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# Redesigning Civic Education for the Digital Age: Participatory Politics and the Pursuit of Democratic Engagement

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**Abstract:** The digital revolution has enabled important changes in political life. Opportunities to engage in *participatory politics* have expanded significantly. Participatory politics differ from institutional politics in that they are peer-based, interactive, and not guided by deference to traditional elites and institutions. These changes require a response from civic educators. Core practices of civic and political engagement, such as investigation, dialogue, circulation, production, and mobilization, must be taught differently because they are now frequently enacted differently and in different contexts. This article conceptualizes these changes, draws on a nationally representative survey to assess the frequency and expansion of these new practices, and highlights examples of curricular reform to help frame an expanded agenda for civic education in the digital age.

**Keywords:** civic education, democratic education, digital age, digital divide, digital media, participatory politics, youth civic engagement

To argue that digital media are increasingly central to civic and political life is, in many respects, to state the obvious. Such changes are particularly prominent among youth.<sup>1</sup> The affordances of digital media are providing youth

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with a way to be heard, to join together, and to work for change. For example, the Black Lives Matter and the DREAMer movements—arguably two of the most prominent youth-led social movements of the past several decades within the United States—both utilize social media to circulate information and perspectives, mobilize others to get involved, apply pressure to elected officials, and change the conversation about fundamental societal issues. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, for example, has become the message of a national movement demanding justice and equality for Black people (Kurwa, 2014). The shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black 18-year-old in Ferguson, Missouri, and the resulting waves of protest were tweeted about in the United States more than any other major event in 2014 (Lopez, 2014). Millions, including broadcast media, gained news and perspectives on fast moving events in Ferguson by following activists and self-appointed journalists on the ground via various social media platforms. Coverage of these issues has dramatically expanded public consciousness of these issues and has created pressure for reform. Forty policing laws in 24 states changed in the year following Michael Brown's death (Lieb, 2015).

Similarly, youth activists in the DREAMer movement have pushed for immigrant rights using social media. Activists share online resources regarding legal status, raise awareness and visibility by changing their online profile images, mobilize support for undocumented youth who were in danger of being deported, and exert pressure on elected officials for immigration reform and the DREAM Act (Zimmerman, 2012). Dreamers have become a potent force in the battle for immigration reform, both in terms of shaping public consciousness and in terms of fighting for particular legislation at both the state and federal level (see Nicholls, 2013). As Allen and Cohen (2015) have highlighted in their discussion of prominent social movements today, by combining engagement online with engagement in the streets, these youth-led efforts have helped to “democratize the conversation” while also influencing democratic decision-making. We call this form of engagement *participatory politics*.

## WHAT ARE PARTICIPATORY POLITICS?

Participatory politics are interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern. Examples of participatory political acts range from blogging and circulating political news, to starting a new political group, to creating petitions, to mobilizing one's social network on behalf of a cause. These activities need not occur online (one can start a political group or circulate petitions, for example, without digital media). The affordances of digital media, however, have expanded opportunities for youth to engage in participatory politics—they make it easier to circulate news, or to mobilize one's social network, for example. Indeed, when engaged in participatory politics individuals and groups frequently leverage the power of social networks, the creation and

circulation of civic media, and access to information from the Internet as a means of investigating issues, promoting dialogue, impacting cultural norms, and mobilizing others. Reflecting the practices that are prevalent in a broader participatory culture (see Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2009), these approaches often blend cultural and political activity, and they are not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions. Participatory politics empower individuals and groups to operate with greater independence in the political realm, circumventing traditional gatekeepers of information and influence. These practices often help to shift cultural and political understandings and create pressure for change. (For a discussion of the historical and theoretical grounding of participatory politics, see Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen [2015].)

The sizable and expanding role of participatory activity and digital media in the practice of politics is clear. However, whether and how civic educators should respond to these changes is not. In order to fully consider this question, it is important to clearly conceptualize how forms of civic and political activity in the digital age compare to prior eras, to assess the significance of these changes for youth, to consider the degree to which these practices have spread and how equitably they are distributed, and to detail how, if at all, preparation for effective engagement with these practices requires differing skills and dispositions than are developed by prior conceptions of best practice in civic education.

As detailed below, we find that participatory politics hold great potential, especially for youth, as a significant support for the pursuit of a democratic and just society. But we also find that social studies educators and others committed to the democratic purpose of schooling must expand and redesign civic education, so as to prepare youth for these new opportunities as well as for new risks and challenges. The article closes by highlighting three perennial challenges related to promoting more frequent, high quality, and equitable civic engagement opportunities, and ways that these challenges have been reshaped in the digital age.

This kind of re-examination and proposal for change sits solidly within the traditions of civic education. When faced with broad scale social transformation, civic educators have long recognized the need to modify practice. John Dewey's (1916) vision of school as community and of education as engagement in real social processes and problems was deeply shaped by the experience of industrialization, the growth of mass entertainment media, and their social effects. And Boyd Bode's (1938) "Ohio School" of progressive education sought to preserve a civic education marked by open-ended pragmatism at a time of global social transformation and conflict. Scholars and practitioners committed to civic education have re-envisioned their work in relation to evolving concepts of democracy across agrarian, industrial, and post-modern social conditions. People are once again facing dramatic change with the rise of digital media and Internet-fueled connectivity. Thus, while continuing to pursue the democratic purposes of education, civic educators must

focus squarely on the kinds of changes that are needed if they are to educate for democracy in the digital age.

## THE CASE FOR ATTENDING TO PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

Drawing on Dewey and the pragmatist tradition, we take as a starting point that civic education should aim to enrich democracy as a way of life. This focus includes, and extends beyond, engagement with formal political institutions. A central aim of civic education should be enabling individuals to work collectively to identify, learn about, discuss with others, and address public issues (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1927). Participatory politics can facilitate these democratic priorities. Specifically, youth can investigate issues through online search engines, start or join an online group to address a political issue, engage in dialogue with their peers and community via social networking platforms, produce and circulate compelling blogs and other content using a wide array of digital tools, and mobilize their networks around a common cause.

Participatory politics differ from more traditional *institutional politics* through which highly organized groups and institutional gatekeepers—political parties, government bureaucracies, news agencies, civic organizations, lobbyists, and special interest groups—structure conversations about which issues deserve attention and drive priorities for action. Although individuals find opportunities for action within institutional politics, such as working on a political campaign or writing an op-ed, the content of such activities are shaped to a significant degree by institutional gatekeepers and are limited in number (see Kahne et al., 2015).

Indeed, youth are increasingly tapping the power of new digital tools and social networks to connect their cultural interests to politics, to express their perspective, and to protest or in other ways exert influence on issues of public concern, such as poverty, online censorship, police misconduct, and immigrant rights (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016). Such political engagement often takes place locally and without much fanfare, but it can also focus on national or international issues and garner widespread attention, as did the #BlackLivesMatter and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaigns, protests of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) bills, and the online mobilization efforts tied to the Arab Spring. Moreover, these activities are not limited to a particular ideological outlook. Libertarians, members of the Occupy movement, and Tea Party activists, for example, all leverage the power of participatory politics (see Bennett, 2012; Gamber-Thompson, 2012).

To be clear, in focusing civic educators' attention on supporting youth engagement with participatory politics, we do not mean to imply that we view these practices as inherent supports for democratic action. Critics point out, for example, that these practices often fail to foster the kind of sustained collective

political capacity and commitment needed to impact societal problems or to sustain a social movement in the face of strong resistance (see Sifry, 2014). In fact, some might argue against incorporating participatory politics into civic education, fearing that education related to participatory politics will divert youth from more productive and consequential forms of civic and political life. We reject this line of reasoning. After all, youth will not stop sharing perspectives on Facebook and Twitter if educators decide to ignore these practices. When educators fail to discuss ways to leverage the power of social media they simply make it less likely that the democratic potential of participatory politics will be realized and more likely that the problems that can come with such engagement will increase.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In order to assess the frequency and distribution of youth participatory politics, we draw on recent studies of digital civic and political engagement by young people and also on the 2013 Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) Survey. The YPP Survey, undertaken in partnership with Cathy Cohen, is unique in that it provides an extensive and nationally representative portrait of online and offline civic and political engagement of youth, as well as oversamples of Black and Latino youth. The 2013 survey contains data for a nationally representative sample of 2,343 respondents ages 15–27.<sup>2</sup> This survey was administered online and by telephone in English and Spanish. It includes questions that enable examination of the quantity, quality, and equality of youth digital media practices, political and civic attitudes and behavior and engagement in participatory politics. Our goal was to create measures that aligned with conceptual understandings of youth civic and political engagement in the digital age in order to operationalize the notion of participatory politics. We supplemented the YPP Survey data with new analysis of data from Pew Internet and American Life Project surveys conducted in the summers of 2008 and 2012. Their nationally representative sample included 2,251 respondents in 2008 of which 125 were ages 18–24 and 2,253 respondents in 2012 of which 232 were ages 18–24. Although limited to those over age 18, these Pew surveys enable assessment of changes in online practices among young adults (Smith, 2013).

Through analyzing data from the YPP Survey and the Pew surveys noted above, we were able to create descriptive statistics and conduct regression analysis to determine the prevalence, growth, and distribution of these practices across various demographics as well as income groups. The analysis in this article is therefore largely descriptive in nature and not intended to predict outcomes based on particular educational interventions, for example. Rather, we systematically assess the prevalence and distribution of these new and emerging practices for youth so as to better understand the priorities for civic education.

## THE EXPANSION OF PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

The case for attending to participatory politics cannot only be based on participatory politics' alignment with important aspects of life in a democratic society. The case must also be based on how often these practices are employed. Survey data on this point are clear. Participatory politics are now commonplace, their incidence is growing, and youth are at the forefront of these changes. The Pew survey on civic and political engagement reported that 67% of youth (ages 18–24), compared with 39% of adults, engaged in civic and political activities using social networking sites in a manner consistent with participatory politics in the year leading up to the 2012 presidential election (Smith, 2013, p. 3).<sup>3</sup> In addition, when comparing Pew surveys in 2008 and 2012, we found that among youth ages 18–24, rates of engagement in acts we associate with participatory politics roughly doubled. For example, the number of youth who posted political news on a social networking site grew from 13% to 32% and the number belonging to a political group or a group supporting a cause on a social networking site grew from 14% to 26%. Furthermore, our nationally representative 2013 survey found that 50% of those between the ages of 15 and 27 got news from Facebook and Twitter posts by families and friends during the week they completed the survey. This compares quite favorably to the other ways young people access news (see Table 1). By circulating information and perspectives, these young adults—similar to newspaper editors—are determining the ideas that those in their social networks are exposed to and shaping the narrative around what's important.

Moreover, of particular relevance for educators, a significant number of high school age youth are also engaged in participatory politics. Analysis of data from our 2013 YPP Survey found that 36% of youth who were between the ages of 15–18 engaged in at least one act of online participatory politics within the previous year.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, 6% of those between 15 and 18 reported working on an election campaign during the previous 12 months and 4% donated money to a campaign. In short, one reason participatory politics require sustained attention from scholars and educators

**Table 1.** Sources of News and Information

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Percent who got news and information about political or social issues from source in last week:	
Twitter or Facebook post/tweets from family or friends	50%
Newspapers, magazines, TV, or radio news accessed online	50%
Print newspaper or magazines, TV or radio news	43%
An online community where people discuss a hobby, sport, or fandom	36%

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Data from 2013 YPP Survey for 15–27-year-olds.

is because they now represent a substantial portion of high school age youths' overall political activity.

### **CAN PARTICIPATORY POLITICS PROMOTE POLITICAL EQUALITY?**

The degree to which such practices are equitably distributed also requires careful attention as it both challenges and confirms commonly held beliefs about the digital divide. Among youth, engagement with participatory politics is largely equal across ethnic and racial groups (see Cohen & Berk, 2015; Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, & Rogowski, 2012, for more detail). However, while the relatively equitable rates of participation for youth across ethnicity and race are a positive sign, equitable educational support and preparation is not assured. Those youth with the most education are roughly twice as likely to engage in participatory politics as those youth with the least (Cohen et al., 2012). Furthermore, a study by Leu and colleagues (2014) found more affluent students had an additional school year's worth of instruction related to online reading abilities (i.e., abilities to find, evaluate, integrate, and communicate online information) compared to lower income students. As discussed toward the end of the article, these disparities signal the need to redesign civic education toward preparing all youth for effective and powerful participation in the changing civic and political landscape. In addition, often due to the lack of responsiveness of institutions to their priorities, low-income youth and youth of color may place less emphasis than White and middle-class youth on formal institutional politics (Bedolla, 2005; Junn, 1999). Therefore, attending to participatory politics in civic education may be particularly valuable for these groups as it may provide a means of supporting political voice and collective action.

### **PARTICIPATORY POLITICS ARE PARTICULARLY RELEVANT TO AND FOR YOUTH**

It is also worth considering probable explanations for the high rates of youth engagement in participatory politics, both when compared to adults' rates of engagement in these practices and when compared with rates of youth participation in institutional politics. Our review of the literature indicates that young people's engagement with digital practices and what Jenkins and colleagues (2009) have termed a participatory culture provide part of the explanation, as does the significant disjuncture youth experience when it comes to institutional politics. Specifically, youth are often ignored, excluded from, or given only marginal roles in institutional politics. Youth under 18 in the United States are not able to vote and, when it comes to shaping the priorities



of most governmental and non-profit institutions, most youth have few meaningful chances to give input. As a result, organizations often do not develop agendas that respond to their priorities. When engaged in participatory politics, in contrast, neither youths' ability to act nor the focus of their efforts require approval of these institutional gatekeepers.

In addition, youth often report being turned off by the conflictual and seemingly ineffectual nature of institutional politics. They express less interest in elections (voting and working on a campaign) and in the traditional political debates engaged in by politicians and interest groups, and they report greater satisfaction from engagement in a range of more participatory forms of lifestyle politics and political acts that emphasize self-expression—forms of engagement facilitated by the affordances of digital media (Bennett, 2012). Thus, media literacy education designed to support youth investigation and research is needed (Hobbs, 2010).

In addition, the attraction of participatory politics appears to stem from its alignment with broader cultural forms of engagement that youth find compelling. Surveys suggest that many youth readily employ the affordances of digital media, both as individuals and in groups, to socialize, to pursue their interests, to collaborate, to produce, and to learn within a participatory culture. For example, our YPP Survey indicated that 37% of youth between the ages of 15 and 27 post links or forward information or media related to their interests at least once a week and 16% create media (blogs, fiction, podcasts, music) online at least once a week. Networks and groups with shared interests tied to hobbies, sports, entertainment, or religious and cultural identities often cultivate these participatory settings. These can be powerful contexts—creating a kind of digital social capital that supports what Ito and colleagues (2015) have called *connected civics* (which they view as a subset of participatory politics) in which groups of youth who share interests become civically and politically engaged; Jenkins et al., 2016). Indeed, participatory political engagement is not only an end. It is also potentially a means through which youth learn. Engaging in participatory politics can deepen participants' understanding of issues and of ways to bring about change in areas of interest. Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative research has found a strong relationship between engaging in interest driven participatory cultures and in participatory politics (Cohen et al., 2012; Jenkins et al., 2016; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2013).

## EXPANDING THE AGENDA FOR CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

While survey data and case studies of youth civic and political engagement make clear the prevalence and significance of participatory politics, they do not provide a clear road map for educators. In order to understand whether and how civic education must be modified, it is necessary to identify the skills,

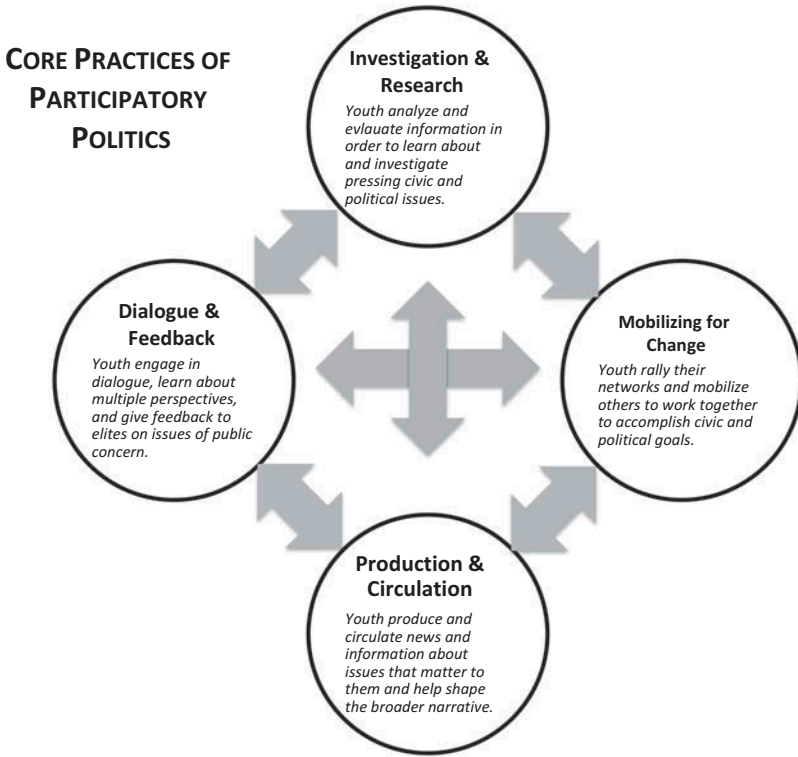


Figure 1. Core Practices of Participatory Politics

dispositions, and experiences required to effectively engage in participatory politics. To do this we look at four practices that are central to civic and political engagement where we feel digital age technology and social connectivity have meaningfully altered the form and dynamics of civic and political life: investigation and research, dialogue and feedback, production and circulation, and mobilization (see Figure 1). Although not the only relevant practices, we highlight these because they are analogues to the main practices identified as part of a broader participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2009). In addition, they reflect the movement from agenda-setting to opinion formation and action taking which are at the core of all political life (see Kahne et al., 2015).

In the section that follows, we provide a conceptual map that describes how these core practices are changing, research detailing the nature of these changes, and implications for educators. (For charts summarizing broad examples of these changes and some key educational implications, see Table 2.) In addition, to illustrate what responding to these needs might involve, we provide descriptions of early efforts of four teams of educators based in three different

**Table 2.** Core Practices for Educating Youth for Participatory Politics

Common Historical Practices	Expanded Practices in the Digital Age	New Opportunities for Youth	Potential Risks	Implications for Educators
<b>Investigation and research:</b>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcast media and newspapers were the main outlets for news on civic and political issues</li> <li>• Research happened through trusted sources, such as encyclopedias</li> <li>• Information was highly vetted by elites, gatekeepers, and major institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Internet makes access to a wide range of information easier</li> <li>• News and information is commonly accessible through participatory channels, such as Facebook and Twitter</li> <li>• Crowd-sourced information can be shared and co-created through platforms like Wikipedia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth can easily tap a wider range of information, forms of data, and view points</li> <li>• Research can be undertaken and shared independently of institutions and gatekeepers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased access to misinformation and information that is not sufficiently vetted</li> <li>• Filter bubbles and echo chambers result in greater exposure to like-minded people and information and less exposure to divergent perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support youth to engage in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective search and credibility analysis</li> <li>• High-quality investigation through multiple sources using digital tools and platforms</li> <li>• Tapping social networks to forage for information</li> <li>• Participatory action research</li> <li>• Information framing and story creation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Dialogue and feedback:</b>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For youth, dialogue about social issues occurred either in private circles with family and friends or with peers in school</li> <li>• Structured forums for dialogue and feedback primarily happened at specified times and locations, such as a town hall or school board meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased opportunities for feedback in online forums, such as commenting on news websites, creating online petitions, and generating viral campaigns intended to pressure a representative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth have increased opportunities to engage in dialogue and feedback outside of structured forums and institutional contexts</li> <li>• There are expanded chances for youth to voice their opinions and perspectives to a wide audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth only engage in spaces and dialogue with like-minded individuals, called echo chambers</li> <li>• Incivility and offensive dialogue can dominate online dialogic spaces that are not regulated by clear norms or guidelines and where anonymity is common</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support youth to engage in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressing one's perspective persuasively in a digital format</li> <li>• Sharing one's point of view with respect and civility even when there is no face to face relationship</li> <li>• Tapping social networks to engage in dialogue with people with diverse perspectives</li> <li>• Reflecting on the impact of dialogue and expression on their own identity while being aware of the risks of disclosure, online bullying, and eco-chambers</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- Many opportunities for feedback—such as voting, calling one’s representative, or writing a letter to the editor—were structured by institutions
  - Dialogue about social issues can occur with a broader range of people in online spaces, such as Facebook, Twitter, chat rooms, etc.
  - In an effort to draw attention, everyday experiences of ordinary lives and struggles can be crowded out by sensationalized accounts
- Production:**
- The production of ideas and media was largely limited to elites and “professionals” within organizations and institutions.
  - Youth were primarily consumers in relation to production; exceptions included small-scale activities possibly provided through school, youth organizations, or volunteering with an organization
  - Accessible digital tools enable youth to engage in production ranging from creating a video to building their own website
  - There are new and expanded opportunities for youth to contribute to the flow of information and to shape the narrative around civic and political issues
  - Youth have voice and agency in spaces where they can also produce ideas and media
  - When working with limited resources, civic and political production projects can require an intensive amount of work over a long period of time that is increasingly unsustainable
  - Support youth to develop abilities to:
    - Use digital tools and platforms for trans-media production
    - Strategically determine the appropriate tools and the best use of the tools
    - Determine how to craft persuasive messages that will reach a targeted audience

(Continued)

**Table 2. (Continued)**

Common Historical Practices	Expanded Practices in the Digital Age	New Opportunities for Youth	Potential Risks	Implications for Educators
<p><b>Circulation:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The spread of information happened through structured civic and political organizations via mass mailings, flyers, posters, etc.</li> <li>• Organizations and the media chose “experts” and “leaders” to speak on a topic and talk about its civic implications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information spreads through participatory channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Wikipedia</li> <li>• Social networks share and circulate information to an expanded audience by “liking,” forwarding, commenting, and remixing information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth have increased opportunities for voice, agency, and creative expression through sharing information and their points of view</li> <li>• Youth help determine what information and views their peers are exposed to</li> <li>• Youth now have the ability to reach an expanded audience outside of an organizational structure using digital tools and online networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The nuances of an issue get lost when a message is trimmed and simplified to circulate quickly and broadly</li> <li>• Exposure to new information and ideas is limited by filter bubbles and one’s social networks</li> <li>• The digital afterlife of a message can take on a different shape or direction than was initially intended</li> <li>• Surveillance is increasingly possible as increased personal expression in online spaces can easily be tracked and traced</li> </ul>	<p>Support youth to engage in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of digital tools and platforms for multimedia circulation</li> <li>• Tapping social networks to circulate information and messages</li> <li>• Determining how to go public and cultivate an expanding online audience for the spread of information or one’s view points</li> <li>• Thinking through possible outcomes of civic and political activity, the footprint it may leave, and the digital afterlife</li> </ul>

**Mobilizing for Change:**

- Political organizations mobilized large numbers of people around a civic or political cause using their capacity and resources, such as door to door canvassing or tapping an organizations' membership
    - Social networks can be mobilized without the need for organizational resources
      - Young people might start a new political group online, write and disseminate an online petition, raise money for a civic cause via a Kickstarter campaign
    - Youth have expanded relevancy and influence in mobilizing others to back a civic or political issue of concern
      - Social networks increase young people's opportunity to be mobilized to respond to an issue by someone they know and trust
      - Youth can take advantage of varying levels of engagement through the fluid and flexible use of digital media
    - Requests to get involved can come from individuals and groups that are unknown and potentially untrustworthy
      - Complex issues can be misunderstood and/or conflated when information is simplified and shortened to more easily mobilize others
      - Individuals and groups can mobilize around savior-like responses that do not effectively address the complexity of the situation
  - Support youth to:
    - Tap social networks and digital platforms to organize and mobilize others
    - Determine tactics and strategies for building support
    - Identify appropriate and relevant responses based on a nuanced understanding of an issue
    - Anticipate the impact of action, and reflect on possible outcomes and unintended consequences
-

cities (Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland) who are part of the Educating for Participatory Politics (EPP) project. Each EPP team provides training and coaching to a cohort of educators as they plan and implement curriculum that explores the expanded possibilities and risks associated with EPP.

Specifically, the Black Youth Project's (BYP) New Media Research Program at the University of Chicago is partnering with Chicago Public School's Global Citizenship Initiative (GCI) in order to develop a series of modules focused on civic engagement in the digital age, including modules focused on digital media use, search and credibility of online information, and digital media's impact on electoral politics and policy formation. The second team in Chicago, a partnership between the Good Participation (GP) Project at Project Zero and Facing History and Ourselves, collaborated to "digitize" a series of Facing History's educational resources that not only give students opportunities to use digital tools, but also reflect on digital media's impact on identity, membership, and community. The Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) Project partners with the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts' Media Arts + Practice Division to curate curricular resources and create workshops for various educational settings. The goal is to provide opportunities for youth to tap the power of cultural storytelling and to learn the creative production skills needed to produce a compelling story using any media necessary (Jenkins et al., 2016). Finally, in Oakland, the Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age (EDDA) project has taken a district-wide approach to re-envisioning civic education in the digital age by building professional learning communities at various school sites who work together to integrate digital civic learning opportunities into the high school curriculum. (See <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/pages/educating-participatory-politics-resources> for more details.)

These projects are just beginning and we are currently conducting focused studies of their impact. Thus, we are not arguing that these are models to be copied or that they are necessarily exemplary ways to address these concerns. Rather, we draw on these examples to provide a more tangible sense of the different ways, through both large and small curricular efforts, that educators can help prepare youth for important forms of engagement in civic and political life in the digital age, including investigation, dialogue and feedback, circulation, production, and mobilization. While each example is used to illustrate one particular core practice, many of the curricular efforts being developed prepare youth for more than one practice. Finally, most of the examples below, but not all, come from high school social studies classrooms. This is not surprising since social studies has long been the discipline most directly tied to the civic education agenda. But it is worth noting that the significant changes taking place in civic and political life in the digital age are relevant for educators broadly to consider.

## Investigation and Research

Direct investigation of community needs and interests, as well as researching civic and political issues more generally, has always been central to opinion and policy formation. In the past, information regarding civic and political issues was identified, assessed, synthesized, and circulated for public consumption by institutional gatekeepers, experts, and elites, such as scholars, journalists, the government, and interest group spokespeople based within formal organizations. Many organizations continue this tradition. However, the changing dynamics of the digital age have led to expanded opportunities for more participatory forms of investigation.

Indeed, individuals and groups now have greater ability to not only check the veracity of information that is circulated by elite institutions (Armstrong & Zuniga, 2006), but also conduct their own investigations in an effort to actively create knowledge and raise awareness. Digital media tools, such as Internet search engines, survey tools, online databases, mapping tools, and mobile phones with recorders and video cameras all make investigation easier. Self-publishing tools have also enlarged opportunities for community members and those involved in youth participatory action research to publish and circulate content without approval from an editor and review board, expanding the system of checks and balances on elite journalist organizations.

The implications of these changes for civic education are significant. First, youth will need an expanded set of skills if they are to effectively tap the affordances of the digital age when engaging in investigation and research. In addition to the ability to search for information in a library, youth must also develop abilities to effectively search for a wide range of information and perspectives online or in collaboration with other people engaged in participatory research. Civic educators, both as individuals and in conjunction with long established programs implemented by groups such as the Center for Civic Education and the Constitutional Rights Foundation, have long promoted practices aligned with the project method (Kilpatrick, 1918), active learning (Owen, 2015), and youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). These types of practices involve studying community issues through interviewing community members, designing surveys, or producing a report or presentation for the public. Youth can now benefit from developing abilities to use digital media when engaged in such activities. Moreover, as noted above, the degree to which information is now accessed through social networks and is circulated without vetting dramatically increases the challenge of judging the credibility of information. This requires youth to develop both new skills and new sensibilities when it comes to research and investigation. Educational responses to these needs must be developed.

For example, Mr. Vaughn<sup>5</sup>, in his work with the BYP New Media Research team, asked his 11th-grade social studies students to use the Internet to investigate civic issues in their community. Students were asked to identify an issue



they cared about and a civic organization they believed was making a positive difference, to go online to learn about the group's perspective on this issue, and to interview a key civic actor in that organization. In order to surface the complexities of undertaking this kind of online investigation, Mr. Vaughn made a screencast of his own online search for a civic organization. Students were able to see the key search terms he entered and the sites he visited, as well as hear the reactions and thoughts as the process unfolded. Students completed the assignment in groups where they examined organizations, such as Cease Fire, Justice for Homicide Victims, and Job Corps, and wrote a collaborative research paper together in Google docs. Mr. Vaughn said that in addition to supporting students' foundational digital literacies, he wanted them to build up the stamina needed to navigate this new landscape, and to take advantage of digital tools for civic purposes (A. L. Linton, personal communication, May 9, 2014).

Taking a different approach, Ms. Richards, a teacher participating in the Oakland EDDA project, focused on helping her students learn to judge the credibility of different online sources in preparation for a research project on a contemporary civil rights issue. While reading articles about New York's controversial "Stop and Frisk" policy, Ms. Richards asked students to use the "Trust-O-Meter" which required students to answer a series of questions to assess whether a source was trustworthy thereby highlighting factors that made a source questionable or untrustworthy (E. Middaugh, personal communication, August 19, 2014). By outlining and then weighing the strengths and weaknesses of a source, Ms. Richards found that students were able to better determine the credibility of the online sources she provided: "When I gave them the sources, . . . and the focus was on evaluating the credibility, bias, and objectivity [using the "trust-o-meter" template] they did really well." However, she also found that it was hard to change youth norms regarding a relatively open acceptance of the information they found online. When students were asked to evaluate sources they had found on their own (as opposed to the sources she had given them), Ms. Richards explained that "I saw them fumbling again. I saw them putting in information from the source, as opposed to reasons to trust it or question it." In a focused study on information literacy in the digital age with four high school teachers, including Ms. Richards, Middaugh and Evans (2015) found that low stakes repetition with these kinds of critical information literacy skills helped students judge the credibility of information, especially when the topic or content area was new and unfamiliar.

It appears that these needs are widespread. In our 2011 YPP Survey, 84% of youth surveyed nationally said they thought that they and their friends would benefit from instruction in how to tell if a given source of online news was trustworthy (Cohen et al., 2012). Unfortunately, 33% of youth in high school in our 2013 YPP survey did not report a single class session that focused on how to tell if information found online was trustworthy. Only 16% reported having more than a few class sessions focused on this topic. The same survey

included an experiment that revealed that those youth who had had media literacy instruction were better able to determine if hypothetical political posts on Facebook were accurate, even with controls for knowledge and interest in politics and a full range of demographic and academic factors (Kahne & Bowyer, 2015). In short, digital networks and platforms enable any individual or group to post and share information without institutional oversight, however, this has made it more difficult to determine the credibility of the immense amount of information accessible online (Metzger, 2007).

**Dialogue and Feedback**

Engaging in dialogue and expressing one’s perspective to those in positions of authority is an important form of civic and political engagement (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The affordances of digital media have greatly expanded youth opportunities to engage in discussion with those who hold differing perspectives, to argue for their points of view, to comment on civic and political issues outside of formal structures and institutions, and to express feedback to government agencies, corporations, and other organizations through avenues such as petitions and online campaigns. The number of youth taking advantage of these opportunities for dialogue and feedback in and out of school is growing. Fifty-four percent of 18–24-year-olds who use the Internet engaged in dialogue related to politics online in 2012, up from 43% in 2008 (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009).

Many scholars have expressed concern, however, that dialogue often occurs within an echo chamber, where individuals engage mostly with those who share their views (Sunstein, 2007). Moreover, when interaction occurs among those who hold divergent views, it is often problematic leading to harshness or disengagement rather than true democratic deliberation (Vanfossen, 2006). Kushin and Kitchener (2009) found that 30% of discussions in Facebook political groups were unproductive/uncivil (for example, containing personal insults and offensive language). Indeed, the desire to gain attention coupled with the anonymity provided by many online platforms may lead to more frequent troublesome exchanges. For example, offensive remarks can also turn into hate speech with racist, sexist, or homophobic tones, especially in the context of heightened anonymity online. Thirty-nine percent of all students, including 45% of Black and 47% of Latino students, on our 2011 YPP Survey reported seeing or experiencing racist statements and interactions online (Cohen & Berk, 2015). Similarly, a study of approximately 260 high school age youth’s experiences of direct and indirect racial discrimination on the Internet, found that 71% of Black, 71% of White, and 67% of multiracial/other adolescents reported seeing racial discrimination online, whereas, 29% of Black, 20% of White, and 42% of multiracial/other youth reported experiencing racial discrimination (Tynes, Tiang, Williams, & Thompson, 2008). The repercussions

of such troubling dynamics have an effect in the short and long term. After interviewing 70 highly active civic youth about their civic participation and expression online, Weinstein, Rundle, and James (2015) found through follow-up surveys that 32% of the sample ( $n = 13/41$ ) had silenced or quieted their online civic expression just 2 years later. Many said this was due to fears of backlash or negative consequences of sharing their perspectives online.

Thus, while providing opportunities for face to face discussions of controversial civic and political issues in contexts moderated by educators has long been and continues to be a best practice by civic educators (Hess, 2009), additional learning opportunities will be needed to support youth to navigate and address the risks, as well as take advantage of the expanded opportunities with online dialogue and feedback.

To create a context in which her students could not only negotiate online dialogue and behavior, but also reflect on their online expression and identity a teacher in Chicago, Ms. Mankie, started an online discussion board for her classes. She initiated discussion threads on people's rights and responsibilities in online spaces, online identity expression, the impact of social media in areas of civic and political unrest around the world, and the potential perils of digital media for social activism and social movements. Students were able to post their views and opinions, craft arguments, comment on one another's posts, and share links to other related information or media. In one discussion thread, Ms. Mankie encouraged students to post and analyze one to two images and messages they had shared recently on a social media platform, like Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, or Instagram.

One student shared a photo of a polar bear clambering on melting ice because she felt it was symbolic of climate change. On the discussion board, she then explained

I post a lot about how we affect the environment and pictures like these point out the harm we've caused. Most of my friends just thought it was funny and commented that it looked like their friends in the lake that day. I deleted the comments because I thought it was somewhat disrespectful to poke fun at tragedy.

Later in class, the student had the opportunity to reflect on why she was offended by her peers' comments and on various ways she might respond in the future.

In focus groups, Ms. Mankie's students described how the discussion board opened up a space for them to share experiences online, reflect on the impact of their own social media use, and voice differing opinions and perspectives on the challenges of online expression and on what they thought constituted a respectful exchange. The student's experience noted above also

highlights a set of challenges that several studies of educational efforts to promote public voice have surfaced. Specifically, educational efforts to engage youth in using digital media for political purposes can increase political interest but it is not always possible to promote high quality or sufficient interaction. In such instances, the “public” aspect of the experience is diminished. Levy, Journell, He, and Towns (2015) found that in such instances, despite educators’ intentions, written content that is shared over social media platforms feels to some students like a regular assignment written for the teacher.

Indeed, because students reported being motivated by having a larger audience, Ms. Mankie is planning to modify her approach to connect students with a broader audience of peers and adults beyond their school when she implements these lessons next year. When engaging with this audience, students will be sharing their perspectives, raising awareness about the civic and political issues they are learning about, and gathering feedback and multiple perspectives.

### Production and Circulation

Prior to the digital age, institutions ranging from political parties, to churches, to interest groups, such as the National Rifle Association and the Sierra Club, produced content and used their contact databases and membership lists to widely distribute political messages. Today, social media platforms make large-scale production and circulation of messages cheaper, more scalable, and less dependent on formal organizations or institutions.

Indeed, production and circulation may be the domain where the affordances of digital media have made the biggest difference for youth. With relative ease, compared to the past, young people can now write and disseminate a blog about a political issue, remix a political video and share it with their social network, or produce a wiki with information about community resources. Communication scholars have argued that such peer-based production can be politically empowering and politically influential in raising awareness and mobilizing others, especially since such production employs skills youth commonly use when engaging socially online (see, for example, Burns, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2009; Ratto & Boler, 2014).

In an effort to help her students take advantage of these opportunities, Ms. Tate asked the ninth-graders in her social studies class in Oakland to choose a contemporary issue related to a social movement they had studied and to develop their own Taking Action Plan. One student used Facebook to show her peers that feminism is still relevant today. On her Facebook page, she circulated links to information and thought-provoking memes about the status of women in today’s society (E. Middaugh, personal communication, August 20, 2014). Another student produced a music video about marriage equality that she circulated to her networks on YouTube in order to raise awareness about gay rights. The ease with which these young people were able to produce and

circulate content to a wide audience far outstrips what young people could typically accomplish without digital tools and social media.

Not surprisingly, the reach of these differing projects varied. Many efforts to produce and circulate content will confront what Levine has termed “the audience problem” (2008, p. 129). Simply put, many blogs or other digital content may get relatively few views and little or no response. Of course, many off-line political activities also fail to engage many members of the public. We would classify a blog that addresses a political issue but has few readers an act of participatory politics just as we would classify a protest that people ignore as a political activity. That said, clearly, the power of public voice is diminished if one fails to reach a public. This reality highlights the need for educators to help set realistic expectations and to support and scaffold activities so that youth can more effectively produce and circulate political content.

In addition, civic educators can help youth reflect on a variety of risks that come along with these practices. For example, given the diminished role played by gatekeepers in vetting the style and content of information and given the increased permanence and public nature of statements they might make and circulate, youth must also now carefully consider what to circulate and to whom. A study by Rundle, James, and Weinstein (2015) noted that youth frequently adopt a casual approach to circulation of civic or political material. Rather than considering, for example, the purpose of circulating the material, the desired impact, or how different audiences might respond, they “just click.”

Curriculum that responds to these challenges will help youth more fully consider the complexities and impact of circulation and production in a highly networked world. As one example, the MAPP team created a workshop curriculum for youth activists in order to further explore the opportunities and complexities of production and circulation. They began by asking participants to craft a compelling and creative story that would draw the audience’s attention to a particular issue and help them express their perspective. After groups developed a narrative complete with a main character, a central conflict, and some type of resolution, participants identified what media they had at their fingers tips that could be utilized—whether it was video, photography, performance, crafting, etc.—and then learned the production skills needed as the process unfolded.

This approach reflects the MAPP team’s belief that educational supports like these workshops can help young people identify avenues for their voices to be heard “by any media necessary,” and tap the affordances of digital media in order to learn how to produce content tied to issues about which they care deeply (Peters-Lazaro & Shresthova, 2015). Indeed, when MAPP asked youth activists how educators can support them in finding and telling their story, youth shared how important it is to “make participation less daunting” (Shresthova, 2014).

**Mobilizing for Change**

Opportunities for youth to mobilize others have also expanded significantly in the digital age. In the past, youth had chances to mobilize others through involvement in community-based youth organizations that provide opportunities for youth to organize and mobilize others to bring about change in their communities and the broader society (Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012). Today, without any institutional backing, both youth and adults can start a new political group online, write and disseminate an online petition, or raise money for a civic cause via a Kickstarter or other online campaigns. Youth can also mobilize others by drawing on the affordances of social media platforms that bypass the need for bureaucratic structures or organization (Bimber, 2003; Earl & Schussman, 2007).

The accessibility and affordability of online petitions through platforms like Change.org, for example, have resulted in an increase of online petitions, a broader range of issues that are attended to, as well as a shift in who has the power to initiate and control petitions (Earl & Kimport, 2009; Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, & Reynoso, 2010). For example, in 2011, 22-year-old Molly Katchpole posted a petition to Change.org protesting Bank of America’s proposed debit card fee of \$5. When over 300,000 people signed the petition and national media coverage turned its attention to the issue, Bank of America withdrew their proposal (Mui, 2012). Our analysis of the Pew data revealed that 28% of 18–24-year-olds were contacted at least occasionally to take an active role in civic or political issues on a social network site (Smith, 2013).

To help students learn about these strategies, students in Mr. Montgomery’s civics class identified a social issue they wanted to investigate and then studied the root causes of gun violence in their community. They then initiated a campaign to raise awareness and mobilize support for providing youth with summer jobs in order to reduce violence. Students worked in groups to create a class Twitter account, an Instagram account, and a Facebook page which all drew attention to an online petition on Change.org that included information and research on violence in the city and urged people to write to Chicago’s Mayor to convince him to expand a summer jobs program for youth. Students also gathered signatures; accumulated followers on Twitter made up of peers, teachers, activists, and civic organizations focused on violence prevention, as well as the Mayor’s news account; and followed people and groups from the local teachers’ union, news outlets, and various civic organizations that were working to prevent youth violence in the city. Mr. Montgomery explained

It was empowering for them to see . . . the people who had gone online to sign the petition because they weren’t all people that they knew. They were starting to see the links between different people and the circles

that connect people. (A. L. Linton, personal communication, August 20, 2014)

While youth today are increasingly mobilized through networked online spaces like Facebook or Twitter, at times, the credibility of the rationale for action can be challenging to determine. And many online mobilization efforts are disconnected from institutional and grassroots organizations or organizing efforts, limiting their ability to build and sustain collective capacity (see Ganz, 2014). Thus, educators must not only teach youth how to gain support for a cause through a petition or online fundraising effort, but must also help youth learn to critically examine requests for their support and how to connect efforts, where possible, to institutions and organizations that can help build and sustain powerful coalitions.

## **PERENNIAL CHALLENGES FACING CIVIC EDUCATORS IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

Educating for core civic capacities, such as investigation, dialogue, circulation, production, and mobilization is vitally important given the significance of these skills to widespread and effective participation in democratic life. At the same time, civic educators must also attend to the educational norms and social contexts in which civic education is implemented if these practices are to realize their democratic potential. In the closing section of this article, we examine three challenges tied to the educational norms and social contexts that have long constrained the democratic potential of civic educator's efforts. While not new, these challenges take on new dimensions in the digital age. Specifically, we discuss the challenge of preparing youth to act in ways that have impact, of ensuring equal access to high quality civic learning opportunities, and of attending to diversity thoughtfully. While far from a comprehensive list, we hope they illustrate how the digital age is reshaping perennial challenges that reformers pursuing civic education must confront.

### **The Challenge of Preparing Youth to Act for Impact**

A strong democracy (Barber, 1984) requires that community members take action to make society better—action, which includes, and goes beyond, periodic voting to send representatives to elected office. To become such citizens, youth need opportunities to engage in action themselves. But almost by definition, political action is controversial, and perhaps even more so when done by young people under the auspices of schooling.

In an effort to avoid controversy and not push any particular agenda, civic educators interested in providing opportunities for youth to be active in the community have often focused on service activities, such as tutoring, or volunteering, or fundraising for widely supported charitable causes (Walker, 2000; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Such activities can be valuable, but these efforts often steer clear of politics and avoid addressing structural or root causes of problems. For example, youth who volunteer for a food bank often are not asked to examine evidence and arguments regarding causes of and possible ways to address hunger and poverty more systemically. As a result, they receive an incomplete preparation for democratic engagement.

Of course, within the confines of a curricular unit, it will often be difficult for youth to take part in civic or political action that promotes systemic change. Faced with this challenge, some civic educators who want to address systemic issues focus on helping youth to deepen their understanding and to “act” by analyzing and sharing what they learn. Youth can, for example, collect data from members of their communities, carefully analyze community issues, present findings to authentic audiences, and interact with community leaders. Such opportunities can help youth develop needed civic skills and, by providing opportunities for voice, foster a related sense of agency.

In fact, the affordances of digital media—especially the degree to which these media can facilitate political expression—may well provide educators with new opportunities to foster youth voice, both in school and out. For example, youth can develop websites or public service announcements and share what they learned via YouTube or other social media. Curriculum that supports such engagement may help counter a narrow focus on uncontroversial charitable activities, allowing young people to learn about and practice voicing positions related to a wider range of political issues and interests. Of course, challenges and risks are associated with these activities as well. For example, discussion over social network platforms often cannot be moderated in the way that a classroom discussion can be and acts of participatory politics can lead to engagement with those who are not part of the school. Moreover, such activities often leave a permanent public record, making an unanticipated problematic exchange even more problematic. Teachers who engage youth with the production and circulation of potentially controversial topics must therefore carefully consider how to structure such activities.

Our point is not that teachers should avoid these activities. Teachers have long found ways to productively discuss controversial content (Hess, 2009). Moreover, the benefits of such curriculum can be substantial. Voice—which Couldry (2010) defined as the capacity of people to “give an account of themselves and of their place in the world” (p. 1)—has political significance, especially for many youth whose voices, experiences, and perspectives are often marginal in mainstream dialogues. In addition, a significant value of digital media and participatory politics may be the avenues they provide for young



people to cultivate and extend their voice beyond the classroom and school into the community and broader culture (LeSure & Cohen, 2015).

To say that promoting youth voice is important, however, is not to say that it is sufficient. The impact of participatory politics will be constrained if scant attention is paid to linking participatory and institutional engagement or to levers of influence more generally (Zuckerman, 2013). For example, a number of scholars (Levine, in press; Sifry, 2014) have detailed ways that individuals' and non-institutionalized groups' efforts to achieve greater voice by leveraging the power of the digital media often fail to prompt institutional change. Expressing caution, Milner (2010) wrote, "[youth who] turn their backs on [institutional] politics in favor of individual expression will continue to find their priorities at the top of society's wish list—and at the bottom of the 'to do' list" (p. 5).

In response to Milner's concern, one might note that a wide range of significant change efforts ranging from #BlackLivesMatter, to the DREAMer movement, to the protests against SOPA, to the push for marriage equality have employed digital media in ways that changed public attitudes and that these changes have enabled new legislation. Still, the concern remains. Watkins (2014) noted, for example, that when it comes to digital media, youth are often "power users" (frequent users), but they are not necessarily "powerful users" (influential users). In order for youth to realize the full potential of participatory politics, they will frequently need to both understand and connect their efforts to institutional politics. Helping youth identify ways to build bridges from voice to influence is vitally important.

### **The Challenge of Providing Equal Access to Civic Learning Opportunities**

If all youth are to be prepared for life in a democracy, civic educators, schools, and civic programs for youth must also work to ensure the equitable distribution of learning opportunities. Unfortunately, data indicate that classrooms with students whose parents are of relatively high socio-economic status (SES), who are White, and who are academically more successful are far more likely than others to experience civic learning opportunities, such as chances to debate issues, engage in simulations, and perform community service. This causes both a civic opportunity gap (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008) and a civic achievement gap (Levinson, 2012).

If civic education in the digital age is to avoid reproducing this civic opportunity gap in new, digital forms, educators must confront the digital divide. Indeed, despite the expansion of Title I funding to increase technological resources, many schools, and in particular ones in low SES areas, do not have the infrastructure or technical and instructional support to maintain, update, and fully integrate robust technology into instruction (Hohlfield, Ritzhaupt, Barron,

& Kemker, 2008). Moreover, Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) found that “the most important technology discrepancies in U.S. schools are not whether computers and the Internet are used, but for what purpose” (pp. 197–198). High income youth are significantly more likely to use educational technology to prepare written text or media presentations, for example, whereas low income youth are more likely to use educational technology to learn or practice basic skills (Gray, Thomas, & Lewis, 2010). In short, one manifestation of the digital divide is the digital civic opportunity gap.

On the positive side, the digital landscape has expanded supports by providing interest driven, participatory learning opportunities—also known as *connected learning*—to ever more young people both in-school and out, as well as online (Ito et al., 2013). Young people now have innumerable opportunities with digital and social media to share, create, make, do, and expand their engagement in collective and self-guided learning while pursuing knowledge and expertise around something they care deeply about. Such practices appear to promote a kind of digital social capital by developing the skills, exposure to group norms, and social networks that, in turn, facilitate civic and political engagement (Jenkins et al., 2009; Kahne et al., 2013).

At the same time, a digital civic opportunity gap may also persist in informal learning environments, even those that support access to and engagement with technology. Providing equitable access to informal learning opportunities has proved challenging. Those with more interest in civic and political issues or those who are drawn to participatory cultures are far more likely to choose to engage in these activities and this is likely to exacerbate inequality. Similarly, those from families of higher SES are also more likely to be able to take advantage of these opportunities (Putnam, Frederick, & Snellman, 2012).

In short, the redesign of civic education must push back against current distributional norms and structures and provide equitable distribution of rich learning opportunities. In order to reach all youth equitably, opportunities for youth to learn to produce and circulate political commentary or consider varied viewpoints on issues cannot be relegated to informal learning arenas only, or offered only as optional courses for the interested, or required only of those who are doing well academically. These learning opportunities must be integrated into core coursework that all students receive (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Districts and schools can make the development of core digital capacities and engagement in particular civically oriented digital projects a universal requirement, for example.

Finally, in order to make equal access a reality, it is key to provide educators in informal and formal learning environments with time and support to explore, collaborate, and build their capacities in this area so that they can create relevant, engaging, and dynamic student learning opportunities. This requires educators to shift from merely focusing on the features of technological tools to prioritizing the process of student thinking and learning (Neiss,

2011) and the social practices of communicating, connecting, and collaborating (Beach, Anson, Kastman, Breuch, & Reynolds, 2014) with digital tools. In order to move beyond technology being used simply as an add-on to a print based curriculum or only being used in bracketed moments in the year like completing an assessment, typing a paper, or developing an end of year project, educators can “gradually move toward modifying and redefining instruction” in the digital age (Beach et al., 2014, p. xi).

### **The Challenge of Effectively Attending to Diversity**

Providing more equal access and distribution of learning opportunities alone will not be enough to overcome longstanding and multidimensional equity issues, which are often inflected along lines of race, class, and gender. The pursuit of political equality, what Verba (2003) described as “one of the bedrock principles in a democracy” (p. 663), requires attention to the ways contexts, culture, power, privilege, and other factors differ across groups and how this variation can in turn shape everything from political influence, to assessments of what’s fair, to desirable norms of interaction. Traditionally, most discussions of civic education ideals and best practices have noted the importance of attending to student interests and to community problems that students view as significant. Such discussions have also highlighted the importance of providing youth with opportunities for agency (often framed in terms of empowerment). Design priorities for civic education, however, have been relatively inattentive to the significance of young people’s identities and social contexts. For example, civic education efforts have often not considered why various groups of youth may have widely differing assessments of the legitimacy of the current system of government, of the ways laws are enforced, and even of whether or not to think of the United States as a democracy (Bedolla, 2005; Middaugh & Kahne, 2008; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Similarly, they have generally not highlighted the importance of understanding how knowledge is constructed—how cultural assumptions and biases may shape understandings and interpretations of civic issues (see Banks, 2001).

Therefore, while recognizing that all youth must learn skills and develop capacities tied to investigation, dialogue and feedback, circulation, production, and mobilization, a generic approach to such curriculum—one that avoids consideration of diversity and equity—will often be inadequate. Youth are not a homogenous group. Their priorities for civic and political engagement and the factors that shape them are quantitatively and qualitatively different (LeSure & Cohen, 2015). Curriculum that ignores the differentiated experiences of young people and the impact of inequality, for example, will lead many youth who identify with groups that have been historically excluded from civic and political life to experience alienation rather than to develop the civic commitments and capacities that would enable them to participate equally and effectively in civic and political spheres. Likewise, curriculum that does not recognize

inequality, power, and privilege may lead some more privileged youth to be unaware of the ways in which such dynamics create and maintain not only alienation from civic and political life but also social inequities.

Determining the curricular implications of these concerns has always been challenging for civic educators (Banks, 2008; Parker, 1997), and participation in the digital age raises additional issues. As illustrated earlier in the article, those committed to equitable civic and political engagement in the digital age must confront problems associated with the varied forms of hate speech that frequently surface online. Moreover, blind spots and structural inequities may lead privileged youth to enact “saviorism” (see Soep, 2014) and fail to recognize privilege as it occurs in on- and offline contexts. For example, in an effort to draw attention to and create a unified response to the tragic killing of a Black teen, Trayvon Martin, some White people posted photos of themselves wearing hoodies declaring “I am Trayvon Martin” (Liu, 2013; Soep, 2014). As Lui (2013) explained:

That was a well-meaning and earnest attempt to express empathy, but it also obscured the core issue, which is that Martin died not because he was wearing a hoodie but because he was wearing a hoodie while black. Blackness was the fatal variable. (p. 1)

In short, in the digital age, as before, youth must learn to carefully analyze issues, understand the social context, and reflect on their own positionality.

### CONCLUSION

We are not proposing that educators reject or replace long established visions of civic education (Gibson & Levine, 2003). Exploring and discussing controversial issues in classrooms, learning about the structure and function of government, and identifying ways to engage in institutional politics, for example, are still vitally important. That said, the prevalence and continuing growth of youth engagement in participatory politics, the degree to which diverse groups of youth are taking advantage of these opportunities, the challenges and risks associated with these practices, and, most fundamentally, the potential of participatory politics to help youth advance their own civic and political priorities requires that civic educators reshape and expand their agenda. Similarly, attending to diversity, providing all youth with equitable civic learning opportunities, and preparing youth to address the root causes of problems must continue to be central concerns of democratic educators.

The challenge of meeting these priorities takes on new dimensions in the digital age, however, prior visions of best practice are insufficient. By attending to ways that the expansion of participatory politics is altering political practice, civic educators can better respond to the democratic purposes of schooling.

These efforts will enable more youth to see and seize available opportunities for civic and political engagement that are empowering, equitable, and impactful.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Consistent with the United Nations, we define youth as those between 15 and 24. Due to the size of this age range, we note the ages of those whose responses are reflected in the particular findings (retrieved from <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>).

<sup>2</sup>Because of the oversamples of racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as other departures from equal probability of selection, all statistical analyses reported in this paper have been weighted to be representative of the national population.

<sup>3</sup>The Pew survey did not use the term participatory politics, but we analyzed responses to questions about forms of activity that are fully consistent with our definition of participatory politics. We give two examples of such activities in this paragraph.

<sup>4</sup>The 2013 YPP Survey included five questions that measure online participatory politics. The question wording for these items is included in the Appendix. These items have been found to form a reliable scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .865$ ). For details on this and other measures in the survey, see Bowyer and Kahne (in press)

<sup>5</sup>All educators' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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**APPENDIX**

Question wording for the measures of online participatory politics included in the 2013 YPP Survey (Cronbach's alpha = 0.865):

- Starting or joining a political group on a social network site (like MySpace or Facebook)
- Forwarded, re-tweeted or posted someone else's article, blog, picture or video about a political campaign, candidate or issue
- Created and circulated your own article, blog, picture or video about a political campaign, candidate or issue to an online site
- Commented online or tweeted about an article, blog, picture or video you saw about a political campaign, candidate or issue
- Posted a status update or sent an email, Tweet or instant message about a political campaign, candidate or issue