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INTRODUCTION

The networked young citizen: social media, political participation and civic engagement

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The accusations that young people are politically apathetic and somehow failing in their duty to participate in many democratic societies worldwide have been refuted by a growing number of academics in recent years (Loader, 2007; Marsh, O'Toole, & Jones, 2007). Undoubtedly many young citizens have indeed become disenchanted with mainstream political parties and with those who claim to speak on their behalf. But this should not be misinterpreted as a lack of interest on the part of youth with the political issues that influence their everyday lived experience and their normative concerns for the planet and its inhabitants. As the recent waves of protest demonstrations by young people in all their different forms and contexts testify, the suggestion that the next generation of citizens is any less politically engaged than previous ones seems at least premature. How then are we to understand the actions and political values of the future custodians of our politics and what are their implications for democratic governance?

There can be little doubt that the institutions and practices of modern representative government have been subject to growing disillusionment from young citizens. A reluctance to vote at elections, join political parties or have a high regard for their politicians all suggest that many young people are turning away from mainstream politics in many countries (Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007; Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012). Instead, participation in social movements, rallies, protests, consumer boycotts all point to the possible displacement of traditional models of representative democracy as the dominant cultural form of engagement by alternative approaches increasingly characterized through networking practices. The political identity and attitudes of young citizens are thereby seen to be increasingly shaped less by their social ties to family, neighbourhood, school or work, but rather by the manner in which they participate and interact through the social networks which they themselves have had a significant part in constructing. Central to this model of 'networked individualism' (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) is the role played by the Internet and network communication technologies. Of particular relevance, and the primary focus of this edited collection, is the potential of social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* for influencing the political department and civic engagement of what we describe as the *networked young citizen*.

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Assembling the networked young citizen

The debate on citizenship is replete with discourses that exhort young people to adopt the dutiful practices of participation that correspond to the regulatory norms established by earlier generations. Thus active citizens should vote at elections, respect their representatives, join political groups and engage in voluntary activities in their civic communities. It is a model of the citizen as someone who should be *seen* to support the representative system through their dutiful actions but whose *voice* should not be heard. Indeed, the very future prospects for democracy are seen to depend upon the support of the electorate as performed and reproduced through these acts of citizenship. Small wonder then that the political class in many democracies is so concerned about the disaffection of so many young people with these norms of participation (Putnam, 2000; Stoker, 2006).

This emergent disjuncture between conventional representative government and the everyday concerns of young people was vividly captured in a television discussion between the forthright BBC interviewer Jeremy Paxman and the charismatic and opinionated celebrity actor and comic Russell Brand in the Autumn of 2013. Brand had been invited by *The New Statesman* political magazine to be a guest editor for one of its issues and so was asked to discuss his political views on the late night current affairs programme *Newsnight*. While a sometimes controversial figure this was the first time that Brand had entered the world of ‘celebrity politics’ (Street, 2004). Often condescending in his style of interrogation Paxman on this occasion appeared to be genuinely engaged by Brand’s arguments. What seemed to surprise Paxman in particular was Brand’s admission that he had never voted and that he extolled young people to follow his example. In this excerpt Brand justifies his view.

I’m not voting out of apathy, I’m not voting out of absolute indifference, and weariness and exhaustion from the lies, treachery, deceit of the political class that has been going on for generations and which has reached fever pitch where we have a disenfranchised, disillusioned, despondent underclass that are not being represented by that political system so voting for it is tacit complicity with that system. And that is not something I’m offering up.

In many respects through this intervention in print and on television Brand is following a familiar path taken by other popular celebrities entering the political sphere. As John Street has described it, ‘celebrity politics is a code for the performance of representations through the gestures and media available to those who wish to claim “representativeness”’ (Street, 2004, p. 445). Thus despite the fact that Brand does not explicitly claim to speak on behalf of younger people, his accomplished use of the media to challenge the conventional perspectives of democratic engagement can be interpreted as just such an attempt to speak more legitimately than politicians for young citizens whose voice is seldom heard (Coleman, 2002). In this sense his performance, as seen on television and more widely through *YouTube*, can be regarded as an act intended to disrupt the normative repetitive depictions of the dutiful citizen. Instead, when asked by Paxman to give an alternative to a model of democracy as voting, he replied with a response which foregrounds an emerging contemporary political aesthetic through which young citizens can engage.

The time is now, change is occurring, we are at a time when communication is instantaneous and there are communities all over the world. The Occupy movement made a difference, even if only that it introduced to the popular public lexicon the idea of the 1% versus the 99%. People for the first time in a generation are aware of massive corporate and economic exploitation. These things are not nonsense and these are subjects which are not being addressed ... Until they are taken seriously ... why would I encourage a constituency of young people who are indifferent to vote?

The ‘representativeness’ of Brand is here expressed as an attempt to claim that the political class is failing to address some of the most important challenges confronting young citizens. Instead, alternative communication channels and modes of action, such as those enacted during the Arab Spring or Occupy movement express the voice of young citizens around the world.

While less dramatic or entertaining than Brand’s narrative, a groundswell of academic opinion has also suggested that the political attitudes of many young people in many parts of the world can increasingly be characterized by a less deferential and more individualized (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1990) self-actualizing (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009) and critical disposition (Norris, 2002) which marks a departure from the dutiful norms of citizenship (Dalton, 2008). Such cultural changes to political participation are shaped of course by wider economic and social forces and they do not happen overnight. Moreover, the decline in mainstream engagement has been ongoing for some time in many countries (Norris, 2002). Instead of regarding them as the death knell of western models of democracy however, it may be more useful to see them as potentially heralding a recalibration of modern political institutions and practices in ways that are more sensitive to the dissatisfaction felt by many young people with their political systems. Young citizens may as a consequence be finding new ways to voice their opinions and garnering new agents of representativeness such Russell Brand to envision their views.

What then does our emerging networked young citizen look like? How can we recognize these actors? Drawing from the literature (Bang, 2004; Beck, 1994; Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Giddens, 1991) it is helpful to take a number of key features to assemble what we call the *networked young citizen*. Networking young citizens are far less likely to become members of political or civic organizations such as parties or trades unions; they are more likely to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks; they are more project orientated; they reflexively engage in lifestyle politics; they are not dutiful but self-actualizing; their historical reference points are less likely to be those of modern welfare capitalism but rather global information networked capitalism and their social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment.

This is of course an ideal type construction and is not intended to represent all young citizens in every respect. Its value is as a framework against which we may assess the normative political dispositions of young people. So the networked young citizen is not necessarily typical of all young people in every society. Our objective is not to provide yet another generalization about all young people being characterized as a type. Rather, we believe that it is a useful analytical device by which to assess the evidence for cultural change. Some further clarifications need to be made to our assemblage. First, this does not represent an all-encompassing discontinuity with previous dutiful models. Networked young citizens may live conterminously with other dutiful citizens and indeed share some of each other’s attributes on occasions. Second, networked citizenship can be seen as fluid and always under construction within regulatory norms and structuring processes. A model of citizenship that is fluid and constituent of lived experience does not suggest apathy but rather an identity whose realization has to be performed and enacted. Part of that performance may surely include disrupting dominant discourses and repeated citations resonant of dutiful models of citizenship (Loader, 2012). Third, networking young citizens are shaped by different individual lived experiences that will not be the same for everyone. Consequently issues of inequality and power come into play. Networks and networking do not imply a power vacuum where all are equal. Instead, the benefits accrued by access to social and cultural capital through particular networks foreground the need to differentiate between social networks. Networks exhibit new regulatory norms of exclusion as well as inclusion. It also requires us to consider what kinds of capacities are required by young people for effective networked citizenship.

Are all young citizens networked equally?

The competitive advantages to be accrued through membership of the most resource-rich networks have become particularly pronounced as a consequence of the world financial crisis since 2007. While young people as a whole have been disproportionately hit harder by these events compared with other age groups the burdens have not been evenly distributed across all young people. Educational and employment opportunities for young people have been significantly influenced by social and cultural factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and location.

Consequently, the economic recession has both compounded the alienation of many young citizens and threatens to produce further personal insecurity for millions of individuals as they join the ranks of the emerging *precarariat* (Standing, 2011).

In Europe, for example, it is estimated that 94 million young people (15–29) face an uncertain future in the labour market and risk becoming politically and socially marginalized. A danger therefore exists of a growing mass of disenchanting young people subject to unemployment, insecure job prospects and without voice or representation in the public domain. In August 2013 approximately one quarter of young European citizens were unemployed (Eurostat). A more accurate indicator providing figures for those ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEETs) is still alarmingly high with 14 million aged 15–29 recorded in 2011. This situation is not uniform across Member States with NEET figures being significantly higher in the East (e.g. Romania, Bulgaria) and South (e.g. Portugal, Spain, Greece) compared with those in the north (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Nordic countries). In the United States the figure for those out of work or education was almost 16% of 18–29-year-olds in October 2013. The transition from youth to adulthood in the twenty-first century is therefore beset by growing social inequality, structural unemployment and a disaffection with politics which when combined are shaping the opportunities for social inclusion and security of many young citizens.

How then does the networked young citizen relate to this picture of global social and economic inequality? Recent developments suggest a strong relationship between social media use and political engagement that raises questions about the potential for social media to help stem or even reverse patterns of political inequality that have troubled scholars for years. Michael Xenos, Ariadne Vromen and Brian D. Loader explore this contention in the second article of this special issue of *iCS* where they articulate a model of social media and political engagement among young people, and test it using data from representative samples of young citizens in Australia, the United States, and the UK. Their results suggest a strong, positive relationship between social media use and political engagement among young people across all three countries, and provide additional insights into the role played by social media use in the processes by which young people become politically engaged. Notably, the results also provide reasons to be cautiously optimistic concerning the overall influence of this popular new form of social networking on longstanding patterns of political inequality.

For some time a number of academics have believed that the interactive, collaborative and user-generated content capacities of social media technologies themselves offer the prospect of facilitating new modes of political communication which are more commensurate with those contemporary youth cultures associated with the networked young citizen. They point to an electoral affinity between what are perceived as the inherent democratic features of social media and their potential for enhancing the participative and deliberative skills of young citizens (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Leadbeater, 2008). This notion of *participatory culture* has quickly managed to gain a strong foothold in contemporary debates about social media and user engagement. The concept’s primary advocate, Henry Jenkins, uses it to describe a cultural situation in which

established relations between media producers and users have been disrupted to the point at which ‘... we might now see them as participants who interact with each other ...’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). Hence, studies of for instance *Facebook*, blogging and *YouTube* have looked into what participatory practices these environments offer and are capable of fostering. Overall, these studies have often looked for, and found, engaged online users and inspiring participatory practices – especially among young people.

But what is the impact of engagement, and participation, within participatory cultures of social media on the public orientation of young people? On this connection, the existing literature is rather unclear. The third article in this special issue, written by Mats Ekström, Tobias Olsson, and Adam Shehata, addresses this question by drawing upon longitudinal survey data from a sample of Swedish 13–18-year-olds. The concept of public orientation is measured by three indicators: young people’s values, interests and everyday peer talk. These indicators are analysed with reference to respondents’ Internet orientations, which are conceptualized as four separate but interrelated spaces (a news space, a space for social interaction, a game space and a creative space). The results primarily emphasize the importance of orientations towards news space and space for social interaction. Overall, the findings strongly suggest that orientations towards these spaces are related to adolescents’ public orientation. The findings confirm the centrality of news and information in political socialization, but they also challenge the idea that social media platforms – such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and blogging – enable forms of social interaction and creative production that have an overall positive impact on young people’s public orientation.

Transitions from childhood to adulthood

As one might expect from a period when dutiful conceptions of citizenship were de rigueur scholars exploring how young people were socialized into their political attitudes regarded the role of parents as paramount. Values and political orientations were seen as transmitted from parent to child in a linear learning mode. The networking young citizen model, constituent of self-actualizing, reflexive and interactive attributes, would suggest however a more complex and critical learning path in which the young person plays a more co-constructive role. In our next article Emily Vraga, Leticia Bode, Jung Hwan Yang, Stephanie Edgerly, Kjerstin Thorson, Chris Wells, and Dhavan V. Shah draw upon contemporary theories of political socialization which move away from traditional transmission perspectives to consider the diverse ways in which parents and children can develop discrete political orientations. In their study during a competitive US presidential campaign they examine various pathways through which influence occurs across generations in terms of partisanship and candidate evaluations. Their results suggest that while harmonious attitudes remain the norm, there are substantial opportunities for young citizens to demonstrate their independence, particularly when gaining different perspectives from schools and social media sources. Their findings are an important contribution to our understanding of how young networking citizens and their parents come to understand politics and the factors that shape youth socialization. Of particular influence in this new socialization perspective is the role played by social media as a means of facilitating mutual understanding between parents and young people.

How then do these social networking environments influence political talk and understanding among young citizens? Do they make it easier for young citizens to chat about the public issues which affect their lived experience? Are they more likely to share political opinions and views? Kjerstin Thorson in her contribution to this special issue provides a microanalysis of political talk and interaction by young citizens networking on *Facebook*. Her investigation leads her to propose that participatory culture is shaped through social networking sites by social ambiguities that can actually increase the risk and uncertainties associated with talking politics rather than reducing

them. She reports on two sets of in-depth interviews conducted to explore the ways that uncertainties about audience reception of posts on Facebook inspire strategies for ‘inventing’ modes of political interaction on the one hand, and, for others, to suppress opinion expression by creating the sense that talking politics on the site is a high-risk endeavour.

Alternative networking young citizens?

The final article in this special issue turns to the alternative forms of political engagement as expressions of emerging political norms characteristic of the networked young citizen. James Sloam examines the role that social media has played in the development of protest movements across the continent of Europe. Networking young citizens have mobilized through mass demonstrations such as the *indignados*, outraged against political corruption and unemployment in Spain, and the *Occupy* movement voicing its anger against what they see as the social inequality arising from global capitalism. Rejecting traditional political elites and organizations they have also been involved in the development of new political parties such as the German Pirate Party and the Italian Five-Star Movement. As commentators have observed a defining characteristic of these developments has been the manner in which young people have used networks to spread and share their protests across continents and national borders (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Sloam seeks to demonstrate how ‘digitally networked action’ has enabled a ‘quickenning’ of youth participation – an intensification of political participation among young, highly educated citizens in search of a mouthpiece for their ‘indignation’.

Concluding remarks

The engagement of each new generation of young people with the practices and institutions of democratic governance in a society is an essential means by which such a political system retains its legitimacy. Without their consent and commitment, the authority of politicians and policy-makers to represent the values and interests of future citizens is called into question. The attitudes and political values of young people are therefore often seen as foretelling the future and are regarded as important agents of social and political change. Increasingly shaped by wider forces of globalization, the digital revolution and reflexive individualism, the concept of the networked young citizen may become a compelling one that is gaining currency through empirical investigation. It suggests an emerging generational cohort that is more sceptical of politicians and mainstream conventional political institutions. But it also raises the possibility of the networking young citizen playing a more significant role in reconfiguring our democratic practices.

Opponents of such an approach will no doubt both reject the notion of emerging political norms associated with the networked young citizen and contend that any move away from the dutiful or active citizen model will undermine liberal representative democracy. Fearful of the ‘personalization’ of politics as a means to undermine serious rational deliberation and even encourage populist rhetoric of the sort expressed by Russell Brand, such critics can only see these developments as evidence for the trivialization of democracy. Yet in the face of growing evidence to the contrary these commentators seem bereft of ideas to address the growing estrangement between young citizens and mainstream political parties, politicians and electoral engagement. The scepticism expressed by young people towards those who represent them rather than being taken as a measure of apathy could instead be seen as a perfectly legitimate democratic attitude of reflexively engaged citizens conscious of their personal circumstances.

Here the distinction between scepticism and cynicism is crucial. The former positive democratic attitude derived from a more informed population and with critical sensibilities can act

to strengthen participatory models of democracy previously considered impractical due to the perceived poor quality of the electorate (Schumpeter, 1943). Through effective networking young citizens have demonstrated a capacity to increasingly hold representatives to account and critically monitor their policies and actions. Social media combined with other networking opportunities enables the networked young citizen to reflexively consider a wider range of political discourses and share these with friends or engage in connective repertoires of political action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Such processes of re-configuration do not require representative systems to disappear but they do demand that our democratic systems need to be more culturally receptive to the lived experiences of those they serve. Coleman (2013) provides an excellent exploration of just how a central democratic act such as voting, when seen as a cultural activity, raises essential questions about its relevance to the emotional experience of those citizens expected to participate. It is an intellectual approach that is both compatible with Russell Brand's clarion call and pragmatic in its desire to reconnect voting with the electorate's everyday concerns and changing norms.

But it is also important that such reconfigurations do not disguise differential capabilities and relations of power that are also a constituent feature of networking. As Bourdieu (1984) reminds us, access to social and cultural capital is often used to ensure unequal social distinctions between citizens. In the context of growing social inequality social networking may thus reinforce divisions that are detrimental to democracy (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). While the present academic debate continues to be divided between those who maintain an adherence to dutiful citizenship the contributions to this special issue have all been prepared to recognize that new forms of networked young citizenship, more compatible for the times and contemporary youth culture, may be more fruitful for both understanding contemporary developments and also for future democratic governance.

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