11. Gen Z's civic engagement: news use, politics, and cultural engagement

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INTRODUCTION

For as long as there has been a study of digital politics, young citizens have occupied a special place in it. Why? Two significant reasons stand out. First, young people early on were recognized as "digital natives", a term meant to capture something special about the relationship between youth and digital media (Prensky, 2001): a supposed electronic sixth sense to explain aptitudes for videocassette recorder (VCR) programming in the 1980s, web surfing in the 1990s, and social media use in the twenty-first century. For scholars of political engagement, one early assumption was that previously disengaged youth might be reached with a preferred medium and so brought back to civic life. Originating as it did with perceptions of older people as less inclined to use technology, the concept of digital native has limitations in describing the practices and abilities of a large and diverse group. Yet the fact that the generation entering adulthood today has come of age wholly immersed in an environment of often rapidly shifting digital media landscapes is one worth paying attention to – although not simply because of their facility with technology.

A second reason for interest in the political uses to which young people have put digital media is high-profile content creation examples. Youth remain at the forefront of experimenting with digital communication in political life. Millennials were the first generation of digital natives to break down divisions between digital communication and politics that pushed the limits of how we understood digital technology and social media usage around the 2010s. Where millennials had prominent examples of pop culture engagement with politics (e.g., "Crush on Obama"), Gen Z had a revolving door of musicians and memes in the 2020 election (Postema, 2020). Young people have been vital in protest politics, such as the DREAMer protests against US anti-immigration policies, Global Black Lives Matter actions for racial justice, and Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests. These activities are not unique to Gen Z: political protest has often emerged among students and other young activists. However, between 2016 and 2020, protest participation increased 5 percent (CIRCLE, 2021).

A further reason for the importance of following young citizens as their political involvements via digital media take shape is the uniqueness of the global youth generation. In the US and much of the developed world, Gen Z are markedly tolerant and liberal; but many are overburdened with student loan debt, inflation, increasing

living costs, and economic precarity (Parker and Igielnik, 2020; Race and Timmins, 2022). Moreover, inequality is growing between those in higher and lower social classes, features of late modern societies generally but often felt most acutely at the youth level (Dawson, 2021). The emerging generation faces significant challenges, and using digital media to engage with public life will surely be at the heart of how they approach those challenges.

The young people who were the subjects of the first articles about the fascinating nexus of young citizens, digital media and politics are now approaching middle age. Even as Internet time churns ahead rapidly enough that "generations" of distinct digital experience turn over every couple of years, we take this chapter as an opportunity to look back on two decades of research on the possibilities that young people will increase their engagement in politics through or because of digital media.

In this chapter, we train our lens on four areas of special interest when it comes to young citizens and digital politics:

●   the changing bases of the civic identities of citizens in industrialized democracies;
●   how younger generations are consuming – or not consuming – news;
●   the practices and patterns emerging as formal political campaigns attempt to reach young people through digital media; and
●   how content creation and interaction in digital media enables, for some young citizens, a form of cultural engagement that pushes the boundaries of the political.

To complement this discussion, we will expand upon the role of socio-economic status and social identity, online practices, socialization and civic education in Chapter 12.

Before proceeding, a note on what is meant by "young" citizens: the literature on youth civic engagement is inconsistent in its definitions of the precise boundaries of youth. However, for the purposes of both chapters, we are comfortable adopting the term "Gen Z" to refer to members born from 1997 and onward (Dimock, 2019).

SITUATING THE DIGITAL CITIZEN IN LATE MODERN SOCIETY

Millennials are often considered novel in their merging of technology and political engagement (see previous edition), in part due to their status as the earliest "digital natives". However, our increasing immersion in a technological society means that the norm, rather than the exception, is for up-and-coming youth to have no residual memory of a predominantly analog world. Gen Z has continued the tradition of digital innovation that millennials began, but with more frequent and far-reaching digital media use (Auxier and Anderson, 2021).

Several important social-structural changes should inform our understanding of young people's civic identities, relationships to politics, and use of digital media to those ends. First, the period preceding and encompassing the childhoods of con-

temporary young people was one of marked economic change. Led by processes of economic globalization, this period saw the completion of the interpenetration of national economies, the rising power of transnational corporations, and the decline of unions; and correspondingly, a faltering working-class way of life for many in the rust belts of the United States and other developed nations. Concurrent with economic globalization was a shift toward network structures of organization, in associational contexts from global capital and international finance to civil society and local communities (Castells, 1996). Paired with new economic stresses, these changes meant a constellation of pressures that undermined the group-based associational life of high modern society (Bennett, 1998). The resulting decline in participation in place-based, face-to-face community organizations (Putnam, 2000) means that many Gen Zers have had less exposure to the traditional interpersonal community interactions that were formative for older citizens. In their place, argue some scholars, is a networked individualism in which young people, in particular, are comfortable creating interest-based communities via online social networks (Rainie and Wellman, 2012).

Parallels can be seen in the media structures younger citizens have grown up along-side. With cord-cutting most prevalent amongst young adults (Kim et al., 2021), television and radio are increasingly defined by subscription-based services like Netflix, Hulu, and Spotify (Tefertiller, 2018), creating an environment and expectation of on-demand media. Thus, whereas their parents and grandparents inhabited a world in which television watchers were simultaneously seeing the evening newscast, Gen Z is tethered to an ever-present panoply of media choices, to suit whatever particular interest (or ennui) grips them at the moment.

All of this demonstrates that what is special about young people is much more than the ability to create TikTok videos. Compared to other generational cohorts, Gen Z is the most ethnically and racially diverse and on track to be the best-educated (Parker and Igielnik, 2020). Gen Z has grown up in a world in which potent labor unions, single-employer careers, long-term economic security (Parker and Igielnik, 2020), limited-channel media systems, and exclusively space-based communities were historical artifacts, not lived experiences. However, as of March 2020, those artifacts drifted even farther into the past. Young adults have suffered the combined misfor-tune of a poorly timed and prolonged pandemic, coinciding with key transitional education and career milestones. Though previously on track to avoid economic and employment issues experienced by millennials and Gen X, Gen Z has instead felt the greatest strain to education and career aspirations, interpersonal relation-ships, economic stability, and mental and physical health (American Psychological Association, 2021).

While social media provided a social lifeline during lockdown, it also put young adults front and center to an overwhelming amount of Covid-19 news while nav-igating public health-related misinformation (Islam et al., 2020). For some young adults, this combination of social isolation and Covid-related information overload triggered unhealthy coping mechanisms, like increased alcohol consumption (Mohr et al., 2021). Despite these struggles and setbacks, young adults are hopeful about

post-pandemic recovery (American Psychological Association, 2021). Gen Z is resilient, perhaps because they have to be.

With this unparalleled and precarious environment in mind, we interrogate how Gen Z makes sense of their civic life. How do these changes play out in young people's actual experiences and activities as they engage the political world with digital media? How can we understand the participation of citizens experimenting with tools, who also had formative experiences – of community, of media, of civic life – quite unlike their elders? This attention to the larger contexts in which young citizens leverage digital media for political purposes yields many insights described below.

YOUTH AND NEWS

If we wish to understand the implications of economic, social, and media changes for young citizens' civic activity, news use is an excellent first place to look. The habits of news media consumption among today's youth are dramatically different from that of previous generations at their age. While previous generations depended on traditional media, digital media are increasingly the primary means of accessing news. For example, in 1963, 79 percent of US high school seniors reported reading about politics in the newspaper more than three days a week, and 70 percent watched political news on television more than three days a week (data from Jennings et al., 2005, authors' analysis). A 2021 Pew Research study found that only 20 percent of US 18- to 29-year-olds get their news from print publications "at least sometimes", while 45 percent watched news on television "at least sometimes" (Matsa and Naseer, 2021).

News consumption as a habit of a particular time and place is being replaced by the digital media-enabled possibilities for news on demand. In 2021, 90 percent of American 18- to 29-year-olds reported using digital devices to get news "at least sometimes" (Matsa and Naseer, 2021). While all age groups are becoming increasingly dependent on digital news sources, especially in light of newspaper closures, young people rely more on social media for news than older cohorts. For example, 42 percent of American 18- to 29-year-olds report getting news from social media sites, compared to only 15 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds (Shearer, 2021). Though young adults know the importance of keeping up to date on news and politics, available sources and their impact on citizenship, daily practices and awareness about current events often do not reflect consistent news use (Swart and Broersma, 2022). However, this may be compounded by the issue that social media-delivered news is not a sufficient substitute for the breadth of general political news that traditional sources afford (Shehata and Strömbäck, 2021). Furthermore, there is little evidence that the use of the Internet and mobile technologies for news is becoming a regular habit of replacing the news routines of earlier generations (Edgerly et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), with news being of low importance in the daily lives of young adults (Kümpel, 2020). Instead, youth seek out news content less and less and often rely on a "news finds me" attitude in which they encounter news incidentally while they are

online for other purposes (Boczkowski et al., 2018; de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Swart, 2021).

The continued growth and introduction of new social media platforms mean that young adults construct diverse and personalized media repertoires that affect how they encounter news and politics (Edgerly et al., 2018b; Swart et al., 2017). Cross-cutting social media repertoires expose young adults to a range of potential news sources such as mainstream news outlets, alternative news sources, politicians and political activists, celebrities and influencers, and ordinary people (Cotter and Thorson, 2022; Walker and Matsa, 2021). Moving beyond Facebook, some young adults are beginning to incorporate regular news use into their everyday leisure routines on platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter (Walker and Matsa, 2021). News app push notifications are also a growing digital news source (Stroud et al., 2020). Though new avenues for accessing news is a positive development, the increasing role that platforms play in the political process, both in terms of how platform logics interact with users' political interests (Thorson et al., 2021) and the increasing prominence of platforms in civic life (Thorson et al., 2020) is a cause for concern.

Various observers have pointed out that algorithmic curatorial practices increasingly drive consumption of news media content. Personal preferences have heightened influence in shaping future content visibility, enabling those with a great deal of interest in keeping up with the world to gain greater knowledge, while those who do not enjoy the news may find it increasingly easier to avoid such content altogether (Aharoni et al., 2021; DeVito, 2017; Kümpel, 2020). Furthermore, the personal preferences of others on social media platforms can also shape news and political content visibility (Bode, 2016; Karnowski et al., 2017; Kümpel, 2019). While user preferences can shape the content that individuals are incidentally exposed to, often the result is very little public affairs content on young adults' feeds (Wells and Thorson, 2017). Young adults are increasingly aware of both their role and the role of algorithms in shaping what they see (and what they don't) – some attempting to trick the algorithms. This awareness leads to varying levels of trust and sentiment towards algorithmic curation (Swart, 2021).

Research has shown that exposure to news content on sites like Facebook can lead to political learning (Bode, 2016), at least under some circumstances (Edgerly et al., 2018b), as well as electoral participation (Moeller et al., 2018). However, the extent to which such engagement occurs among younger citizens is not yet settled. Many individuals feel social pressures to avoid exchanging opinionated political content, particularly on Facebook, largely arising from the complexities of networked audiences (Thorson, 2014). As political tensions grow, social media as a platform for news has become increasingly associated with uncivil and draining political discussion and practices such as unfriending, blocking, and muting (Merten, 2021). Not surprisingly, polls regularly show younger citizens to be at the bottom of the heap regarding the standard measures of political knowledge and news quiz questions (Wattenberg, 2020). Curiously, in the face of most classic accounts of citizen engagement in politics, which posit learning about politics through news as

a necessary precursor to action, some research is unearthing evidence of decoupling of knowledge and action. For example, Dimitrova and colleagues (2014) found regarding democratic functionality that social media was relatively low in its ability to generate informational opportunities for voters but generated higher levels of political involvement, connection and mobilization in comparison. The inverse was true of online news sites. More research is needed to consider whether the role of knowledge in civic engagement is indeed changing as the nature of the media system, and young citizens' inclinations evolve.

FORMAL POLITICS

This brings us to the question of how digital technologies impact young people's participation rates. In the United States and other Western countries, the most elemental act of formal political participation has long been the vote. Historically, young adult turnout has been quite low compared to other age cohorts. For example, during the 2020 US presidential election, 18- to 29-year-olds comprised the smallest percentage of voters at only 16.5 percent of the population (Fabina and Scherer, 2022). Moreover, this trend has endured since 1988 (Fabina and Scherer, 2022), suggesting that it is a characteristic of a life process stage more than any particular generation. Not surprisingly, the low – and, through 2016, declining – level of youth participation in formal politics has long been a source of great concern, a state of affairs that had many observers prepared to hope for a turnaround prompted by new communication technologies.

The integration of digital media strategies has become increasingly part and parcel of campaign efforts (Stromer-Galley, 2019). However, regulating political advertising and electoral politics is often a tug of war between corporate policies and democratic processes, with political consulting mirroring many paid client relationship practices in non-political digital advertising scenarios (Barrett, 2022; Kreiss and Mcgregor, 2019). While platforms are cause for political concern, they are also a source of political creativity, blending popular culture and political media, precipitating the growth of political fan cultures.

While politicians may benefit from campaign exposure and subsequent opportunities for political talk, amongst youth target audiences campaigns run the risk of user-generated content taking on a life of their own, as was the case in the US with Bernie Sanders' 2016 digital campaign. Sanders' campaign mirrored that of Obama in merging traditional, grassroots outreach and online strategies. However, the Connect with Bernie app was both an information and mobilization platform, which collated information from the campaign's official social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr) with the ability to share to users' social media profiles and compensate for other candidates' extensive mainstream media platforms.

Lastly, political campaign strategies extended into virtual worlds in 2020, employing pop culture fandoms to identify audiences who may be excluded from more tradi-

tional social media campaigning efforts, particularly gamers. For example, the Biden campaign, taking advantage of the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons'* pandemic popularity, paid for virtual lawn signs, in addition to rolling out a "Build Back Better" map in the online game *Fortnite* (Roose, 2020). Politicians also used Twitch's game-streaming platform to connect with young adults. For example, Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden used the platform to extend more traditional campaign tactics, like fireside chats and live streaming speeches. In contrast, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-New York) promoted early voting, answered viewer questions, and discussed issues with other politicians, as did guest Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota), during gameplay (D'Anastasio, 2020).

Technology integration into all facets of everyday life is now normal, expected, and uneventful. So the bigger question is, if the novelty of platforms as part of political campaigns has worn off, what might be contributing to the uptick in youth political participation?

One possible answer to the recent uptick in civic participation lies in the ability of technology to help facilitate political cross-talk amongst youth. Leading up to the 2020 US election, 51 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds reported trying to persuade other youth to vote, and 70 percent noted that they had discussed political issues and the elections with their friends (CIRCLE, 2021). For some young adults, social media were spaces to attempt to counteract candidates' potentially impactful rhetoric, such as responding to Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric. Weighing in on social media in response to politicians as a means of social correction is seen as a duty (Penney, 2019). However, rates of youth political expression on platforms may be constrained by impression management and anonymity (Lane, 2020a).

While it seems that digital media mobilizing youth may be an oversimplification, the reality is that young people are finding new ways to talk about news and politics that impact their lives, whether through public expression or direct messaging. In addition, platform affordances provide young people with different means of engagement with some spaces more conducive to including softer voices in the conversation. See Chapter 12 for further discussion.

CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Digital media enable an assortment of activities that exist at the boundary of what is commonly accepted as "the political". Foremost in testing those boundaries has been work on what has been described as content production, user-generated content, engagement with participatory culture, cultural engagement, or interactivity.

New digital platforms have put the tools of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) in the hands of more youth (Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Similarly, creative multimedia tools available on mobile devices and social networking have changed our understanding of youth political engagement and the expressive citizen (Lane, 2020b; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). Platforms provide youth with various engagement options, from creating a public TikTok video to privately sharing

a political post in closed WhatsApp groups. That said, it is not "better" technology that drives participation, but rather cultural practices that inspire individuals to use technology for acts of participation (Jenkins, 2006). Thus, a key civic benefit of participatory cultures is the potential for youth to develop skill sets that extend beyond personal expression to include the social skills needed to interact with a larger community.

Fandoms are participatory cultures in which members hone communication skills and coordinate with others to accomplish goals. Fandom as a mechanism for youth political participation and mass mobilization has exploded since earlier fandom mashups of popular culture and social issues (e.g., Harry Potter Alliance). One recent example is K-pop, idol culture-oriented Korean popular music where social media savvy young adults hone their creativity and skills to support their favorite group. In the past, K-pop fandoms have connected with select philanthropic initiatives and social justice commentary (see Diaz Pino, 2021). One example of K-pop's mobilization power responded to Donald Trump's free registration for a 2020 campaign rally with limited attendance due to social distancing. Young adults created content to promote fake event registration to generate low event turnout and block interested Trump supporters from attending, expanding beyond K-pop circles, particularly on TikTok (Bandy and Diakopoulos, 2020).

K-pop fans also mobilized around human rights violations, state-sanctioned violence and police brutality. During the racial justice protests following the murder of George Floyd, the Dallas Police Department promoted the launch of a crime tip app on Twitter, encouraging the public to submit videos of illegal activities. Subsequently, the Dallas PD was bombarded with user-generated content of K-pop idols in the Twitter comments, obscuring any legitimate content, and crashing the app. The BTS Army (the fandom of K-pop Superstars BTS) also staged a strategic takeover of #WhiteLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, and other allegedly white supremacist hashtags (Kanozia and Ganghariya, 2021).

Youth online engagement has also been demonstrated through civic gaming. Research in this area focuses on digital games' potential to foster the learning and practice of civic skills. This is an up-and-coming line of investigation given that a 2021 survey in the US found 76 percent of individuals under the age of 18 reported playing some type of video game (Entertainment Software Association, 2021). Jenkins (2006) argues that gaming cultures can provide individuals with the core experiences of play, simulation, and performance, which are precursors to participation. Games require young people to make decisions, communicate their ideas effectively, and in many cases, work with multiple players to achieve an end goal. Coordinated political actions are not a pandemic-related advent in the gaming world, as they often provide safety from state-sanctioned and reprisal violence. However, during the pandemic, popular video games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*ACNH*), *Grand Theft Auto*, *World of Warcraft*, and *The Sims*, increasingly resembled traditional acts of political participation, becoming the sites of virtual memorialization acts and protests in response to police brutality and the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in addition to pro-Hong Kong democracy activism. *ACNH*

protests were often paired with the streaming platform Twitch to increase reach, participation, and fundraising efforts for Black Lives Matter (Ismangil and Lee, 2020; Schofield, 2020). Pokémon GO players in Hong Kong planned and promoted meetup events used as a cover for anti-extradition and anti-authoritarian protests. Players also adopted Pokémon imagery to communicate safety guidelines and messaging strategies for protesters ahead of these events (Ismangil and Lee, 2020). Examples such as these, well beyond the conventional territory of civic engagement, point to the ongoing need for conceptual and empirical work to understand the involvement of young people through digital channels.

CONCLUSION

We hesitate to speculate about the future of Internet time. However, perhaps the maturation of both the first digital generation and our first generation of research on digital media allows us to imagine ourselves near the "end of the beginning" of youth digital politics. That is, though we are far from coherent answers to many of our questions about the implications of digital media on the political world (in a time of change as rapid as ours, giving any such answers would be foolhardy), we are accumulating bodies of evidence on several critical issues. What is the relationship between digital politics and youth civic engagement? Our reading of the evidence leads us to paraphrase Kranzberg's first law of technology (Kranzberg, 1986): digital media are sometimes good for youth engagement, sometimes bad, and almost always complicated.

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