



Doing Civics in the Digital Age: Casual, Purposeful, and Strategic Approaches to Participatory Politics

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Executive Summary

In this report, we explore how civic youth use Facebook, Twitter, and other online mechanisms to help them address issues that matter in their communities and in the world. Drawing primarily on a data set of in-depth interviews with 70 civically and politically active youth between the ages of 15 and 25, we examine reported uses of new media as part of five participatory practices: investigation, circulation, production, dialogue and feedback, and mobilization. We investigate the nature, and quality, of youths' use of these practices. We surface three distinct approaches to new media-enabled participation—casual, purposeful, and strategic—and describe how these approaches play out among the five participatory practices. We also explore the factors that appear to contribute to more or less robust uses of new media for civic and political purposes.

In brief, our findings show that civic youth are more likely to use digital media for some practices—such as circulation, production, and investigation—and traditional means for others—such as dialogue and feedback, and mobilization. Moreover, these youth put these practices into action in different ways. As we illustrate in the findings below, *casual approaches* are brisk and often require little time, energy, and even thought. A one-step, “Just google it” move is a signature example of a casual approach to one practice, investigation. *Purposeful approaches* have distinct aims in mind, involve consideration of audiences for particular online moves, and generally require more work. A purposeful approach to production might involve writing a blog post that is a compelling call to action around human rights issues in Sudan and circulating the link via Twitter. A more strategic approach would include needed links to resources required for action steps. *Strategic approaches* to circulating provocative, political ideas might also involve coordinated campaigns that tap influential people connected to distinct networks in order to broaden the reach.

When civic youth leverage new media, we find that casual approaches are more common, especially when they circulate or produce content, or seek to mobilize others on behalf of their cause. Purposeful approaches are more typical when youth engage in online investigation and dialogue and feedback. Strategic approaches are relatively rare for any practice; we found an absence of strategic approaches to any practice among fully half of our participants. Fewer than 10 percent describe strategic media use for more than two practices. Among the factors that support more purposeful and strategic approaches are time, access, skills, and supports. Yet, consideration of the personal and civic implications of doing participatory politics online also informs the approaches youth adopt.

All told, we argue that casual, purposeful, and strategic approaches are markers of how civic youth envision and act on the possibility space new media afford for participation in public life. In the discussion, we describe the implications of these findings for scholars and for educators working at the intersection of youth, media, and civic engagement.



Introduction

Digital civic action: Two snapshots

Lori's civic passion was ignited in early high school when she first learned about the child sex trade in Asia. Impressively, through yard sales and fundraising dinners, she and her friends raised tens of thousands of dollars for an Asian rescue center for young girls. Lori and friends then learned that the child sex trade also happens closer to home, in the U.S. So they decided to take on the issue anew, and with different methods: they founded a non-profit organization in which to anchor their efforts; they organized a cross country, consciousness-raising road trip, giving talks to teens; and, ultimately, they created an online public service announcement (PSA) campaign. Social media and the web were an integral part of all of these efforts. Through Twitter and Facebook, Lori and colleagues promoted their educational and fundraising events, posted links to informative articles, and engaged in dialogue about the issue. They created a website as a central information and action hub, aimed at educating youth and inspiring their participation in the cause. In an effort to interrupt the child sex trade more directly, they curated an online series of PSAs created by youth. Lori turned to all of her contacts—school, work, and personal—to promote the series. She also tapped celebrities to help circulate the PSAs via Twitter and leveraged LinkedIn to connect with a leader of a major non-profit organization poised to support the campaign. Lori was highly strategic in carrying out these efforts and the web was instrumental, if not essential, to her civic efforts.

Unlike Lori, Carolina's passion for civic issues was borne out of direct experiences with injustice. Growing up in an urban, low income neighborhood, Carolina's family was touched both by gun violence and serious health issues attributed to pollution. From a relatively young age, Carolina was motivated to take action in her community. In the 9th grade, she secured an after school job with a community-based youth group. Over the next four years, Carolina worked on various campaigns: lobbying the city council for a youth commission, organizing rallies to foreground urgent youth issues, and supporting voter registration drives. However, Carolina's leading interest and passion was for improving her community's environment. She and her colleagues conducted air and water quality testing and engaged in community outreach and education efforts. To support their efforts, they researched scientific information about environmental issues online. To promote community events, they used mass text messaging to their phone contacts and posted event information on their organization's Facebook page. Carolina also used Facebook to share photos of the group's offline events and campaigns—including leafleting motorists to discourage idling engines, and decorating and installing neighborhood receptacles to reduce street trash and increase recycling rates.

Concerns about youth *disengagement* from civic and political life are frequently voiced by scholars and cultural critics alike. On the basis of data showing low participation in elections and low membership in civic organizations (National Conference on Citizenship, 2006; Putnam, 1995), youth are often cast as uninterested in public, democratic life.

The snapshots of Lori and Carolina above serve as compelling counterpoints to this narrative, revealing



the ways in which some contemporary youth are extremely dedicated to civic issues. These snapshots also point to distinct modes of civic participation taken via the internet—modes not captured by traditional measures of civic engagement (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Childers, 2012; Galston, 2004) and which are often dismissed as disconnected from “real” social action (Gladwell, 2010). These modes of participation include *investigation* of civic issues; *circulation and production* of civic content; *dialogue* about civic matters and delivery of *feedback* to powerholders; and *mobilization* of fellow citizens and elites aimed at effecting social change. These “participatory practices” are arguably significant ways of engaging in democratic life (Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, & Rogowski, 2012); further, when undertaken online, in networked publics, the potential for impact may be considerable.

Yet, at the same time, it would be naïve to assume that simply tweeting a plea to end child sex trafficking or reduce pollution is sufficient for addressing complex social issues. While the internet has unique affordances—including the capacity to reach a broad audience—leveraging it for impact often requires more than just a click or two. Indeed, our profiles of Lori and Carolina above reveal an array of digital tactics being deployed for civic action. Carolina, deeply committed to ensuring everyone has access to clean air, water, and a safe environment, leveraged online information sources, Facebook, and text messaging as key tools. And Lori used multiple social media platforms – including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter—as part of her campaign to address child sex trafficking. Acknowledging that these young people, and many others, are using these media in service of civic ends is important. However, digging deeper into the “how” behind these digital civic acts is an essential next move. Therefore, we ask, how do civically minded youth approach their use of digital and social media for civics? To what extent, and how, do they reflect on purpose, strategy, and impacts (including unintended impacts) and then calibrate their approaches accordingly?

In this report, we examine how civic youth approach and tap the opportunities the internet affords for civic and political action. In the pages that follow, we explore the different ways in which civic youth use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other sites on the internet to help them address issues that matter in their communities and in the wider world. In our account, we point to well-known examples of digitally-enabled civic action. We also draw on a rich data set of in-depth interviews with 70 civically active youth between the ages of 15 and 25. In presenting these data, we focus our attention on reported uses of new media as part of the five participatory practices noted above: *investigation*, *circulation*, *production*, *dialogue and feedback*, and *mobilization*. In brief, our findings show that civic youth are more likely to use digital media for some practices—such as *circulation*, *production*, and *investigation*—than others, such as *dialogue and feedback*, and *mobilization*.

The heart of the report, though, is our investigation of the nature of youths’ deployment of these practices. We put forth three distinct approaches to digital civic action that emerged from our data. In brief, *casual* approaches are brisk and often require little time or energy. A one-step, “Just google it” move is a signature example of a casual approach to the practice of investigation. Casual approaches emphasize ease, efficiency, and speed, and often (though not always) proceed based on an assumption, or a naïve



hope, that one's goals will be achieved. *Purposeful* approaches have more distinct aims in mind, involve consideration of audiences for particular online moves, and generally require more work and time. A purposeful approach to production might involve writing and publishing a blog post that is a compelling call to action around human rights issues in Sudan. A more *strategic approach* would include links to resources required for action steps. Strategic approaches to circulating provocative, political ideas might also involve coordinated campaigns that tap influential people connected to distinct networks in order to broaden the reach. Lori's use of Twitter, in connecting her own networks and then leveraging the power of public figures' followers, is a further example of a strategic approach. In the body of this report, we further describe how these different approaches play out when a group of civic youth engage the "participatory practices" of investigation, production, circulation, dialogue and feedback, and mobilization.

A few key questions follow from our analysis. How prevalent are casual vs. purposeful vs. strategic approaches to digital civics? To what extent are civic youth consistent in the approaches they adopt across the participatory practices? Moreover, what accounts for the differences in approach to digital civic action that youth take? Following our analysis of the practices, we explore these questions and discuss factors that appear to inform whether youth adopt casual, purposeful, or strategic approaches when they use new media for civic action. Here, we point to the influence of baseline factors (e.g., access to technologies, time, skills, and other supports for strategic participation) and the inclination to engage complex considerations (e.g., reflection about the personal and civic opportunities and risks involved in doing civics online).

Our discussion of casual, purposeful, and strategic approaches circles around the quality, or effectiveness, of specific digital civic efforts. Although we acknowledge the ways in which "thin" online acts (Zuckerman, 2013b) can be valuable, we also argue that youth should be cognizant of the limitations of certain approaches, and equipped with the skills, strategies, and mindsets to achieve their goals. In line with Evans (2015) and Jenkins, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, Shresthova, and Zimmerman (forthcoming), we argue that casual, purposeful, and strategic approaches can be considered expressions, or markers, of the *digital civic imagination*—the ways in which civic youth envision and act on the possibility space (including the opportunities, challenges, and implications) new media afford for participation in public life. Importantly, our motivation for this work is to consider whether youth have the supports needed to both envision and enact participatory politics in effective and thoughtful ways. Therefore, in the Discussion, we describe the implications of these findings for scholars and for educators working at the intersection of youth, media, and civic engagement.

Context

Contemporary U.S. youth have never known a world without cell phones, computers, and social network sites. They use digital technologies almost unconsciously for virtually (pun intended) every aspect of their lives—including in school, at work, for shopping and entertainment, and perhaps most central of all, for



communicating and connecting. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, and YouTube are just as, if not more, central to the experience of growing up today as are the mall and movie theater. Ongoing use of these media can hold implications for young people's attention spans, interests, learning styles, identities, and imaginations, to name just a few areas of documented or potential impact (Carr, 2010; Dede, 2005; Gardner & Davis, 2013; Ito et al., 2010; Turkle, 2011). Not surprisingly, then, new media are poised to play a role in how youth learn about and engage with civic matters.

Yet, while youth today are undoubtedly growing up digital, there is considerable debate about whether they are also growing up civic—developing the capacity and inclination to participate in civic and political life. Some scholars contend that democratic participation in society is in decline, especially among the young, as evidenced by voting or joining “voluntary associations” (National Conference on Citizenship, 2006; Putnam, 1995). Others maintain that youth are engaging in public life, but are doing so in more personalized and participatory ways that point to new models of citizenship (Bennett, et al., 2009; Childers, 2012; Galston, 2004).

Adding to this tension, the internet is often portrayed as either enabling or diluting civic and political engagement. To take the example of opportunities for civic voice online: on the one hand, some argue that opportunities to express one's opinion through blogging or online commenting constitute new pathways to public participation (Rheingold, 2008). Yet others note how such online speech opportunities are diminished by the real risk of unresponsive, critical, or uncivil audiences (Levine, 2008). Further, the link between online civic acts and discernable impact in the “real world” is disputed (Gladwell, 2010). Some invoke the term, “slacktivism,” to describe Facebook “likes” and other low burden online acts. This characterization reveals concerns about depth of commitment to civic issues and misperceptions about what social change really requires (Christensen, 2011; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009). At the same time, there are clear cases in which even “thin” moves undertaken by large numbers of people can have unquestionable impact on public awareness and discourse, even if more tangible changes are not immediately discernable. Mass circulation on social media of the Human Rights Campaign logo symbolizing support for marriage equality is one recent example (Zuckerman, 2013b).

Given the potentials described here, it seems essential to explore the extent to which, and how, civic youth consider, turn to, and exploit the internet and other digital tools as part of their participation. Recent studies of youth across the U.S. suggest some noteworthy trends. Based on a national survey of 2,920 young people aged 15-25, Cohen et al. (2012) find that over 40 percent of young people report having engaged in at least one online act of “participatory politics,” defined as “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern.” More specifically, these youth reported starting, joining, or “liking” an online political group, blogging about a civic or political issue, or forwarding a politically-slanted comic, video, or other content to friends or followers on a social media site. These innovative, online participatory practices certainly have longstanding, offline counterparts (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2015). However, online spaces offer unique affordances, including the potential to amplify the audience for one's voice and thus reach more people



than can be reached through offline, face-to-face forms of practice (Rheingold, 2008). Additionally, text messaging and social media technologies ease coordination among geographically dispersed participants (Shirky, 2008).

While it is promising to hear that many youth are dabbling with such civic and political uses of the web, these data hardly suggest that the civic potentials of the internet are being fully realized by young citizens. Emerging research does suggest, though, that youth who engage in interest-driven online activities (Ito et al., 2010)—such as fan fiction communities—are poised to tap new media in innovative ways in order to support civic agendas. For example, Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova (2012) describe how youth involved in online “participatory culture communities,” such as the Harry Potter Alliance, often convert their cultural interests, fandom, and connections to civic or political purposes via new media. There are promising potentials here; yet, not all youth are inclined to become involved in interest-driven communities in the first place. And not all those who do will subsequently venture down civic paths.

What requires further exploration is how a broader swath of young people who are concerned with civic and political issues is responding to the new digital landscape. More specifically, our interest here is in young people engaged in more traditional (and perhaps more typical) civic and political activities—including community-based organizations, political groups such as the Young Democrats and Republicans, and social cause groups. To what extent are these youth thinking about and acting on civic issues in new ways because of social media and other affordances of digital life? In other words, what is the nature of their *digital civic imaginations*? And, critically, how are they deploying digital tools in service of their civic agendas?

The Current Study

This research study is part of the Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) Research Network, an interdisciplinary group of researchers and practitioners exploring how digital life is changing the face of youth public participation (see Cohen et al., 2012; Jenkins et al., forthcoming; Kahne et al., forthcoming; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013; Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova 2012; Shresthova, 2013; Soep, 2014; Soep, forthcoming; Thompson, 2012; Weinstein, 2014; Weinstein, Rundle, & James, 2015).

In 2011 and 2012, we had the opportunity to learn from 70 civically engaged youth aged 15-25 about the “what,” “why,” “how,” and “where” of their civic engagement. This diverse group of 43 females and 27 males from the Northeast and Midwest of the U.S. were for the most part involved in civic organizations and activities that could be considered “traditional,” or longstanding, venues for youth engagement—for example, settings included school-based groups, community organizations, and political groups and issues ranged from student voice in school and community matters to LBGT issues to campaigning in elections.



We administered surveys and conducted in-depth interviews with these young civic actors. These encounters allowed us to explore the roots of their engagement, the daily enactment of their civic mission, their understanding of how to create change and civic concepts, and the supports and challenges encountered in pursuit of making the world a better place for all. The results of these rich, lengthy conversations and survey responses form the core of this report and led to the framework of civic thinking and action that we present below. For a detailed account of our study participants, recruitment strategy, research instruments, coding and analysis, see Appendix A: Methods.

In brief, we coded the interview transcripts for instances in which participants described engaging in the five participatory practices noted above—*investigation* (researching social issues); *circulation* (sharing civic content or ideas); *production* (producing civic content); *dialogue and feedback* (exchanging ideas with others or giving feedback to elites); and *mobilization* (encouraging fellow citizens to take action on behalf of a cause). In examining how youth deployed these practices online, we discerned the presence of three approaches—*casual*, *purposeful*, and *strategic*—defined in Table 1. We subsequently coded the transcripts for evidence of these approaches.

Table 1: Approaches to Digital Civic Action

General features

(note that some variation exists by practice)

Approach	Emphasis	Nature of goals / desired outcomes	Orientation towards outcomes
Casual	Ease, efficiency, speed of digital action	General goals; range from implicit to explicit	“Good to go”: An assumption or hope that digital actions will lead to end goals
Purposeful	Leveraging technical affordances of digital media for action	Specific goals; often explicit	“Fingers crossed”: Awareness that digital action may not be sufficient for achieving end goals
Strategic	Leveraging technical affordances in informed, tactical, and/or creative ways	Specific goals; usually explicit	“Cover all bases”: Awareness that digital action may not be sufficient for achieving end goals; additional steps taken to increase probability of meeting goals

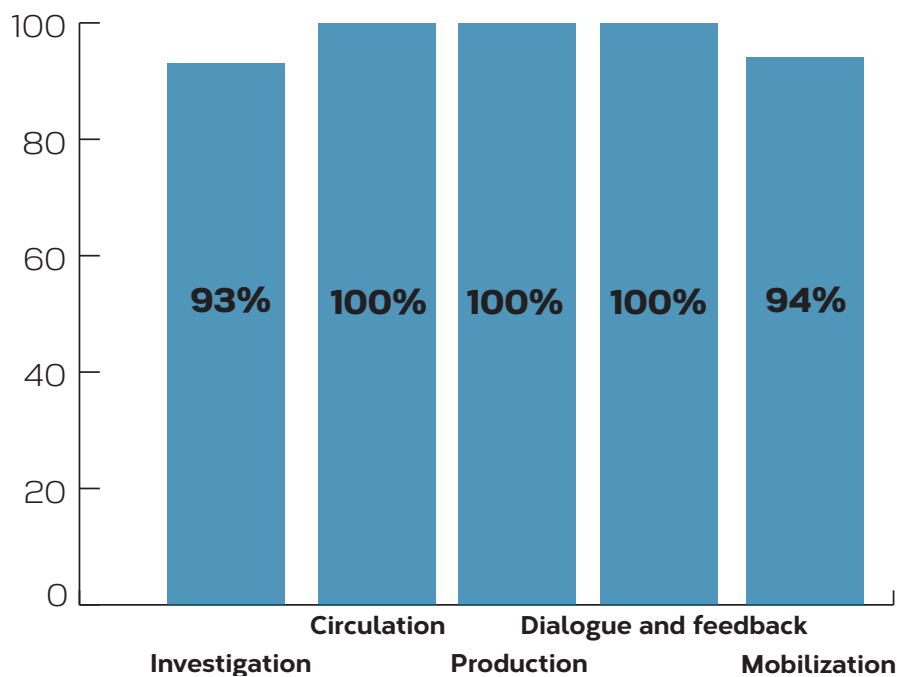


Findings

Below, we report our findings across and within the participatory practices. First, we share a sketch of our general findings about the prevalence of participatory practices across our sample. Then, we detail the extent to which digital media are being utilized in service of these participatory practices. We then explore each participatory practice in-depth, bringing our qualitative data to bear and examining how youths' approaches to these practices can take casual, purposeful, and strategic forms. Following this exploration, we consider the extent to which youth lean toward one approach or another, or vary their approaches by practice or context. We then discuss the factors that may account for differences in the approaches civic youth take.

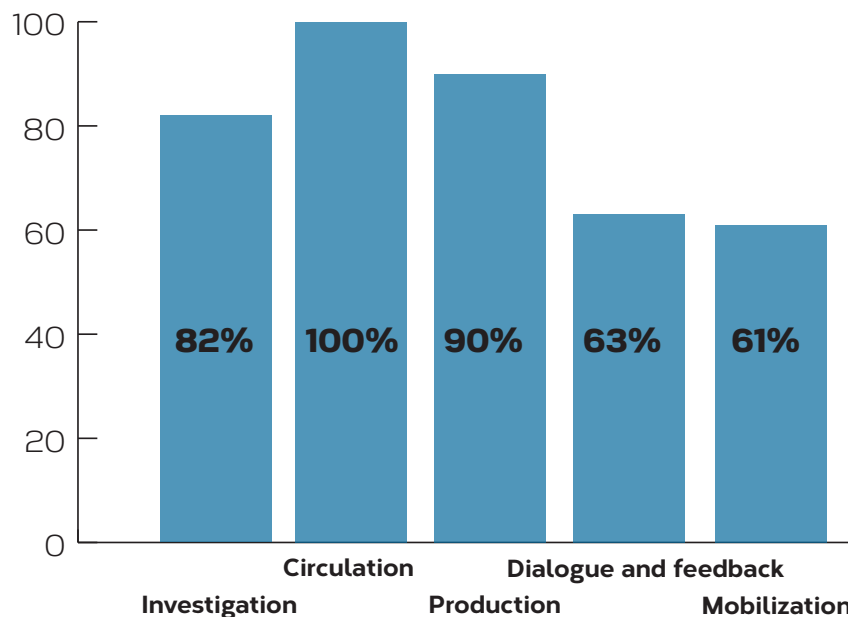
Our coding of youths' civic efforts (including offline and online acts) revealed that all five participatory practices—*investigation*, *circulation*, *production*, *dialogue and feedback*, and *mobilization*—were employed by youth in our sample (see Figure 1). Of particular note, all participants (100 percent) mentioned engaging in, or being part of a civic group that engaged in, *circulation*, *dialogue and feedback*, and *production*. And 66 participants (94 percent) referenced mobilization while 65 (93 percent) described investigation. In sum, the vast majority of youth in our sample address issues of public concern by employing all five participatory practices, either online or offline.

Figure 1. Percentage of whole sample describing practice



When we looked at *how* youth carry out the participatory practices, we found that digital means were not used to the same degree for all participatory practices (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of participants describing practice using digital media



Perhaps not surprisingly, given the ease with which content can be shared online, fully 100 percent of youth who employ *circulation* as part of their civic activities report using the internet to do so. *Production* and *investigation* follow closely with 90 percent and 82 percent of youth, respectively, creating content and researching issues via digital platforms. Fewer youth reported engaging in *dialogue and feedback* and *mobilization* online; 63 percent discuss issues with others or give feedback to elites online, and 61 percent report online efforts to rally fellow citizens to support a cause.

These findings suggest that digital tools are perceived to be more appealing or effective for some participatory practices than for others. Yet, a deeper exploration is required if we are to understand the “how” and the “why” behind youths’ choices to leverage digital tools for these practices, either alongside or instead of traditional, face-to-face mechanisms.

In the next section of the report, we provide in depth portraits of each participatory practice, illustrating the potentials and complexities with rich examples. We open each portrait with a dramatic example of a high profile case in order to call attention to the broad possibility space. We then dive deeply into the ways in which the particular practice plays out among youth in our sample. In each portrait, we pay particular attention to how youth incorporate digital media—or not—into their civic efforts. More specifically, we describe the extent of *casual*, *purposeful*, and *strategic* approaches to digital civic action for each practice. While we consider each practice separately in turn below, we acknowledge that practices



such as production, circulation, and dialogue are in reality often intertwined or carried out in concert as part of youths' civic efforts.

A word of caution regarding several of the participatory practice portraits: While we call attention to the positive opportunities digital media afford youth for civic action, we also point to some of the risks that can go along with internet-enabled public participation. We note that well-intentioned and highly successful online efforts sometimes have tragic or otherwise troubling impacts for the young people involved or for the larger causes around which they are engaged. Two of the high profile cases we highlight—in our portraits of *circulation* and *production*—are notable examples. As we will discuss, such cases suggest a need for careful reflection about the implications, for the self and for others, of leveraging digital media for civic action.

Investigation

Consider all of the information created from the dawn of human civilization up to the year 2003. In 2010, Google Executive, Eric Schmidt, estimated that we now create that much information *every two days*. Whether or not Schmidt's estimate is credible, the fact that we are in the midst of an incredible explosion of new information is beyond doubt. And, of course, the rate of information generation has hardly decelerated since 2010.

With unprecedented amounts of information at our fingertips, it's just as easy to feel overwhelmed as it is to feel well-informed. Given this challenge, tools to sort and find what we are looking for are vital. We often rely on the algorithms behind search services such as Google and Yahoo to help us find the most relevant information. Yet, as these services become increasingly personalized, we can end up stuck inside what Eli Pariser (2011) terms "filter bubbles." Filter bubbles are our individualized, tailored online universes, but we don't actually decide what gets in our bubbles and what is left out; our past clicks and browsing history as well as the kind of computer we use and our physical location all influence the results. Pariser offers a compelling case of two different friends whom he asks to run a Google search for "Egypt" in the midst of the Arab Spring: one friend's top hits focus on news about the crisis, while the other friend, a travel enthusiast, sees mostly tourism information—and nothing about the protest in his top hits.

In sum, given the ever-expanding sea of information available online, digital search technologies are increasingly focused on trying to predict exactly what we want to know. Consequently, we may be getting exactly what we want without ever knowing what we are missing. The filter bubble challenge that can transpire online is not limited to search queries, however. Ethan Zuckerman (2008, 2013a) surfaces the related ideas of homophily and echo-chambers that form on social media: we are drawn, often unconsciously, to like-minded others who collectively create our online communities. Zuckerman explains how communication with only like-minded others can lead us to "miss huge trends, changes and opportunities." This echo-chamber challenge is exacerbated by our social media worlds. If we follow the



news principally through our Facebook feeds, we may see a great deal of information about a particular issue without actually seeing more, and different perspectives. And, Americans—especially those under the age of 30—are increasingly likely to rely on social media as their primary source for news (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). When we use the internet (including search engines and social media sites) to investigate and explore important societal issues, we need to be mindful of these challenges.

At the same time, digital technologies can be decidedly positive for our investigation of civic topics. The internet dramatically expands the range of possible resources and voices from which we can draw in order to understand any given problem. Online, user-generated content and citizen media are readily available alongside more traditional sources. Platforms like Twitter enable real-time updates about stories unfolding down the street and around the world. The phenomenon that “sources go direct” means that those with information about a news story or topic can bypass traditional gatekeepers and present directly to the public (Winer, 2009). This, in turn, means that youth can seek out and access information from those closest to the issue without relying on media institutions. The “sources go direct” effect is at play when public figures like President Obama tweet their message directly (“Climate change is real and dangerous. Show your support for the @EPA’s new standards to cut carbon pollution”) and when news anchors like Greta Van Susteren turn to blogs (gretawire.com) and Twitter (@gretawire) during off air time to reach their audiences. The notion similarly enables people not normally in the public limelight to temporarily assume the role of journalists. Thai student Alisara Chirapongse posted photos and news about the 2006 Thai Military Coup on her personal and previously fashion-focused blog. Her readership temporarily soared, attracting international attention, as she covered daily events in her community (Cohen, 2009). Alisara shifted from her usual roles as a student and fashion-writer into the position of a citizen journalist, writing about news “from the trenches.”

Yet, in a world of instant updates, where barriers to producing news and information are lowered and traditional source vetting processes may be set aside, concerns about misinformation are very real. Consider, for example, the misidentification of the Boston Marathon Bombers that spread rapidly over social media. Bayles (2013) laments the pervasive inaccuracies in news coverage of the Boston case. He contrasts his own early beginnings at the Associated Press—where he was taught that “getting it wrong was the absolute worst thing that you could do”—to the quip of a contemporary reporter explaining that “you rarely get it right the first time” in a social media-fueled world.

The internet therefore creates a unique context for civic investigation. Contemporary youth have an ever-increasing pool of information to explore related to civic issues. Different opinions and perspectives abound, affording the real possibility of a multi-dimensional understanding of civic issues. However, passively absorbing the contents of one’s Facebook newsfeed or simply “googling” a buzzword is unlikely to result in a robust understanding of complex social issues and current events.

And youth do in fact rely heavily on simple web searches in their information gathering processes.



Gasser, Cortesi, Malik, and Lee (2012) use the term “fortuitous searching” to describe the oft-cited practice among youth of browsing and simply following links as a way to investigate a topic or issue—even in the context of preparing academic assignments. Hargittai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, and Thomas (2010) similarly find that youth place considerable trust and value in online resources, but they may not always be equipped or inclined to assess the credibility of the sources. Indeed, Metzger, Flanagin and Zwarun’s (2003) investigation of college students’ perceptions of digital information credibility reveals that youth rely heavily on online resources, with minimal verification efforts.

One barrier in the past—how to find information—is now much lower thanks to digital resources. But another barrier—critical consumption—remains and may have become exacerbated in the digital world. How, then, do civic youth manage the opportunities and challenges for investigation posed by the internet? Do they employ digital tools to explore civic issues? Do their investigations tend to involve relatively simple, one- or two-step searches, or more complex curative processes of seeking and analyzing information from particular sources?

Investigation in Practice: Civic Youth

The short and perhaps unsurprising answer to the basic question of how contemporary civic youth investigate issues of concern is that a strong majority does so online, principally. In our pre-interview survey, 60 participants cited online sources as places where they most frequently get their news, and more than half specifically cited social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. In their interviews, fully 82 percent of youth who mention civic investigation describe utilizing digital tools in service of their research. Their descriptions illuminate a range of investigative efforts, from *casual* and quick information-seeking searches in service of their civic goals to more *purposeful*—or even decidedly *strategic* uses of digital tools in the service of cultivating robust understandings of civic issues. In the following sections, we describe these three approaches to digital civic investigation and draw on paradigmatic examples to highlight notable differences between them.

A Strategic Approach to Investigation

Youth adopt a strategic approach to investigation when they use digital media in comprehensive ways to actively seek multiple and diverse perspectives and to become information curators. They may also draw on internet resources, including online communities and TED talks to deepen their understanding of a civic topic or concern.

Take, for example, a recent instance of investigation that Samuel shared with our team. Samuel is a college freshman with aspirations of a career with the State Department. On campus, he is an active member of College Democrats. The organization provides a space for discussions of current events, in which Samuel participates regularly. Staying informed is crucial to his participation in these exchanges, and Samuel uses Twitter as a tool for monitoring the news. He follows “*big news-making sources*” including New York Times



global edition and CNN's Anderson Cooper. But Samuel does not limit his social media investigation of civic issues to traditional news sources: during the Tahrir Square uprising in Egypt, he sought out and began following a local citizen—someone who was “*on the ground there*” as a way to investigate the situation.

Samuel's actualization of “sources go direct” is an example of strategic investigation. He strategically seeks out information from multiple parties and uses digital technologies to become an active curator of his news consumption. Samuel thus engages in a type of civic investigation that would have been difficult, if not impossible, in a pre-digital world; such inquiry is a hallmark of strategic investigation. Among the youth in our study who carry out investigation online, 19 percent described a strategic approach.

A Purposeful Approach to Investigation

More youth, however, describe purposeful investigation. Purposeful investigation is characterized by directed efforts to seek out information, often through multi-step investigations. Youth who investigate purposefully consider their information sources carefully. They therefore indicate a level of awareness that may allow them to begin puncturing their own filter bubbles. Yet, unlike strategic approaches, purposeful ones do not involve active steps to either seek out different perspectives on an issue or to move beyond traditional sources.

Martin, also a college freshman, is the Secretary of College Republicans. Although he has long been interested in government, he realized more recently that if he actively investigated news about the political system, he could better understand it. Martin explains,

I've always been kind of fascinated with government, and then when I finally realized that if I start reading about it, I can start knowing about it. There was one particular website that I read all the time, that I got really into, because it was clearly only talking about presidential politics, and then it moved on, like, into a more vast array of things, that really made me interested in it.

Martin describes seeking out a website on Presidential politics and reading it “*all the time.*” Following the site eventually provided him with the foundational understanding he craved, and ultimately paved the way for him to follow and understand a “*more vast array*” of issues in the news. The kind of directed, purposeful search for information Martin relates is described by 60 percent of the civic youth who use the internet to investigate civic or political matters.

A Casual Approach to Investigation

When they use either purposeful or strategic approaches to investigation, youth explore issues by moving beyond the information populated in their query results on Google or social media news feeds. However,



not all technology-mediated investigation is characterized by such intentional and reflective approaches. Casual investigation involves searching the web in an efficient manner; for example, simply “Googling” a search phrase or two as the main way to learn about an issue. Using this quick and low key approach, the internet primarily brings efficiency to the process of finding information, and may even enable a more passive ‘stumbling across’ information without the user demonstrating a clear investigative purpose.

Gianna, a senior in high school, joined a local, youth-led, recycling initiative after becoming concerned about environmental change. When asked whether she reads up about environmental issues online, Gianna explained that she will sometimes run searches for information, and other times she will just *“sit there and...be doing whatever, what I do... and then it comes up and I’m like, ‘Oh, this is cool’ and I’ll just write it down.”* Fifty-seven percent of youth who engage in online investigation described such casual approaches.¹

Investigation: Absences

While most of the civic actors in our sample described adopting at least one digitally-mediated civic investigation approach, nearly one quarter (24 percent) did not. This does not indicate a lack of use of search platforms or social media—indeed, all youth in our sample are active users of the web. However, these youth reportedly do not use online tools for civic investigation; they appear to turn to offline sources to learn about civic issues.

Investigation is just one tool

Investigation—the process of exploring information about issues of public concern—is a key support for civic action; but for many civic youth, it is just the start or just one practice in their civic toolkit. In the digital world, youth are poised not only to gather information online, but also to share what they learn with countless others with astounding ease and speed. In the following section, we consider opportunities and challenges related to a further participatory practice: circulation. Again, we dive into the experiences of contemporary civic youth in order to deepen our understanding of the practice, as well as to explore how digital technologies change the context for civically oriented circulation.

Circulation

On March 5, 2012, a nonprofit organization called Invisible Children (IC) circulated on the internet a 30-minute video about Ugandan warlord, Joseph Kony. The purpose of the video was to raise awareness

¹We coded whenever participants described the different approaches, even within a practice. As a result the combined percentages noted for the three approaches adopted for a particular practice often totals more than 100%.



about human rights violations—particularly those against children—perpetrated by Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army. In a matter of days, the video, entitled *Kony 2012*, had over 40 million views on YouTube, 13 million plus views on Vimeo, and the Twitter hashtag, #StopKony, had been used in nearly 10 million Tweets (Goodman & Preston, 2012).

In the digital age, circulation—the practice of sharing ideas, information, and content with others—is supported by an array of digital tools. Text messaging, Facebook status updates, Tweets, and emails are among the many digital levers one can tap to spark dialogue, promote an event, or raise awareness about an issue of social concern. While the practice of sharing content has existed for eons, the digital age arguably represents a tipping point in which anyone can quickly and easily reach a wide public. As the co-founder of IC, Jason Russell, says in the opening minutes of *Kony 2012*, “The game has new rules” (Invisible Children, 2012).

Or does it? The *Kony 2012* story reveals the power of the internet to spread content quickly in a short period of time. At the same time, the bare facts noted above obscure the strategic moves on the part of IC to get their film noticed, “liked,” and ultimately forwarded, retweeted, or otherwise shared. In fact, the effort involved a well-planned and coordinated campaign that drew on an existing base of young “fans” of previous IC videos who were already inclined to share new content with their networks. Indeed, many American youth were primed to help, as IC had been doing the high school circuit for years, screening their early films and recruiting youth to support their work (Greenblatt, 2012; Jenkins, 2013). Perhaps more critically, though, Russell and colleagues tapped celebrities, including Justin Bieber, Rihanna, and Oprah, to tweet to their followers which, combined, amounted to over 44 million people at the time (Goodman & Preston, 2012; Rainie, Hitlin, Jurkowitz, Dimock, & Neidorf, 2012).

To be sure, the content of the artfully-produced film certainly played a role in capturing a mass audience. Viewers are taken on a dramatic, 30-minute journey that includes a compelling personal narrative about Jason Russell’s young son enjoying a relatively privileged, carefree childhood in a loving home, juxtaposed with the story of Jacob, a Ugandan youth, and other “invisible children” enslaved as soldiers by Kony’s army. Central to the story as well are the successful efforts of IC activists to focus the U.S. government’s attention to Kony and the as-yet elusive goal of capturing him. A key goal of the movement that *Kony 2012* is aimed at beginning is “to change the conversation of our culture...to make Kony famous, to make him visible” (Invisible Children, 2012). Illustrations of the power of citizen media in today’s world form strategic bookends in the film. In the film’s opening minutes, Russell says, “We share what we love and it reminds us of what we have in common...This connection is changing the way the world works.” In the last minutes, Russell says that our interconnected world “changes everything.” The film concludes with a forceful call to take action – including one that requires just a few clicks of a mouse. “Above all, share this movie online. It’s free.”





Invisible Children (2012, March 5). Kony 2012 [Video file].

Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>

And share they did. Teens and young adults are reported to have been the leading circulators and viewers of the film (Jenkins, 2013; Quilty-Harper, 2012; Rainie et al., 2012). Kony 2012 serves as an especially dramatic example of how social media can be leveraged in the service of sharing a story, raising consciousness about distant atrocities, and, in turn, inciting dialogue and mobilizing people to act (e.g., recirculate the video, donate money to IC, pressure political figures to act). In these ways, circulation can feed many (if not all) of the other core participatory practices, especially investigation, dialogue and feedback, and mobilization.

The world at your fingertips?

The power to circulate information and content is widely acknowledged as a hallmark affordance of digital technologies and environments. Writing about youth social networking sites as “networked publics,” danah boyd pointed to a core set of affordances that define these spaces. Among these affordances is “replicability”—the capacity to copy content from one place to another (2008, p. 126). Our everyday online experiences reveal the ways in which all kinds of content can be replicated and thus move quickly across social networks—sometimes with relatively little strategy or effort on the part of the creator or circulator. Poignant or humorous quotes, photos, e-postcards, and videos are the stock-in-trade of Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. At the same time, in a context in which an endless stream of content is being posted and shared, the odds of effortlessly “going viral” may be increasingly slim.

Moreover, the notion of “virality” itself is out of step with the reality that content is produced and circulated rather deliberately; it doesn’t simply infect the masses. In *Spreadable Media* (2013), Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green make this point and give the practice of circulation a book-length treatment, exploring the nuances of the current digital landscape that shape its use and potentials. Jenkins



et al. (2013) describe an “emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways” (p. 1). The Kony 2012 phenomenon similarly involved civic actors, elites, and ordinary citizens, all playing key roles in pushing the film into the spotlight.

Our task here is to explore how civically engaged youth respond to this landscape of new opportunities to share ideas and content, especially that related to their civic and political activities. How often do they circulate content of a civic or political nature? Perhaps more importantly, how do they approach this practice? With an assumption, or simply a hope, that a Tweet or two will achieve the desired reach? With a more deliberate strategy in mind? Or something in between? Below, we describe the nuances of how circulation is carried out by the young civic actors in our study.

Circulation in practice: Civic Youth

Circulation is the most prevalent online participatory practice among the civic youth with whom we spoke. Our survey data show that nearly two-thirds of youth in our study have circulated political content or commentary created by others within their networks. In our interviews, every young person spoke about using new media to circulate content of a civic or political nature.

A Strategic Approach to Circulation

The most involved approach to circulation includes features reminiscent of how IC spread its Kony 2012 video. More specifically, strategic circulation is supported by a multi-layered strategy that is yoked to specific purposes and markers of impact. Additionally, this approach takes into account particular platform features, audiences, and, where necessary, key influencers or re-circulators with significant reach. We found examples of this approach to circulation among 20 percent of youth in our study.

Nineteen-year-old Lori, described in the Introduction of this report, leveraged a number of different online platforms to target specific networks and influential figures to disseminate information about her organization’s PSA campaign. Through this multi-step, strategic approach Lori sought to reach as large an audience as possible and mobilize them around the issue of sex trafficking. Other elements of a strategic approach to circulation came up in our interview with 18-year-old Tia, who is active in an arts and social justice organization. Tia created a Facebook group as a space for voice about the urgent problem of youth violence in her community. She is very thoughtful and strategic about the specific content she shares, the audiences she seeks to reach, and the outcomes she hopes to see.

I don’t want to throw on there just “violence should stop.” It’s also the community’s responsibility to—if they see something, say something, like they say on the train... And a lot of other people feel that way, from what I’ve seen on my page. There’s a bunch of adults who like it and they comment and...they’re really happy, because when I say I’m a high school student, pending graduation [laughs], they’re really



surprised, like there's a kid who's actually doing this and really cares. Because nobody's really, like, doing anything about it. They're just like, "Oh, my friend died. I cry. Go to the funeral. Okay."

Like there has to be somewhere somebody, well everybody—because I like centralized communication. I like where a lot of people can state their own opinions and stuff. So that's part of the reason why I made it... I also have like the photo albums. I have a photo album of people who have died. And I know it sounds kind of weird, but like I had people sending me in pictures, like on my email, and I put it on the album so they could, so everyone can see, like, what the violence is doing. It's killing like 14-year-old kids. It's not just affecting us. It's affecting everyone. So like, a lot of people really are happy with what I'm doing. And I mean, I couldn't be more satisfied, to be honest.

Tia sees her Facebook group as a generative space for sharing information and memorializing youth lost to gun violence. She sees the page as a space for dialogue and one that, ideally, incites in the community a larger sense of responsibility for the issue.

Similarly, Mia, age 22, told us about the strategic significance of her youth activist organization's blog. She argues that the blog is not just as a vehicle for youth voice but also *"a means for [youth contributors] to actually carry out their action plans."* Echoing Jason Russell's notion that *"The game has new rules,"* Mia challenges youth whose action plans involve *"getting in touch with media"* and says, *"Well, we can actually do that in our own way."* These examples illustrate how circulation via social media is often aimed at inciting other participatory practices, notably dialogue and mobilization.

A Purposeful Approach to Circulation

Many more youth reported a purposeful approach to circulation, which involves one or two strategic elements – such as consideration of the purposes of circulation, anticipated reaction from audiences, or reflection on possible impact – though not all of these ingredients. An impressive 71 percent of youth in our study shared examples of practices that represent purposeful circulation.

Eighteen-year-old Gianna described her purposeful use of Facebook to circulate information about her organization's recycling initiative. Her posts are intended to communicate an explicit message about the importance of recycling, but also an implicit message about her involvement in significant community work aimed at inspiring others to get involved:

I put a lot of stuff on my Facebook mainly about us. I never put anything that's beyond work... Because I think a lot of people are in their own world nowadays. So, if there's just that one person that will do that, they'll be willing to do that. So, I want to be that one person that, you know, "Gianna just [posted] some weird recycling thing. She's so weird." But then they think about it, [and] be like, "Wow, this is cool. Maybe we should start working with that"... SO YOU HOPE TO AFFECT OTHER PEOPLE MAKE THEM THINK ABOUT IT? (Yes.) DO YOU THINK YOU'VE DONE THAT? Yeah. I think so because in the past month, people have been asking me about what I do and no one had no idea what I was doing. They just know I work, but they didn't know what I was doing.



Gianna's story shows how she thinks through both her message and the anticipated and desired reactions of those who see it. She recognizes how what she shares may influence how people think and which actions they take. As with the cases above, circulation here is ultimately in service of another participatory practice: mobilization.

A Casual Approach to Circulation

The most common approach to circulating civic content on the web, found among 97 percent of our interviewees, was casual circulation. Casual circulation involves one-time or one-step efforts—"just clicking," "just emailing," "just texting"—to share an idea, piece of content, or information. Here, social media or text messaging are thought of as mass broadcast mechanisms; there is little to no strategic consideration of specific technology and platform affordances, target and likely audiences, reception of content, and impact.

Clare, a 20-year-old college student involved in campus political groups and a state voter registration initiative, shared a vivid example of casual circulation. She describes how social media make offline tasks infinitely easier by allowing information transmission through a low-effort "click."

Facebook and MySpace make things so easier. [Offline,] it's hard, it's impossible—I don't want to say it's impossible, but, like, to go out right now and invite 500 people, 500 to 700 people to one event; it's hard. And Facebook makes it so easy, because you could just click, click, click, click, click, click, click 500, 700 times, or whatever, 500, 700 different people and invite them to this one thing, and all you have to do is either click "accept" or "not attending." It's just that easy. You save time, you save money, you save paper, you save ink. It removes all of that... And I think it's [also] harder, because...the reliability and dependability of it [may be low]. Because...a lot of people just click "accept," and they're not going. And it's just harder to get, like, a [reliable] tally of who's going and who's not going.

Clare's discussion of circulation points to the key game-changer of the digital age—that access to a mass audience can simply be a click or two away. The pre-internet equivalent of mass Facebook invitations would have been mass mailing campaigns that require reams of paper, envelopes, stamps, and countless hours of human labor—not to mention the paper cuts.

At the same time, Clare acknowledges that the capacity to reach a large number of online friends and followers does not necessarily translate into a desired outcome—whether it be showing up to an event, donating money to a political campaign or social cause, or simply forwarding the received message or content. As noted above, the endless stream of notifications, invitations, tweets, and status updates compete for our attention; we simply cannot respond to them all. Clare acknowledges and seems to accept this limitation without adjusting her approach, whereas Gianna, Tia, and Mia develop tactical (and higher bandwidth) approaches to address it.



The potential significance, and after life, of circulation

Whether or not they are producers, most internet users have engaged in the practice of circulation—sharing content with networks ranging from relatively small online “friends-only” groups to vast publics. As Jenkins et al. (2013) note, “people increasingly interact through sharing meaningful bits of media content” (p. 11). Civic and political actors turn to the practice of circulation to reach supporters and powerholders alike; indeed, their work increasingly hinges on effective use of these media. Our interviews with civic youth show that they recognize the power of circulation and, in putting circulation to work, some of them form deliberate, strategic approaches that increase the likelihood of reaching their desired goals. Yet others take the casual, low-bandwidth, “just click” tack and hope for the best. In the Discussion section, we explore the key factors—such as digital access, time, skills, and savvy—that influence the circulation approaches civic youth use. We also explore other considerations that may make some civic youth apprehensive about engaging in circulation, and other participatory practices, at all. Revisiting our opening case, *Kony 2012*, sheds light on the risks of circulation in the digital era.

While the effort to spread *Kony 2012* was wildly successful, with this success also came considerable, critical attention to factual details shared in the film. Among other things, the film was criticized for “over-simplifying” a complex situation, ignoring the efforts of Ugandans’ efforts, and setting up Western viewers as potential saviors (Shresthova, forthcoming; Zuckerman, 2012). The propriety of IC’s use of funds was also questioned (Flock, 2012). Jason Russell, a new hero in the eyes of many American youth, was a key target of the criticism. Within a little over a week after *Kony 2012* came into the spotlight, Russell suffered a breakdown and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for treatment (Davis & Lovett, 2012). Ultimately, Russell recovered and, as of 2013, was reported to be reengaged with IC’s latest campaign against the Lord’s Resistance Army (Bailey, 2013). However, his tale is suggestive of the personal risks that can accompany a successful campaign to call attention to a civic or political cause. Given the criticism of certain facts related to the *Kony* story, this case also suggests the importance of the care with which one carries out the participatory practice of investigation. In other words, a strategic approach to circulation doesn’t necessarily imply that another practice—in this case, investigation—is approached as carefully.

All told, the examples of circulation described here illustrate how youth can and do play instrumental roles in circulating content that sparks attention, dialogue, and even mobilization of large numbers of people to take action, online or offline. Youth can readily circulate civic and political content produced by other people. However, given the digital tools often at their disposal, civic youth can also produce content of their own. In the next section, we zero in on the participatory practice of production.

Production

“Hi, this is Jamey from Buffalo, New York and I am just here to tell you that it does get better. Here’s a little bit of my story.”



Fourteen-year-old Jamey sits in front of his computer in what looks like his bedroom. He quietly and calmly shares details of his story of coming out as bisexual and dealing with negative reactions from peers. He talks of the support he finds in friends and role models like Lady Gaga and assures viewers of a better future. He says, *“Hold your head up and you’ll go far. Because that’s all you have to do. Just love yourself and you’re set. And I promise you it will get better. I have so much support from people I don’t even know online. Look at me, I’m doing fine....So it gets better”* (Rodemeyer, 2011).

Jamey ends his very personal video of hope to other youth with a “hand heart.”



Tabatha Heart (2013) Couple Hand Heart [Online image].

Retrieved from <http://tabathaheart.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/153589996-couple-hand-heart.jpg>

Founded in 2010, the *It Gets Better Project* (itgetsbetter.org) provides lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth with the means to view and create inspirational messages of hope, and real examples of how life “gets better.” The website also offers resources and ways to get involved in LGBT youth issues. While the project was founded and is supported by adults—including public figures such as President Obama and Ellen DeGeneres who have submitted videos—youth are key users and participants on the site. Thousands of young people like Jamey have produced and shared their own video messages on itgetsbetter.org and, in so doing, have created a robust community for support, dialogue, consciousness-raising, and mobilization around LGBT issues. Jamey’s video alone gained an impressive audience; as of early 2015, his YouTube video had been viewed over 1.9 million times. Although Jamey’s case may be atypical (for reasons to be discussed at the close of this section), it is suggestive of the significant potentials for impact.

The *It Gets Better Project* illustrates how youth are engaging in the participatory practice of *production*—creating original content, remixing existing content, creating content worlds, and reshaping narratives about important issues. As frequent participants in online communities, including social network sites



and fan spaces, youth are no longer just consumers of content but are increasingly content producers—creating profiles, comments, blogs, stories, artwork, and videos related to their social and cultural interests (Greenhow, 2010; Palfrey, Gasser, Simun, & Barnes, 2009). The Pew Internet and American Life Project noted that the number of online teens who are content creators had increased from 57 percent in 2004 to 64 percent in 2007 (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007); this number has undoubtedly risen in the last 8 years as digital tools and internet access have become ubiquitous in the U.S. As of 2013, 93 percent of U.S. teens reported owning a computer or having access to one at home (Madden et al., 2013). For some youth, particularly low income and minority youth, mobile phones and other technologies are the tools of choice when it comes to digital production (Harris, 2010). While youths' creations are often related to their interests—friends, music, gaming, anime (Ito et al., 2010)—many are also produced with political or civic aims in mind (Owen, 2006). Indeed, social and technical literacies gained in online communities and “participatory cultures,” such as Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games (MMRPGs) or fan fiction sites, can be—and sometimes are—directed to address social issues. The Harry Potter Alliance, a civic offshoot of Harry Potter fandom, is a signature example (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012).

The civic acts of Jamey and of other youth, who leveraged digital tools to produce personalized, video messages for a national campaign, are impressive. Here, production is used in service of a timely civic initiative, and the thoughtfulness, preparation and skills these young people employ to this end constitute a robust form of participatory politics. However, the practice of production is not always so sophisticated or robust. When a young person tweets, “I just took the @ItGetsBetter pledge,” or comments, “This is great!” on a Facebook post about a LGBT relevant policy change, the show of support may be important, but the effort, skill, and creativity required are minimal (especially in comparison to creating a video). Further, consideration of target audience—and how best to amplify it—may be absent. To be sure, there are other forms of production that lie in between a relatively low effort Tweet and the more labor intensive video creation. For example, youth can share their stories on The It Gets Better Project by writing and posting a brief narrative describing how the site has helped them, how things are “getting better,” or about their efforts in support of LGBT youth. Furthermore, a short and easy-to-post tweet can be an effective and important avenue for consciousness raising and mobilization of others. At the same time, there are times and places where having a sophisticated skill set for production may be necessary in order to achieve one’s civic aims.

The proliferation of digital tools, platforms and software, including mobile tools, put content creation within reach of most young people. But what does civic production look like among youth engaged in largely traditional civic organizations or contexts? Do these youth have, and are they leveraging, digital skills and affordances in imaginative ways on behalf of their civic causes? Or are most civic youth engaging in quick, low key effort modes of production?



Production in practice: Civic youth

The young civic actors in our study certainly made use of digital tools to create and share civic media related to their particular causes. Fully 90 percent of youth in our study described creating media content related to an issue of public concern. Yet, we also seek to determine the extent to which their approaches to production appeared casual, purposeful or strategic.

A Strategic Approach to Production

Among our sample of civic youth, 35 percent of participants who talked about creating civic content described a strategic approach. These young civic actors were often engaged in the creation of novel digital civic spaces, such as new websites, community forums, or online news outlets, as venues for their civic activities.

For example, 23-year-old Dylan is the founder of a tech startup that created a digital platform for discussion of, and democratic voting on, local issues in small communities.

I think the platform that we built, in its ideal state, acts as a network where people can-- you know, it's not necessarily collective knowledge that they're tapping. But every individual participating in it has access to a greater pool of knowledge, access to a greater pool of people, because they know who's in their community. They know other people, what they... care about.

Dylan described his vision for the platform, rooted in his deep belief in democracy and the potential he perceived in using the web to enhance democratic participation. He recalls how he and his team designed the platform. He goes on to describe their efforts to improve it over time in order to increase the extent and quality of another participatory practice—dialogue and feedback—among members of the community.

But we sort of gradually changed, so that it became not just us posting questions, it became other people could post questions. Stayed with this sort of vote “yes” and “no” model for a while. [Then we] rolled out to other towns. Figured out that, you know, tried to perfect the launch process so you could get more stakeholders involved, and you could sort of mitigate the fact that the first people who come to the group can often dictate the pace of the community.

During his interview, Dylan spoke about technical skills he leveraged to create this online community, and the amount of time and effort required of him and his team to design, test, and continually refine the platform based on community feedback. Importantly, Dylan's creation was inspired by his strong belief in the potential of the internet to change society and supported by his sense of self-efficacy and identity as a “civic entrepreneur.” In short, Dylan's digital civic imagination—especially his willingness to look beyond preexisting models of online participation to create something new—was robust, but it was also well supported by skills, effort, passion, and self-confidence.



Yet, strategic approaches to production are not always about building a new online space from the ground up. Other strategic approaches to this practice were apparent when youth coopted existing digital spaces or tools in innovative ways, for purposes not intended by their creators. For example, 23-year old Ava, who works on youth health issues, described how she leveraged the affordances of text messaging to create a program that provides peers with credible and current information on sexual health issues.

A Purposeful Approach to Production

In contrast to the above example where Dylan created a new digital space, many youth contribute to established online communities in less grand ways, in the manner of the youth who submit written stories to the *It Gets Better Project* website. Eighty-three percent of participants in our study who described the participatory practice of digital production used a purposeful approach. Some of these youth spoke about blogging about issues dear to them, such as the environment, while others created Facebook pages for community dialogue and mobilization with respect to issues such as youth violence or youth jobs.

Clare, a 20-year-old journalism major who is involved in electoral politics, writes pieces for her college's print and online magazine, in addition to other online outlets. She spends many hours composing pieces focused on issues of concern and uses her editing skills to ensure her work is well presented, and her literary skills to grab the attention of her readers. *"This column that I write every week, I just pick an issue that's happening this week, and I write about it. And it's an opinion column, so I have freedom to say, 'This is what I think. This is what you should think, too.' ... It's a print, but they also have a website."* Clare spends a significant amount of time and effort crafting her pieces. Yet, her online writings arguably do not represent innovative ways to use new media for civic purposes. Her opinion pieces typify the features of purposeful production: they clearly connect to issues of public concern, take a fair amount of time and skill to create, and require more than basic knowledge of new media sites, but the digital tools are used in a manner in keeping with the designers' vision.

A Casual Approach to Production

Other youth produce civic content that takes much less time, planning, effort, skill and know-how—for example, the tweets and Facebook comments on the *It Gets Better Project* platforms. A large majority of youth in our study who create civic content, 87 percent, described efforts that were far more casual. For example, youth often described posting brief status updates on Facebook to promote events or short comments—usually no more than a few words—in response to a news item. To be sure, tweets, comments, and other short bursts of communication can require time and thoughtfulness; these short posts may be purposeful and even quite strategic. Words need to be well chosen in order to have the needed effect. For the most part, though, the youth who took casual approaches to such postings were focused on communicating ideas and information quickly.



For example, 22-year-old Mia, a staff member of a nonprofit civic education organization, describes productions that typify a casual approach. One of the ways in which she engages with creating content is in small posts or comments on her organization's social media platforms; she uses these posts to give readers a quick message about or a snapshot of her work. *"Sometimes, Facebook and Twitter become just sort of portals for us either sending out articles that we've seen or telling people to go to our blog and read the newest post. Or sometimes saying, 'Oh, we're at so and so organization today, excited to partner,' or whatever."* While Mia's overall civic engagement is sustained and effortful, her Facebook status updates or Tweets about her activities characterize a casual approach to production; they are brief in content, not overtly focused on particular issues of concern, and may not require specialized skill or considerable time and effort. Further, these casual acts of production are often marked by an absence of reflection on how to leverage the web in new and potentially more impactful ways.

Production: Absences

While most youth dabble in production at various levels, we did find that a small number—10 percent—did not report any use of digital media for civic content production. To be sure, most of these youth did mention using media to produce some form of content—but the content was social or personal, not civic in nature. To take one example, 19-year-old Luke, a college freshman involved in electoral politics, describes in hilarious detail how he and his brother created storyboards and then using a small digital camera filmed nonsensical videos for their own, and their friends', amusement and uploaded them to YouTube. Luke, however, did not use these production skills to create content related to his campaign work. Why might this be the case? The answer here may lie in the broader implications, and risks, that can follow in the wake of online civic acts.

The power of production, and its afterlife

As civic youth consider turning to social media and other sites on the web to further their civic goals, some of them are alert not only to the benefits but also to the risks that can accompany digital civic action—especially those actions that prove “successful” in the sense of gaining a wide audience.

Of relevance here is our example of Jamey and his *It Gets Better* video. In creating a video for this high profile project, Jamey entered the public sphere and took a stand against mistreatment of LGBT youth. He did so through a compelling personal narrative about his own experiences. In line with the goals of the initiative, his video was a message of encouragement to LGBT youth like himself, to have hope for a better future. Indeed, many viewers posted messages of thanks to Jamey for giving them hope. Tragically, however, after posting his video, Jamey continued to experience mistreatment and, in the span of a short few months, took his own life.

This case calls attention to the mixed potentials, and risks, of using the web on behalf of a civic cause, especially one that is deeply personal in nature. Even when civic media have a desired, positive impact



on an issue, a negative “after life” can also manifest (Soep, 2014). The ramifications of impact, whether positive, negative, or none at all, all deserve consideration when youth engage the participatory practice of production and subsequently get pulled into other practices—notably, dialogue and feedback. Online discourse about any topic can range from reflective and generative to disagreeable, uncivil, and downright cruel. Civic and political issues are particularly vulnerable to heated, and therefore uncivil exchanges—especially when controversial issues such as marriage equality, climate change, immigration reform, or gun control are on the table. We now turn to an exploration of how youth approach opportunities for civic dialogue in online spaces.

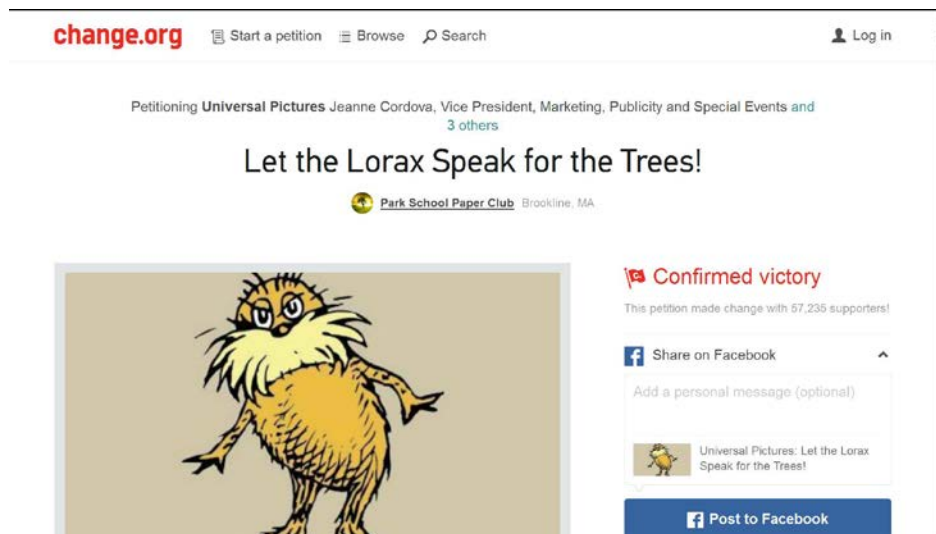
Dialogue and Feedback

“Let the Lorax Speak for the Trees!”

This assertion was directed by a group of Massachusetts 4th graders to Universal Pictures, a major U.S. movie studio and the production company for the movie version of Dr. Seuss’s book, *The Lorax*. The students in Mr. Wells’ 4th grade class had read the book and loved it, especially the message about caring for the environment. Excited about the movie’s release, they visited the website eager to learn more. But what they found there was disheartening. The official website seemed sharply focused on promoting the film in order to sell movie tickets, rather than on engaging viewers with messages about the environment, a key theme of the book. Outraged at this missed opportunity for building on and honoring Dr. Seuss’s call to action, these young citizens decided to take action, share their concerns with the studio, and suggest ways to rectify the situation.

Here we have a nice story about children caring enough to voice their opinions, but nothing was likely to come of it. However, strange things do happen. As summed up nicely by Nicholas Kristof (2012) in his New York Times piece about these ambitious youth, “A battle between a class of fourth graders and a major movie studio would seem an unequal fight. So it proved to be: the studio buckled.” So what did this band of gallant 4th graders do to prompt this reaction from such a powerful institution? They used pencils, markers, and paper—traditional production tools—to create colorful posters and to write a script, and then produced a Dr. Seuss-style video with their plea to Universal. In December 2011, with the help of their teacher, the students uploaded their video to YouTube and then created a Change.org petition to mobilize broad support for their cause.





Park School Paper Club (2011). Universal Pictures: Let the Lorax Speak for the Trees [Online petition page]. Retrieved from <http://www.change.org/petitions/universal-pictures-let-the-lorax-speak-for-the-trees>

Through strategic use of video production skills, YouTube, and a petition platform, these youth shared their voices, invited others to the conversation, and gave specific feedback to the studio. Within a month's time, the petition received over 50,000 signatures, with critical help from media coverage and celebrity endorsements. As the screenshot depicts above, by January 2012, the students declared victory. On their Change.org petition page, Mr. Wells describes how Universal Pictures—who stated that the petition accelerated plans they were already considering (Boudreau, Netter, & Francis, 2012)—revamped the film's website, adding educational materials and links to environmental partners and programs, in line with suggestions made by the students.

The story of Mr. Wells' 4th graders is an example of how even young children can engage successfully in the participatory practice of *dialogue and feedback*—voicing, negotiating, and considering perspectives; engaging in dialogue around relevant public issues; and sharing feedback with community members and powerholders. The internet has significantly lowered barriers to participation in the public sphere, especially for youth (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2009). To discuss pressing issues, young people can connect online with people in the same town or around the world. With the proliferation of social media and other platforms, youth under the age of 18, who are ineligible to vote, can engage in political life by communicating with, or about, public figures and those in other positions of power (Kann, Berry, Gant, & Zager, 2007). However, simply conveying one's opinion online does not guarantee reaching a diverse audience and/or a specific public figure; further, a lack of response may lead to disengagement (Levine, 2008). It is therefore important to garner insights from successful efforts such as those carried out by Mr. Wells' students and their *Lorax* petition.

With support from their teacher, the 4th graders seized the affordances of digital tools and the web to



engage in dialogue about the environment, an issue about which they, and many others (including Dr. Seuss), care deeply. They leveraged social networks, produced compelling content (a video and petition), and circulated it in a strategic manner to gain the attention of the wider media and celebrities, who in turn, cast a larger spotlight on their cause. In turning to YouTube and, more importantly, Change.org, they effectively shared their message and targeted their feedback—including specific suggestions for change—to appropriate power holders, specifically the President and Vice President of Marketing at Universal Pictures. Leveraging the web to engage with other community members, public figures, and elites in this manner is characteristic of a strategic approach to dialogue and feedback. (Notably, this case also reveals strategic approaches to production, circulation, and mobilization.)

Yet most youth and adults who supported this initiative were involved in more minor, or supporting roles. Their engagement was essential, but required fewer steps, less time, and almost no planning or strategy. On the casual end of the spectrum, they could simply add their names to the petition and move on. At the same time, contributing in this casual way, signaling agreement with the petitioners' message was crucial to the ultimate outcome. More purposeful participants may have posted a lengthy comment, "I'm signing because..." with their reasons for supporting the petition. Both types of efforts are comparatively smaller, and appropriately so, as the 4th graders had already done most of the heavy lifting. Nonetheless, signing a petition initiated by others is a mechanism for giving feedback that still requires some degree of consideration. Notably, 71 percent of youth in our study responded in the pre-interview survey that they had signed an email, Facebook, or other online petition in the previous 12 months.

Online petitions are just one mechanism for dialogue and feedback. The explosion of digital media tools available means that numerous modes of communication and opportunities for voice are at youths' fingertips. And, as mentioned at various points in this report, the scalable quality of the internet adds the potential, at least, for significant reach (Rheingold, 2012). Facebook, Twitter, and comment spaces in online news sites are increasingly important venues for civic dialogue and feedback. These media have their drawbacks, to be sure. Incivility, and even outright hostility, can strain dialogue about civic and political issues in these contexts (James, 2014; Santana, 2014). At the same time, even heated exchanges can advance understanding about complex issues (Papacharissi, 2004).

Given this complex opportunity space and environment, it is important to explore the extent to which civic youth are leveraging the internet in casual, purposeful, or strategic ways to engage in generative civic dialogue and feedback. Further, we wonder to what extent youth are prepared to anticipate, and respond productively to, conflicts that may ensue in the course of online political discussions.

Dialogue and Feedback among Civic Youth

It might seem a safe bet to assume that dialogue and feedback are key practices for civic youth, regardless of the focus, or locus, of their civic activity. Indeed, every young person we interviewed reported



discussing civic issues with others and giving feedback to elites on at least an intermittent basis. However, when we examined their narratives about this practice more closely, we observed that only 63 percent of participants were engaging in dialogue and feedback digitally. Therefore, substantial numbers of youth in our study communicate about civic issues principally through non-digital means—including paper petitions, face to face meetings, or rallies.

A Strategic Approach to Dialogue and Feedback

“Let the Lorax Speak for the Trees!” is a compelling example of strategic dialogue and feedback; it illustrates a high level of initiative, creativity, effort, and strategy with a clear expectation of impact. Twenty percent of the youth in our study described approaches to online discussion and feedback that were similarly strategic. Examples include designing online spaces for the explicit purpose of civic discourse—as exemplified by Dylan in the production section—and making videos to convey a specific message to a political figure. Seventeen-year-old Sienna, an environmental organizer, created a YouTube video in order to share with Vice President Joe Biden her views on the Affordable Healthcare Act.

Further examples of strategic dialogue surfaced when young civic actors use Facebook, Twitter, and news corporations’ online comments sections to exchange ideas with fellow citizens or to send messages to powerholders. For instance, Tia, described in the circulation section, tweeted at Fox News and posted a comment on their website about inaccuracies in a news report published about an incident in her neighborhood. She clearly communicated the ways in which the news outlet had misrepresented the events and then proceeded to set the record straight.

Twenty-year-old college student Danelle described a novel use of the online social networking site Twitter. During a campus conversation about diversity, Danelle and her peers used Twitter to engage in dialogue and to crowd source “live” feedback to be directed to the Dean of the college.

They’re having a meeting, talking about how they’re going to hire the new provost of diversity. So what you get is 75 students sitting in a room listening to the Dean talk about this. But really, we’re all tweeting each other. So if I ask a question, I know the Dean’s not going to call on me to ask another question. I’ll just put the question on Twitter. Somebody else will raise their hand and ask the question. Or, we’re all sharing our opinion on like, “Did you hear what the Dean just said? That’s not acceptable because, la, la, la.” Or, “Really, you know, I think that’s actually a good way to go.”

And so, while they’re up there being talking heads, we’re kind of analyzing everything they’re saying. We’re coming up with strategies on the spot. We’re coming up with our kind of collective concerns and questions.

Danelle and her peers leveraged Twitter as a critical, and strategic, backchannel during this important campus meeting. Given limited opportunities to ask questions and share feedback, the students leveraged Twitter to crowd source top questions and comments on the spot. Their use of social media for substantive



dialogue and targeted delivery of comments to a powerful figure exemplifies a strategic approach to this participatory practice.

Purposeful Approaches to Dialogue and Feedback

Very few youth in our study reported approaches to dialogue and feedback as strategic as that described by Danelle. However, many participants did report engaging in online exchanges that deepened their understanding of civic issues. The majority of youth in our study (84 percent) took purposeful approaches to online dialogue. Such approaches are characterized by engaging in substantive, although often brief or one-off, discussions of issues that they care about with fellow citizens; giving targeted feedback to elites is not a common feature in this approach.

A typical example of purposeful dialogue is given here by Caiden, a college student working on education quality issues. Caiden recalls how he met someone on Facebook and began a conversation with them.

I would talk to people who are from different universities in different states. Like last Saturday, I spoke to this girl who goes to [University in New York State]. And she's very passionate about politics as well, and I knew that because she also likes hip hop, and particularly she likes Immortal Technique, who, just like Dead Prez, is very influential when it comes to political ideology and just voicing himself as an individual.

Caiden goes on to explain how he uses discussions about shared interests, such as music, as a gateway to discussions about more substantive issues.

So I connected with her and said, "Listen," as an initiator, "hey, I just noticed this on your page. I would really love to build with you on this concept of social reproduction." And I didn't say social reproduction like that, but I said, "I really want to talk to you about your taste in music, your interest in hip hop. It's just like mine." But down the line, my intention was to make sure— well, it wasn't to make sure, it was to build about social reproduction through that. You know what I'm saying?

Caiden's approach to this online conversation involved using tactical moves to raise civic issues without interrupting the flow or ending the exchange. His conversation was not carried out with a discrete goal of social change. His purpose was broader: to exchange perspectives about social issues and raise the civic consciousness of other young people.

A Casual Approach to Dialogue and Feedback

While the majority of youth we interviewed reported online dialogue and feedback characteristic of purposeful approaches like Caiden's, a small group described even briefer conversations or discussions comprising little detail of substance about a topic of interest and with no indication of an expectation of impact resulting from the exchange. A casual approach to dialogue and feedback is characterized by



minimal effort and is more open-ended with respect to goals.

Casual approaches are often typified by brief, one-way comments on Facebook or on news items. Feedback may be given but in a vague, non-directed way—i.e., broadcasting “to the world” through Facebook or text messaging. Sixteen percent of youth in our sample reported online civic commenting that appeared to be casual in nature. Martin, a 19-year-old college student who is involved in a political party group, regularly attends in-person meetings where he engages in extensive conversations and debates with his colleagues and with members of other political parties. However, his online exchanges are much more limited. When talking about his favorite sources for political news, he mentions, *“Yeah, if I’m reading Huffington Post or something, I’ll comment on it.”* Martin’s offhand description of occasionally leaving a brief comment for anyone who reads that particular article is representative of the minimal time, effort, and expectation of impact found in casual approaches.

Dialogue and Feedback: Absences

A significant number of our study participants, 37 percent, made no reference to engaging in civic dialogue and feedback in online contexts. This is not to say that these participants do not have online exchanges related to their civic work; they do, but for the most part these exchanges are administrative or logistical in nature. For instance, Linn, a 20-year-old college student who is a service group leader, explains how she and her team organize group meetings: *“My co-lead and I, we’re planning sessions and we’re emailing back and forth about what we’re going to do.”* Linn describes dialogue that is focused on how to run an engaging, effective meeting and not about the substance of civic issues. Other youth, such as 16-year-old Makayla, engage in dialogue related to hobbies and interests online. While some of these exchanges can certainly veer into political territory (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012), youth in our study did not report interest-based conversations shifting into civic ones. Makayla, a community youth organizer, is an active participant in online fandom sites. She told us, *“I’m...on a site where I do a lot of reading. I comment to the author, like I read stories, like short stories. [I say,] ‘This was very good. You should continue writing stories like this.’ I do that.”* While Makayla is very committed to dialogue and feedback in this fan fiction community, like many other youth we interviewed, she does not mention politics online.

The significance of dialogue and feedback

Dialogue with fellow citizens and sharing of feedback to public figures are important elements of civic participation. Engaging in conversations about relevant issues, exchanging ideas and perspectives can lead to a fuller understanding of the stakes related to a given social issue. In these ways, dialogue is an essential first step before taking action—though, ideally, discussion doesn’t end there. Providing timely feedback to public figures is a potentially powerful way to make a difference in one’s community, society, and world. To be sure, powerholders do not always listen and, if they do, may not respond as hoped. Even



so, exercising one's voice can have indirect or latent positive effects for youth development. While many of the civic youth with whom we spoke do raise their voices and make their views known online, a large number do not take advantage of online platforms for civic dialogue and feedback. As we will explore below, complex considerations—such as weighing the opportunities and costs of making one's civic and political views known online—can play a role in quieting or even muting civic youth on the web.

Returning to the opening example of Mr. Wells' 4th grade students, it is clear that students' use of dialogue and feedback was carried out alongside, or following, other participatory practices, including: investigation (identifying the producers of The Lorax site, finding facts to include in a petition or video); production (creating the video and petition); and circulation (spreading links for the petition and video via social media). The goals of dialogue and feedback can also be connected with the last participatory practice—mobilization. Talking with others, either online or face-to-face, is a basic strategy to rally others to do something in support of a particular cause. For the 4th graders, communicating with their close relations and others beyond was done with the aim of mobilizing many voices to the cause. In the following section, we examine more closely the mobilization approaches of young civic actors.

Mobilization

CNN described October 24, 2009 as “the most widespread day of political action in our planet's history” (Aroneanu, 2012). The International Day of Climate Action involved 5,245 actions coordinated across 181 different countries. The event centered on the number 350, demarcating the safe level of CO₂ in the atmosphere (350 parts per million) we must reach to mitigate climate change. From the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon to the peak of Table Top Mountain in South Africa—and many, many places in between—activists young and old acted together to send the message. Children in Maasai Mara Kenya together formed the number “350,” while divers visited the wreckage site of Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior with a banner declaring, “350 or we're all sunk.”



350.org (2009). Children in Maasai Mara Kenya call for 350 [Online image].

Retrieved from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/350org/4017427506/>



350.org The Day the World Came Together - The 350 Movement [Video file image]

Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noPcVKf24rk>



The movement relied heavily on digital technologies and the web in order to coordinate and support activists around the globe. The campaign's founder Bill McKibben says, "technology played a critical role" in organizing the grassroots campaign (Silberman, 2009). Michael Silberman, an online campaigns strategist and co-founder of EchoDitto, concludes, "350's success was not because of technology; but it couldn't have happened without it."

At a minimum, the event elevated public consciousness around a critical scientific data point and inspired widespread, real world participation. Successful, digitally-aided mobilization is evident in the *thousands* of videos and images that poured into the campaign's website. Although 350's campaign is exceptional in many ways, the strategic use of online tools to mobilize citizens is becoming common, even routine. Barack Obama's presidential campaign, for example, utilized technology to carry out an historic, grassroots organizing strategy (Exley, 2008; Piskorski, Winig, & Smith, 2013).

Why are digital tools so transformational for organizing? Clay Shirky (2008) argues that technology dramatically changes the constraints on coordinated action. The Coasean Floor, Shirky explains, is the point below which transaction costs of a particular activity are too great for a traditional institution to pursue. With digital tools, "loosely coordinated groups" can operate with the kind of synchronization evinced in 350's International Day of Climate Action. The power of digital tools to enable coordinated action is demonstrated not only in examples of adult-led activities, but also in youth-driven civic action. In 2010, more than 18,000 New Jersey teens used social media and text messaging to coordinate a mass exodus from their classrooms. At first glance, a synchronized move to cut class may seem like a far cry from civic engagement. But the coordinated student walk-outs across the state were actually a youth-driven protest against Governor Chris Christie's proposed budget cuts to New Jersey schools. Students carried signs proclaiming, "We want to learn," "We love our teachers," and "We are the future" (Hu, 2010; Ochman, 2010). And as for the organizational efforts that enabled this coordinated action? A single Facebook page started by 18-year-old senior Michelle Ryan Lauto, followed by a flurry of text messages and tweets (Ochman, 2010).

But if Shirky is right, is the fact that coordination and mobilization are easier in the digital age necessarily always a "win" for civic engagement? Malcom Gladwell (2010) calls the enthusiasm about social media and engagement "outsized." Gladwell accepts that digital tools have lowered the barrier to participation, but cautions that the barrier has moved so low that increases in engagement are simply a product of the ability to participate *without* real motivation. Gladwell compares low risk digitally-enabled engagement—such as getting others to join the Save Darfur Facebook group or "like" a page—to the higher risk, higher impact activism of the civil rights movement. Yes, the Save Darfur Group mobilized many people to join (it had 2,797 members when Gladwell wrote his piece), but each gave an average of merely 15 cents to the cause. This is not the kind of activism for which Gladwell thinks we should strive; the revolution, he concludes, will not be tweeted.

Gladwell's concerns may have merit, but his argument falls short in light of other, powerful examples



where digital tools were in fact used to mobilize high risk activism. In a response to Gladwell, Twitter co-founder Biz Stone (2010) cites Kenya's 2010 constitutional referendum where digital tools gave voice to citizens to report violations and mobilize election officials. The Kenya case also suggests that broader political context matters; in countries where speech is often suppressed, the potential for digital tools to enable impactful mobilization may be that much greater. "Lowering the barrier to activism doesn't weaken humanity, it brings us together and makes us stronger," Stone contends.

Nor do advocates of digital tools believe that online "likes" are the end goal for participation. As Sam Graham-Felsen (2010), the blog director of Barack Obama's presidential campaign, is quick to point out in his reply to Gladwell, "Any online organizer worth his salt recognizes that his job isn't to get people to 'like' a page of Facebook, but to empower people to take tangible, real-world actions." Indeed, both low-effort "thin" mobilization and higher-effort, higher-impact "thick" mobilization are similarly possible in the digital world (Zuckerman, 2013b). That is, youth can mobilize in low-effort ways by getting peers simply to click a "like" button on Facebook or in higher stakes and more demanding ways by getting others to attend a controversial offline protest.

Digital tools are also potent for mobilization because of the capacity to "extend and amplify the reach of traditional social networks" (Rheingold, 2012, p. 192). Youth can use the web to leverage their own personal connections and reach ever-greater networks that may have been previously difficult to access. Rheingold (2012) specifically writes of "centrality" as a measure of how well an individual interconnects people in different parts of the network, and he uses the term "bridges" to describe individuals that connect different networks (p. 204). In the context of mobilization, digital tools afford the possibility of amplifying an individual's efforts and engaging others beyond their personal network.

While a simple tweet, like, or post may not be the ultimate engagement goal, a recent study by Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life project found that engagement with political issues on social media can lead to offline activism (Smith, 2013). And, the potential for transformative reach at little (or no) added cost contributes to a unique contemporary context for civic mobilization. Thus, although not all acts are created equal, mobilization efforts large and small similarly merit consideration.

How, then, do contemporary civic youth actualize digitally-enabled opportunities for mobilization around the issues they care about? Are they simply sending out casual, low effort, one-time rallying cries to broad groups of potential participants? Do they use the facility of easily reaching others online in order to follow-up and "nag" potential participants, reflecting purposeful attempts to bolster the likelihood of actual participation? Or, do they draw on digital tools more strategically, to increase exponentially their reach by identifying people with centrality or bridging potential?

Mobilization among Civic Youth

For the civic youth in our sample, mobilizing others to participate is a common practice: fully 94 percent of



youth describe efforts to mobilize others either on or offline. Of this 94 percent, a substantial number, 61 percent, use digital tools for this mobilization.

The vast majority of youth who mobilize using digital media describe either casual or purposeful approaches. Using casual approaches, youth draw on digital tools to send out broad mobilization requests easily and widely. With purposeful approaches, youth send messages intended to mobilize others and then follow up with potential participants, thereby expending more personal effort in order to increase the likelihood of successful mobilization. Strategic mobilization efforts—considerably less common in our sample—involve youth intentionally tapping people who are bridges or influencers to other networks. In this sense, the strategic approach reflects an awareness of the large system of influence in which individual actions reside.

A Strategic Approach to Mobilization

As evidenced by the 350 campaign, strategic approaches to mobilization involve leveraging the affordances of digital technologies to maximize reach within and across social networks. Thirteen percent of youth who mobilize via digital means explicitly described using social media in strategic ways in an effort to extend or amplify their reach.

Brian is a rising college senior with a dedication to AIDS activism that dates back to his early teen years. Brian describes how he used digital tools to coordinate a webathon. To participate in the webathon, individuals sign-up (online) and commit to reaching out to their own personal networks in order to raise awareness. Participants then input information back into the organization's website, providing a basic metric about the scope of the campaign. Brian explains,

We also use Facebook for one of our campaigns. It's called the AIDS countdown... But basically, the point of it is-- okay, so we changed the name repeatedly. As of now, it's called a webathon, okay? And the point is to get people to pledge to talk to a certain number of individuals about the importance of getting tested and HIV/AIDS awareness. And so we collect pledges for that campaign on Facebook and on [the organization's] website. So, Facebook is pretty heavily involved there because it allows you to very easily engage with hundreds of people per person. You can invite all your friends very easily to this event and then they can just see it and submit a sort of pledge to talk to X number of people.

Nora, age 23, is another participant who describes a strategic approach to mobilization. She works with a non-partisan youth civic engagement group and with an organization that helps domestic violence survivors. Recently, Nora organized a fashion show as a fundraiser. Her team was struggling to find potential models; the team needed to mobilize potential participants to come to a casting call and to donate their time to the event. Nora explains, *"We just couldn't get enough people out for the casting calls. So [the organization], their actual Twitter tweeted it out, I retweeted it, and asked all of my friends to retweet it. So a lot more people got the information to come out to our casting call."* Nora recognizes that tweeting to a



broad network, and then encouraging others to retweet, allows the organization to reach not only its own network, but also the networks of their different followers in order to secure more participants.

A Purposeful Approach to Mobilization

Purposeful approaches to mobilization are thoughtful and effortful, but they do not involve the kind of bridging or connecting of networks as in the strategic examples described above. Purposeful mobilization is characterized by the recognition that sending a broad, one time mobilizing message may not be sufficient for achieving one's goals. For the mobilizer, purposeful mobilization is generally a multi-step effort rather than a one-time request; it tends to involve a feedback loop or personalized follow-up.

Gianna is the high school senior introduced in our discussion of investigation; she works on recycling initiatives in her community. Gianna describes follow-up as a key component of her mobilization efforts. Gianna explains that she first invites a broad group of potential attendees, and then individually reaches out to potential participants as the event approaches: *"Before the event, I'll just write to all of them and be like, Are you sure you're going to come? Are you sure you're going to come?"*

Tasha, a high school senior who works on teen health and social justice issues, similarly describes a purposeful approach to mobilization. Tasha explains that when she was trying to mobilize others to take a survey for one of her civic organizations, follow-up was vital. In Tasha's words, *"We relied on Facebook. I went to everyone of my friends' page and I say 'Go to this link and take this website.' And because they thought it was spam, I have to chat with them on Facebook to tell them, 'This is not spam, just take it.'" Forty-eight percent of civic youth in our study who describe online mobilization efforts demonstrate purposeful approaches characterized by deliberate follow-up or targeted messaging beyond one-time broadcasting. However, most youth mobilize in more casual ways.*

A Casual Approach to Mobilization

With the affordances of digital technologies, casual mobilization is straightforward and simple to execute. Loren, a high school student who works on a local recycling initiative, illustrates casual mobilization when she describes using Facebook to notify people about programs. Loren explains, *"We put stuff up [on Facebook] and we tell them, 'Oh, there's something going on here and just come.'" Lia, a college freshman who works on electoral politics initiatives, similarly discusses a "flyers-gone-digital" version of getting the word out about events. She explains, "And then when we put out event invitations, people would share those. It's just a lot easier to share information that way, because all the people you want to contact are already there, for the most part."* Loren and Lia are intentional in their use of digital tools in order to mobilize others, but their efforts prioritize efficiency—creating a brief message or event page on Facebook, a one-time notification—over strategic reflection about impact.



To be sure, low effort, casual mobilization can be impactful. Gavin is a sixteen-year-old high school student involved with civic and political initiatives both within and beyond her school community. She describes a time when she sent out a broadcasted invitation to a Facebook event and posted a few flyers offline in an effort to mobilize people to attend an afterschool phone banking event. Gavin was only expecting about 10 people, but instead had a turnout almost 60 of her peers. Reflecting on planning the event, Gavin remarks that it was *“actually surprisingly easy. I was expecting something more difficult.”*

Across the youth who spoke about online forms of mobilization, 85 percent described casual approaches. This approach to mobilization can certainly be successful—as in Gavin’s case—but the odds may be slim, as by definition it involves little more than broadcasting a message and hoping for the best. Consequently, such moves may not be the most promising avenues for successful mobilization.

The significance of mobilization

Mobilization is an essential participatory practice in the young civic actor’s toolkit. The digital age affords new opportunities to reach others in ways that, ideally, incite them to take action. Yet, digital mobilization in many respects relies on successful engagement of the other participatory practices. The success of the International Day of Climate Action was built on a foundation of credible investigation and strategic production and circulation. Dialogue and feedback played key roles leading up to the action day and certainly followed in the wake of the highly visible campaign. This example points to the interrelationships among the participatory practices—the ways in which they feed off of one another. Mobilization is, in many respects, either the result of or aimed at convincing others to engage in the other participatory practices. Casual approaches can be impactful on occasion; yet, without a clear sense of purpose and, ideally, a strategy, the odds of success are typically low. So while new media can enhance civic action, how we tap them matters.

As noted above, only a small percentage of the civic youth in our sample described experiences hinting at the potential of strategic mobilization. It is feasible that this finding simply reflects an omission from their narratives rather than their experiences, since we did not directly ask youth whether they use digital technologies to bridge networks. However, it is also possible, indeed likely, that youth are not realizing the full potential of digital technologies to support their civic goals.

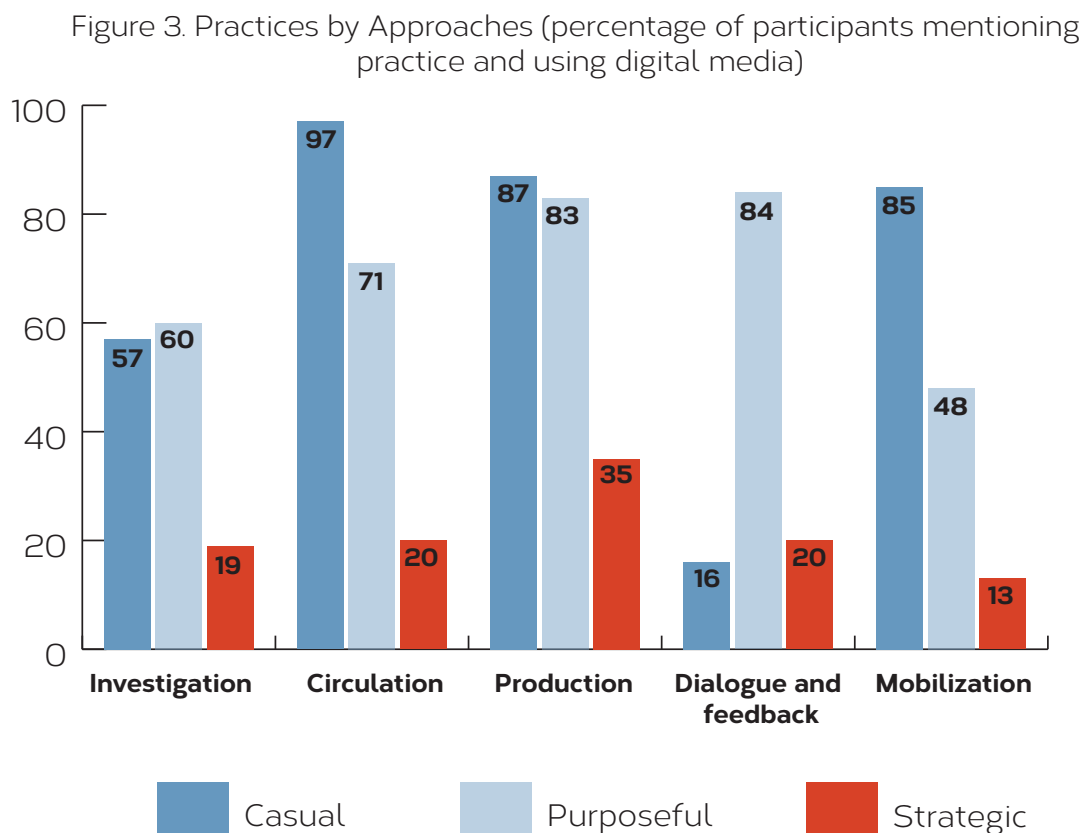
Casual, Purposeful, or Strategic? What Underpins the Approaches Youth Take?

Our in-depth exploration of civic youth’s participatory practices revealed important differences in approach. Many youth take casual, brisk, or “snap” approaches to online participatory politics that may involve “just googling” or “just clicking ‘send’ or ‘share’” with little more than a hope that some kind of



impact might follow. Other youth are more purposeful in their uses of new media. They have distinct aims in mind and consider audiences more fully in leveraging online tools and practices for civic action. Finally, there are youth who are much more strategic about the participatory practices—they bring deeper knowledge about their intended audiences to bear, tap online influencers who can help them carry out their goals, and develop multi-step plans of action that truly leverage the web.

Looking across the practices, we observe some differences in the approaches that youth tend to take when they engage in particular practices (see Figure 3). The casual approach is most clearly prevalent in *circulation* and *mobilization*. The purposeful approach is most clearly prevalent in *dialogue and feedback*. The strategic approach is not the most dominant approach in any practice but has a substantial presence in *production* and is least noted in *mobilization*.



These findings beg the question: Are individual youth consistent in the digital civics approaches they adopt? In other words, do youth tend to be casual, or purposeful, or strategic across the board or do their approaches vary by practice or context? Importantly, do a small number of youth account for all the strategic approaches observed across the practices—or do a larger number dabble on occasion in strategic approaches?



We found that youth vary their approaches across, and sometimes within, the five practices. Nearly half of the youth in our sample did not use the strategic approach for any of the practices. And for those youth who did display strategic approaches, they did so in relation to no more than three practices (See Table 2). Put differently, none of the youth used a strategic approach all the time. By the same token, none used casual approaches across the board either, although such approaches were more prevalent in general. There were six youth (9 percent) who used a purposeful approach across all five practices; however, these youth also shared instances in which they turned to more casual or strategic approaches for certain practices.

Table 2. Percentage of youth using specific approaches for a number of practices

Number of practices	% of total sample (n=70)		
	Casual	Purposeful	Strategic
0	1	6	49
1	9	13	24
2	29	26	20
3	37	24	7
4	21	23	0
5	3	9	0

A further question raised by our analysis and findings is: Why do youth vary their approaches and lean toward casual approaches in some instances, when they use certain practices, while more purposeful or strategic tacks in others? In seeking to account for these patterns, we call attention to two elements: the basic building blocks and supports for different participatory practices; and the personal or civic considerations that inform youths' choices to participate in different ways online.

Digital media are widely considered to lower the barriers to entry to participation (Jenkins et al., 2009). That assertion assumes, though, that would-be participants have the basics. Baseline factors such as time, access to digital technologies, skills and literacies, and the presence of supports influence the extent to which youth use new media in casual, purposeful, or strategic ways. In relation to the practice of production, many youth have tools to create video and the like right in their smart phones. However, crafting an artful video aimed at a political issue requires time, further access to editing software, and the know-how to use it. Our interviews with youth revealed considerable variation in the extent to which youth are tech- or social media-savvy. Some youth, like Lori—the young activist dedicated to the issue of sex trafficking described in the Introduction of this report—are adept at leveraging different social media



platforms and other digital assets in service of their causes. Other youth were far less experienced with leveraging the web in these ways, although they were often quite engaged with one platform or another for social purposes. The availability of supports—including offline or online resources, peers, or mentor figures—who can scaffold the needed skills or literacies, as well as the inclination to seek out and tap these supports, are key factors in this disparity (James, 2014). To be sure, all youth need not be equipped with an in-depth toolkit of digital skills, especially if they often engage civically in collective or social contexts, where different skills may be tapped across their network as part of any given civic effort.

As important as these tech factors are, whether or not youth put their time, digital access, and skills to use in strategic ways also depends on how they conceive of, or imagine, the possibility space—both positive and negative—for civic action. Related to this, we draw on Evans' concept of the "digital civic imagination" or "a young person's capacity to imagine strategic uses of digital tools and platforms...[and] the ability to abstract strategies from personal, social uses of digital tools to address civic and political issues of personal significance" (2015). Similarly, in their account of various youth groups engaged in participatory politics, Jenkins et al. describe the "civic imagination" as "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems" (forthcoming, p. 38). In turn, the casual, purposeful, and strategic approaches described here can be considered expressions, or markers, of the *digital civic imagination*—the ways in which civic youth envision and act on the possibility space (including the opportunities, challenges, and implications) new media afford for participation in public life.

Importantly, both personal and civic considerations influence youths' digital civic imagination (thinking) and, in turn, the ultimate approaches (actions) they adopt. Personal stakes—the perceived risks or benefits to an individual young person of online civic participation—can encourage or discourage robust uses of the internet in support of a civic or political cause. Some youth worry about the short- and long-term implications of producing and circulating a provocative, politically-tinged video via YouTube and Twitter (Weinstein, 2014; Weinstein, Rundle & James, 2015). The "digital afterlife" (Soep, 2014) of online content can include negative backlash and perhaps pose concerns about negative impacts for one's future employment prospects and the like. Therefore, in addition to technical supports, youth need emotional and ethical supports for navigating the personal risks that can accompany digital civic action. As boyd & Marwick (2011) point out, youth like Jamey Rodemeyer need fuller support from adults as they manage the afterlife of their online civic deeds.

In addition to personal stakes, civic considerations—reflection about what might constitute an effective change-making approach for a given civic or political issue—should also be at play.

If a young person is involved in a recycling campaign in her community, walking door to door, observing the presence or absence of recycling bins, and talking with neighbors directly may be a more effective tack—especially if many people in her community are not often online and may miss strategic Tweets shared on the organization's website. Furthermore, sometimes use of the internet for certain practices can actively backfire. For example, dialogue and feedback may be essential in helping a community exchange perspectives about how to



address a proposal to change the school busing system. However, there is also abundant evidence that online exchanges often devolve into shouting matches that may undercut and discourage voice. Therefore, strategic consideration of how the internet may, or may not be, helpful to one's cause can lead to adoption of different online approaches—casual, purposeful, or strategic—or to the decision not to use the internet at all. Furthermore, civic considerations should be attentive to not only the “how” of addressing an issue of importance, but also the “why”—the structural factors that underlie social problems like youth violence, racism, and educational inequities.

Our interviews suggested that the baseline factors and complex considerations described here inform civic youth's approaches to participatory politics. Put differently, these elements support their digital civic imaginations and their capacities to put them into action.

Discussion and Implications

In this report, we have explored the ways in which civically active youth envision and enact the digital civic imagination—how they think about and do civics online. We set out to understand both the extent to which and how youth are leveraging digital tools for civic deeds. Our findings point to inspiring examples of youth engagement in strategic forms of participatory politics, but also to many instances in which online tools are used in a less considered, more offhand manner, thus limiting the potential for impact.

Our analysis focused on five participatory practices which predate the digital age but which can be facilitated in powerful ways by social and other digital media. All of the civic youth in our studies engage in investigation, production, circulation, dialogue and feedback, and mobilization—although new media are used to varying extents as part of these practices. Digital technologies, social media sites, and other online spaces are routinely used as part of investigation, circulation, and production, whereas offline forms of dialogue and feedback and mobilization were more prevalent than online modes of these practices.

More critical than the “where” of the practices, though, is the “how.” A central aim of this report is to specify differences in approach when youth take up these participatory practices. Our analysis revealed three distinct approaches: “flash” or casual uses; purposeful but not quite savvy approaches; and, finally, robust and strategic uses of new media in pursuit of civic agendas. We found that when civic youth leverage new media, casual approaches are more common, especially when they circulate or produce content, or seek to mobilize others on behalf of their cause. Purposeful approaches are more typical when youth engage in online investigation and dialogue and feedback. Strategic approaches are not dominant for any practice. Fewer than 10 percent describe strategic media use for more than two practices. Further, among fully half of our participants we found an absence of strategic approaches to any practice.

Notably, our data also suggest that youth don't necessarily stick to one approach. Rather, as they do civics online they often change their approaches. Casual approaches to one practice, such as circulation, may be carried out alongside more purposeful or strategic approaches to other practices, such as production. In other words, just because a young person is casual or strategic about one practice, doesn't mean she takes the same approach to other participatory practices. There could be various reasons for these shifts in



approach. Youth might have more experience with, and support for, certain practices which over time, can “up” their game, leading to a more sophisticated, strategic approach. Or they might reason that a casual, low effort approach might be sufficient for a given civic goal, but that a well-developed, strategic plan is necessary for another objective.

Note the distinction here between the thinking behind one’s approach and the specific actions undertaken. Approaches that appear casual on the surface can be carried out after due consideration. However, our accounts of casual approaches to the participatory practices described in this report were cases in which the thinking behind the acts appeared to be as brisk as the acts themselves.

The distinctions in approach described in this work echo Zuckerman’s distinction (2013b) between “thin” modes of civic action, which require less effort, and “thick” modes, which are more involved and robust. As Zuckerman argues, even thin approaches are important elements of civic engagement, even if the outcomes are typically more symbolic than concretely impactful. Therefore, casual modes of participation are not to be dismissed out of hand. What seems vital, though, is that youth think through and grasp the realistic or likely impacts of different approaches to online civics. What’s worrying are the instances in which civic youths’ aspirations are grander than the strategies they use to meet them. Assuming that a single tweet or Facebook message is all that it takes to spread the word about an event or online campaign may be naïve, especially in a cultural moment in which social media feeds are fast moving and overcrowded. The most important takeaway from this report is that youths’ civic goals need to be more strategically aligned with the methods or tools they use.

More generally, we want to ensure that youth are equipped with the online savvy, and supports, to stage successful civic efforts with the help of the web, when they wish to do so. The fact that half of the youth in our study did not evince a strategic approach to any practice is notable; it may indicate a lack of skills and supports for effective participatory politics in the online space. Therefore, civic education in a digital era arguably should include supports for the development of new media literacies.

At the same time, we surely don’t want youth to tap the internet just for the sake of using it. Rather, we want them to leverage it in ways that can truly help, and hopefully will not bring significant harm to the cause, or to themselves. Engaging in dialogue about a controversial issue, taking a stand on behalf of a cause, and confronting elites in networked publics, can each pose considerable risks alongside the promising opportunities. The tragic case of Jamey Rodemeyer, who created an “It Gets Better” video and later committed suicide, and the backlash experienced by Jason Russell in the wake of Kony 2012 are both cautionary tales. Yet, the message from these tales is not that civic youth should avoid using the internet on behalf of their civic goals. Rather, our call is for supports for youth that are mindful of the unique affordances, both positive and negative, of civic participation in a digital age. Youth first need supports to develop the necessary skills to do participatory politics. They also need ongoing supports to help them reflect on the personal opportunities and risks that can attend to online action and to manage the “digital afterlives” of their online choices.



Given the complexities of the digital age there are various efforts to rethink civic education. Our research team is part of a educational effort to design supports along these lines, aimed at helping youth develop their digital civic imaginations. As part of the Educating for Participatory Politics (EPP) project and in collaboration with the educational organization, Facing History and Ourselves, we are designing classroom materials focused on the five participatory practices and their affordances in the new digital landscape. Importantly, building off of Facing History's curricular materials about bigotry, genocide, and civil rights, the new lessons engage consideration of how the internet can support but also challenge our understandings and approaches to address such issues. Our EPP network partners are undertaking related efforts designed for different venues—including informal learning environments such as camps and after school programs as well as youth civic organizations themselves. Overall, our agenda is to reimagine civic education given the new opportunities and complexities of the digital age. Our hope is that these interventions will serve to support effective and responsible use of the web for civic ends.¹

All in all, our findings suggest that the internet may be changing the *where* and *how* of youth civic and political participation. We opened this report with vignettes about two young civic actors, Lori and Carolina. Both of these young women are exemplary in their dedication to civic matters, and in that, offer a counterpoint to the common refrain that youth are not stepping up to assume "citizenly roles." At the same time, these actors take somewhat different approaches, particularly to the digital affordances they have at their disposal. Lori is a sophisticated strategist, harnessing social media sites and other digital capabilities to serve her cause. Carolina is no less committed, and is arguably a strategic civic actor offline. However, she certainly takes a less strategic approach with respect to the online mechanisms she uses to support her offline community-based efforts to stem pollution and uplift her neighborhood. These differences in approach may be appropriate, given the types of civic goals these two young women are pursuing.

Across our larger sample of civic youth, we also observed differences in how youth tap new media to do civics. In many cases, "light touch," casual approaches are more prevalent than robust and strategic ones—often where online tools, if tapped more strategically, might lead to greater impact. While the internet may hold great potential to transform the public sphere, uplifting youth voice and its potential for impact, the reality may often fall short of the promise. Getting closer to that promise requires that we focus our energies on bolstering youths' digital civic imaginations, supporting them in developing the technical literacies and reflective dispositions that will enable them to be successful participants in contemporary public life.

¹For additional information and samples of resources see <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/projects/educating-participatory-politics>.



Appendix A – Methods

Participants and recruitment

The findings detailed in this report are drawn from analyses of interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012 with 70 civically engaged youth aged 15-25. The broad aim of our study was to examine the “what,” “why,” “how,” and “where” of civic action among young people involved in school-based groups, community organizations, political groups, or other efforts to make a difference in the world.

Most of the young people who participated in our study were from the Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States. We identified participants using a variety of methods: recommendations from colleagues in the field, researching awards given to youth for civic and political work, reaching out to local youth civic and political organizations, and snowball sampling. We aimed to interview a group of youth that was balanced in terms of a range of variables such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of engagement, issues focused on, roles played, and so on. However, recruiting a diverse group of youth engaged at a high level, and securing commitment to participate in our study proved to be challenging. As a result, our sample is not random or representative and is in some respects a convenience sample. Nonetheless, the data reveal important, qualitative insights about what civics looks like among a contemporary group of young people.

Participants in our study were for the most part involved in civic organizations and activities that could be considered “traditional,” or longstanding, venues for youth engagement. These include college Democrat or Republican party affiliates; nonpartisan organizations that offer high school youth firsthand activities in the democratic process, such as campaigning in elections, voter registration, or acting as student election judges; youth groups that advocate to, and work with, elected officials and School Superintendents on issues, such as youth job programs and student voice in teacher evaluations; and community youth groups who raise awareness about environmental issues in their neighborhood, like air quality or recycling. A number of the youth in our study had received national awards in recognition of their work on a range of political or social issues, such as AIDS awareness, LGBT rights, and education initiatives, such as collecting school supplies and raising money for school scholarships in developing countries. Our sample of young civic actors comprised 43 females and 27 males, who were diverse in terms of age (22 were under 18, 28 were 18-21, and 20 were 22-25) and race (27 identified as white, 19 Black/African American, 17 Hispanic, and 7 Asian). Less than 43 percent of our participants had at least one parent who completed a college degree.

These youth were often involved in multiple civic endeavors. Some participants had only recently become civically active in the months prior to taking part in the study, while others (including some of the teens) had been involved in some kind of civic activity for five or more years. Regardless of length of commit-



ment, most youth in our study reported a strong sense of efficacy in their civic or political pursuits. In a post-interview questionnaire, more than 75 percent of the sample responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that they thought of themselves as well qualified to participate in politics. Similarly, almost 75 percent of participants responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that public officials don't care very much about what people like them think. When asked on the pre-interview survey to choose which was more important—being honest, responsible, and law abiding, organizing others to work on something, or questioning and seeking change to injustices—50 percent chose questioning and seeking change to injustices.

Research instruments

Three research instruments were used in the study: a pre-interview survey, an in-depth qualitative interview protocol, and a post-interview questionnaire. Data from all three instruments inform this report. The pre-interview survey was designed to gather baseline data about participants' civic, political, and online activities. The survey also served as a screening tool. In total, 137 completed the pre-interview survey. Based on the type of self-reported activities and the length of involvement, we invited 73 highly engaged youth to take part in the in depth interviews; 70 youth completed the interview portion of the study.²

The in-depth interviews focused on the background and details of young people's civic participation with special attention to the role of digital media therein. We asked participants to discuss how they got involved in their civic or political activities; what they specifically did when working on the issues that they care about; the challenges and supports that they encountered; their goals and successes; what they had learned about the issue, civic work, or about themselves. We inquired about their use of social network sites and other online platforms for their civic work, including the advantages and disadvantages in using these media to effect change. We also asked questions about big ideas and concepts, such as the meaning of the terms, "citizenship," "activist," and "political."

Participants were also presented with two of five hypothetical dilemmas, which were designed to elicit their theories of change. The dilemmas asked youth to imagine themselves in a particular situation and describe what they could do to address an issue. Dilemmas included situations about illegal waste dumping in a local river; helping elect a young candidate for national office; addressing increased youth homelessness; tackling neighborhood youth violence; or choosing an issue of their own.

Interviews lasted an average of two and half hours and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were de-identified prior to coding and analysis. Following the interview, partic-

² We also conducted interviews with 10 young people involved in the Occupy movement. However, the interview protocol was somewhat modified for this subsample, taking into account the distinct nature of their involvement. This report focuses only on findings from the core sample of 70 youth.



Participants were asked to complete a post-interview questionnaire, which contained questions about youths' sense of efficacy in political life, and their experiences and perceptions of race and inequality. Sixty eight youth completed the post-interview questionnaire.

Coding and analysis

The survey data (from both the pre-interview survey and the post-interview questionnaire) provided summary descriptive statistics—for example, the percentage of youth who had signed an e-petition or forwarded political commentary or news related to a political campaign, candidate or issue. These data gave us insights into the kinds of activities participants engage in and the prevalence of certain activities across the sample. However, in order to understand the thinking behind such activities, we closely read and rigorously coded the interview transcripts.

In collaboration with fellow researchers in the YPP network, we developed a coding scheme anchored by the five participatory practices: *investigation*, *circulation*, *production*, *dialogue and feedback*, and *mobilization*. A team of three researchers coded selected transcripts in N'Vivo, a qualitative software program, until we reached reliability with the codes, achieving a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.7 or higher. In order to maintain consistency throughout the coding process, we routinely discussed code definitions in light of new data. Coding of all transcripts was entered into Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis platform.

Once coding was complete, coders undertook further rounds of coding in order to examine the extent to which and how traditional or digital media were being leveraged as part of the participatory practices. Subsequent rounds of coding also functioned as shadow coding for the first round of participatory practices coding, further ensuring reliability.

During the coding process for media use, we observed differences in youths' approaches to new media tools in relation to their civic work. For example, two youth may each use Facebook to circulate information related to their organizations but in quite different ways. To explore these differences, we used a thematic analytic approach. Through this process we identified three distinct approaches to digital civic participation: *casual*, *purposeful*, and *strategic*. Two team members then subcoded all *participatory practice* data for these three approaches. A third team member shadow coded a third of the excerpts in each report to ensure coding consistency.



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