

Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age

W. Lance Bennett

University of Washington, Seattle, USA

lbennett@u.washington.edu

Prepared for OECD/INDIRE conference on Millennial Learners, Florence, March 5-6, 2007

It is clear that many young citizens of this digital and global age have demonstrated interests in making contributions to society. Yet the challenge of engaging effectively with politics linked to spheres of government is difficult for most. A casual look at world democracies suggests that many of the most established ones are showing signs of wear. Parties are trying to reinvent themselves while awkwardly staying the course that keeps them in power. In the press, in everyday conversation, and often from the mouths of politicians, politics has become a dirty word rather than a commonly accepted vocabulary for personal expression.¹

And so, younger generations are disconnecting from conventional politics and government in alarming numbers. These trends in youth dissatisfaction with conventional political engagement are not just occurring in the United States, but have parallels in other democracies as well, including Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.²

At the same time, many observers properly note that there are impressive signs of youth civic engagement in nongovernmental areas, including increases in community volunteer work, high levels of consumer activism, and strong involvement in social

causes from the environment to economic injustice in local and global arenas.³ Some even see civic engagement in online social networking and entertainment communities. For example, Henry Jenkins, Cathy Davidson, Mimi Ito, and Jochai Benkler argue that many forms of shared activity online (from blogging, to conflict and protest behavior in gaming, fan and entertainment sites) represent forms of civic or media engagement.⁴

If we are to design better civic engagement programs that use the attraction of online communities for young people, we must try to resolve these competing views of young people and civic life.

Two Paradigms of Youth Engagement

There seem to be two different paradigms that contrast young citizens (roughly in the 15-25 age range) as either reasonably active and *engaged* or relatively passive and *disengaged*. Like all paradigms, each foregrounds different core organizing values and principles, prompting proponents to weigh and select different sets of supporting facts and reasons. Each paradigm thus comes equipped with its own arguments and evidence, making it convincing to adherents and elusive and often maddening to those operating from the other constructed reality.⁵

The *engaged youth* paradigm implicitly emphasizes generational changes in social identity that have resulted in the growing importance of peer networks and online communities. In this view, if there is an a decline in the credibility or authenticity of many public institutions and discourses that define conventional political life, the fault lies more with the government performances and news narratives than with citizens who cannot engage with them.⁶ In an important sense, this paradigm emphasizes the empowerment of youth as expressive individuals, and symbolically frees young people to

make their own creative choices. In the bargain, the engaged youth paradigm also eases the overriding duty to participate in conventional government-centered activities. In many cases, researchers in this school are only dimly aware of (and may tend to discount) research on declines and deficits in more conventional political participation among young citizens. As a result, the *engaged youth* paradigm opens the door to a new spectrum of civic actions in online arenas from MySpace to *World of Warcraft*.

By contrast, the *disengaged youth* paradigm may acknowledge the rise of more autonomous forms of public expression such as consumer politics, or the occasional protest in MySpace, while keeping the focus on the large body of empirical data showing a generational decline in connections to government (e.g., voting patterns) and general civic involvement (e.g., following public affairs in the news) as threats to the health of democracy itself. Those speak of disengaged youth often worry about the personalization or privatization of the political sphere (young people living in heavily commercial online worlds), and focus more on how to promote public actions that link to government as the center of democratic politics, and to other social groups and institutions as the foundations of civic life.

The question is how can we resolve these different perspectives so that we can have a more productive discussion of education programs and policies? To begin with, consider the possibility that these different views of young people and political engagement reflect actual generational changes in the nature of citizenship itself. Proponents of the disengaged citizen paradigm seem to be using an earlier generational model of citizenship (centered on duties and obligations) to evaluate younger generations, while those seeing more engaged citizens seem to be focusing on changes in identity

(involving needs for more self actualization, personal expression and individuality) associated with globalization and life in late modern society.

The challenge for bridging the paradigms is to recognize the profound generational shift in citizenship styles that has been occurring in most of the post-industrial democracies. The so-called *millennials* are far less willing to subscribe to the notion held by earlier generations that citizenship is a matter of duty and obligation. This earlier sense of common duty to participate in public affairs was anchored in group and class-based civil societies that are fragmenting with the forces of globalization. The underlying sense of citizenship is thus shifting in societies in which young people are more responsible for defining their own identities, often using the various tools offered by social networks and digital communication media.

In short, there is a broad, cross-national generational shift in the post industrial democracies from a *dutiful citizen* model (still adhered to by older generations and many young people who are positioned in more traditional social settings) to an *actualizing citizen* model favoring loosely networked activism to address issues that reflect personal values.⁷ In some cases, this self-actualizing brand of politics may be tangential to government and conventional political organization, and may even emerge in parallel cyberspaces such as games. This citizenship transformation is by no means uniform within societies. Where traditional institutions of church or labor remain strong, more conventional patterns of civic engagement prevail, and moral conflict may erupt. However, the two broad patterns do seem to mark a change in citizenship among younger demographics coming of age in the recent decades of globalization.

Actualizing Citizen (AC)	Dutiful Citizen (DC)
Diminished sense of government obligation –higher sense of individual purpose	Obligation to participate in government centered activities
Voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism	Voting is the core democratic act
Mistrust of media and politicians is reinforced by negative mass media environment	Becomes informed about issues and government by following mass media
Favors loose networks of community action – often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies	Joins civil society organizations and/or expresses interests through parties that typically employ one-way conventional communication to mobilize supporters

The Changing Citizenry: The traditional civic education ideal of the Dutiful Citizen (DC) vs. the emerging youth ideal of self- Actualizing Citizenship (AC)

It seems clear that many education programs and attempts by government to design digital portals and other youth networks fail to attract AC citizens simply because they are based on DC images of citizenship. As a result, they tend to over-manage and limit the opportunities for more interactive and expressive participation that young people find in other media experiences from online social networking communities to reality

television programs. For example, Coleman's survey of *managed* (government and NGO built and operated) and *autonomous* (youth-built and operated) sites in the UK suggests that young citizens find more authentic experiences in edgier political sites and in entertainment media and games.⁸ The dilemma is that many of the political sites that young people build and operate themselves avoid formal government channels for communication and action, and often lack the resources needed to sustain them.

Continuing to anchor political offerings to young people in one conception of citizenship or the other only reinforces the two paradigms of youth engagement discussed earlier. And those paradigms only continue the dissonant public conversation about whether young people are engaged or disengaged. Given their value premises and empirical references, the paradigms are (by definition) both right, but they are also equally responsible for confusing much of our theoretical, empirical and practical approaches to youth engagement in the digital age.

A key question thus becomes how to nurture the creative and expressive actions of a generation in change, while continuing to keep some positive engagement with government on their screens.

Toward a New Policy Dialogue

The conflicting paradigms of youth engagement, along with the different definitions of citizenship on which they are based, continue to shape the thinking of policymakers and educators about how to get young people involved in civic life. When set side by side, the broader picture seems to point to changing the institutional and

communication environments in which young people encounter politics, rather than somehow fixing the attitudes of youth themselves. Yet the institutional and communication environments themselves are politically contested and controlled (generally by proponents of the DC model). The official management of civic education and engagement experiences, both on and off line, generally results in unattractive encounters with government. Many, and perhaps most, young citizens are left with alien conceptions of proper citizenship imposed upon them by educators, public officials, and other institutional authorities.

Clarifying and building bridges between the paradigms is necessary in order to better promote constructive dialogue among researchers and clearer policy and practice among educators, youth workers, parties, campaigns, and public officials. Each set of players responsible for creating civic education environments for young citizens must be guided by better understandings of changes in citizenship and communication practices:

- 1) politicians and public officials who represent the official world of politics to young people must learn more about their citizenship and communication preferences, and how to engage with them
- 2) educators and youth workers who design civic education programs can benefit from learning how generational social identities and political preferences are changing so they can design more engaging civic education models
- 3) the government agencies, foundations and NGOs who design and operate online youth engagement communities can benefit from learning more about how those sites may be networked, and how they may be opened to less managed partnerships with young people who need to see them as authentic and credible

- 4) news organizations and other public information producers can learn how to develop information formats that appeal to the AC citizen's interest in interacting and co-producing digital content, and in better integrating the information and action dimensions of citizenship
- 5) young people, themselves, can better learn how to use information technology and digital media skills to develop more effective public voices
- 6) and academic researchers can learn how to bridge the paradigms to better inform all of these players

Conclusion: Two Scenarios of Youth Engagement

If the two citizenship paradigms can be bridged, we –academics, educators, educational policymakers, NGOs, journalists, foundations, public officials, and young people – can make more effective choices about what civic engagement outcomes are most desirable and how to nurture them.

If nothing is done to bridge the paradigms, the default scenario will likely be persistent youth disconnection from conventional politics, with little reconciliation of the gap between AC and DC citizenship styles, and continuing unproductive paradigm battles in the academic and government policy worlds. Part of this scenario (which seems more or less positive depending on the paradigm one chooses) is the continued growth of youth (AC) politics ‘by other means:’ political consumerism, contestation of entertainment product ownership and distribution, and issue networks spanning local and global concerns.

A second scenario utilizes the possibilities for more expressive and interactive communication technologies to bring vibrant experiences of politics into classrooms, youth programs, and yes, even elections. The goal here is to help young people find effective public voices within the conventional arenas of power and decision-making. This scenario requires more creative research paradigms that combine AC and DC citizen qualities into realistic scenarios for engagement that can be implemented and assessed.

The most important question before us is: What kind of democratic experiences would we choose for future generations? This is a properly political question, yet it is one that often chills creativity among government officials, educators, and NGOs – the very players with the capacity to make a difference in the political futures of young people. The outcomes for youth engagement, insofar as they involve the restoration of positive engagement with government, alongside creative and expressive personal communication, depend importantly on the adults who shape the early political impressions of young people. Are politicians, parents, educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers willing to allow young citizens to more fully explore, experience, and expand democracy, or will they continue to force them to try to fit into an earlier model that is ill suited to the networked societies of the digital age?

NOTES

The author wishes to thank the MacArthur foundation for supporting my thinking about this subject through its Digital Learning initiative.

¹ Eliasoph, Nina (1998). *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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- ² Bennett, W. Lance (2008). "Civic Learning in Changing Democracies: Challenges for Citizenship and Civic Education." in Peter Dahlgren (Ed.) *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning and Democratic Engagement*. New York: Routledge.
- ³ For examples of this, see Lopez, Marc Hugo, Peter Levine, Deborah Both, Abby Kiesa, Emily Kirby, and Karlo Marcelo. (2006). "The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Detailed Look at How Youth Participate in Politics and Communities." Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. www.civicyouth.org.
- ⁴ See comments by Jenkins, Ito, Davidson, and Benkler in *MacArthur Online Discussions on Civic Engagement* (2006). (URL link here).
- ⁵ Note the recurrent bumping of these paradigms in the *MacArthur Online Discussions on Civic Engagement* (2006). (URL link here).
- ⁶ Coleman, Stephen. 2008. "From Big Brother to Big Brother: Two Faces of Interactive Engagement." in Peter Dahlgren (Ed.) *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning and Democratic Engagement*. New York: Routledge.
- ⁷ For a more developed version of this argument, see Bennett (2008).
- ⁸ Coleman Stephen (forthcoming). "Doing IT for Themselves: Management versus Autonomy in Youth E-Citizenship," in W. Lance Bennett, ed. *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. MacArthur Foundation.