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Getting Into the Fray: Civic Youth, Online Dialogue, and Implications for Digital Literacy Education

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Abstract

The potentials of social media for youth voice are clear. Young people's experiences using these media for civic dialogue are less well understood. In this paper, we draw on qualitative interviews with fifteen civic dialoguers to explore how they navigate online political conversations. Our findings suggest that youth use various strategies for online engagement; however, they struggle, especially when engaging with disagreements. Our findings suggest a need for supports for engaging with diverse perspectives online.

Introduction

The potentials of social media for youth voice and influence are clear. Facebook, Twitter, and other social network sites offer young people public opportunities to engage in a range of participatory acts. Through status updates, tweets, and even photos, young people can communicate their opinions and mobilize fellow citizens to support their chosen causes.

They can also express support for or opposition to a political candidate, give feedback to powerholders, and more. Yet, how these opportunities are leveraged, and the consequences for young people's civic inclinations, are less understood.

In this paper, we explore how digitally savvy civic youth are leveraging the civic affordances of social media. We focus our analysis on youth who use social media to discuss civic and political issues. Existing research on the challenges of political talk offline¹ and emerging studies about online political discussions² suggest important insights and a need for further research on how youth are navigating this landscape. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with civic youth, we explore their beliefs about the ingredients of good and not-so-good online discussions and the online strategies they use to express their voices and engage others. We also explore their related anxieties and struggles, and the supports they seek as they use social media for civic and political purposes.

Context

Voice and Response

According to Couldry (2010), voice should be understood both as a process (e.g., expressing voice, giving an account of one's life and conditions of living) and as a value (e.g., noticing the ways in which voices are listened and responded to).³ Valuing voice involves considering the ways in which voice as a process is effective or influential,

and where and when it is not. Importantly, when one's voice is expressed yet not listened to, one's sense of political efficacy can suffer.⁴

Expressing one's voice elicits reactions from others, some of which are welcome, even desired, others of which are not. Managing these reactions and subsequent exchanges—and formulating responses to other people's expressions—are vital aspects of civic participation and civic development.⁵ Indeed, engagement in dialogue or “discourse” about civic and political issues is essential to democracy⁶ and has a number of important benefits for youth in particular. Political discussions can support youth knowledge and understanding of key public issues, as well as different perspectives on them.⁷ The opportunity to discover one's own perspective on an issue is also made possible through such exchanges.⁸ Further, thoughtful inquiry and listening to the perspectives of others can support vital character strengths such as tolerance and respect, as well as social trust.⁹ At the same time, studies show that dialogue about political issues can be challenging, especially when the possibility of disagreement and conflict is present, and is thus often avoided.¹⁰

Online Voice and Dialogue

Social media provide new opportunities for civic voice and participation—new repertoires of tactics for activism¹¹—that are particularly salient for youth. Online, youth can arguably enter and actively participate in a “public sphere” regardless of their status as legal citizens or eligible voters. The opportunity to join and even initiate political conversations is a key affordance of social network sites, news site comment sections, and other online spaces.

Yet, online contexts also pose unique challenges for voice and dialogue. The public or semi-public nature of online spaces; the persistence, “replicability,” and “searchability” of digital content;¹² opportunities for anonymous commenting and exposure to conflict;¹³ and the difficulty of discerning tone in text-based speech are just some of the features that make online expression both empowering and risky.¹⁴ Surveillance further complicates the landscape of online voice for youth, leading some to practice self-censorship in “a pervasive climate of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear.”¹⁵ In the post-9/11 era, Shresthova finds many young American Muslims cautiously weighing the benefits of participation against the risks, struggling to strike a balance between expression and silence in “precarious publics.”¹⁶

Turning to online dialogue specifically, particular challenges have been noted. Communication research has long underscored the deplorable state of dialogue in online comments sections on news sites, which influence participation.¹⁷ As Thorson argues, social media “increase the uncertainties and risks associated with political talk by increasing the ambiguity of the social setting both in terms of the potential audience and the context within which a political message will be received.”¹⁸ Ongoing changes to privacy and visibility settings by social media companies compound these uncertainties. Consequently, Thorson argues, political dialogue on social media is marked by “social groundlessness”¹⁹ or a lack of shared normative codes.²⁰ While concerning, this groundlessness also has potential upsides; political actors can experiment with novel strategies of engagement.

Indeed, Thorson's qualitative study of political talk on Facebook revealed that a small number of youth—whom she dubs “political entrepreneurs” or “provocateurs”—use the site to express their views as they wish.²¹ She also finds that many youth avoid posting their political ideas due to risks related to the public context and audience reaction, and informed by their own negative perceptions of the “political provocateurs” who use Facebook to “push their ideas” on others. Therefore, while online communities provide opportunities for civic dialogue, an absence of clear norms and the potential for conflict may deter many youth.

Media Literacy and Civic Education

How do digital media literacy and civic education inform young people's online civic participation? In other words, to

what extent are youth being supported to engage in political conversations on social media?

Both theory and research suggest that media skills support civic skills and activities. Mihailidis describes how digital media literacies directly support the skills and dispositions young citizens need to engage effectively in public life.²² Participation in robust media literacy programs has been found to be associated with news analysis skills²³ as well as increased exposure to diverse perspectives and civic engagement.²⁴ Research also shows the important role educators can play in helping youth develop political efficacy as well as media production skills.²⁵

Turning to discourse specifically, supporting youth to engage in discussion and debate about public issues is recognized as an essential aim of civic education today.²⁶ As noted, robust media literacy education is associated with increased exposure to diverse views. However, the degree, as well as the “how,” of direct engagement with diverse views is less studied. Moreover, the extent to which youth are being supported to manage “social groundlessness”²⁷ and other apparent challenges of online civic dialogue is unclear.

The Current Study

A key point of departure for this study is the assumption that social media provide extensive opportunities for voice while also posing challenges. While there is a growing literature on different facets of online activism, beyond the studies of Thorson and colleagues²⁸ there is little known about young people’s use of social media for civic dialogue. Our study examines youth’s beliefs about the key features of good online political conversations, the dialogue strategies they use, and their anxieties and struggles. Further, we investigate the supports—media literacy and civic—youth turn to as they express their opinions in social media contexts.

Methods

Over a nine-month period in 2015, we conducted surveys interviews with forty civic youth, ages 15–25, living in the United States. Our overall sample was diverse with respect to gender and race.²⁹ We specifically recruited youth who use social media sites extensively to address civic issues. The issues with which youth were engaged ranged from education reform to the Israel-Palestine conflict, racism, queer issues, sexual assault, and environmental issues. We identified participants through awards recognizing their work, media coverage of actions they were involved in, recommendations from key gatekeepers in the youth organizing field, or activist organizations.

Through a pre-survey, we collected information about participants’ media use, civic activities, and educational supports related to digital media literacy and civic engagement. The survey helped ensure participant eligibility for the study and provided initial data, which was explored further in the interview. We developed two in-depth interview protocols—one for youth who are frequently involved in online civic dialogue (“civic dialoguers”) and one for youth who engage in various online civic activities. This paper is focused on survey and interview data from the fifteen civic dialoguers.

We closely read and coded interview transcripts guided by a coding scheme comprised of twenty-six parent codes and numerous child codes. We coded selected transcripts until we obtained reliability with the main parent codes.³⁰ Reliability was maintained by shadow coding of each transcript by another coder. We used a qualitative analysis platform for coding and analysis.

Findings

Below we report findings from surveys and interviews with fifteen civic dialoguers. We explore their conceptions of good dialogue about civic issues, the dialogue strategies they use, their anxieties and struggles, and the supports they have (or lack) for engaging in effective online conversations.

Participants in our study had well-defined conceptions of good, and bad, online dialogue. Not surprisingly, good and bad conceptions often reflected one another. For example, a good discussion occurs when participants stick with the topic at hand, and a bad discussion is when participants bring in irrelevant information. Consequently, we focus on features of good dialogue, as they also indicate negative features. In their interviews, youth described numerous features of good online dialogue. Our current analysis surfaced three broad characteristics: *informed*, *diverse*, and *respectful*. Seventeen-year-old Sarah,³¹ an anti-bullying activist, shares:

A *good* online discussion to me is where people are well informed; they know their facts, but, at the same time, they're not pushing their facts on anybody, and they're really, really respectfully conveying them to people. It's okay to have different opinions. A good online discussion doesn't mean everybody agrees; it's just that if they disagree, they respectfully disagree.

For many of our participants, productive exchanges are more likely when those involved have a good understanding of the issue and can craft well-written, structured contributions. Included here would be the use of proper grammar, trustworthy evidence, substantive views, and a professional tone. Good discussions also involve engaging different perspectives and pushing an individual's thinking in new directions. The introduction of new perspectives and pointed questions asking for clarification allow conversations to go beyond the stilted agreement of like-minded discussants. Finally, signs of respect such as appreciative comments characterize good dialogue. Respect is also conveyed in statements that show active listening, support and non-judgment, inclusive language, and generous spirit.

While our participants all agree that good dialogue involves informed opinions, diverse views, and respectfulness, there is variation in how these features are weighted and enacted. Indeed, we often found differences between participants' conceptions of good dialogue and their actions. Also, participants' goals for dialogue influenced their actions. We observed three distinct goals for dialogue: *persuading others*, *educating others*, and *learning with others*.

When a dialoguer's goal is to educate others or learn from discussions, sharing articles via hyperlinking is common. Nineteen-year-old Bill regularly "post[s]...resources and links for [people] to check out" and adds "I'd love to hear what you think about it." Other participants, notably those who are looking to convince others of their perspective, reject hyperlinking as a strategy. Scooby, a prototypical persuader, explained, "I hate when things devolve into article posting. ...No, this is not helpful. *You* read it, then tell me what you gained from it, and make the case yourself." For twenty-one-year-old Scooby, active in Israel-Palestine affairs, hyperlinking is a conversation stopper; he simply ignores links.

For most participants, respect is a fundamental ingredient in good dialogue. Respectful dialogue is not rude, mean-spirited, insulting, nor judgmental. However, youth who aim to persuade others via dialogue are willing to lower the respect bar somewhat in order to make the discussion "productive." Scooby values discussions that "generally have a tone of respectfulness;" however, he also contends that "you can be a little condescending [in order to] get your point across."

Further, seventeen-year-old Cortana, an activist for student voice and feminist issues, is okay with "very inflammatory, radical" posts as they bring "an interesting voice to the conversation" and satisfy the need for diverse perspectives.

The clarity with which our participants articulate the features of good dialogue is heartening. How do young dialoguers go about putting their conceptions into practice? What particular strategies do they employ when

engaging in online civic exchanges?

Savvy Moves and Tactics

The young activists we interviewed are savvy and, in many respects, confident users of a variety of online moves aimed at amplifying their voices and engaging others in political conversations. Most participants reported making strategic moves, including educating ($n=15$), sharing their points-of-view ($n=15$), mobilizing others on behalf of a cause ($n=13$), and advocating ($n=10$). Frequent online tactics³² included circulating civic content by retweeting, “sharing,” or hyperlinking ($n=15$), along with strategically crafting the tone ($n=14$; e.g., neutral, professional, casual) and style of their posts by using slang, humor, or irony ($n=14$). Youth also described planning the timing and adjusting the frequency of their posts ($n=13$) and incorporating multimedia to draw attention to their posts ($n=13$). Scooby, mentioned above, described his tactics as follows:

When you're dealing with online presence, when you're talking about something online, and you're preaching to your community of peers, it's not enough to simply be right and be informative. There needs to be a little flair. There has to be something that's gonna get people excited to endorse it, or to like it. And so that's where a hint of condescension can come in and can be impactful, when people are like, “Yeah!” like, “Get him.” There's a little biting, without being disrespectful, just like that little extra panache. It can go a long way.

Some moves and tactics are much less prevalent among the civic youth but important nonetheless. For example, some youth discuss setting dialogue norms ($n=2$), explicitly acknowledging ($n=3$) and appreciating ($n=4$) others' ideas, admitting one's own uncertainty ($n=2$), and making efforts to keep the conversation focused ($n=3$). Notably, many of these less-used strategies focus on dialogical and procedural aspects of communication rather than one-way dissemination of information. The extent to which these strategies are used to navigate diverse perspectives, especially outright disagreements, was a further question in our study.

Disagreement/Conflict Strategies

Conflict is a frequent ingredient in online political conversations. A handful of youth pursue dialogical moves and tactics to engage and persuade others when disagreements arise. Their strategies include elaborating or reiterating their perspectives ($n=3$); questioning ($n=3$), appreciating ($n=2$), and quoting others ($n=1$); acknowledging ($n=1$) others' points before presenting other points of view; and sharing links to related articles or discussions ($n=1$). For example, Scooby leverages the text-based nature of online discussions and “enumerates” key points made by an opponent, using direct quotes from their statements, and then “refutes” each point in turn, all while attempting to use a neutral tone.

Despite the various strategies mentioned by Scooby and a few others, young people's toolkits for managing conversations with disagreements and/or conflicts were somewhat limited. Only one-third of participants ($n=5$) reported deploying more than three different moves and tactics to respond to a disagreement or conflict. And, despite their commitment to using social media for civic ends, most youth ($n=11$) reported efforts to avoid conflict by not initiating or entering into conversations on controversial topics or scaling back their audience (e.g., posting only to a select group of people). For example, Tara, a twenty-two-year-old focused on racial justice, feminism, and LGBT issues, described engaging only on platforms where she can control the audience:

I think when you post on news websites, it's open to everyone to see. [But] I think Facebook and Tumblr is more contained to...my followers...and to whoever's friends with me... That's why I feel more comfortable engaging in those spaces than just throwing it out to the whole world and having whoever else, attack me.

Limiting one's audience to known others doesn't preclude disagreements from arising, though. All of our participants

described engagement with individuals who disagreed with them, and nearly all ($n=14$) mentioned instances of ignoring or exiting conversations when they became heated, irrelevant, or took on an offensive tone. A few reported “unfriending” or “blocking” aggressive or difficult individuals on social media ($n=2$).

Occasionally, though, youth reported staying with disagreements and actually arriving at a satisfactory resolution. For example, Sassy, a twenty-five-year-old race and juvenile justice organizer, describes “working it out” with another online commenter:

It was just some random article that we were both commenting on... [The commenter] talked about her work with people of color and her being very frustrated. We were on two different sides, and... It was very frustrating 'cause I could see that she was doing good work and I didn't want to discredit her work, but the criticism— whatever criticism she was giving—I felt like she didn't really understand the issue from people of color, or my standpoint, I should say... There were some points where we got really just upset at each other, but we stuck to it. We worked it out until we came to...a great ending, I think, given the context or the conversation. And I think she walked away understanding what I felt, and I walked away sort of seeing her view. And I think that that's a great conversation.

Sassy's persistence and “happy ending” are noteworthy. However, more often than not, even those who emphasize the importance of engaging with different perspectives end up withdrawing when exchanges become contentious. Overall, the most common strategy for managing disagreements was to ignore or withdraw. Underlying participants' actions, or inactions, were range of anxieties that left youth feeling uncertain about how to navigate certain online discussions.

Uncertainties and Struggles

Our conversations with civic youth revealed several areas in which they feel uncertain about, or otherwise struggle with, online political conversations. When asked if they ever felt uncertain about posting something political on social media, all but one of our interviewees ($n=14$) responded in the affirmative. And some youth ($n=6$) indicated that uncertainty is a recurring, if not constant, emotion that they grapple with as they engage online. For example, Audrey a twenty-five-year-old environmental activist, says that she feels hesitation “probably every time” she posts. Similarly, Ann, an eighteen-year-old animal rights activist, always feels “hesitant” or “nervous” about posting political statements. Even the most confident dialoguer we spoke with indicated he worries “every time” he posts something about his main issue, Israel-Palestine.

The specific concerns that underlie these feelings of uncertainty vary somewhat, but all hover around audience reaction. A few participants worry about unintended audiences, such as current or future employers. These youth express concerns about getting into trouble or losing a job opportunity because of a political online post. However, most youth focused on the reception of immediate, intended audiences, such as current Facebook friends and Twitter followers. Concerns included “flooding people's feeds” with political content and consequently “pissing people off.” Michael, a twenty-five-year-old activist who is interested in environmental issues and racial justice, explained, “If I post too often, I worry that people will begin to take my posts less seriously.”

Other youth shared worries about the potential for negative exchanges when they disagree about something. Anticipating negative comments is a major source of anxiety for Sarah, a seventeen-year-old feminist activist, who says:

I don't wanna purposely provoke anything. And I know that they are important issues, and I know that I should feel comfortable voicing out my opinion, but personally I just don't feel comfortable if I know someone is gonna argue with me. I just don't want to put myself in that situation.

Julian, an assertive fifteen-year-old feminist blogger, explained her anxieties about “coming out” online: “The only hesitation I had was getting more hate than I already do. Because I get a lot of hate from being a feminist... I’ve been called a Satan-worshipping lesbian dyke whore (which is hilarious). So I would worry that I would get a lot of hate and death threats.” All told, while youth are managing their own emotions—often anxiety and fear—around online political talk, they are also anticipating, and attempting to manage, the emotional reactions of their audiences.

Related to this, several youth expressed concerns about engaging in a discussion and unintentionally offending someone out of ignorance. For example, Audrey shared, “And you always feel like, ‘What if you say the wrong thing?’ And it’s gonna go really far, and it’s semi-permanent because it’s on the Internet. It’s easy for me to get caught up in being really worried about... saying something offensive, or what have you.”

Like Audrey, several youth either alluded to or explicitly cited the qualities of the online space that can make political discussions challenging. They mentioned the persistence of online content and the fact that it’s “easy” to post something impulsively on social media. Several youth spoke about the challenge of communicating tone on social media. For many youth, these qualities make social media a challenging place to have productive discussions and, as noted above, withdrawing from contentious exchanges is common. Overall, the anxieties and concerns expressed by these youth raise important questions about supports to sustain their online participation.

Supports

In our interviews with young dialoguers, we asked various questions about where, how, and from whom they learn to discuss political issues on social media. We were particularly interested in who, if anyone, was supporting their efforts to engage with conflicting perspectives and manage the emotional toll of online participation. All young dialoguers mentioned a peer ($n=7$), family member ($n=5$), or educator / other non-family adult ($n=11$) as someone they have learned from regarding “how to” or “whether to” participate in online civic discussions (fig. 1). Interestingly, the vast majority of participants ($n=12$) explicitly mentioned a lack of support for certain aspects of doing civics online. We also observed a dominance of self-directed learning strategies ($n=14$) where direct advice was absent. Moreover, several participants ($n=10$) filled this support gap themselves by offering advice to peers.

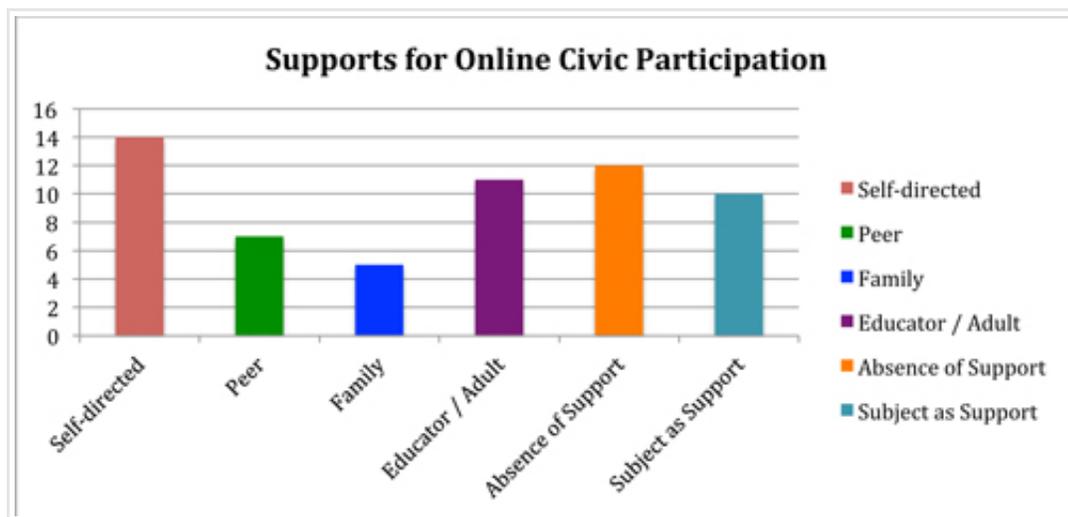


Figure 1. Supports for online civic participation.

All fifteen participants reported learning about online engagement vicariously through various role models and/or negative models, and a few mentioned receiving direct advice. The individuals they learned from included internship

advisors, teachers, college professors, social media icons and bloggers, established social justice activists, authors, and sometimes siblings, parents, or peers. Often, young dialoguers looked up to people who had large online followings, generated lengthy comment threads, and imbued their posts with respect and positivity.

Where present, direct advice took the form of explicit “tips” for structuring comments in response to online articles, using appropriate tone and style (i.e., being respectful), learning how to understand others’ perspectives, and strategic uses of platform-specific affordances. For example, Ann shared that her internship advisor provided “tips for writing online comments on articles” and said “he’s been probably the biggest influence on helping me be productive online.” Similarly, Julia, a twenty-three year-old interested in climate change and immigration reform, mentioned that her organization paid for her to attend “a couple of trainings on how to use email and social media.”

Despite these examples, only a few participants described formal supports for how and whether to engage civically online. More often, young dialoguers mentioned learning by observing others participating in discussions. Bill, a participant focused on education reform, explained, “a lot of it is also learning as you go and seeing what other people do.”

In addition, participants reported learning “what not to do” by observing anti-mentors who they described as combative, disrespectful, offensive, and, more broadly, not contributing to productive online discussions. All but three participants ($n=12$) gave examples of anti-mentors. These anti-mentors included journalists of major news networks, administrators of online community forums, unknown online commenters (i.e., individuals who were outside participants’ social networks), and peers. As with the role models, young civic dialoguers learned how to effectively convey messages by reflecting on tone (e.g., not being too blunt, respecting other opinions, using professional language) and posting timing and frequency (e.g., not posting too often so others leave the discussion or unfollow their posts), being mindful of bias, and refraining from sharing tangential or personal issues in civic spaces. Participants told us that they actively avoided these maladaptive approaches and adjusted their own behaviors accordingly. For example, when asked how an anti-mentor influenced her, Ann told us, “Well, it’s definitely made me realize what not to do and like seeing that makes me just kind of think about how I’m posting and think about how other people might perceive it.”

Youth clearly learn valuable insights about online tone, style, and language by observing other dialoguers. Even so, direct, formal supports for managing the complexity of online dialogue were often desired but absent or insufficient. Michael shared:

I don’t think there’s been a lot of places to learn it in school... Almost all of it was just learning it from peers and sometimes even the classes I took that might have been related to it might’ve been a little outdated. Like not relevant to the most current way that people are communicating.

Michael learned from peers but also indicates a gap in formal supports for online participation. Not only is instruction about online civic participation typically missing from curricula but also, where it exists, it tends to be “outdated,” not addressing current media contexts.

Aggregating pre-interview survey data across the dialoguers revealed similar support gaps. For example, nearly half of participants ($n=6$) indicated that they never learned how to create and share digital media as part of formal classes in school, and five mentioned having a few such learning experiences. Only two participants reported having this type of instruction often. Similarly, most participants ($n=10$) reported never having been formally taught how to share their perspectives about social or political issues via online platforms, while only two said this happened often (fig. 2). Interestingly, the majority of participants ($n=9$) did report having classroom discussions a few times about finding different perspectives on the Internet, though much fewer reported such learning happening often ($n=3$).

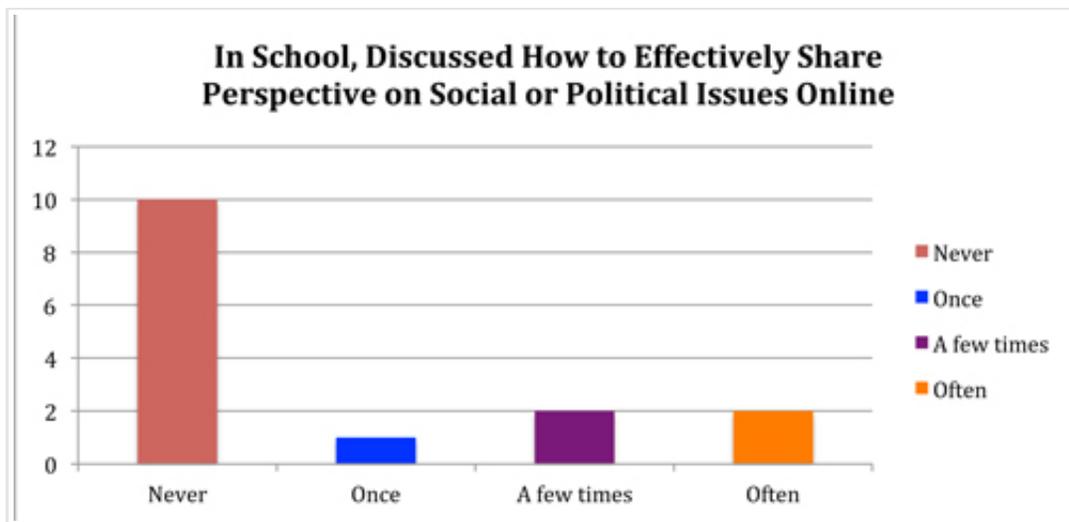


Figure 2. In school, participants discussed how to effectively share perspective on social or political issues online.

In our interviews, twelve youth specifically described absences of support for online dialogue. As noted, these participants mentioned frequent experiences with conflict and a lot of uncertainty about how to respond to it. They spoke of emotional vulnerabilities and lack of platform-specific knowledge and frequently wished they had learned how to respond to personal attacks, structure their comments productively, and express their voices confidently.

In sum, young dialoguers in our study reported having models to learn from—both good and bad—but more often learned by observing rather than receiving formal support. Self-directed learning was reported by nearly all participants ($n=14$) and most frequently co-occurred with observing various online role models. Therefore, self-directed learning and informal supports both played the largest roles in their online participation. While learning as they go works well for a few young dialoguers, others express a clear need for stronger supports.

Discussion

Our data suggest that civic youth who engage in political conversations on social media are making their way in a complex, often challenging context. In relation to Couldry’s conceptualization of voice as process and value, we find that the *process* of expressing one’s voice in exchanges with peers and fellow citizens is vexed for many youth—even for committed activists who appear to have extensive repertoires for civic dialogue.³³ Indeed, our findings echo Thorson’s (2014) observations and argument that online dialoguers face uncertainties, or a “social groundlessness,” and anxieties about audience reaction, especially conflict. Yet, our data offer further insights into the models of good dialogue youth aspire to, the moves and tactics they adopt, and the supports (or lack thereof) at their disposal.

Youth had clear conceptions of good online political conversations. Across the sample, we saw consensus about the key features of such conversations—they are informed, respectful, and engage different perspectives. Yet, the emphasis placed on one feature or another—especially tolerance for conversations that are less respectful—depends on participants’ goals for their discussions. Compared with participants who aim to educate or learn from online discussions, those who aim to “win” by persuading others of their perspective are more willing accept a little incivility for the sake of a productive exchange.

The specific moves and tactics civic participants use to engage in online dialogue are informed by their dialogue conceptions and civic goals. However, in the face of real or potential conflict, the value many place on engaging with diverse perspectives is undercut by feelings of anger, fear, or anxiety. Indeed, the repertoire of moves that young activists use when they engage in conversations with disagreements or conflicts is a small subset of the moves and tactics that they report using overall. That is, the set of dialogue strategies that young people use decrease

significantly when conversations turn difficult. The most common response by participants is to ignore or withdraw from such conversations. While these young activists pursue creative ways to strategically position themselves and push their own activist agenda online, they experience difficulties when it comes to conversations that require them to “stick it out,” or genuinely listen to and engage with diverse perspectives. In reality, then, many youth prioritized respectful, conflict-free exchanges over those that met their stated ideal of engaging different perspectives. Overall, we observed that youth often failed to realize their conceptions of ideal political conversations due to discomfort and an apparent lack of efficacy around navigating disagreements. Developing skills in this area is an acknowledged priority of civic education,³⁴ yet most youth in our study reported few direct supports for developing these skills.

The findings presented here offer evidence of a lacuna in formal supports for digitally active civic youth. The youth in our study often employ—and admittedly gain valuable insights from—self-directed learning strategies. Yet they also expressed a need and desire for support regarding the “how to” of using digital platforms effectively and engaging in productive exchanges—especially exchanges where diverse views (and often conflict) surface. They also need support for managing the emotional toll that online civic participation can have. Our analysis revealed that although youth have both online and offline role models, the quantity and quality of direct support received varies greatly. While these young people demonstrate creative moves and tactics to amplify their civic voices, they also report challenges that, in the absence of formal support, cause uncertainties, especially around managing conflicts. Hodgins’s work, which discusses five stages of opportunity for educators to support youth online participation, is highly relevant here.³⁵ Hodgins’s study of a school-based online program suggests that educators—and well-designed platforms—can help young people practice productive online dialogue and build dialogic communities.

The current findings are based on a small, exploratory study of young people who are both digitally and civically active. We therefore cannot make claims about all youth who use social media to engage in political discussions. Exploring the moves and tactics of a larger population of youth, and adult, civic dialoguers—especially their strategies for engaging with disagreements—would be a worthwhile next step. Yet our small, qualitative study suggests important dynamics and tensions that some youth are negotiating as they use social media to do civics. Above all, our study confirms the need, indicated by Mihailidis and others,³⁶ for integrating digital media literacy supports with quality civic learning experiences. In particular, youth need practice with and support for engaging productively with diverse perspectives—a vital yet often unachieved goal of civic education.

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29. Our overall sample included twenty-two females and eighteen males; fourteen youth were in the 15-18 age range; sixteen youth were ages 19-22; and ten were ages 23-25. In terms of race/ethnicity, seventeen participants identified as White, ten as African American, six as Asian, four as Hispanic, and three as multiracial. The subset of civic dialoguers (our primary focus in this paper) consisted of eleven females and four males; seven youth were ages 15-18; three were ages 19-22; and five were ages 23-25. Seven youth identified as White, three as African American, three as Asian, and two as multiracial. Although the subset of civic dialoguers, like our larger group, is not a representative sample, this exploratory study uncovers valuable insights about youth experience of online civic dialogue. ↵
30. Reliability was established by achieving a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.7 or higher. ↵
31. All participant names in this paper are pseudonyms chosen by the participant at the time of the interview. All quotes are from our interviews. ↵

32. We made a loose distinction between dialogue *moves* and *tactics*. We categorized strategies such as “questioning,” “storytelling,” and “mobilizing” as *moves* because they suggest higher order goals or strategies found in a given post or comment. We referred to strategies such as “hyperlinking,” “hashtagging,” and use of tone and images as *tactics*, as they were more specific mechanisms through which a participant enacted discourse *moves*. For example, as part of the mobilizing move, a participant might embed links, use provocative images, and adjust tone to appeal to a target audience. ↵
33. Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*. ↵
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About Carrie James, Daniel T. Gruner, Ashley Lee, & Margaret Mullen

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