (participation in online communities tied to hobbies, sports, or other interests), and friendship driven activity (socializing via email and on social networks), as well as their exposure to media literacy education. Data from the fourth study, executed in partnership with the Pew Internet and Life project and drawn from their 2008 “Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey,” consisted of a random, nationwide sample of just over one 1,100 young people, aged 12-17.

### How Might Civic Educators Leverage Youth Engagement with Digital Media?

These four studies provide an early look at the ways online participation and media literacy education may influence both on and offline civic activity and development. We discuss findings from each of these studies and also highlight examples of strategies educators are using to tap the potential of youth engagement with digital media.

#### *Online Participatory Communities Can Promote Civic Engagement*

##### Conventional Wisdom: Online communities distract youth from real world issues.

In a cartoon depicting the evolution of good samaritanism in the digital age, a man walks by a homeless person lying on the street and does nothing. In the next frame, he is at his computer – "What's this?!! Sally needs a bag of fertilizer for her Farmville farm? I better get right on it!"

Many are struck by how many people participate in online communities. There are, for example, 30 million virtual farms in *Farmville* (There are, by the way, 2 million real farms in the United States). Such statistics lead some to wonder if the vast engagement with virtual worlds

distracts from real world issues. Often, we believe, the opposite is true.<sup>15</sup> Participation in online communities often functions much like offline, extracurricular activities, which have been found to foster later civic engagement by teaching skills, by developing a sense of agency and productive group norms, and by fostering an appreciation of the potential of collective action. Moreover, in the context of a social group with shared interests, civic activity often takes place.

Consider, for example, Gaia Interactive, an online site where fans of avatars and virtual worlds come together, not only to connect in Gaia's virtual space – playing online games and sharing artwork, writing, and avatar creation – but also to discuss their specific interests in a wide variety of online forums. Of the monthly 1.4 million American visitors, the vast majority are teens and young adults and many of the interest-based chat forums reflect stereotypical interests of this younger demographic.<sup>16</sup> Alongside forums on body piercing and celebrity gossip, are “Gaia Community Projects,” where participants rally their fellow users to get behind a social cause such as breast cancer or autism awareness. For the month of April 2011, for example, “Gaians” were encouraged to equip their avatar with a daffodil to support cancer awareness as a form of onsite engagement. Further, offsite engagement was also part of the drive, with teams (e.g., “Team Melanoma,” “Team Leukemia”) creating YouTube videos to promote awareness and making donations directly to charities supporting cancer research. The site also contains guilds, or groups of users associated with a particular cause. More than two hundred such guilds categorized as “political” in focus.

In our study, we did not assess the impact of a particular web site, but rather looked at participation in interest driven communities more generally.<sup>17</sup> Overall, we found that young persons' non-political, interest-driven participation was a strong predictor of their civic participation. Indeed, even controlling for their prior level of engagement with civic life, when

youth were highly involved in interest-driven online participatory communities they became more likely to volunteer in their community, raise money for a charitable cause, or work together with other individuals to solve a problem in the community where they live.

In explaining why such a relationship might exist, Henry Jenkins and colleagues note that interest-driven communities are often characterized by a participatory culture – one in which peer to peer exchange and mentorship is common.<sup>18</sup> These cultures enable voice, respond to an impulse for expression and social relationships, and tie to what participants find valuable – all features that align well with dynamics of civic engagement. They also create or expand an individual's networks that would potentially strengthen the likelihood of recruitment into civic or political activity. In short, these results challenge the conventional notion that immersion in online communities are distracting or socially isolating and, instead, highlight the potential civic benefits of non-political participation in online communities.

The civic value of non-political interest-driven activity within a participatory culture has interesting implications for educators, parents, and others who work with youth. First, helping to guide youth towards interest-driven online communities may well make sense. Indeed, just as many extol the value of offline extracurricular (and generally interest-driven) activities, it makes sense to find ways to promote youth engagement with online interest-driven activities.

In addition, we believe educators should develop ways to create participatory cultures around aspects of the academic experience. One early experiment with these possibilities is InteroBang, a problem solving social network game that engages youth in missions to enhance the study of science, history, art, and culture.<sup>19</sup> Students and teachers select missions based on interest and curricular requirements and post their work online where it can be viewed and commented on by other youth as well as by game moderators and teachers. More than eight

thousand students in seventy-two countries have submitted missions on a variety of topics linked to civic and social engagement. One student created a photo essay and reflection statement comparing produce from the local grocery store chain to produce from a nearby farmers market. Another painted a mural encompassing students' dreams as motivated by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Drawing on the affordances of social networks, youth can view and comment on the work of others and can create missions for other youth to do. The platform provides an authentic audience and community for student work, enables youth to pursue their interests and to interact with those who share their interests, and engages youth in activities that develop both media literacy and civic skills associated with production.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Youth Exposure to Diverse Perspectives Through Online Activity*

Conventional Wisdom: The Internet functions as an "echo chamber" for youth, surrounding them with only those perspectives that match their own.

Political theorists have long extolled exposure to a wide range of perspectives as an essential support for a free and democratic society.<sup>21</sup> To an increasing extent, individuals using the Internet can select which sites to visit and for how long, which homepage should be launched by the browser, which news features to look at, and which email updates to receive. The Internet enables users to control what news and perspectives they see, causing some to worry that the Internet will lead many to enter echo chambers – isolated enclaves of like-minded individuals.<sup>22</sup> In addition, platforms are increasingly designed to focus users on information and contacts consistent with preferences revealed by prior behaviors. For example, while once Facebook users controlled their homepage content by promoting or demoting, Facebook now determines this based on use patterns. Users have to seek out the updates of those they do not normally interact

with. Similarly, as iPads and iPhones gain popularity, companies steer users toward the use of “apps” (applications) – standalone sites dedicated to that company’s services. Where once users might have begun with a website dedicated to one topic and followed the links to different places, the increasing trend toward using “apps” may discourage this sort of intellectual roaming. Little is currently known about whether these developments change the likelihood that youth encounter diverse information and viewpoints. As Eli Pariser warns, this tendency toward customization may lead us into “filter bubbles” in which we are decreasingly exposed to information that challenges our worldviews.<sup>23</sup>

To consider this possibility, we examined whether youth exposure to divergent views and to political views with which they agree was linked to a) politically driven online activity, b) nonpolitical interest driven activities, and c) to friendship-driven activities.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to conventional wisdom regarding Internet “echo chambers,” our findings revealed that few young people, 5 percent, report interacting only with those whose views align with their own. Most youth, 57 percent, who report exposure to views that align with their own also report exposure to individuals who hold divergent views. In line with a good bit of political theory, we view this dual exposure as desirable.<sup>25</sup> Engagement with those who share one’s perspectives often makes civic and political engagement more likely and can help deepen and clarify one’s perspective. Further, exposure to divergent perspectives has been found to foster an individual’s perspective-taking ability, knowledge of rationales put forth by those who disagree, and political tolerance for those with differing perspectives.<sup>26</sup>

We also found that young people’s politically driven online activities were strongly and positively related to their exposure to diverse perspectives and that friendship-driven socializing had no impact one way or the other. Perhaps more interesting was the finding that non-political,

interest-driven participation was related to increased exposure to diverse perspectives on civic and political issues, even after controlling for their politically driven activities and for prior levels of reported exposure to diverse perspectives. It appears that these nonpolitical online interest-driven communities provide a setting for youth to engage with civic and political issues, affording a valuable form of social capital where diverse perspectives are considered. Indeed, the discussions that occur in nonpolitical online contexts may be particularly important because they can reach those who lack strong civic and political interests as well as provide more ideologically diverse environments.

This finding is consistent with results from a study of adults by Wojcieszak and Mutz who found that 53 percent of those engaged in online groups where discussions concern sports, entertainment, hobbies and other interests end up exchanging perspectives on political issues.<sup>27</sup> In fact, participants in interest-driven groups were the most likely to be exposed to cross-cutting political discussions. These findings do not mean that exposure to highly partisan blogs or websites may not be occurring or that such exposure may not be of concern. Rather it reminds us that the networked nature of interest-driven online participation may often expose youth to diverse viewpoints.

At the same time, it is important to note that in our study a substantial number of youth (34 percent) disagreed when asked if they were exposed to any perspectives or information on societal issues. Thus, while few youth reported exposure to “echo chambers,” it appears that many youth are in “empty chambers” where they are not exposed to any perspectives on societal issues. This should be an area of great concern. Indeed, this finding is an indicator of a broader and well-recognized phenomenon – many youth are largely disengaged from civic and political life. Such realities underscore the need for civic education and, especially for civic education

efforts that are universal (like required high school civics courses) so that they reach those who might otherwise never engage with these issues. In addition, the fact that nonpolitical interest-driven activities are related to such exposure indicates that non-political interest-driven participation might be used to create a gateway to civic and political engagement.

YouMedia, headquartered in Chicago, and currently being expanded to thirty cities, provides an interesting model. In partnership with the Digital Youth Network, YouMedia includes both a physical space – a library and a complete media repository with computers, studio equipment, video/digital cameras, and much more – as well as an online youth network. Both the Network and the physical space provide youth with opportunities to develop media literacy skills and to express themselves through projects that often integrate music, art, books, personal interests, and issues in their lives and in the broader society. On and offline, YouMedia provides participants with both an audience and a space for discussion, collaboration, and debate. The physical space provides an afterschool and weekend hub and the Digital Youth Network provides a way for youth to participate anywhere and anytime. Their reach is expanded through partnerships with public schools in Chicago. One interesting initiative is “The Change Society” – a subgroup of older teens in the YouMedia fold who work with one of the organization’s mentors to create media pieces (music, poetry, video) with a focus on civic engagement. They use both literature and current events as inspiration for dialogue. More generally, while YouMedia does not focus primarily on civic or political engagement, their rich array of activities such as poetry slams, book discussions, digital art, music, and video projects often inspire the sharing of diverse perspectives on civic and political issues.

*Digital Media Literacy Can Promote Online Civic Participation*

Conventional Wisdom: Young people are digital natives who have little to learn from adults.

In March 2010, the New Yorker published a cartoon popular with “techies” and teachers alike. Set in a hospital nursery, the cartoon features an infant holding up his cell phone and texting, “OMG! I just got born!” Conventional wisdom holds that, when it comes to digital media, youth are digital natives who learn on their own what they need to know and that adults have little to offer.

Research indicates that this view is mistaken. If the ability to text or tweet was all youth needed to tap the civic potential of digital media, this might be true. However, accessing online content with any depth takes a certain level of media literacy, which research has demonstrated is not evenly distributed among all youth.<sup>28</sup> For example, those from privileged backgrounds demonstrate higher-level “know-how” – Internet search skills, the ability to download or send files, an understanding of Internet vocabulary – compared to those from lower socioeconomic status.<sup>29</sup> All youth must learn to judge the credibility of digital media content, in order to navigate almost limitless options regarding both content and technology, and to become competent, civil, critical online participants.

Taking an early look at the impact of digital media literacy instruction on online behaviors for young people, we investigated digital media learning opportunities for high school and university students.<sup>30</sup> To remove the confounding effects of other digital media use on skill development, we controlled for various forms of digital media engagement including: communication (e-mail, text messaging, online chat), blogging or social networking, online video game activity, and overall time spent online.

Our results indicated that digital media literacy instruction is fairly widespread, at least within our California sample. More than 80 percent of high school students in our sample

reported opportunities to assess the trustworthiness of online information and close to 90 percent were required to use the Internet to find both information and differing viewpoints on political and social issues. Participants were less likely to report creating original online content as part of a school assignment, with approximately 65 percent of both high school and college students reporting “never” being given such an assignment.

These media literacy learning opportunities appeared to have a positive impact on civic engagement, even with controls for political interest and for prior levels of online activity. Those youth who had media literacy opportunities were more likely to both engage online politically as well as to report being exposed to diverse perspectives during their discretionary time. This supports the idea that as youth have opportunities to learn *how* to engage in online, they become more likely to do so.

Unfortunately, few studies have examined the civic impacts of particular media literacy programs in school settings.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, this work, along with work by media literacy educators, clearly highlights the potential of such efforts. One example is Project Look Sharp. Their lesson guides, media documents, and staff development aim to help teachers engage students in critical analysis of current political/societal issues and the ways those issues are portrayed in the media. For instance, lessons on criminal justice expose youth to news articles and other media that make varied arguments. Youth are then asked to critically analyze both arguments and associated imagery within the news report (the cover of a magazine article, for example) or the ways in which statistics are used to make an argument more convincing.

In addition, those focused on media literacy are increasingly attending to youth as producers as well as consumers of media. For example, the Civic Action Project is a curriculum for high school students in civics and government created by the Constitutional Rights

Foundation. Students identify a problem, policy, or issue and design an action project with a tangible civic goal. Engagement with digital media is woven into this curriculum. Students create project blogs, learn how to use multimedia sources to persuade and inform others, and gain the necessary skills to navigate online sources of information about their chosen topic. Further, students learn about the importance of the media in setting the public agenda.

### *The Civic Potential of Video Games*

#### Conventional Wisdom: Video games are a distraction at best.

While conventional wisdom has it that video games are largely a waste of time, distracting youth from other, far more meaningful pursuits, some educators and developers view video games as powerful learning tools. We collaborated with the Pew Internet and American Life Project to investigate the relationship between video game play and civic and political engagement in young adults.<sup>32</sup>

We found that 97 percent of teens reported playing video games, but that, overall, playing video games was not related to engagement, one way or another. We also examined youth who played video games that incorporated the same opportunities found in high quality civic education such as opportunities to help others, to be a leader of a city or nation, or to encounter controversial societal issues.<sup>33</sup> We found that many games provided youth with such civic learning experiences and that youth who played games that provided these opportunities were far more likely to seek online sources of political information, to give money to a charity, to be interested in politics, to protest or demonstrate, and say that they had persuaded someone to vote in a particular way. No doubt some of this relationship is due to the fact that youth who like politics also like playing games that provide these experiences but, given positive findings from

studies of the impact of such simulated and school-based civic learning opportunities, we also suspect that civic gaming experiences can enhance the likelihood that youth will be active when offline. In addition, and in contrast to school-based civic learning opportunities, we found that civic gaming experiences were equally distributed by race, ethnicity, and family income.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, while educators have been found to provide youth who are white, high achieving, and from homes with higher income with more civic learning opportunities, when it is the youth who decide what they want to do (as is the case with video game play), they are equally likely to pursue civic content.

Interested stakeholders, from political, government, and educational organizations have already begun to develop ways to foster civic outcomes through video games. Quest Atlantis, a popular educational virtual reality game, played by more than ten thousand young people on five different continents, opens by telling tweens that they *have* “to help save Atlantis!” Kids are presented with a compelling narrative surrounding the social and environmental problems of the mythical world “Atlantis” and are entreated to help solve these problems with the help of other “questers.” Game challenges are structured around seven social commitments, several of which are distinctly civic in nature, including “Social Responsibility” and “Healthy Communities.” Recent research has found that the game promotes civic outcomes such as ecological stewardship, an understanding and appreciation of community action, and social responsibility.<sup>35</sup>

There are many other such initiatives, including Real Lives, a simulation game where youth in a class can each be assigned an identity that is modeled on the world census.<sup>36</sup> Students then must live their life (get an education, a job, stay healthy, etc.) making decisions and being affected by differing events; the probability of any given event impacting a given player is tied to actual data regarding their likelihood. The game provides youth with insight into the ways

differing political, economic, and cultural realities, as well as chance, influence both decisions and life courses of individuals in differing parts of the world.

The growing number of independently designed, socially conscious video games has inspired the work of the Games for Change organization, which supports the creation of video games with a social impact and curates online lists of relevant games, organizing them by appropriate age range and game focus, including areas such as human rights, politics, global conflict, and public policy.<sup>37</sup>

### **Implications for Policy**

The findings from studies and the broader trends discussed in this paper highlight some important and potentially valuable directions for policy and practice. While some practices were detailed in the prior section, directions for policy follow.

#### *The Virtual World Can be Good for the Real One*

We found that both politically driven and interest-driven engagement in online communities can promote civic and political engagement. Friendship-driven online socializing appeared to make little difference one way or the other. Our studies also indicated that media literacy instruction about ways to engage with issues civically and politically promote engagement during youths' discretionary time. In addition, politically driven and interest-driven online participation as well as media literacy efforts all appear able to bolster the degree to which youth are exposed to diverse opinions. Finally, while the total volume of video game play is not related to overall levels of engagement with civic or political life, when the video games provide civic learning opportunities by focusing on societal issues or placing the player in the role of a

political leader, playing video games is strongly associated with offline civic and political activity and commitments.

As stated earlier, these findings represent initial investigations into a fast changing field. Much more research is needed to fully understand when and why varied kinds of online experiences influence particular outcomes. That said, these early findings, along with those of other researchers, provide helpful guidance for policymakers and educators who must act now. For this reason we conclude with five recommendations.

1. *Promote media literacy.* Despite multiple strong rationales for media literacy, it is still often on the margins of school curriculum and school reform efforts. Within the United States, it has rarely been a sizable focus of curriculum standards or district or state policy. Indeed, there has not been a single national survey that details how often this goal is attended to by teachers. That said, the momentum may be shifting.<sup>38</sup> A number of policy statements and efforts to bolster attention to media literacy are emerging. For example, media literacy receives significant attention in the Common Core standards.<sup>39</sup> It makes sense for policymakers and educators to amplify such efforts and to be sure that the civic dimensions of media literacy (learning how to critically assess media, to produce compelling and informed media tied to societal issues, to engage in dialogs in a respectful manner, for example) are included in these efforts. Our data indicates that when youth are given structured opportunities to gain political information online during school time, they become more likely to use these tools during their discretionary time. In addition, media literacy opportunities are needed if we want to expand the number of youth who can judge credibility and assess bias in online information, who can produce and share work that is compelling and informed, who can engage with others respectfully, and who know what to share and what to keep private. Media literacy is also far

preferable to relatively hopeless efforts to prevent youth from engaging with digital media. As the leaders of Common Sense Media explain, “We believe in teaching our kids to be savvy, respectful and responsible media interpreters, creators, and communicators. We can’t cover their eyes but we can teach them to see.”<sup>40</sup>

2. *Close the digital divide and the participation gap.* Currently, data regarding the inequitable nature of civic participation and influence is troubling. Low-income and less educated citizens, as well as recent immigrants and those less proficient in English, have far less voice in the political process.<sup>41</sup> Given the increasingly digital nature of civic and political life, it is fundamentally important that we enact policies that close both the digital divide and the participation gap.

By the digital divide, we refer to unequal levels in access to technology. For example 95 percent of households with incomes over \$100,000 had broadband in 2009 compared with 38 percent of those with incomes under \$25,000.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, youth of different races are equally likely to own cell phones and recent research shows that Black, Hispanic, and Asian American youth are the heaviest consumers of digital media content (games, music, videos) using that device.<sup>43</sup> When deciding which aspects of the digital divide on which to focus, it is very important to know more about how differing kinds of technology are related to desired forms of participation.

Indeed, many now argue that rather than focusing solely on the digital divide, policymakers should also focus on the “Participation Gap” – on differences in the ways in which youth participate when online.<sup>44</sup> For example, it may be more important for youth to have affordable access to Smartphones than for them to have computers at home with broadband. In addition, closing the participation gap may depend as much on ensuring equal supports for media

literacy education and for opportunities that support desired use of digital technology for civic and political purposes as on equalizing access to technology. In other words, at the same time that policies advance the cause of access, there should be policies that assess whether school and after-school supports for media literacy and desired forms of participation via digital media are equitably distributed and policies that respond to disparities once they are identified. Such policies can strengthen our democracy by helping to ensure that all individuals can and do voice their perspectives.

3. *Promote out of school opportunities along with those that occur in school.* Often civic educators focus only on schools. When it comes to leveraging the power of digital media to support civic and political development, we believe this stance would be a sizable mistake. After-school and extra-curricular opportunities as well as youths' discretionary time have the potential to be quite valuable when it comes to fostering desired civic and political outcomes. Indeed, while schools can support this agenda in many ways, it is often easier for those outside of schools to support youth engagement in actual political and civic activity both because these organizations are often community based and because schools are often hesitant to engage youth in activities that might be considered politically partisan or controversial. Thus, it makes sense to look for ways youth can engage civically and politically in out of school contexts and at ways media literacy can be developed in these settings.

For example, the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) is a youth-led community based organization in which youth learn organizing strategies to address issues of educational quality and access.<sup>45</sup> As part of their activities, youth engage in political education and action but also in new media literacy and new media strategy. Video, web-radio, digital photography, blogging, and a dynamic web presence are embedded in PSU's organizing efforts and recent research with

PSU alumni has detailed the substantial influence the organization has had on both their traditional and non-traditional forms of civic and political involvement.<sup>46</sup> Recognizing the value of digital literacy as a skill and as social justice issue, PSU has recently launched the “Young People’s Computer Center” to provide a space where youth can learn together and “bridge the digital divide.”

4. *Fund the development of digital civic infrastructure.* The need for increased attention to digital infrastructure is enormous. When we speak of the need for digital civic infrastructure we are referring less to digital technology and more to the need for digital resources that can foster desired civic and political engagement. Some outstanding models already exist.

Puget SoundOff, with offices in Seattle, is an online “hub” where teens can do all the “usual” fun stuff – blog, share and comment on photos and videos, connect with friends in a self-contained social networking space – while simultaneously learning about, generating original web content on, and mobilizing around regional political, environmental, and social issues. The site provides a space for teens to learn about what’s happening in their area, for them to share their perspectives, and for peer to peer encouragement to get involved, as well as room for discussion and reflection. Educators in both school and out-of-school contexts are invited to use the site as a way for youth to learn about issues and to develop media literacy while the integrated social network provides a valuable and sizable audience for youth productions. Such online platforms are relatively easy to replicate in other regions and to tailor to local conditions. Civic educators and designers are only just beginning to develop this kind of infrastructure; it will be key to supporting high-quality civic opportunities for youth in school and out.

5. *Conduct relevant assessments.* Assessments, rightly understood, are essential. They provide a meaningful way for individuals and groups to receive feedback on the quality of their

work and for educators and policymakers to assess the impact of varied efforts. There may well be ways that digital media and the networked nature of digital media can provide important supports for quality assessment.

Imagine, for example, if every high school student had a digital civics portfolio. Throughout their time in high school, each student might post writings, videos of activities, and other artifacts of their civic and political analysis and action. These portfolios might also be placed within a network so that teachers and students can see and comment on each other's work. There would be many details to work out, of course, but such portfolios might enable more authentic characterizations of student engagement and of their analytic and expressive capacities than a survey or test. By having the portfolios span several years it would hopefully also be possible to see how students' thinking and levels of engagement develop. Digital "badges" might be tied to these portfolios to provide an additional support for this kind of support for assessment. Digital badges call attention to the skills youth are using and the experiences they are having during their digital activities. These electronic badges are earned when an individual accomplishes a given task or demonstrates a particular skill. They can be used to motivate accomplishments and to provide clear indicators of varied capacities and experiences. One could imagine earning badges for engaging in a service activity, for sharing an informed perspective on a societal issue with a large audience, or for seeking out diverse perspectives on a controversial topic. In addition, the networked nature of badges mean that those pursuing badges might receive feedback and enter into dialogs with a range of individuals, spurring reflection and engagement. While the use of badges as part of assessment structures is just beginning to take shape, their ability to attend to a wide range of priorities, that they can attend to both individual and group accomplishments, and their ability to focus attention on what

individuals have done and can do make them especially appropriate as a way of characterizing civic learning, skills, and levels of engagement.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Educators and policymakers should look for ways to leverage the civic potential of online activity. Unfortunately, often we do not. Lumping all activities together, we ask: how much time do kids spend with media? The answer is shocking – something close to 7.5 hours a day if you include television – but it's the wrong question. We need to focus on what youth are doing when they engage with media and on the impact of different practices. Answers to these questions can help us highlight ways educators, policymakers and others can leverage youth engagement with these media to foster their productive engagement in society.

In short, the virtual world can be good for the "real" one. There are forms of online participatory activity that can give youth civic and political engagement a much-needed boost. It is vitally important that educators and policymakers in both school and out-of-school settings seize these opportunities to more fully tap this potential.

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