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Young people, social media and connective action: from organisational maintenance to everyday political talk

Ariadne Vromen^{a*}, Michael A. Xenos^b and Brian Loader^c

^a*Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia;* ^b*Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA;* ^c*Department of Sociology, Wentworth College, University of York, York, UK*

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Social media is pervasive in the lives of young people, and this paper critically analyses how politically engaged young people integrate social media use into their existing organisations and political communications. This qualitative research project studied how young people from a broad range of existing political and civic groups use social media for sharing information, mobilisation and, increasingly, as a means to redefine political action and political spaces. Twelve in-person focus groups were conducted in Australia, the USA and the UK with matched affinity groups based on university campuses. The groups were of four types: party political group, issue-based group, identity-based group and social group. Our focus group findings suggest that this in-depth approach to understanding young people's political engagement reveals important group-based differences emerging in young people's citizenship norms: between the dutiful allegiance to formal politics and a more personalised, self-actualising preference for online, discursive forms of political engagement and organising. The ways in which political information is broadcast, shared and talked about on social media by engaged young people demonstrate the importance of communicative forms of action for the future of political engagement and connective action.

Keywords: politics; citizenship; social media

Introduction

Focusing on actively engaged young people, and the civic groups they are involved with, can provide a better understanding of the everyday use of social media for political engagement. This paper shows that everyday social media use now underpins a shift in young people's citizenship away from dutiful norms to personalised, self-actualising norms with a preference for online, discursive forms of political engagement and organising. However, we also demonstrate that this picture of young people's political engagement is not straightforward. Both the emergence of communicative engagement on social media and self-actualising citizenship norms are challenged by groups of young people tied to formal politics and by those who remain sceptical about digitally enabled connective action.

There are three main themes in current research that frame our analysis. First, a focus on new or changing forms of youth political engagement; second, the growing literature

*Corresponding author. Email: ariadne.vromen@sydney.edu.au

on citizenship norms that argues young people have shifted from a dutiful sense of allegiance to existing political institutions and processes to a more personalised, self-actualising citizenship norm; and the third theme is research on how everyday social media use is implicated in changing both political engagement and citizenship norms. The paper proceeds in the following way: an overview of current research on young people, politics and social media; an outline of our focus groups method and introduction to the research participants' use of social media; and then presents a discussion of themes on organising and communicative political engagement that emerged in the focus group discussion. The analysis addresses three broad research questions:

- How do civically active young people conceptualise their use of social media for political engagement?
- Is there a relationship between countries, the type of civic group young people are involved in and the meaning given to social media use?
- Does young people's use of social media for political engagement demonstrate that citizenship norms are changing?

Current research on young people, political engagement and social media

Over the last decade, a new critical focus on young people's political engagement has emerged. In the shift away from 'finding' young people to be apathetic due to their disengagement from formal politics, there has been a re-examination of both how political engagement itself is defined and what new forms of participation young people are practicing. This research agenda has been facilitated by the emergence of digital and networked forms of participation, as well as a more pluralistic examination of how young people themselves define their political engagement (see Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones 2007; Harris, Wyn, and Younes 2010; Rheingans and Hollands 2013). These critical studies are often qualitative, using focus groups, interviews or text-based discourse analysis, to place the understanding and the everyday experiences of young people at the core of analysis. For example, in criticising assumptions that young people are politically apathetic, there has been an attempt to better understand 'non-participation' (O'Toole 2003) or develop concepts such as 'radically unpolitical' (Farthing 2010) or 'dissenting citizenship' (O'Loughlin and Gillespie 2011), to explain young people's agency in disengagement from the formal political realm.

This paper continues this critical focus on young people's political engagement that prioritises the voices and understandings of young people themselves. Nathan Manning (2013, 29) points out the importance of understanding young people's reflexivity in understanding and practicing politics. The young people in his study 'described the ways in which they engaged with issues as they arose rather than in a broad systematic fashion according to a particular ideology or set of principles'. Other researchers demonstrate that everyday local spaces for political engagement – or 'micro-territories' – offer young people more individualised and personalised ways of engaging with politics, as compared to what they are likely to encounter in more formal settings (Harris and Wyn 2009). Through extending this approach to examine existing groups run by and for young people, we can better understand how they view their engagement, and what role social media plays in both maintaining groups and promoting new forms of youth-led engagement.

Underpinning our analysis is the concept of citizenship norms, which are understood as attitudes and values pertaining to how democracy functions, and specifically, how citizens

relate to the political world. Norms can be identified both among young people and in the framing of political communication for their benefit. For example, recent research suggests that young people may be abandoning traditional modes of 'dutiful' citizen participation (voting, party membership and reading the newspaper), in favour of a more personalised politics of self-actualisation through digital networking or consumer activism (Loader 2007; Bennett, Wells, and Rank 2009; Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011; Xenos and Bennett 2007; also see Bang 2005; Dalton 2008; Amnå and Ekman 2013). In summary, theories of the emergence of young people's everyday, self-actualising citizenship suggest that young people now see and engage with politics in a much more individualised (rather than collectivist) way and are involved in ad hoc issues-based campaigns (rather than long-term organisational commitment). Also emphasised is that young people often choose to work horizontally with their peers, rather than with hierarchical authority, thus their social circles are an important source of information, as well as support (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2009, 29).

Through content analysis and case studies of organisations and websites targeting young people, it has been found that citizenship norms now vary across digital media. Several studies have found that the majority of websites that target young people to increase their political engagement are underpinned by dutiful citizenship norms. Online-only organisations, however, including many that are led by young people themselves or have a significant input from young people, are more likely to present self-actualising, personalised norms for citizenship behaviour (e.g. Banaji and Buckingham 2013; Wells 2013; Bennett, Wells, and Rank 2009; Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011; Collin 2008, 2010; Dahlgren and Olsson 2007; Vromen 2008, 2011). Many existing youth-led, offline political groups and organisations are also adapting their approaches to information circulation, recruitment and mobilisation in the digital age (see Mercea 2013; Rheingans and Hollands 2013). High-profile social movements of recent times, such as the transnational Occupy movements, the Indignados in Spain, and the Five Star Movement in Italy, have all been noted for their particular use of social media platforms for organising and maintenance of collective identity (e.g. Gerbaudo 2012). These movements are all instances of 'connective action' that Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2013) explain have emerged as a result of the integration of digital media with contemporary contentious political engagement. While the groups we studied are not contentious social movement organisations, two (of three) connective action *ideal* types are useful as they establish the transformative impacts digital media already have on political organising. They are 'organisationally brokered coalitions' where digital media are used mainly to reduce communication and coordination cost and 'organisationally enabled networks' where digital media are used to enable participants to personalise engagement on their own terms (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 13). Here we examine how predominantly offline, youth-led groups practice these two forms of connective action.

Young people's use of social media for political engagement is a growing research field. The more established literature on young people and the Internet posited that the Internet appealed to young people, and they were early adopters of its functionality for flexible forms of political engagement that were often interactive and peer-based (Livingstone 2007; Harris 2008; Ostman 2012). In-depth research found that the Internet provided a space for the nurturing of young people's alternative political identities and information sourcing (Dahlgren and Olsson 2007; Collin 2008). However, there was very little consistent evidence that the Internet was mobilising *more* young people into *new* forms of political engagement (Livingstone, Markham, and Couldry 2007; Calenda and

Meijer 2009; Xenos and Bennett 2007). More recently, representative survey-based research by Pew in the USA found that young people are more likely than older citizens to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter for civic activities, particularly promoting or 'liking' political material, and posting their own thoughts (Rainie et al. 2012). This is consistent with the idea that particular social networking platforms may be changing, or lowering, the threshold and transaction costs for young people engaging in politics online.

The early research on digitally networked and social media use reinforces the emergence of new everyday, self-actualising citizenship norms. Ellison and boyd (2013) recently pointed out that 'much of what is novel stems from how participants incorporate an articulated list of connections – or Friends – into their online practices'. They argue that it is also the everyday user practices and sociality of social media that matter for analysis, not only the affordances of new socio-technological systems. This point about the sociality inherent to young people's social media use deserves emphasis as it demonstrates the difference between social media and earlier uses of online technologies. Others have pointed out that young people's social media-based interactions, or online sociality, are not disconnected from in-person 'material sociality' but ought to be more accurately thought of as an extension of their offline lives (Waite 2011, 22); and that social media increases young people's everyday sense of belonging while also increasing the visibility of everyday Friend-based social connections (Robards and Bennett 2011, 306–309).

Social media is also changing political organising. Everyday social media use means that individuals do not need to formally join traditional political organisations to be involved in, or access information about, collective forms of politics. Instead, the creation of individual profiles on commercial platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) enhances expressive sharing and distribution of networked, peer-driven political information and points of view (boyd 2011; Ellison et al. 2011). While political information found on social media sites may originally come from sources such as traditional media or political actors, users remediate authority and information by sharing – or 'micro-broadcasting' (Wohn et al. 2011) – in their peer-to-peer social networks (Kaye 2011; Thorson 2014). In addition to everyday sociality, the simple affordances of micro-broadcasting have assisted social media sites, such as Facebook, to become the preferred public organising tool for new campaigners (Wohn et al. 2011). The changes in collective action organising brought about by social media highlight the need to see communicative practices *as* organising, and not separate from, or merely a precursor to, participatory action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 8).

Method

This is a qualitative exploration of how civically active young people understand their own engagement. We focused on existing affinity groups on university campuses to ensure a relatively similarly aged and social background of our cohort. This project was originally funded as an Australia–USA comparison but was later expanded to also include the UK. The three countries are similar advanced democracies, and their young people have, comparatively, very high use of social media: surveys from late 2012 found that 80% of young people in the USA, 94% in the UK (Pew Research 2012) and over 90% of young Australians (Essential Media Report 2012) regularly use social media.¹ The cross-national comparison is important because it starts to uncover whether assumptions about, or

expected relationships between, young people's social media use and political engagement are national-context specific. There is very little systematic comparative social media and politics research at present. Hopefully, the field will expand through comparative research that is more generalisable than this exploratory study, and builds on existing, leading studies of the US case.

Most existing research on young people's political engagement has the individual as the unit of analysis; some additional research focuses on how the macro-level context, usually the state, enables or constrains youth participation. Here we are interested in how the less-studied meso-level context of groups, organisations and networks (see Morales 2009, 7) shapes and facilitates young people's political engagement. We purposively sampled four different types of civic groups: a dutifully oriented political party affiliated group, a social group involved in sport or recreation that was not overtly political and two self-actualising kinds of groups: one based on publicly expressed identity (such as sexuality or ethnicity/race) and an issues-based group, based on inequality and human rights. While our selected groups could not be representative of all political opportunities for young people, the inclusion in our research of groups with a range of issues and citizenship norms is important because it reveals the diversity of young people's meso-level collective experiences and the potential for political engagement. Morales (2009, 51–52) suggests that in most comparative group-level research youth-focused groups are problematically overlooked and labelled as non-political engagement. All of the groups we studied here are commonly found across university campuses within each country, and are arguably developing young people's organising and communicative skills. While this is a predominantly exploratory study open to themes emerging through guided discussion, we were interested in whether national context *or* type of citizenship norms encapsulated in the purpose of the group would be important for explaining their interpretations of their social media use.

We chose in-person focus groups as they are the closest researchers can get to observing qualitative political talk among group members in the absence of in-depth ethnographic study. As noted by Conover and Searing (2005, 273) from their research on everyday political talk, 'focus groups allow researchers to investigate the meaning of concepts, topics and processes as ordinary citizens understand them'. The emphasis is on how ideas about politics are articulated, discussed and debated by group participants, rather than individual responses and experiences (as found in in-depth interviews).

The civic groups we recruited and number of focus group participants are listed in Table 1. All 12 groups used a common set of discussion themes and questions, over two main areas:

- (1) understandings of citizenship and politics and purpose of the civic group and
- (2) use of social media for political engagement by individuals, by the civic groups and in society.

The second area of questions was analysed for this paper. As can be seen in Table 1, we had varying success with individual participant recruitment. In all three countries, we had a research assistant who was a current student active in university life who assisted us with group and individual recruitment, and occasionally assisted in some of the facilitation of the focus groups discussion. The focus groups were widely advertised by key organisers of the groups to their membership, and due to arm's length recruitment

Table 1. Focus group participants: type of group, country and number of participants.

Type of group	Australia	The USA	The UK
Party	Sydney University Liberal Club (6)	College Republicans (6)	York Campus Greens (4)
Issues	Young Vinnies (6)	Habitat for Humanity (4)	Amnesty (5)
Identity	Shades (2)	AHANA (4)	LGBTQ Network (4)
Civic	SUTEKH (2)	Humans v Zombies (4)	Women's Cricket Club (4)

ethical considerations of our universities, we had very little scope to intervene in the type of participants recruited.

In Australia and the USA, we also had a token \$20 payment for individual participants through an iTunes, movie or Starbucks voucher. Despite this, we had to rearrange timing for at least half of the groups at least once, and in two instances, we ran the focus group even though only two participants turned up,² albeit most were key group participants. While we still obtained rich in-person discussion data, the caveat is that when researching the real world of young people's politics, you are beholden to the timetables and interest of young people themselves!

The focus group recordings were all transcribed and coded in qualitative software programme NVivo. Initial thematic coding by a research assistant was for any discussion of group or individual use of social media. Secondary coding by a project Chief Investigator was for the three main ways in which social media was discussed: as a tool for group organising, as a space for communicative politics and as peer-to-peer communication. Subsequent coding within these themes identified different approaches to each of these uses of social media. Throughout the analysis of these categories of codes, exemplar quotes from the focus groups are used. No individuals are identified, but the responses of the four different types of groups are contrasted throughout.

Overview of 12 civic university groups and their use of social media

To contextualise the focus group analysis, we compared and contrasted how the 12 civic groups were using publicly visible online platforms and social media. All groups used some form of publicly accessible social media. This examination assisted in understanding whether the groups' social media use was simply an add-on to their existing offline activism (akin to Bennett and Segerberg's 2013 'organisationally-brokered coalitions' approach to connective action), or was central for mobilisation to the groups' activism and included online personalisation for group participants (as in 'organisationally-enabled networks'). We also used these social media-based public representations of their purpose to discursively label the kinds of citizenship norms the group adhered to (see Banaji and Buckingham 2013; and Vromen 2011). The Appendix (Table A1) provides an overview of three online platforms used by each campus group, at the time of writing (August 2013): a website, Facebook page and Twitter account.

Only two groups actively used all three platforms: identity group, Shades at Sydney, and party group, York Young Greens. The use of websites is in decline among these 12 groups.

Most are inactive information portals that had not been recently updated; only two of the 12 groups were interactively using a blog-type approach (issues group, Habitat for Humanity in the USA, and the party group, York Young Greens in the UK). Ten of the 12 groups had an active Facebook page that served as the main information and organising point for the group. The College Republicans used to have a Facebook page but are now active users of Twitter. AHANA (stands for African, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American) had a Facebook page but with very little activity; most of their organising happens through regular offline, in-person meetings or conferences. Only half of the groups were active, ongoing users of Twitter; two others had a Twitter account, but tweeting was sporadic at best. Thus, as Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) connective action concept suggests, online media are routinely used to underpin organisational maintenance. All groups studied at least use social media for reduction of the everyday costs of coordination and communications. However, as we found through the focus group discussion, it was important to move beyond this simple thematic labelling of the *appearance* of social media platforms to gain a better understanding of the political meanings that young people attribute to their groups' social media use.

Sydney University Liberal Club (SULC) is the main University of Sydney club affiliated with the conservative Liberal Party of Australia. The group runs stalls and organises volunteer campaigners during elections and social events such as a regular Freedom Drinks nights. Their Facebook page claims authority via political connections: 'Join the largest Liberal Club in Australia and follow in the path of our alumni network including John Howard, Tony Abbott, and Malcolm Turnbull' (SULC 2013). The Young Vinnies Society is affiliated with Catholic charity St Vincent de Paul. It organises youth volunteer programmes to work with disadvantaged members of Australian society such as refugees. Their Annual Winter Sleepout is a fund-raising event that draws attention to the experience of homelessness in Sydney. Their Facebook page states:

a deficiency of compassion breeds an attitude of inaction. That's why we provide a diverse range of volunteer services for students interested in giving back to their community and understanding the issues facing the disadvantaged from a more direct perspective. (Young Vinnies 2013)

Shades organises social events for GLBTQI students and their friends. This includes Shades Winter Wonderland party and drag show at a local Sydney pub to fund-raise for the Sydney University Queer Revue. They state on their website that their 'events are designed to be apolitical' (Shades 2013); however, they regularly invite GLBTQI people from a range of industries to speak at events about their achievements and to mentor young members. They use fun events to publicly and politically celebrate a shared sense of identity. Sutekh, named after an obscure Dr Who character, is a well-established club dedicated to all things geek, from sci-fi and fantasy, pop culture and Internet culture to all kinds of gaming. They have drop-in events most nights during semester.

Of the four Sydney groups, only one uses a traditional dutiful citizenship discourse on its Facebook page: the SULC. The other three groups do not describe their activities as overtly political. While Shades claim that they are 'apolitical', their individualised focus on both mentoring and hedonism can be labelled as self-actualising. Young Vinnies purposefully emphasise volunteering and community solidarity, over politics, and can also be labelled as self-actualising. There were no overt citizenship norms on Sutekh's page.

The College Republicans are a University of Wisconsin–Madison-based group associated with the conservative Republican party. Their constitution shows similar recruitment and electoral campaign links with the parent political party as the SULC above, suggesting a shared dutiful citizenship norm. They develop skills ‘in preparation for future service by them to the party and the community’ (UWGOP 2013). Habitat for Humanity International is a non-profit, ecumenical Christian organisation. It focuses on homelessness and has the creation of adequate, affordable housing part of its mandate for action. It hosts annual social and fund-raising events such as the Act! Speak! Build! Week and the Longhorn Open golf day (Habitat UW 2013). AHANA is an identity-based society for students of colour in the health and medical sciences that holds regular seminars and conferences. Both Habitat for Humanity and AHANA do not label themselves as overtly political despite their focus on addressing inequities in society. Their shared focus on members’ individualised development and taking concrete actions suggest self-actualising citizenship norms.

The Humans vs. Zombies group is part of a broad international network and organises large-scale events of moderated role-playing tag that involves nerf guns. The statement below suggests they have a social capital-type orientation, akin to a dutiful citizenship norm:

Many players report that Humans vs. Zombies is one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives. The game creates deep bonds between players, instantly removing social boundaries by forcing players to engage as equals and cooperate for their survival. (HvZ 2013)

York Young Greens are a campus-based affiliate of the progressive UK Greens party. They hold film and music nights as fund-raising events and organise campaigners and magazine articles for election campaigns. Their mission, despite being of a different ideological background, is very similar to the SULC and the College Republicans, and is underpinned by a dutiful citizenship norm committed to getting more young people involved in formal, electoral politics (Young Greens York 2013). The University of York Amnesty student group is officially affiliated with Amnesty UK and campaigns on international human rights issues. It holds a weekly meeting and promotes online petition campaigns, as well as fund-raises for the parent Amnesty group. It uses the online, personalised politics that Amnesty is identified with and has self-actualising citizenship norms. The LGBTQ network at York is an official body of the York Students Union and has two sections, one for delivering services and the other for organising LGBTQ friendly social events and organising the annual York Pride march. They are underpinned by self-actualizing citizenship norms and ‘run campaigns on LGBT issues and aim to fight homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and hetosexism to help create a safe and inclusive environment in the university’ (LGBTQ York 2013). The University of York Women’s Cricket club is a sporting group that trains regularly, plays in a women’s cricket league and promotes general engagement with sport. Similar to the social group in Sydney, their overt citizenship norms were difficult to ascertain.

We examined the groups’ online presence to understand both how they utilised social media and publicly represented their citizenship norms. We found that the party groups, and one social group, use a dutiful discourse, while the issue and identity groups all have a self-actualising discourse representing their citizenship norms. The two remaining social groups were harder to categorise. In the remainder of the paper, we dig deeper into this

idea of the relationship between social media use and citizenship norms to see how young activists themselves understand and explain their groups' practices.

Social media and connective action for organising and group mobilisation

What does organising and group mobilisation via social media look like for contemporary youth-led civic groups? All 12 groups discussed that how they used social media, mainly Facebook, to a large extent to maintain the group, distribute information and organise group events. Many of the groups typically made this kind of statement: 'Because these days, you assume that everyone has social media as a given. That's your go-to mechanism' (Party group, Australia).

The three party groups were the most broad-based and sophisticated thinking about their multi-platform organising strategy. As university-based groups of larger, national political organisations, it is no surprise that they had thought through which platform was most useful for organising member events (Facebook), which for sending out messages or longer stories (Twitter and Blogs) and which for communications among the group's executive committee, or elite organisers (still email). For example:

We have an email account, which we send out emails to our members with information. We have a Twitter account which we use to advertise events coming up but also to comment on ones that just happened. We rarely use that for actual political discussion. And then we have a Facebook page which we also use for advertising events coming up. Mostly we use a Facebook event thing, but we post Facebook polls to start a political discussion. (Party group, Australia)

Most of the other groups also straightforwardly described the different uses of social media platforms for organising and maintaining their groups. For example, all three social groups used Facebook, rather than websites or email lists, to regularly organise offline meet-ups:

I've seen that a lot with clubs and societies now. With the older clubs and societies that have pretty much existed before the Facebook/MySpace era, who probably still have actual legitimate websites, you tend to see more and more inactivity on them. Now we're just using Facebook, the occasional Twitter. (Social group, Australia)

In terms of the demise of email as a central organising tool, the US issue group noted that they used Facebook in a minimalist way, and that pressure was now on them to make sure their organising emails were engaging and 'colourful':

A recap of our meeting, and who you can contact if you want to do the build, or the fundraising, stuff like that. The secretary before me she was 'make it colourful, make it fun!' so people are interested. It is sad, people [say] 'you have to make it colourful and big' and people are not going to sit there and read an eleven point email. (Issue group, USA)

In contrast, a UK group notes the immediacy and usefulness of Facebook over email-based organising:

We found a lot of the times people, when they get the emails, if there's a lot of information in the email they won't read it all whereas if it's on their Facebook they will tend to notice it more. Our president last year did resort to bribing people with biscuits at the bottom of the

emails. And then we just had biscuits and it fell apart. We found people notice [Facebook] more. It's more immediate. Chances are the message will get through because most people have phones which obviously have Facebook. (Social group, UK)

Thus for most of the groups, we studied young people's ubiquitous use of Facebook, and the inherent sociality of friendship networks is built into group organising (Ellison and Boyd 2013). However, two of the identity groups (the UK and the USA) were particularly sensitive about the public visibility of social media and retained active use of email lists to protect member anonymity. For example:

Yes, we have our mailing list in addition to that and then Facebook groups. We also run Twitter. However, confidentiality is quite a big issue for us because not all of our students that want to participate in our network want to be 'out' to the wider University campus. (Identity group, UK)

Clearly, some groups still use email even though its use by young people in general is in decline. However, Facebook's functionality to set up private groups is also used for small group executive decisions as it is quick and straightforward:

We also have an exec group, which is really convenient because we run the leadership – everyone has a say in how everything works. We'll sometimes post up, 'What do you think of this?' and then within three to five minutes, we'll have maybe five or six people online at once, and then suddenly we'll have an exec consensus on what we're doing about a certain issue very rapidly. (Issue group, Australia)

Event organisation

Social media, predominantly Facebook, is used for event organising across all of the groups – this is the kind of 'micro-broadcasting' function and event coordination that Wohn et al.'s (2011) research participants also found useful. While Facebook discussion does not replace meetings and events for the group members at large, it has become essential for organising any kind of offline group meeting and ensuring event attendance. This is consolidated through social media functionality, such as the public display of members saying they are attending an event, and especially the diary functions Facebook events add to. For example, 'There's no other way to invite 100 people to an event at once apart from Facebook. And also to remind me where I need to be at what time, it's very useful' (Identity group, UK).

Another factor discussed in several of the groups was that Facebook event organising often replaces other traditional means of organising events on campuses – mainly posterage. This suggests that the visibility of on campus activism is changing for many as it is now based within the everyday sociality of online spaces instead of public, outdoor advertising:

It's also very cheap. Like we don't pay anything to do that. Whereas if we want to put up flyers around campus it takes more time, it takes more effort, you've got to go and photocopy things, there's a cost involved. And chances are, they're just going to get posteraged over when you put them on a bollard anyway. (Identity group, Australia)

However, the simplicity of event organising via Facebook was not universally preferred among our groups. Two of the US-based groups – the issue and identity groups – were

ambivalent about Facebook and saw it as, at best, a necessary evil. The quote below suggests that Facebook is used for its social networking and visual display function, rather than as a tool for group mobilisation and maintenance:

It's definitely not our primary way of advertising what we do. We have some social events that will say 'go to our Facebook page for more information on what we're doing thing week'. For the most part it's to post pictures after events and it's very rarely to get people together to do something. (Issue group, USA)

Overall, organising via Facebook, embraced either enthusiastically or reluctantly, has become a normal practice for all of the groups we studied. Half of the 12 groups – the three party groups, two of the identity groups and one social group – have a sophisticated take on their use of several different social media platforms for organising and mobilising their groups and publicising their cause. Most groups adopt the functionality of Facebook to organise events and create private executive group discussions. Yet there is ambivalence from some groups about using Facebook beyond posting pictures to report back on recent events. Other organising functions such as recruitment, campaign and issue-based mobilisation are, at first glance, not undertaken online. However, the next section demonstrates that this picture of using social media as a new political space is more complicated when focusing on how the communicative function of groups is a central plank of their participant engagement strategy.

Social media and connective action redefining communicative political action

There were four main ways that social media was understood to either create or shape new kinds of communicative political action among young people. These were thematically coded as: broadcast, new information, everyday political talk and new political action. Cumulatively, these changing facets of youth-led political engagement can be seen to underpin the use of social media for personalised, self-actualising citizenship, and, as Ellison and Boyd (2013) emphasise, the way sociality, rather than technical features of platforms, is core to everyday social media use. The analysis of these themes also demonstrates how the maintenance of dutiful notions of citizenship are undermined by some of the groups through their communicative actions, while also reinforced by others.

Broadcasting information

The three party groups were much more likely than all other groups to make references to using social media to broadcast information, mainly unidirectionally. They did not really see that broadcasting information would increase the number of voices in the public sphere. Rather they argued that it amplified already mainstream media opinions, and that broadcasting or sharing of information was leading to ill-informed political debate on social media. For example, this quote from the Australian Party focus group points to the risks of social media making political stories and events bigger than they ought to be, that is to 'blow them out of proportion':

It doesn't generate a story but what I would say is that it massively overinflates a story. I think if you didn't have social media – and I know that's a bit of a weak hypothetical – I don't think the Gillard speech would hold as much traction because it would have obviously dominated the news for about two, three days.... A lot of news opinion and news commentary was being driven by the engine of social media. I would say that while it

doesn't create stories, social media has a great ability to blow them out of proportion. (Party group, Australia)

Very similar statements were made during the US Party focus group which can probably be attributed to both party groups being more strongly affiliated with the news making of formal politics, more so than both groups being conservative. It is quite probable that any party-connected group would be suspicious of where 'truth' and factual information about politics comes from and the relationship between mainstream media and social media. Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) label the consumption of mainstream media, especially newspapers, as a dimension of dutiful citizenship.

Other discussions, especially in the issue group focus groups, focused on the *quality* of political information broadcast by young people themselves (rather than only sharing or remediating mainstream media stories), and several criticised it as being often based on unformed opinion. For example, 'Anyone can put an opinion on Facebook but that doesn't make it a well-informed opinion' (Issues group, USA), or that the broadcasting of political content was in fact 'good spam':

With social media, I have friends from home that always say that they get spams on Amnesty stuff. It comes up all of the time but it means that they're aware of it. And they say it's fine it's 'good spam' and they are things that they're not otherwise aware of. (Issue group, UK)

One articulate and vocal member of the Australian issue group referred to social media-based distribution of information as 'white noise'. He was the only participant who did not use social media at all, and the discussions among the group that he generated were provocative, reflecting the tensions in this group between dutiful and self-actualising norms of citizenship:

Absolute white noise. It doesn't generate information. It just transfers it from place to place. It's impossible to monitor. People – it's a great idea that everybody can have a platform to stand on, but the same thing existed here in Sydney in the Domain. It's called a soapbox. Hop on it. You needed charm, you needed to be able to convince people. It's a gutless sense to tap at a keyboard and get a little tweet out there and think you've just had your intellectual session, you've made a great contribution. And really, you haven't. (Issues group, Australia)

New means to access information

The second way in which social media was discussed as a new form of communicative political action was its capacity to provide information rapidly that replaced or bypassed mainstream media. This theme is the counterpart to the previous theme that focused on questioning social media's capacity to rapidly broadcast information that was accurate. Instead, this theme reflects how young people use trusted friends as curators of their everyday news content (Zuckerman 2013; Thorson 2014). It reflects the high level of personalisation (Bennett and Segerberg 2011) in the ways information is distributed to young people, who may not access political news and information in other ways. For example, the quotes below point out the importance of sociality and friend networks in distribution of information:

I've got certain friends that are more politically minded than me and whenever I feel like going onto politics, I usually just scour their pages. I find it lot quicker than using a news site, although you have to accept their biases. (Social group, Australia)

This quote also demonstrates how mainstream media is not the first port of call for information on everyday news for many of our research participants:

I think it's interesting because I also get a lot of news. I don't have time and I'm loath to buy a newspaper when I can just get it online. But when my friends all post something, if we have similar interests, they will post something and I'm 'That's really interesting. I'll click on that link'. It's interesting how it's changed and it's almost like it is a news feed for me for certain aspects. Even like local stuff, because people will post like 'This rally is going on at Sydney Uni campus' and I'll go, 'I didn't know that was happening'. I find that much more useful day-to-day. (Identity group, Australia)

This theme also signals the use of some social media platforms every day, such as Twitter, to find out information from a potentially larger range of news sources. For example:

I have a Twitter account that I don't use, in that I don't tweet but I use it as a live stream newsfeed. I follow a lot of journalists that I'm interested in and a million different newsfeed things. Instead of watching the news in the morning I'll look at my Twitter feed and read how many articles I'm interested in, and you're kind of aware of things. (Issues group, UK)

While many participants saw the capacity to access new and broader forms of information through social media as a positive development, a view also surfaced that this use of social media reduced the complexity of politics to a '10 second sound bite' (Party group, Australia), or more specifically 140 characters via a Twitter update, that could be easily manipulated.

Everyday political talk

This theme, labelled as Everyday Political Talk, demonstrates that most of our young participants believed social media was a political space that facilitated broader political discussion. Optimists about the democratic potential of the Internet and social media tend to focus on two factors: the capacity for more deliberation online (see Coleman 2005; Wright 2011) and/or the mobilisation to new forms of political engagement that reduce existing political inequality (e.g. Schlozman et al. 2010). Conover and Searing (2005, 279) focus on 'everyday political talk', rather than formal deliberation, and define it as 'an act of self-expression through which citizens express "constitutive" preferences that are central to their understandings of who they are' (see also Kim and Kim 2008; Mansbridge 1999). This shift towards understanding everyday political talk as political engagement is the most important of the four themes on how social media provides a new political communicative space. It became apparent that for many of the focus group participants, social media was providing a space for discussion and identity expression that was not really occurring elsewhere. Those more sceptical about the usefulness of social media as space for political talk tended to be the groups that adhered to a more dutiful norm of citizenship, suggesting that for them, politics is best kept in rarefied offline political, but not everyday, social spaces.

One view that emerged in all three of the identity groups was that social media debate was not just 'preaching to the converted' but had the capacity to replicate reasoned political talk that may or may not occur in person. For example:

Sheer force of numbers means that the conversation develops more on Facebook than, say, six of you in the pub could ever get to. And because of that you're more likely to find an opposing view. Me and my mates in the pub generally agree on most things so we're not going to have the same level of conversation or we're not going to challenge each other to the same extent that the wider Facebook group will. (Identity group, UK)

Some participants suggested that they felt more comfortable expressing their political views and disagreeing with others online. For example:

I personally think I'm more confident online in expressing my views. Because I've got a lot of right wing friends that I know that just lampoon me. But I feel I can say it on Facebook. (Party group, UK)

In the issues group in the UK – the York Amnesty group – there was a disagreement between participants about online debate. The first view put forward by two participants was that online debate was worthwhile as it was important to challenge the viewpoints of others, publicly, be it on Facebook or on mainstream news websites. The reply from another participant was that sometimes debate on Facebook seemed to be just debate for debate's sake, and that it was rarely a genuine form of political engagement due to anonymity. However, both these viewpoints reinforce the suggestion that social media provides a space for young people to engage in a range of forms of everyday political talk, sometimes adversarial, sometimes more consensus driven. Previous research on everyday political talk found that ordinary citizens preferred 'weakly contested' debates and disliked 'strong contestation' that they associate with formal politics (Conover and Searing 2005, 277).

While it was unusual for our participants to speak the language of either representative or participatory democracy to describe their use of Facebook and social media, there were examples where they saw social media having democratising potential for their own organisations in the relationship between leaders and members. For example:

The internet is incredibly democratic in the respect that anybody who wants to get a Twitter account or a Facebook account or start their own blog absolutely can and can say whatever they want on it. I think it's a good thing that we have that lively debate on a lot of our internet forums. Even though we read some of the things people say and shake our heads, we can hear what they're saying. They are our network and we are their representatives, and we have to listen to them. (Identity group, UK)

The emergence of everyday political talk demonstrates that social media-based connective action is more than lowering the costs of coordination and communication. For many groups, it is reshaping organisational networks into personalised forms of digitally enabled engagement.

Doing politics online

Most of the discussion about how social media created new political spaces was about accessing and sharing information or focused on online debate. There was a limited

discussion about using social media as part of campaigning work or as participants described it ‘doing politics’ online. Overall, many of our focus group participants saw that the information sharing and debating they were doing online, especially as part of their own groups, was the same as other offline forms of politics. For example:

I follow the President of the United States on Tumblr. I do politics online. I think it’s a really good way, especially with youth. A few weeks ago I was in an online forum group discussion about what we think the President will do next and that came about by a tweet from Barak Obama. I think it’s completely relevant and important that you do politics online. And if you don’t engage with that perhaps that’s just you. (Social group, UK)

Some preferred doing politics online as it was less confrontational than other kinds of offline campaigning:

I don’t think canvassing is the best way but I think a lot of times with social media it’s more indirect so you’ll see it, but it’s not like someone’s throwing this at you and they’re trying to get you to think their way. You don’t feel that pressure. So you can look at it, maybe click on the link, and learn more and investigate it yourself. (Identity group, USA)

However, occasionally examples were given of new forms of online political action. One example from the Australian identity group was of how social media tools were being developed to encourage group members to share information and viewpoints on services: akin to a Trip Advisor site for GLBTQI-friendly medical centres. Less common was a reflective discussion on the limitations of ‘doing politics’ online and the need to still use offline forms of campaigning and organising work. Following the dutiful citizenship norms, this tended to be the party groups who were less convinced of the efficacy of both everyday political talk and doing politics online:

There’s a danger that you get people liking things or sharing things on Facebook and then not doing anything else. But most of the people that I know that are posting regularly about politics are very active offline as well. (Party group, UK)

Implications for future youth political engagement studies

The in-depth findings reported here open up broader discussion and empirical analysis of how young people incorporate social media into existing group-based political involvements and their everyday political engagement. It particularly demonstrated the emergence of new forms of social media-led communicative politics, akin to Bennett and Segerberg’s (2013) connective action via organisationally enabled networks. Earlier we posed three broad research questions that underpinned our research: How do civically active young people conceptualise their use of social media for political engagement? Is there a relationship between countries, the type of civic group young people are involved in and the meaning given to social media use? Does young people’s use of social media for political engagement demonstrate that citizenship norms are changing? We respond briefly to these in turn below.

First, we contributed to existing debate through critical oversight of new practices and understandings of youth-led politics. We focused especially on how young people see social media facilitates, and in some example also limits, their group-level political engagement. Our participants explained that the event organising, information sharing

and everyday political talk they engage in via Facebook and other social media are important ways for maintaining political engagement. Our participants did however vary in their enthusiasm for, and confidence in, social media. Some raised concerns about the quality of information shared or broadcast via social media and pointed to the limitations of online political debate and collective action. Future research should continue to explain how social media organising and communicative practices are now providing a primary space for micro-political engagement (Harris and Wyn 2009) and everyday political talk (Mansbridge 1999), instead of only looking at how social media mobilises young people to offline forms of individualised or collective politics.

Second, while our analysis compared youth-led groups across three countries, the similarities of attitudes to the use of social media for political engagement were strikingly similar. That is, the three dutiful-oriented party groups had more in common with one another in terms of their citizenship norms and practices than they did with the identity and issue-based groups within their own country. The three countries do actually differ in terms of institutional political practices that shape young people. For example, compulsory voting in Australia and obligatory civics education in the UK and the USA may differentially affect the context for young people's political engagement. This was beyond the scope of what we could analyse here, but future research needs to use systematic large-scale research to delve more deeply into these similarities and potential differences in increasing use of social media for politics.³ Our approach here was different from looking for evidence of how social media expands the level of political engagement, but that is a result of studying an already active population of young people. When studying ordinary young people who are less likely to be already mobilised, everyday social media-based information sharing, debate and political talk may well be lowering the threshold for political engagement.

We found here that the type of group – party, issues, identity and social – and the citizenship norms that they encapsulate mattered more for the ways social media was understood. The political party groups were much more likely to maintain dutiful citizenship norms that prioritised mainstream media use, formal political organising and respect for political authority. They not only valued social media mainly as a group organising tool, but also considered it a problematic space that more often than not distorted political information and debate. Most of the other groups – especially the overtly self-actualising issue and identity groups – referred positively to how personalised elements of social media use facilitated young people's everyday political talk and action. This emphasised that everyday sociality and friendship connections inherent to social media (Ellison and Boyd 2013) are becoming key in maintaining contemporary political engagement. Drawing direct policy implications from these data is difficult, but our study suggests that for policy practitioners who want to involve young people in initiatives, it is not a simple matter of using social media as a consultation add-on. Taking into account the sociality and friends-based networks, underpinning young people's everyday political engagement could lead to engaging initially with what Kjerstin Thorson (2014, 213) calls the young 'social politics curators' who bring politics into their social media networks.

Third, as highlighted above, we see that citizenship norms inscribed in the meso-level of politics of groups and networks matter both for subsequent political engagement and how social media may or may not constitute practice. Many argue that *most* young people themselves now hold self-actualising or engaged citizenship norms (Dalton 2009), even if most older generation-led political groups and institutions at the meso- and macro-level of politics do not (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011; Xenos and Bennett 2007; Vromen 2011).

Our participants demonstrate that understanding citizenship norms is relational. That is, we cannot understand the emergence of youth-led self-actualising groups and norms, such as found in our issue and identity-based groups, without also reflecting the powerful maintenance of dutiful citizenship norms. Some of these groups did not see their overall mission as ‘political’ as they gave that label only to existing groups with a political party alignment. Similarly, the party groups were dismissive of the political content of everyday talk and action on Facebook and other social media. Future research needs to continue to reflect on how these two citizenship norms are codependent, while also looking at young people’s new collective practices that open up cracks in between to create new ideals for engaged democratic citizenship.

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Notes

1. We found similarly high usage of social media by young people in our three-country representative survey, see Xenos et al. (2014).
2. We continue to refer to these as focus groups (rather than paired interviews) as the questions asked still generated discussion and debate, rather than only reflection on individual experience as an interview seeks to do.
3. We have started to do this elsewhere as part of our larger comparative project, The Civic Network, see Xenos et al. (2014).

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Appendix

Table A1. Overview of online presence of each group.

	Website (address, active/ inactive, info or interaction)	Facebook (members or likes, open group and active/ inactive)	Twitter (followers and active/ inactive)
<i>Sydney</i>			
Sydney	http://www.sulc.com.au/	486 likes	919
University	Inactive	Open	Active
Liberal Club	Info only	Active	
Young Vinnies	http://usydyv.wordpress.com/	959 members	n/a
Society	Inactive	Open	
	Info only	Active	
SHADES	http://www.shades.org.au/	1334 members/633 likes	363
	Active	Open	Active
	Info only	Active	
SUTEKH	http://sutekh.info/	561 members	81
	Inactive	Open	Inactive
	Info only	Active	
<i>Wisconsin–Madison</i>			
College	http://uwgop.com/	n/a	1759
Republicans	Active		Active
	Info		
Habitat for	http://habitatuw.org/	304 likes	n/a
Humanity	Active	Open	
	Interactive	Active	
AHANA	http://win.wisc.edu/organization/ahanaprehealthsociety	47 likes	62
	Inactive	Open	Inactive
	Info	Inactive	

Table A1 (Continued)

	Website (address, active/ inactive, info or interaction)	Facebook (members or likes, open group and active/ inactive)	Twitter (followers and active/ inactive)
Humans vs. Zombies	http://humansvszombies.org Active overarching org page Interactive	1292 members Open Active	n/a
<i>York</i> York Young Greens	http://yorkyounggreens.wordpress.com/ Active Info	67 likes Open Active	197 Active
Amnesty	n/a	598 members Open Active	226 Active
LGBTQ Network	http://www.yusu.org/campaigns-and-representation/lgbtq Inactive Info	202 members Open Active	n/a
Women's Cricket	https://sites.google.com/a/yusu.org/york-womens-cricket/ Inactive Info	52 members Open Active	92 Active