

DIGITAL NATIVES AS SELF-ACTUALIZING CITIZENS

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“ But where some see crisis, others of us simply see changing patterns of engagement, and opportunities that will reshape the notion of citizenship in this new century. ”

Citizenship styles have changed dramatically in recent years. Young people in post-industrial democracies are less motivated by a sense of civic duty than were earlier generations. In particular, as noted by scholars, they are less interested in joining formal groups or political parties, less inclined to seek information via conventional news outlets, and more likely to avoid connecting to government through activities such as voting.²⁸ The famed sociologist Robert Putnam and others describe these trends as nothing short of a crisis in citizenship and civic engagement.

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28 Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press, Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2006). *A new engagement? Political participation, civic life, and the changing American citizen*. New York: Oxford University Press.

engagement, and opportunities that will reshape the notion of citizenship in this new century. More than anything else, more than creating new government structures or adding new agencies or changing how we vote, our country desperately needs a change in our approach to engaging young citizens in community and government life to reinvigorate our democracy in the 21st century.

Learning to become an effective citizen does not happen automatically, and isn't enhanced in formal settings such as schools and youth programs that are often not attuned to the unique communication and social identity styles of young digital natives. Schools typically emphasize individualistic, knowledge-heavy, spectator styles of citizenship. Young "self-actualizing" citizens are connecting with peers through loose social networks, frequently online, focusing on lifestyle issues. They gravitate towards highly interactive modes, particularly on gaming and social networking websites. But, these young citizens are not solely focused on entertainment. Public-issue websites like Taking IT Global, YouthNoise, and election campaigns that enable social networking are also very popular. The bottom line is that digital natives largely do not participate in civic affairs out of a sense of duty or obligation but a sense of personal fulfillment.

The dramatic shift in citizenship styles can be cast in simple terms as a contrast between old century Dutiful Citizens (DC) and new century self-Actualizing Citizens (AC).²⁹ Dutiful Citizens have the following characteristics:

- Obligation to participate in government-centered activities
- Voting is the core democratic act, supported by surrounding knowledge and contact with government
- Mass media news informs about issues and government

29 Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press).

- Joins civil society organizations and/or expresses interests through political parties or interest groups that typically employ one-way conventional communication to mobilize supporters

Contrast this with the orientation of *Actualizing Citizens*:

- Diminished sense of government obligation—higher sense of individual purpose
- Voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism
- Mistrust of media and politicians is reinforced by negative mass media environment.
- Favors loose networks of community action—often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies

Given these stark, clearly visible differences, why do public schools continue to teach young people as if they are their grandparents—sitting in their armchair, reading their afternoon paper, looking forward to their lodge meeting that night? They do this, in part, because it is both politically safe and easily testable. But perhaps the persistence of ineffective approaches to civics in public schools is simply a reflection that most school policy officers, curriculum developers, education researchers, and many older teachers are, themselves, *Dutiful Citizens*.

Schools should help students to develop their own public voices by using various digital media, allowing students to find their own means of engaging with and learning about issues, and forming peer-learning communities. However, despite some glimmerings of a national school civics reform movement, there is little immediate promise of school reform that will introduce more balanced learning goals for *Actualized*

Citizens. The ideal learning environment would find ways to combine the two styles. It would include identifying the individual preferences for personal expression and peer-to-peer discovery of issues within relatively open digital media spaces. It would also offer learning paths for issue resolution and public problem solving that included, among other options, contact with appropriate government officials and processes.

We are unlikely to find more balanced approaches to civic learning in schools. The integration of new civic styles in various learning environments remains a formidable challenge. Many adults (teachers, youth workers, scholars, policy makers) are unaware or unappreciative of the civic identity shift that has occurred among many young people. Similarly, many of the online communities developed by governments and youth experts fail to utilize the power of social networking involving participatory media in relatively open, democratic contexts. Too often when adult-run institutions such as schools, governments, NGOs, or community organizations build digital media projects, they impose limits on what young people can and “should” do. As a result, the more sustainable projects often strike young people as inauthentic and lacking credibility, and often fail.³⁰ At the same time, when young people are left to their own devices, they may lack models for effective communication, organizing, and democratic practice.

We need to create or identify existing, informal learning environments within which young people can learn civic skills and practice citizenship. We should consider creative ways to link those informal environments back to formal organizations such as schools, libraries, and youth organizations so that they indirectly aid the civic missions of those formal organizations.

Young people are creative and resilient. They are finding new and innovative ways to engage politically, often using online communities.

30 Coleman, S. (2008). Doing it for themselves: Management versus autonomy in youth e-citizenship. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*.

For example, in fair trade and sweatshop campaigns, young people are using their power as consumers to communicate directly with corporations. In these and other ways, many “netizens” are forming online communities that Mimi Ito calls “networked publics.” These communities may have novel, and as yet, little, explored civic aspects. In a fascinating example of democratic action by young people in an arena of their own choosing, Earl and Schussman describe music fans petitioning companies to give their favorite musicians greater exposure or more creative freedom.³¹

All of these efforts are in their infancy. Challenges abound. We need to know what kinds of youth are attracted to what kinds of online environments. We also need to better understand to what degree online engagement networks reach youth who are at risk for democratic participation, as opposed to simply reproducing the involvement of high socio-economic status youth who participate actively in politics anyway. And even the most promising youth-built projects often lack the resources to make them sustainable and available to larger audiences. Yet when government and foundations attempt to create platforms for engagement, the efforts are generally well intentioned, but driven largely by old-fashioned notions of citizenship and engagement that often miss the mark.

Scholars and practitioners can forge more productive partnerships with sponsors to create research-driven models for digital environments that are more in tune with emerging civic styles. Those environments should offer rich resources and peer training in the public communication, organizing, and advocacy skills to help young people develop more effective voices and action.³² And then, the adults should step back and learn from what happens. Above all, the vitality of our democracy rests

31 Earl, J. & Schussman, A. (2008). Contesting cultural control: Youth culture and online petitioning. In W.L. Bennett (Ed.) *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*.

32 See the Civic Learning Online project: www.engagedyouth.org.

on reconciling changing youth civic styles with the more traditional notions of citizen engagement that still characterize most schools, governments, and public interest spheres.

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