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The civic web: young people, the internet and civic participation

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BOOK REVIEW

The civic web: young people, the internet and civic participation, by Shakuntala Banaji and David Buckingham, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2013, 208 pp., US$30.00 (hardcover), US$21.00 (ebook), ISBN 978-0-262-01964-4

Much scholarship on the role of the internet for civic engagement has been motivated by concerns about the decline of traditional forms of political participation and fears about a crisis of democracy. These fears, along with the hopes, have tended to focus on young people. More recently, the emergence of spectacular repertoires of online civic engagement – from hacktivism to the use of social, mobile and increasingly image-based media to organize and mobilize (often) young people in street protests around the world – has spurred a frenzy of scholarship on the way the internet enables globalized, personalized and networked political communities and action. These developments have further problematized accounts of *what actually counts as civic engagement*, but to some extent, have also obscured *the role of institutions, organizations, context and culture for shaping the scope and significance of online civic practices*.

In this timely book, Banaji and Buckingham, seize on these questions to examine directly whether young people are alienated from mainstream politics, but empowered online to identify, explore and take action on issues they care about. In doing so the authors ask many more questions than they definitively answer – culminating in a conclusion that deconstructs the very premise of their research! This is a fantastic move – and a thoroughly necessary one – which, fortunately, comes at the end of an immanently readable book.

In a clear, almost conversational, but deceptively sophisticated style, Banaji and Buckingham build on significant country-specific studies of the youth civic web (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Montgomery, Gottlieg-Robles, & Larson, 2004; Vromen, 2011) and edited collections (e.g. Loader, 2007; Olsson & Dahlgren, 2010) that have captured diverse insights into young people's online political practices, communities and identity. However, distinct from the extant literature, as well as the preceding titles published in the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, Banaji and Buckingham present an international (if largely pan-European) view that undertakes both a broad, and nuanced, examination of the role of context (social, political, cultural) and the socio-material relations mediating the democratic potential of the civic websites studied.

This is no mean feat – even for these authors who masterfully grapple with the challenges and limitations of research on this 'moving target'. As they note early on: youth experience is diverse, notions of 'civic' vary widely according to context and culture, and the internet and its associated techno-socio infrastructures are ever-changing. Despite – indeed, *because* of – this heterogeneity, the authors take on the task of productively engaging and making sense of the diversity and complexity of the empirical and conceptual terrain. To do this, they draw on a broad range of data generated through a multi-country research project funded by the European Commission examining the role of the internet for promoting young people's participation in six – 'most different' – EU member sites (Hungary, Slovenia, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) and one applicant state (Turkey). The contrast of the case study countries allow the authors (and their project collaborators) to consider how vastly different social, cultural, economic and political dynamics shape how young people go online, what they do and the meaning and significance

of their online practices. However, this project takes a much broader, cultural approach than many other studies, using multi-methods to generate data to be combined and compared about the creators and managers of civic websites, their 'audiences' (the young people who use them) and the texts and affordances of sites themselves.

The introduction and first chapter lay out the conceptual and empirical questions and dilemmas of the research, rehearsing a now well-established narrative on youth, political participation and the internet which is characterized by two streams of interest: one on mobilization, the other on normalization. Banaji and Buckingham then disassociate their project from those concerned with establishing an 'internet effect' (p. 12) and instead pursue the project of problematizing and then broadly qualifying the nature, extent and implications of the civic web for young people and participation. Subsequent chapters chart a course through the ecology of the youth civic web. Drawing first on in-depth interviews with managers and content producers of a cross section of civic websites, the authors argue that the form and function of civic sites is highly contingent on local dynamics associated with the work and management practices, funding, policy and socio-cultural contexts of organizations – and their websites. Their attention then turns to how young people go online and the nature and motivations for civic participation, drawing first on online survey data, and then focus group discussions. These analyses reveal that online and offline participation are complimentary and that most young people – like most adults – are not always 'active' or 'inactive' citizens. The civic acts in which they engage depend more on circumstances, opportunities, and indeed on gender, class and level of education. Moreover, while positive experiences offline are likely to drive online engagement, the barriers to young people's offline participation in civic and political life tend to be replicated online. The 'problem' of 'youth disengagement', is not, as they say a 'communication problem'. Indeed, Banaji and Buckingham challenge the very framing of this 'problem' by pointing to a system that appears largely disinterested in engaging with young people and their politics. This problematic is further explored in the final two chapters, concerned with the online 'texts' as represented by a diverse range of sites. From the extensive and nuanced case study analysis undertaken in these final chapters, Banaji and Buckingham conclude that the politics and pedagogy of organizations have greater influence over the extent of participatory or democratic capacities of sites and their users, than does the affordances of the technology.

This monograph offers a sobering, less optimistic, contribution than much of the current scholarship – preoccupied as it is with examining the forms, ethics and impacts of political expression and organization via social media. While such studies help to problematize and explore the nuances of new, highly networked forms of micro-political action, in this book Banaji and Buckingham remind us that studies of mediated politics cannot be separated from the social and material relations on which they are based. They find support for wider claims that young people's politics are broadly underpinned by a sense of alienation provoked by exclusion and disillusion with mainstream political systems and cultures. While going online has become utterly normalized the internet is intertwined in a complex web of practices and relations that constitute youth civic engagement as an uneven field among diverse youth populations. Furthermore, despite the heterogeneity of the online civic sphere that is mapped by this project, Banaji and Buckingham do not find a proliferation of websites designed to actively engage with young people's views or connect them both horizontally and vertically to political networks and elites. Rather, sites are more likely to replicate offline socio-cultural, generational, political and structural patterns, including constructing young people as learner-citizens and reflecting limited and conventional assumptions about 'youth' and what they 'should' be doing. Nevertheless, the authors do find the non-government, community and interest-based organizations behind civic websites continue to play a significant role in the lives of young people both off and online. Where these organizations engage respectfully with young people's experiences, concerns and

views of the world they can facilitate meaningful engagement and foster an expanded notion of 'politics' that reflects the socio-cultural, peronalizable and everyday frames through which young people approach issues of concern.

The book is beautifully organized and written and as such belies the scale and complexity of research it is based on. Despite the fact that much of the data for this monograph was collected between 2006 and 2009, the central concerns, theoretical and empirical arguments of the book are at the forefront of debates within the field. Indeed, in conclusion, Banaji and Buckingham pose a rethinking of the initial research questions driving their inquiry. Rather than asking if and how the internet can engage young people in politics and civic life, they argue that scholarship should be concerned with whether or not political systems can adapt to the expectations and aspirations of citizens. Put somewhat differently, the democratizing potential of the internet is less a question of technology, than it is one of the capacity of political institutions, elites, systems and cultures to enthusiastically adapt to the networked, personalizable and participatory imperatives of digital society.

Notes on contributor

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