



Campus politics, student societies and social media

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Abstract

The university campus has often been seen as an important site for the politicization of young people. Recent explanations for this have focused attention upon the role of the student union as a means to enable a 'critical mass' of previously isolated individuals to produce social networks of common interest. What is missing from these accounts, however, and what this article seeks to address, is how these factors actually facilitate the development of political norms and the active engagement of many students. Drawing upon qualitative data from three countries we argue that it is the milieu of the smaller student societies that are crucial for facilitating the *habitus* of the student citizen. They provide the space for creative development and performance of the political self, affiliations to particular fields and access to cultural and social capital. Moreover, we contend that these processes of politicization are increasingly enacted through social media networks that foreground their importance for developing political habitus in the future.

Keywords: citizen norms, young people, political engagement, student politics, social media, social capital

The university campus has long been regarded as an important space for enabling the engagement of students with politics and their participation in civil society more widely. For aspiring career politicians it represents the first significant rung on the ladder for professional recognition and future advancement. At least since the 1960s student politics has also been regarded as a crucible for student protest and social movement activism worldwide. The university campus also provides an important space for non-politicos to be exposed to political ideas and debates and a range of opportunities to engage in civic activities more broadly. Little surprise, then, that scholars have consequently been interested to explain the role played by universities in the formative development of the political norms and citizenship practices of their students. An insightful contribution to this debate by Nick Crossley and Joseph Ibrahim (2012) argues that the bounded environment of the university provides the ideal location for a 'critical mass' of previously isolated individuals

who share a common interest in politics to combine through the formation of social networks. More specifically, as Crossley (2008) suggested in an earlier article, the university campus provides a range of opportunities for students to meet and share their interests (including halls of residences and courses), but it is the Students' Union that is the most likely mechanism for political socialization and networking.

These persuasive assertions that critical mass, networking and the Students' Union are important explanatory variables for student politicization make a valuable contribution to our current understanding. However, they tell us less about how these factors actually facilitate the development of political norms and the active civic engagement of many students. Moreover, a growing literature, largely associated with theorists of late-modernity, has suggested that the political attitudes of young people can increasingly be characterised as reflexive individualism (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), self-actualizing (Bennett, 1998), expert citizens (Norris, 1999) or 'everyday makers' (Bang, 2004), all of which mark a departure from the traditional dutiful norms of citizenship (Dalton, 2008). If we are to critically assess the role of the campus for shaping the political and civic norms of students we need therefore to be clear about what kind of politics we are referring to when we talk about politicization? Finally, despite foregrounding social networks, Crossley and Ibrahim make no reference to the potential role of social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube*, as a means to stimulate participatory practices and influence political socialization. Through their interactive, collaborative and user-generated content capacities these social networking media are seen by some scholars to be increasingly important for the development of the political norms and practices of young people (Bennett, 2003). Consequently, we believe their importance for student politicization deserves closer scrutiny.

This article draws upon an analysis of new data from three countries (UK, Australia and USA) to explore processes of politicization through an examination of the increasingly digitally mediated networks of student groups. Moving beyond the generalized focus of the Students' Union we go further in this article and argue that it is the myriad of *student societies* supported by the Students' Union that are a primary locus for politicization. Student societies provide the resources necessary for mobilizing students and sustaining their interests as well as enabling the development of organizational skills necessary for a future lifetime of civic engagement. But they also crucially provide the networked milieu whereby young students can explore a range of contemporary political practices and repertoires. That is, they enable students to develop what Pierre Bourdieu might have described as the *habitus* of the young citizen (Bourdieu, 1977). As such it enables us to see politicization as an experiential learning process rather than being formally acquired through instruction and teaching. Formal knowledge of politics is less important than how the political habitus is acquired through performance. It is our contention that we would expect to see social media increasingly informing the political habitus of students through their involvement in student society networks.

Whilst much of the previous research of student politics has focused upon student protests this is not primarily the focus of our analysis here. Instead, we are interested to explore, the nature of the role of student societies in the formative development of political norms through the everyday lived experience of the students; whether we can detect the emergence of new political norms within student politicization; what role social media may play in politicization processes; and whether these factors could be commonly identified in the UK, Australia and the USA despite cultural differences and institutional contexts that would give greater credence to their significance. We addressed these questions by conducting a small exploratory study comprising a number of focus groups in these countries during late 2012 and early 2013 with students belonging to a range of societies. The results will be considered more fully later in the article but first we need to consider in a little more detail the literature on student socialization, new political norms and social media participatory culture.

The student society, socialization and habitus

Political norms are of course acquired to some extent by individuals through a range of pre-university experiences and socialization agencies such as parents, schools and neighbourhood. Nonetheless, as Crossley and Ibrahim have argued, the university provides a significant site for the politicization of students by enabling 'like-minded actors to find one another and form bonds that will support collective action; that is to say, to form dense and multiplex networks' (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012: 609). These networks, we argue, are both increasingly supported by social media platforms and manifest themselves through student union societies. How are we then to understand how students within these societies might become politicized? More specifically, we may ask what is the nature of the role of student societies in the formative development of political norms and practices?

Student societies are an important dimension of the student experience of campus life. They represent the wide cultural interests of the student body and provide a focal point for many students to meet others with similar affinities. For those with a political enthusiasm they may be a point of entry to the active participation in a field hitherto rarely accessible to the adolescent. Student societies also provide an opportunity for those with latent political interests to explore its potential relevance for their lives. Supported through the Students' Union, these societies are primarily run by and for the students themselves. As a consequence, this enables their members to engage and experiment with a range of activities which inform both their acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding but also their values and normative perspectives. It is important to recognize at this stage that not all students engage with student societies to the same extent any more than students in general can be said to be highly politicized. However, our contention is that the role of student societies for the

politicization of those students with a manifest or latent interest in politics may be highly significant.

Traditionally the academic literature on processes whereby young people become socialized into their political attitudes and behaviour has focused upon how values are 'transmitted' by parents or are learnt through 'formal' education, in civics classes, for example (Jennings *et al.*, 2009; Plutzer, 2004). This is a view of politics as being handed down through a process that is external to the recipients. It is often associated with a *dutiful* conception of citizenship whereby the young person is expected to acquire a set of appropriate practices and knowledge to actively participate in democratic society. Akin to this somewhat essentialist notion of the socialization of the dutiful citizen is the concurrent narrow conceptualization of politics itself. Typically, politics becomes defined in relation to mainstream institutions (Parliaments, nation-states) and practices (voting, party membership) with little reference to how young people themselves either experience these or indeed may acquire alternative conceptions of what social issues matter to them personally and how they might engage with these outwith formal politics (Marsh *et al.*, 2007).

More recently it is possible to discern alternative views of political socialization – more sympathetic to our own approach – that both consider the concept of politics to be much broader so as to encompass the lived experience of diverse young citizens and also regards the young person as a more active agent involved in their own political awareness and development (Lee *et al.*, 2012; McDevitt and Chaffee, 2002). How they feel and talk about, as well as relate to politics is contingent upon their lived experience and shaped through interaction with agents, institutions and social networks. It is a perspective that regards socialization as an experiential learning process where the subject is continually mutually adjusting their values, habits and language through complex combinations of peer networks, media, family and formal education.

This view of political socialization as practised and actualized attitudes and dispositions has a clear affinity to Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. Whilst Bourdieu himself never undertook systematic analysis of campus politics his conceptual tools of *habitus*, *capital* and *fields* can, we believe, be adapted to explore the political socialization, acquisition of skills and resources and the civic engagement of students. Bourdieu thought of habitus as the largely unconscious assimilation of values, conventions, habits, and rules that give rise to social practices: 'An acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted' (Bourdieu, 1977: 87). Student societies, we want to suggest, can be seen to provide an important social space for generating and maintaining a political habitus that does not have to be reinvented or created afresh. Instead, its cultivation over time through student societies provides the social organization – conventions, habits, rules – which enable new members to occupy roles and engage in social action. This does not mean that individual actors cannot reinterpret or that these social structures are unchanging and deterministic in their effects.

Indeed, one of its strengths as an explanatory model is that it has the potential to provide a social context for the political habitus to evolve in relation to wider socio-cultural changes and digitally mediated politics.

Following Bourdieu's approach, it is through their close association with particular 'fields' that student societies enable the production of the habitus and access to capitals – economic, cultural, social – which can be seen as resources and assets for their development. The fields of politics, environmentalism, sport, education and others, all in their different ways provide reference to appropriate institutions, content, rules, role models, discourses and practices that are both the product of habitus and its generator. Likewise, by their behaviour, manner of communication, interaction, humour and the like, inculcated by the student societies, students bring their habitus into being and vice versa. It is an environment where they may develop unconsciously the habits of the political self through the opportunity to play, perform, experiment and innovate: in Bourdieu's sense they are able to realize their own 'deportments' – attitudes, values and feelings and emotions. Of particular value is that this understanding allows us to consider that habitus is not determined as a consequence of training the novice student but is instead the outcome of social practices produced both through interactions within a networked community and in relation to the social world of the campus outside.

Consequently the student society can be seen to represent a transitional space for the student between adolescence and their prospective occupational fields. For Bourdieu, the development of an appropriate habitus and the accumulation of appropriate forms of 'capital' is crucial for providing the competitive advantage which enable the individual to succeed over their rivals and position themselves within their destined hierarchical fields. Bourdieu identified a number of different types of capital most notable of which are economic capital (wealth) and cultural capital (knowledge, education, taste). Seemingly less important but still significant were social capital (the value of networks of significant others) and symbolic capital (status and prestige). Political capital he regarded as a form of symbolic capital.

In Bourdieu's work the 'political field' is somewhat narrowly defined in conventional terms as the mainstream political institutions (parties) and practices, inhabited by career politicians and professional public servants (2005). Nonetheless, he also refers to the wider 'field of power' that acts to shape and influence all cultural fields. Political socialization, in the broader understanding we employ here, is experienced through student societies by the embodiment and enactment of habitus and the procurement of capital. These not only facilitate social advantage within these semi-autonomous fields but crucially enable the actor to convert these skills and resources and enable them to participate in other fields. Thus habitus and capital relevant for political and civic engagement in one field may be convertible for active participation in other fields and act to shape the field of politics itself.

Emerging political norms?

One of the criticisms of Bourdieu's work is that it is too closely attached to a French cultural structure that may not be relevant to other countries and is outdated by changes to the political norms of many young people in late modern societies (Bennett *et al.*, 2009). It is important, therefore, that we consider these assertions of emergent political attitudes for politicization and how comparable they might be between societies with similar democratic traditions. Whilst differing in detail, a number of commentators, either directly connected with late-modern theories of social change (Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1991) or drawing upon their propositions (Bang, 2004, 2011; Bennett *et al.*, 2011), have outlined ideal type characterizations of new political identities particularly associated with young people in post-industrial democracies. Lance Bennett, for example, has described the emergence of 'self-actualizing citizens' (AC) who can be distinguished from traditional 'dutiful citizens' (DC) (Bennett, 1998; Bennett *et al.*, 2011; Bennett, 2008a). The former are less likely than their dutiful colleagues to join political organizations, vote in elections, have a strong sense of duty to engage in civic life, follow the news, and hold their political and civic leaders in high regard. Instead, ACs are said to be more motivated by 'lifestyle politics' of ethical consumerism, social movement activism and loose networking increasingly through new media. In similar vein Henrik Bang maintains that we can witness the emergence of 'everyday makers' whose political norms are formed through a 'lived experience' often felt to have little connection to conventional mainstream politics of parties, voting and politicians (Bang, 2011). Everyday makers are reflexive individuals who engage with politics on an ad hoc basis according to how it relates to their life projects at that time. Indeed, a defining aspect of these models of new political norms is the engagement with politics through innovative repertoires that are communicative and interactive and frequently conducted through social networks rather than as a consequence of the proselytizing of formal organizations such as political parties or trades unions. We were therefore interested to search for evidence of these political norms associated with self-actualizing young citizens and everyday makers in the campus politics we explored through a range of student societies. That is, we sought to enquire whether the contemporary habitus engendered by student societies might promote either dutiful or self-actualizing political norms?

Social media and the networked student citizen

Finally, in an age of ubiquitous digital communications, attention in recent years has become focused upon the potential role of social media for influencing the political norms and civic engagement of young people (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Bennett, 2008b; Loader, 2007; Loader *et al.*, 2014). More

specifically for our focus here on student politics we believe social media may be important for three primary reasons. First, the cost effective access to social networking platforms and functional capacities to instantaneously communicate and share digital content makes it a valuable tool for student societies to organize themselves. Second, social networking enables a small critical mass of society members to access cultural and social capital through wider networks. This is sometimes referred to as bridging capital acquired through weak ties. Third, the political domain itself has become significantly influenced by social media with *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* postings prompting news coverage and becoming a commonplace feature of discussions with politicians and celebrities *tweeting* their latest thoughts and ripostes. This raises questions about whether the effective use of social media networks may significantly influence the accumulation of cultural and social capitals and act to shape the political habitus of students.

The study

To examine how politically and civically engaged students understand their own sense of political and civic identity we undertook a qualitative study of existing affinity student societies on three university campuses. We also adopted a comparative approach that comprised the advanced democratic societies of the USA, Australia and the UK in each of which young people are known to be comparatively high adopters of social media.¹ This enabled us to explore whether the expected influence of social media upon the political habitus of students through their networking activities in student societies was national-context specific or more generalizable.

In-person focus groups were chosen as the closest means for us to record qualitative political talk among student group members. As a means to observe the development of political habitus over time in their 'natural' settings they are, of course, limited in comparison to an in-depth ethnographic study. Indeed, we would suggest that our strong indicative findings from this small exploratory investigation could usefully be regarded as a justification for just such an approach in the future. In the event, financial restrictions required us to adopt focus groups in our attempt to discover how students themselves talk about, experience and understand their political self. As Conover and Searing suggest, focus groups are an 'especially useful method for probing the experience of everyday talk to better understand the motivations of citizens' (Conover and Searing, 2005: 40). Within the group environment our intention was to encourage the students to use their own language and ideas to express their opinions, values and views about politics and civic engagement.

To examine political norms we selected societies according to four criteria: first, those who might be more traditionally dutiful through their affiliation to mainstream political parties; second, issue-based groups focused upon human rights and social inequalities; third, societies closely associated with identity politics; and, finally, a selection of what we term 'civic' societies with no explicit

Table 1 Focus group participants: type of group and country

	Party	Issue	Identity	Civic
Aus	University Liberal Club	Young Vinnies	Shades	SUTEKH
USA	College Republicans	Habitat for Humanity	AHANA	Humans vs Zombies
UK	University Green Party	Amnesty International	LGBTQ Network	Women's Cricket Club

political affinities, typically involved in leisure or sporting interests. The decision to choose a sample of groups that covered a range of political and civic norms was taken deliberately to enable us to illicit their diverse experiences of politics and its potential for shaping their political habitus. The respective groups are illustrated in Table 1.

In all, twelve focus groups were recruited, four in each country according to the criteria outlined above. The range of societies chosen are typical of most university campuses across the three countries.

Research assistants currently active as students were employed in each location to recruit participants, and occasionally to facilitate discussion in the groups. Discussion was guided in all groups by exploring a common set of themes intended to elicit responses on the personal value of society membership for political and civic departments; attitudes to citizenship and politics; and the influence of social media for political engagement. The focus groups were all recorded and transcribed. The qualitative software programme Nvivo was used to code the discussions according to the themes outlined above and throughout the following analysis exemplar quotes are used as indicators of salient responses. These are all anonymized but the distinctions between the four different types of groups are identified.

Boundary building through student societies

What then can we discern about the role of student societies in the development of political norms and practices of students? As the critical mass thesis would suggest, our respondents did generally recognize the value of student societies for social networking and cherished the opportunity they provided to mix with similar-minded students who shared their interests. One of the most pertinent findings, however, was the evident boundary work on the part of the party groups which marked out their political habitus. This distinctiveness manifested itself not only in terms of how they regarded their student society as a means to enter the political field but also as a contrast to what they regarded as the poor political acumen of other students. A typical response which contextualized their society within the wider political field for example was:

I'm interested in going into [politics] in the future, so being involved in it at a local youth level is an effective mechanism of doing this . . . you do it because it helps you get involved in the party later. (Party Aus)

Indeed, recruitment to their societies was often shaped by the objective of attracting those they saw as potential life-long members and career politicians. Membership size was less important than securing a small group of dedicated members who were more likely to be emergent politicians and policy-makers. One party respondent noted for example that:

We spend less of our efforts trying to pull people into the party who otherwise wouldn't be interested because at the end of the day, they're probably not going to be interested in the long run. (Party Aus)

Furthermore, they recognized that those new students with an existing or latent interest in politics would be the ones to seek them out. Prior socialization through family and school were repeatedly mentioned as factors influencing their own decision to join a party society.

Well my mum was a member of the Labour Party so I grew up watching Question Time with her. She was always quite politically active. (Party UK)

Motivation to continue with membership, and even engage in organizing the societies, centred on the opportunities it provided for a range of activities and exchanges which facilitated their political habitus. These included debating political issues and sharing a desire to campaign for their policies. In all three party focus groups the passion to engage in politics and 'make a difference' was manifest.

That's one of my motivations, to be around people who do want to talk about these issues. Because even if you dislike the current situation, and a lot of people do and we all do, by just saying it's a terrible situation and then not discussing it, not trying to do something about it, that's not the way that you change the world. (Party UK)

As anticipated, these groups could be seen to exhibit a conventional 'dutiful' understanding of citizenship, not only through their membership of a political party, but also through their commitment to engage with mainstream politics to enact their ideological perspectives.

I mean I guess in a democracy [. . .] it's our duty to contribute to make our voice be heard. (Party USA)

Indeed, so strong was this dutiful habitus that it acted as a further distinguishing characteristic for the party participants in our sample in that they

frequently asserted that non-party political students and groups failed to fully understand the complexity of the political field; criticizing them for their lack of knowledge about current affairs. When discussing the precarious nature of graduate employment opportunities, for example, one party respondent believed that:

across campus all students don't see it [graduate employment] so much as a political issue, 'cause the lack of informed students on political issues is absolutely detrimental. (Party USA)

Whilst this discourse of political expertise acted to reinforce their own sense of political acumen it was also expressed as a frustration that non-party students could be easily misinformed. Their own in-depth political understanding of the 'facts' might enable them to have political insight, the general student body was more easily characterized by a 'sound byte mentality' (Party USA). A particularly clear illustration of this perceived boundary between party group participants and other students was provided by reference to a controversial speech made by the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard just prior to our focus group discussions. Gillard accused the then opposition leader Tony Abbott of sexism and misogyny in a speech which, whilst criticized by many Australian journalists, received a much more favourable response through the Internet. This populist support for Gillard was used by one of the Australian party participants as evidence that students are generally attracted by such sensational storylines rather than an in-depth understanding of the political issues. One remarked that:

because all students aren't politically interested, they're only at best keeping a vague eye on what's happening in the news, so things like the Gillard speech are so attractive and so much more easy to get invested in because it's really easy to boil that down to a simplicity: this guy's misogynist (Party Aus)

As a Liberal Party student society member we might detect a degree of defensiveness on the part of the respondent but that does not detract from the more general assertion that other students do not understand politics to the same level as themselves.

This distancing themselves from other students can be seen to enable the party societies to provide a space for the development of their political habitus, but interestingly it also facilitated reciprocity from other non-party groups. In discussions with these latter societies, frustrations with student party politics was frequently voiced. For instance, one of the respondents remarked about the political activities of politicians at election time:

I view this whole thing as a bit of a circus or a sandpit for those people who want to go onto it later on in life. (Issue, Aus)

This view of party students and their activities was repeated as a correspondingly negative perspective of party politics by several of the non-party students. In contrast to the politicians who only wanted to engage in talk many non-party groups prided themselves as people who got things done.

I'm exceptionally cynical about all those people who yell about their political views instead of doing things . . . So our group is very much about knuckling down and getting things done . . . (Issue, Aus)

These boundaries between party societies and many of the other students appears to mirror strongly the gulf between career politicians and those they represent, which has become such a central aspect of debates about the current state of advanced contemporary democracies (Hay, 2007). The albeit limited evidence from our exploratory study suggests that the university campus may play a significant role through student societies in building the barriers that later separate career politicians from their electorates. In part, of course, these may be reinforcing attitudes and behaviour that commence earlier in the life course. Nonetheless, the very strength of student groups to provide a protective milieu for the development of a dutiful political habitus suited to the political field of conventional politics may also act as a powerful mechanism to isolate them from the lived experience and views of other citizens.

Towards self-actualizing citizens?

If we now turn to consider the other student societies in our study we might ask what was revealed in discussions with them about their political attitudes? Did for example their proclaimed action orientation to 'get things done rather than talk' suggest a different kind of political engagement? One perhaps closer to Pippa Norris's model of 'engaging in civic life by recycling the garbage, mobilizing on the internet, and volunteering at women's shelters or aids hospices' (Norris, 2002). More specifically, could their attitudes and activities be characterized as self-actualizing citizenship as depicted by Bennett (Bennett *et al.*, 2011)? Here the picture was more complex than the dutiful party students. Certainly many exhibited an aversion to mainstream party membership. Interestingly one respondent, invoking the language of the consumer, described their group affiliation as to a brand in contrast to the ideology of party politics – loyalty to a brand being more contingent upon lifestyle and self-regarding. Guided more by 'a personal philosophy' she believed that these would be placed in jeopardy by the discipline required from party allegiance.

When asked about their interest in current affairs and political issues, however, there were more subtle differences between the groups. Whilst the party groups tended to cite examples of legislative politics, party campaigning and political speeches, respondents from the other groups would be more likely to refer to issues of personal interest to them. As expected, the interest

and identity groups foregrounded their particular agendas initially but this was often broadened later to encompass a wider range of current affairs. The civic groups, despite not identifying themselves as overtly political, also exhibited experiential interests in political issues:

Personally I've been following the same sex marriage bill. It's quite interesting, just the debates surrounding it . . . I would like to marry my girlfriend at some point in time. Who lets me do that? I would quite like to find out.
(Civic UK)

Even in the case of the issue groups who were often affiliated to a national or international organization, such as the Catholic Church in the case of the Vinnies or Amnesty International, their motivation for engagement was often couched in a personalized ethic. Interestingly, in the case of the Vinnies respondents did acknowledge that some of their former members had become senior politicians and thereby entered the political field through this pathway. Nonetheless, their approach to politics can be seen more as an individual (non-party membership) lifestyle perspective that is strongly informed by an action orientation. Unlike the party groups whose recruitment to their societies was more narrowly directed towards career politics, the interest and identity groups attempted to be more inclusive and to widen recruitment. Having a fun time through activities such events, volunteering and specific campaigns was seen as the best way to engage and network with the wider student community rather than 'thrust opinions down people's throats'.

The dutiful and self-actualizing political orientations of the respective group respondents was further revealed through discussion of what they regarded as a 'good citizen'. For the party groups, emphasis was placed upon the duty to vote and 'to be informed' about issues. For the non-party groups, voting as a citizenship activity was not as highly regarded as the self-actualizing experience of doing a project. As one Identity group respondent put it:

I guess to me Habitat's just like, you're on the front line, so you're trying to . . . solve a specific problem where if you're voting you're trying to really solve all of the problems by organizing the government, but you're not really at the frontlines, you're not really making the decisions, . . . you're just getting somebody else to represent you to make the decisions for you.

Despite these dutiful and self-actualizing distinctions expressed about the nature of a 'good citizen', what was most striking about the responses from the groups on this issue was not their differences but rather what they shared in common. The most typical type of response from all the groups was expressed as a dutiful motivation to 'give something back' to the community, or less well off, through voluntary activities. Such actions included a range of things from being law-abiding and picking up your litter to money raising and engaging in

voluntary work. Such requirements might form the content of any civics education curriculum or be expressed by previous generations. Thus whilst self-actualizing norms may indeed be seen to be shaping the political habitus of many educated young citizens who are more sceptical of conventional mainstream politics it would be a mistake, on the basis of our exploration at least, to suggest that this requires them to abandon dutiful notions of citizenship altogether. Instead, a more nuanced picture emerges whereby non-politico civic respondents help out at polling stations as a way of giving back to the community as a good citizen; where political party members regard volunteering in civic groups as citizen action; Identity groups share with party and interest groups a view of politics as active engagement; and where civic group respondents can see their activities as an embodiment of the good citizen.

Social media politics

Turning now to examine our third line of enquiry we explored with the students their use of new media communications technologies in their lives and whether they thought it influenced engagement with politics. All these students had grown up with the Internet and treated email and websites as everyday forms of communication and sites for information retrieval. Our particular interest, however, was in the social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with their affordances for networking, sharing and rapid messaging. All of these traits had been demonstrated in many parts of the world including the student protests in the UK, the Occupy movement and the uprisings in the Middle East where predominantly young activists had used social media as a highly effective means to organize large-scale protests and share their messages almost instantaneously. Detailed analyses of these events by Bennett and Segerberg (Bennett *et al.*, 2014; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) have advanced the proposition that they represent new forms of political mobilization through the communicative practices of social media which they describe as ‘connective action’. Moreover, mainstream politicians and celebrities are also increasingly using social media as a means to engage in political discussion. Consequently we wanted to find out both what our groups thought of these developments and also gain some idea of how it was influencing their own political habitus.

In general the groups used some combination of email, Facebook and Twitter in their communications with members. Only a couple of groups had websites and one of these had noticed a move towards social media. Facebook was the primary platform recognized by respondents as it was acknowledged to be ubiquitous, easy to use and enabled fast and widespread communication. A common theme was that committees found themselves communicating to a membership larger than the number who physically attended meetings and events. One participant remarked about group postings and emails,

for the people who come it's obviously an open invitation to attend a meeting. But, for example, I'm on the [Oxfam] mailing list and I support what they do, I read it, but I don't go to their meetings. (UK Issue)

Another participant noted, 'we contact a lot more people than we actually see' (UK Civic). Little surprise, then, that our groups recognized the value of social media and e-mails more generally for facilitating connective engagement with both active members and a much larger network of latent activists. These wider participants may be close to what Amnå and Ekman describe as 'standby' citizens 'who stay alert, keep themselves informed about politics by bringing up political issues in everyday life contexts, and are willing and able to participate if needed' (Amnå and Ekman, 2013: 2).

Besides the use of social media for organizational purposes, the students we talked to also expressed a positive acknowledgement of its value for political engagement. Such endorsements were not unconditional and frequently manifested critical evaluations based upon their experience. Many pointed to the advantages of social media for generating political discussion in the first place but this was often matched by questions about the 'quality' of online politics. As one remarked:

Anyone can put an opinion on Facebook but that doesn't make it a well informed opinion. (Issue USA)

The very ease of access and the potential rapid and widespread 'viral' dissemination of content led to expressions of concern that social media could amplify misinformation. 'Facts', it was claimed, could be misconstrued, taken out of context and be misused. This familiar accusation of social media as a threat to democratic politics by encouraging 'slacktivism' was illustrated by reference to examples such as the well-publicized KONY 2012 campaign. Produced by the charity Invisible Children, Inc. KONY 2012 was a video film intended to raise support for the arrest of Joseph Kony for war crimes. Once posted online the video spread virally on social media and became particularly noted for attracting the attention of young people. A report by the Internet Research Group Pew estimated that over half the US population of young adults had accessed the video at some time. (<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Kony-2012-Video/Main-report.aspx>). Equally significant, however, was the level of criticism aimed at the video campaign for oversimplifying and distorting the complex reality of the situation in that part of Africa. This contention was picked up by one of our respondents.

... the Kony 2012 video which was an example of people being politically engaged but politically engaged in terms of looking at a video, watching the first five minutes, going, 'Yeah, this is kind of interesting', posting that on their Facebook with like and encouraging comment and then just spreading it all over. And that's politically engaged. Unfortunately, it was also wrong,

like it was identifiably and incurably wrong in many instances, which came out over the next month or so . . . (Party Aus)

Typically these types of accusations of slackivism were voiced by those party members and others who assumed a more dutiful conception of engagement associated with a political model of informed rational deliberation. Once again we can discern a difference in approach to political engagement on the part of the party students in their attitudes towards social media. Whilst recognizing its value as an organizing tool they tended to be much more sceptical of its use as a means to talk 'serious' politics.

. . . for me social media is not grassroots politics, it's sitting in your chair, you know, you can be ranting about your ideology and doing anything like that, I think it's very helpful, a tool for organizing people together, but if you're not willing to get up off your chair, get off your smart phone and actually go talk about the issues with someone and really change someone's mind, 'cause no tweet is going to change someone's mind, let's be honest, no hashtag is gonna, 'Oh, I didn't think of it like that. Oh this is really interesting.' No, it really takes some personal integrity and motivation to go out there and do it. (Party USA)

Many of the other students, however, were more receptive to the use of social media for following political events. They were more relaxed about the quality of discussions and instead emphasized the 'democratic' nature of the medium for raising debate. Their lived experience was frequently online and they valued the immediacy of social media for raising issues and sharing ideas.

I had to try and explain how to do Facebook based politics discussion with my mum the other day and she just couldn't understand that you can have a conversation with so many people all at once. And I think it's the attitude to the medium that is different. Not necessarily the opinion on politics but whether I am much more comfortable spending a huge amount of time on YouTube or something than my mum would be to learn information . . . (Civic UK)

Most strikingly they appeared more open than their dutiful colleagues to a variety of modes of political engagement evidenced through social media. These included narratives and complex issues that could be visualized through graphs, cartoons and videos and could 'spark' debates. The use of memes which had a 'comic edge' were seen as an effective way of raising serious issues. Such communication could be incorporated into a personalized presentation of their political self through sharing images, posting a status, exhibiting a liking for a story or commenting on a discussion. In contrast to serious political talk encountered in a dutiful public sphere, these forms of mediated political

engagement can be interpreted as more expressive of playful, emotional, personalized and disruptive forms of participation.

Regardless of the varied approaches noted what was most clear from our focus group discussions was the important role played by social media in the communicative experience of our students. Moreover, in their respective cautionary ways this included accessing, sharing and more rarely posting political content. Student politics, judging from our exploratory study, can be seen to be increasingly carried out through the mediated social networks facilitated by social media platforms. This in turn has significance for the role of student societies as facilitators of political habitus and enabling the accumulation of capital. The influence of new media technologies upon the development of social capital has been one of the central debates amongst scholars since the widespread adoption of the Internet. Robert Putnam remained sceptical that online social networks would do much to counter what he regarded as the erosion of social capital and the decline of civic engagement in American society (Putnam, 2000). Others, however, have maintained that social media networks facilitate wider access to social capital than was previously possible (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). It thereby enables students to more easily acquire social capital beyond the social networks of the student groups and to build additional specialized networks for themselves. Consequently, both the student society and the networked individual may benefit from the mixture of strong local bonds and diverse weaker ties provided by social media. Moreover, the accumulation of political and symbolic capital that Bourdieu associated with success in the political field may also be increasingly influenced by the digital literacy of those wishing to take up a career in politics. Aeron Davis and Emily Seymour (2010) have pointed to the importance of what they describe as mainstream 'media capital' for the competitive advantage of politicians but we would contend that this needs to be supplemented by understanding how the university campus plays a crucial role in the construction of a political habitus increasingly informed by digital networking. The acquisition of networking competencies is not only important for politicians, of course. Effective political engagement by citizens and activists is also likely to be significantly influenced by the accumulation of social and cultural capital through the maintenance of status profiles, management of reputation and social networking.

Conclusion

We have attempted in this article to contribute to debates about whether and in what ways universities may be significant for politicizing students. By addressing Crossley and Ibrahim's suggestion that critical mass and social networks are important explanatory variables we have explored deeper in search of more specific factors influencing the political socialization of students. Whilst acknowledging that not all students become interested in politics at university, or indeed engage in civic activities, it is our contention that for

those that do the role of the *student societies* is crucial in facilitating political attitudes and departments. These groups, often supported by the umbrella Students' Union, provide the focal point for new students to follow their interests (latent or manifest) and be recruited into an existing social network. Whilst acknowledging some limitations we nonetheless believe Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is helpful in enabling us to understand how these student societies act to provide a means for students to experientially develop their political talk, values, emotions and performances. Student societies are thereby generative of political practices within particular fields and further provide access to the cultural and social capital that can inform the nature of their political participation and civic engagement later in life.

For those students with a strong existing interest in politics, they are likely to be drawn to the mainstream 'party groups' and/or to special interest groups often with national or international organizing bodies. Other 'civic' student societies were, however, also seen to provide opportunities for politicization through discussions and engagement but in ways that they themselves would not necessarily regard as 'political'. Our focus group discussions revealed very clearly the playing out of social practices on campus that distinguished those students associated with the political field and others already disaffected by, or sceptical of, mainstream politics and its acolytes. For the political party groups this division often revealed itself by reference to a more serious understanding of politics and 'facts' in comparison to other students who they believed engaged in misinformation and generalizations. When asked about their views of citizenship they tended to reply with dutiful conceptions of obeying the law and voting.

In contrast, the habitus of the other societies as revealed through our discussions can be said to display more self-actualizing characteristics of civic engagement as outlined in the typologies by Bennett. They did not tend to want to join parties but instead were more driven by active engagement in projects. Whilst the politicians may *talk* politics these other groups often prided themselves on actively *doing* something about what they perceived as problems, whether it was housing, migration, poverty or the like. Interestingly, however, when asked what a good citizen might be, they frequently provided both dutiful responses concerned with voting and 'giving back' to the community as well as broader self-actualizing notions. Consequently, whilst many late-modern theories of reflexive individualism and self-actualizing political norms may point to important emergent traits, as simple binaries they may exaggerate the demise of the dutiful social obligations of young people.

As anticipated, the practices of organizing, sharing information and social networking of the student societies were all significantly mediated by social media technologies. *Facebook* in particular was a platform that was almost universally adopted. There was widespread recognition that social media was a valuable means of coordinating the groups since it was both an everyday aspect of their lived experience as well as all their fellow students. However, the idea that these students were uncritical adopters was clearly not the case. They were familiar with criticisms of online content as potentially biased, ill-informed and

sensational. Furthermore, they all recognized that the participative culture afforded by social media may produce a low level of political engagement characteristic of slacktivism. Strikingly, however, our respondents exhibited marked differences in their views about how these factors might influence political engagement. Once again the distinction between those students exhibiting a more dutiful habitus and those more expressive of self-actualizing norms was clearly discernible, if not stark. The former tended to be far more dismissive of social media, seeing it as a channel for trivializing political talk and appealing to people's emotions instead of providing a domain for 'factual' political deliberation. The latter, on the other hand, acknowledged such self-expression as providing opportunities for more inclusive personal engagement over political issues through a multitude of discursive styles.

The responses from our focus groups provide a rich insight into their political attitudes. Whilst exploratory in nature this study provides support for the contention that the university campus is indeed a significant space for the politicization of young citizens, many of whom will go on to become influential stakeholders in their respective democratic societies. It also foregrounds the importance of the student society, increasingly mediated by social media, as a *loci* for developing their political habitus. These insights are important for at least two reasons that can inform further debate about the future direction of our democracies. First, the well-documented recent concerns about the gap between political representatives and their electorates in many democracies can be clearly detected through an examination of the political habitus of students. The critical distrust exhibited by many of our non-politico respondents towards student politics was only matched by the disparaging scepticism of the party groups about the competence of their fellow student citizens. This suggests that our understanding of and attempts to re-engage citizens and politicians should include the university campus as an important site for the formative development of these political departments. Second, social media platforms are likely to play an increasingly significant domain for the political messaging, discussion, disruption and the presentation of the political self. Thus the accumulation of social and cultural capital through online social networking is likely to become an important dimension of the political habitus not just for competitive advantage in the field of mainstream politics, but also for the activists engaged in connective action.

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Note

- 1 Regular usage of social media by young people in 2012 was respectively 80 per cent in USA, 94 per cent in UK (Pew Research, 2012), and over 90 per cent in Australia (Essential Media, 2012)

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