



Ethan Zuckerman on civic engagement

Elisabeth Soep at 4:08 pm Fri, Mar 15, 2013

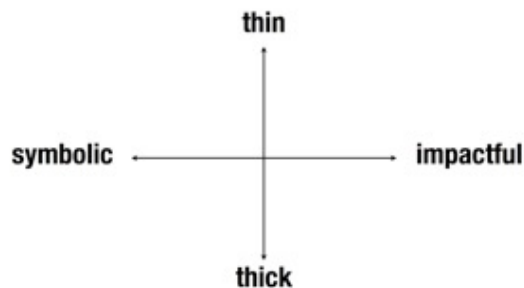


It's easy to find alarming evidence that we've lost our way when it comes to civics in the US. But longtime global activist and MIT prof Ethan Zuckerman says there's a lot to get excited about too, if we're willing to think in new ways about what it even means to be civically engaged in the digital age.

Ethan's working with a group of scholars and practitioners (I'm one of them) to track how young people are expressing voice and exerting agency in public spheres through participatory politics. Registering to vote or campaigning for a candidate are obvious and important political moves. But so is appropriating **Occupy for hurricane relief**, mobilizing Hunger Games fans to **organize for real-life civil rights**, or producing a libertarian music video **professing a crush** on the economist Friedrich Hayek, (thanks Liana Gamber Thompson).

But here's the rub. If we're willing to take this expansive view of civics, how do we start to make sense of what any given activity really achieves in the world? When does "voice" make a difference? That's the question Ethan took on this week in his keynote, How Do We Teach Digital Civics? at the **Digital Media and Learning** conference in Chicago. He offered this diagram as a way to map actions into one of four quadrants.

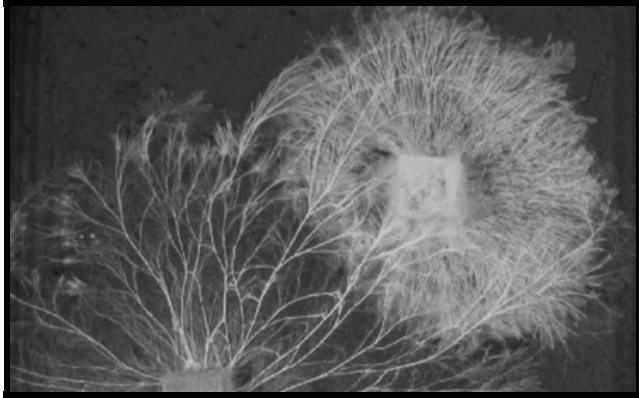
Want to figure out where your own civic moves fit in the mix? You can watch **Ethan's whole talk here**. It's an attempt to envision an approach to civics that engages young people's imaginations and networks rather than telling them what to do.



Elisabeth (Lissa) Soep is Research Director and Senior Producer at **Youth Radio** and co-author of **Drop That Knowledge: Youth Radio Stories** (University of California Press, 2010).

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LIBIntOrg says:

March 15, 2013 at 2:07 pm

Thanks for the article. For info on people using voluntary Libertarian tools on similar and other issues worldwide, please see the non-partisan Libertarian International Organization @ <http://www.Libertarian-International.org> ...

Reply



millie fink says:

March 16, 2013 at 6:17 am

“non-partisan Libertarian”? :-/

Reply



Sean McKibbon says:

March 15, 2013 at 5:23 pm

“impactful” blick : P. What’s the opposite of symbolic? C’mon... is there a semiotics expert in the house?

Reply



Matthew Edwin Netzley says:

March 16, 2013 at 2:12 am

The opposite of symbolic, serving as a symbol of something, that I would use would be substantive, real or actual. It gets bonus points for being alliterative.

Reply



Chris Ellis says:

March 15, 2013 at 8:29 pm

Impactful is not a word.

Reply



Antinous / Moderator says:

March 15, 2013 at 9:33 pm

And yet, it appears in the dictionary when I look it up.

Reply



Sean McKibbon says:

March 17, 2013 at 8:37 am

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/supercalifragilisticexpialidocious>

Reply



SoItBegins says:

March 16, 2013 at 12:00 am

When I first read this, I thought it said 'Ethan Zuckerberg'.

[Reply](#)



Robert says:

March 16, 2013 at 1:42 pm

When I first saw this, I thought it was about a Ben Franklin re-enactor.

[Reply](#)



Andrew Whitacre says:

March 18, 2013 at 7:04 am

(It was a joke gift I'm pretty sure, but Ethan proudly displays a Ben Franklin action figure in his office.)

[Reply](#)



anansi133 says:

March 16, 2013 at 1:35 pm

Not having 82 minutes to spare I read the liveblogged notes

<http://civic.mit.edu/blog/erhardt/ethan-zuckermans-dml-keynote-beyond-%E2%80%9Cthe-crisis-in-civics%E2%80%9D>

It's pretty inspiring stuff. When politics gets the same kind of highly polished, impermeable sheen over its workings that consumers get from consumer goods, people are going to want to break the warranty just like we do in hacker spaces.

I'm looking at a HELLO WORLD project with my city council, hoping to scale that leverage up to the larger scale over time.

[Reply](#)



Lissa Soep says:

March 17, 2013 at 9:17 am

Thanks for adding that link! Should have put it in the post myself!

[Reply](#)



Charles Lenchner says:

March 17, 2013 at 2:41 pm

I watched the whole thing and found it very useful for my own work as a digital activist. I feel like this is great language. My mission as a digital strategy consultant is to help occupy move from symbolic to impactful and help progressive political actors move from thin to thick engagement. Both of those vectors point to the same place, one with more 'real' democracy and agency for individuals and communities that are under represented because of our wealth dominated political process.

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