Youth, citizenship and online political communication

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

There is a common lament that young people are not very interested in politics. They do not vote, they are not concerned with their elected officials, and they forgo involvement in political matters. In essence, they are disengaged from the political process. “Politics” has become a dirty word and it refers to boring, hypocritical politicians that only seem to care about one thing: getting a vote every four or five years (Coleman & Rowe, 2005). But at the same time, youth are active online and internet-based activities are a frequent part of their lives. They represent the most regular and savvy users of the internet. They are computer literate, they know how to find information online, and they use the internet to make friendships and sustain networks. Therefore, organizations that want to promote civic or political knowledge and engagement and encourage political participation in a variety of arenas should ensure that they have a successful online presence. The organization’s website should, at a minimum, have a better chance of reaching this age group, and at most may be able to assist in reversing the problem of political disengagement.

These claims are made in a changing environment. Democratic citizenship is evolving in conjunction with political communication, due to tremendous social, political, and economic factors. Academic literature across an array of disciplines has attempted to pinpoint these changes, theorizing how such changes are (either positively or negatively) influencing democracy. Because the perspective of this dissertation advances from an understanding of political communication within a democratic context, it addresses both the theoretical environment of democratic citizenship as well as that of political communication.

Blumler and Gurevitch (1995, 2000) define a “system perspective” to understanding political communication. First proposed in the 1970s, they see the ideal political communication system containing three elements: political institutions, media institutions, and citizen audiences. Interaction between these three actors is both horizontal – between political and media institutions – and vertical, where political and media institutions provide information to and get information from citizens.

Such a model must be continuously adapted, due to what Blumler and Gurevitch call internal and external “sources of instability.” External forces include rapid advances in
information and communication technology and updated laws aimed at the media and political elites. Internal forces include mutual adaptation between political elites and the media as well as changes in the relationship between political elites and the media and their audiences. This dissertation focuses on both of these forces. It examines the external force of changing communication technologies and specifically political (youth) organizations’ adaptation to the internet in the form of civic-political websites, which aim to provide information and promote participation. It also focuses on both mentioned internal forces, that of mutual adaptation and elite-citizen relations, particularly the elite response to the political positioning of youth.

Traditionally speaking, political elites wage a constant battle with media gatekeepers. Politicians struggle to make their messages appear in the most flattering ways on television and in newspapers. Media organizations defend their practices (for example, in the UK by giving equal coverage to all major candidates during election campaigns) and fight back against what they see as spin produced by scheming politicians. However, with the adaptation of online communication tools, a new dynamic in this relationship has emerged: Mass media still exist, of course, but political elites now have the option of creating an unmediated, global online presence where citizens can receive these messages without intervention from media organizations.

The term mutual adaptation implies a struggle between two equivalent actors. As noted, online communication (an external force) has somewhat altered this internal dynamic. But the growing use of online communication technologies has also influenced the other internal source of instability: relations between political actors and citizens. As this dissertation will explore, some (Blumler, 2001; Brants, 1998) have argued that this relationship is changing. If political elites are now operating within a different dynamic in balancing their intended messages with mass media gatekeepers, at the same time they are experiencing a growing need to address the concerns and demands of citizens. The internet – which initially promised unrestricted dispersion of information and strategic communication – is providing the means for citizens to speak back. Because of the interactivity made possible online, political elites are adapting to pressure to take into account citizen’s voices on important issues.

Thus mutual adaptation as an internal source of instability, though it still exists between political elites and media institutions, is also becoming a more relevant term to describe the relationship between political elites and citizens. As is the focus of this dissertation, civic-political youth organizations are using participatory websites to reach out to young people, providing them with information but also encouraging their feedback and participation. Though on the surface it may appear innovative, this progression still often takes place within traditional
boundaries. To explain this perceptive, it is important to bring in the concept of democratic citizenship, that is, membership in or attachment to a political community.

With such rapid transformation and perceived transparency in decision-making processes, it seems that these elites have successfully adapted to an evolving political communication system. But adaptation goes beyond a more interactive, top-down dialogue where elites control the setting and citizens act within permitted styles of debate. There is evidence for more radical change. Citizens are increasingly demanding – and in some cases, being granted – dialogue with elites. But they are also morphing into new kinds of institutional actors, who create individual forms of pressure and also form their own, bottom-up organizations capable of acting on an institutional level. This dissertation will focus on both organizations construed as encouraging conventional citizenship and also others that operate within a model of non-conventional citizenship.

In sum, the internet as an external force of instability has contributed to a shift in the focus of mutual adaptation, where political elites to some degree control their own mediated presence, and a greater role for the citizen, who is also capable of creating her own online space. Thus the previously vertical, top-down interaction between political elites and citizens is incorporating a more equal, horizontal element. I am interested in exploring the contemporary challenge for political elites situated in this environment, where the evolution of communication technology collides with an evolving citizenry.

At the same time that political communication is experiencing an evolution, so is the citizen. In order to simultaneously understand these shifts one must begin with an appreciation for contemporary changes in democratic theory. Like literature focusing on political communication, democratic theorists see technology playing an important role in how citizens operate in today’s world. There are some (e.g., Delli Carpini, 2000) that declare individuals – and particularly young people – to be disengaged and indifferent citizens. Such studies maintain the concept of apathetic youth; they point to dwindling voter turnout and falling party membership and declare a crisis. The solution is to find ways to reconnect youth to traditional political participation. They want youth to watch the news, participate in electoral campaigns, and vote.

Others reject these claims of apathy. Young people may be cynical – bored, irritated, even angry with politicians – but most certainly not apathetic. This group argues that young people are dynamic and empowered. They are turning against party politics and not voting, but they are looking for and demonstrating other ways to get their voices heard. These non-traditional political activities relate to emerging theoretical ideas about what constitutes
citizenship and political engagement (Coleman, 2004b) and include things like signing a petition or attending a demonstration (White, Bruce, & Ritchie, 2000). But I see both perspectives (of apathetic and the just-mentioned dynamic youth) operating within a model of conventional citizenship. Although they differ in who is considered responsible for youth indifference and how to define legitimate forms of participation, for both the end goal is to reconnect youth with traditional institutions and allow those institutions to regain their legitimacy. But a thriving culture of alternative organizations, often not seen as an equal alternative in this arena of literature, points to a need to acknowledge a non-conventional citizenship, which sees political institutions and citizens in a much different light, outside of traditional activity and geared towards different aims.

With these considerations at the fore, this project aims to analyze one particular scenario of modern-day political communication: that is, communication directed from political elites to citizens. Given the above-detailed political climate I examine the theoretical perspective of organizations towards citizenship as well as the types of communication used with their chosen audience. In essence, I look at the mode of online political communication (distinguished as either strategic or reflexive in character) employed in both conventional and non-conventional organizations (detailed next). Empirically, this dissertation focuses on the aims and strategies of youth organizations as well as an examination of the online content of corresponding websites. At the same time, these tensions are situated against young people’s own understanding of citizenship, through an exploratory analysis of a survey that taps youth attitudes and behaviors towards online use and civic and political participation. It is appropriate to briefly define a number of terms that are key to the development of this research project.

1.2 Key terms

As described, there are two concepts that operate as a theoretical backdrop to this dissertation. The first is democratic citizenship. Citizenship can be understood as the role of each individual member of a democratic society. Keeping in mind the current evolution in thought, I distinguish between conventional and non-conventional citizenship and use such a distinction to classify the organizations that are the focus of this research. Conventional citizenship encourages a mainstream, more traditionally accepted means to admirable citizenship, where political engagement entails casting a vote, joining a political party, or wearing a campaign button. Non-conventional citizenship also promotes participation but encourages methods outside the scope of traditional arenas. It focuses on life-political issues that young people are particularly concerned with, like the environment or animal rights. Perhaps
most importantly, though, non-conventional citizenship encourages a citizenship that does not explicitly relate back to institutional politics, and recognizes action against government actors but also corporations.

Political communication is the second key theoretical concept, and is examined here primarily in terms of communication from political elites (in this case, youth organizations) to citizens, within the context of participatory websites. I distinguish between strategic and reflective communication. Political actors are strategic because they aim to achieve a particular outcome. Such intentional communication can be seen from a youth organization in attempting to raise the number of visits their website gets, encourage young people to participate in a particular campaign, and so on. Strategic communication can therefore be defined as goal-oriented communication, necessarily following from a supply model of communication (sender to receiver) and is often persuasive in its approach. At the same time, political actors must be aware of the changing environment in order to effectively communicate with their target audience. In order to deal with difficulties or adjustments they must reflexively examine their goals. Reflexive communication is defined as responsive and interactive, utilized in order to deal with difficulties or adjustments in strategies and motivations.

A further term of interest is youth. Young people, defined as a developmentally distinct age group, often find themselves differentiated from citizens as a whole. As noted earlier in terms of political communication, this distinction takes both positive and negative directions, with some seeing young people as disengaged and apathetic, while others argue for shifts in reputable citizenship practices and praise youth for innovative forms of expression. At the same time, youth demonstrate a great affinity for online communication. Within this climate, both academics and political elites have made great effort in understanding how best to reach them online. The most obvious indicator of youth is age and usually ranges anywhere from 12 to 30 years. I do not make such a specification in this dissertation, rather gearing the inquiry around definitions provided by youth organizations.

Youth organization is the term used to describe a wide variety of groups that address young people, encompassing social movements, government initiatives, and campaign associations. Due to their civic-political nature they operate under a certain premise of citizenship and exist to provide certain types of information, often in the hope that this information will lead to specific forms of engagement or participation. In essence, they want youth to respond in particular ways. This dissertation distinguishes youth organizations as promoting either a conventional or non-conventional view of citizenship, as seen through their online presence.
Finally, civic-political websites encompass the form of mediated communication examined in this dissertation. Countless ways to communicate are now available online and have only multiplied in recent years. Civic-political websites are seen as an online structure of communication: An organization’s website represents its official online face to the world, and though it may choose to incorporate other strategies, the website remains a steadfast entry point for official information about the organization. Further, it allows for wide provision of information but also maintains a global connection with citizens, networks, friends and foes, and the possibility (or risk) of interaction with its audience. Because of the focus on communication strategies, a fixed point of entry – as represented by an organization’s website – is a good starting point for disseminating the message to the intended audience.

The UK as a research focus

The United Kingdom is the contextual reference point in this research. It provides an interesting country case as it has a rich heritage of theoretical work on citizenship as well as a focus in recent years in coming to terms with a “crisis” of citizenship, particularly among youth (e.g., Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002). This has resulted in a multitude of academic and press attention to this issue, a recent introduction of citizenship education into school curricula, and numerous government-sponsored initiatives as well as a thriving alternative sphere where single-issue campaigns and pressure groups grow in number and influence. The UK is also a technologically advanced society with high internet penetration rates, and scholars and practitioners in this context have demonstrated interest in reviving relations between government and the people, for example with an enthusiasm for applying e-democracy to this challenge (Coleman & Gatze, 2002). Literature referenced in this dissertation comes primarily from British but also United States sources, though occasionally insights from continental European research are also drawn upon. The presence of US-based literature is worth acknowledging but not problematic: Although by no means identical, both contexts have been noted as representing a North Atlantic or liberal model of media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Both countries work within advanced systems of political communication and are currently experiencing similar developments in economic, social, and technical arenas.

1.3 Research questions

Situated within the broad theoretical arenas of democratic citizenship and political communication, I hope to form a better understanding of web producer views and compare and contrast this with online content. I also draw on survey data to explore youth civic-political
attitudes and behaviors in order to better understand the age cohort youth organizations are keen to reach. The primary research question guiding this study is:

How are websites addressing youth (dis)interest in politics and how does that fit the nature of young people’s conception and “living” of democratic citizenship?

Beyond the primary research question, I address several secondary queries (see Chapter 4 for more detail). These questions focus on three separate political contexts to gather data from a number of relevant perspectives. They vary from the traditional setting of an election campaign, to a look at a broad scope of organizations in a non-electoral time period, and finally to an examination of political consumerism, a rising form of alternative participation that equates certain forms of consumption behavior with citizenship practices. Election campaigns are known for heightened political activity, and much of what constitutes political participation is in part fueled by what transpires during election campaigns. The inquiry began in the context of the Internet and Elections Project1 to examine UK-based websites focused on young people during the 2004 European Parliament election campaign. It continued by examining content in a non-electoral time period, incorporating semi-structured interviews with web producers to understand the motivations behind the content. User data were necessary to understand how youth view citizenship and how they use the internet. An online survey conducted via the CIVICWEB project made this exploratory element possible.2 Therefore, online content is examined in both electoral and non-electoral time periods, web producers are interviewed in order to capture their views towards citizenship and communication, and youth are surveyed to gain insight into their perspectives as young citizens. At its conclusion, this dissertation provides theoretical and practical insights as to how youth-focused organizations are using websites to address today’s young citizen.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of eight chapters, with the Introduction constituting Chapter 1. Chapter 2 provides a detailed theoretical background of the key concepts at stake, examines how

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2 CIVICWEB is a European-wide project that focuses on the production and the nature and characteristics of civic and political websites and the uses and interpretations of these sites by young people. See http://www.childrenyouthandmediacentre.co.uk/ for more detail.
politics and citizenship are being redefined, and introduces the concept of political consumerism. As noted, many see new technologies, particularly the internet, playing an important role in this evolution. Chapter 3 examines theoretical notions surrounding democracy and new media, reviews empirical literature, and discusses why the internet is the medium of choice in this research project. As will be shown, it is theoretically possible to argue that the internet can be used to support or promote traditional democracy and citizenship, but can especially thrive when embracing new forms due to certain characteristics inherent in its structure. Here, a theoretical model is introduced and related specifically to online communication.

Chapter 4 begins by introducing all research questions and detailing the methodology, including qualitative and quantitative content analysis of websites, semi-structured interviews, and the online CIVICWEB survey of young internet users. Next begins a series of three results chapters that provide the opportunity for empirical comparison. The first (Chapter 5) focuses on an analysis of information and engagement features of websites in the UK during the 2004 European Parliament election campaign and looks at the online structure of youth address and approved participation. It also provides initial results from the user survey. Chapter 6 uses producer, content and user data and moves outside of electoral politics by focusing on online initiatives that engage young people in a non-electoral context. Chapter 7 brings together a similar methodological mix and presents a case study of political consumerism. The final chapter, Chapter 8, discusses the research project’s conclusions and implications.