

## **Young Citizens and Political Participation Online Media and Civic Cultures**

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### **Abstract**

The first part of this essay focuses on the theme of civic engagement, set against the dilemmas of democracy confronting the West. It examines the role of the digital media in this regard, while at the same time trying to illuminate the challenges in broader socio-cultural terms. Specifically, it underscores that the Web environment constitutes a key social site, especially for young people in late modernity, and that the contingencies of its use and the potential it offers have significance for the character of democracy. The second part of the essay offers an analytical framework for examining civic cultures. Civic cultures can support democratic agency and are shaped by a variety of factors. The media, however, are of particular importance here. The framework is modeled as a circuit with six mutually reciprocal dimensions, each opening up an avenue of possible empirical research.

**Key words:** Participation, young citizens, civic cultures, online media, Internet, and democracy.

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**I**n the current and often troubled discussions on the state of democracy, the participation of its citizens in political life, and the role of the digital media, young people often are identified as being of special concern. This is understandable, given that younger-age cohorts not only represent the future of society—and hopefully, of democracy—but also are the ones who are most developed in terms of the use of the Internet and its various platforms and ancillary technologies (such as mobile telephony). Moreover, they also tend to be the ones who are most likely to manifest a disconnection from established political life and the public sphere.

At the same time, we should be cautious about defining “young people” as some kind of unified group; in many respects, they are often like their elders,

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and within any one society and certainly in international comparative terms, they manifest many differences among them. Yet, if we take the signifier “young people” as indicative of trends and patterns, rather than as a specifier of a homogenous group, it can still make sense to use it. The aim in this essay is to offer a few central aspects in regard to young people, democratic participation, and online media. In particular, the essay presents an analytical framework that can help us to understand the role played by the digital media in regard to the civic agency of young people, and addresses the questions (without laying claim to having all the answers!) of what factors are likely to promote or hinder civic agency, and how we should understand the significance of the digital media in this process.

The discussion that follows has two main parts. The first situates the question of declining—and reemerging—civic engagement in the context of democracy’s contemporary difficulties, and reflects on what we today know about democratic participation and online media, particularly in regard to young people. The second section presents the analytic framework of civic cultures, with its six dimensions. This framework strives to conceptually depict the factors that can promote or impede democratic participation, while at the same time offering pathways for empirical study. The essay concludes with a few summary reflections on the significance of the digital media

### **Dilemmas of Democracy: Media, and Participation**

Democracy is not a universal and static phenomenon; its specific character varies under different and evolving circumstances. Its vitality and even its very survival cannot be taken for granted. It is an historical project, criss-crossed by contestations among those forces that would in various ways constrict it and those that seek to broaden and deepen it, not least of which by enhancing the participation of citizens. Even on the Left, there is a wide range of visions of its future.<sup>1</sup> Within Europe and the EU, we find significant differences and even tensions in regard to political traditions, notions of citizenship, assumptions about accountability and transparency, conceptions of what constitutes civil society, and so on. In other parts of the world, struggles are raging in an effort to establish something that might be called democracy.

In much of the Western world, party politics seem stagnant, reactive, and uninspiring; many citizens feel that they are not offered real choices. From the standpoint of political participation, we have been witnessing a steady decline in the electoral system, in party loyalties, and even in civil society activities. There is a growing scepticism, frustration, indeed, even cynicism toward the political class. Among the many problems facing democracy in

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Giorgio Agamben et al., *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

recent decades has been the tendency for accountable political power in the formal political system to diminish under the onslaught of neoliberal models of societal development.<sup>2</sup> When market dynamics come to be seen as the most democratic force in society, the opportunities for meaningful civic participation are eroded. At the same time, governments at all levels have decreasing margins of maneuverability in the context of increasingly global economic forces. Neoliberalism has become not just a polity horizon but also a cultural motif, shaping values, social relationships, and visions of the good society.<sup>3</sup>

This narrative of declining political engagement is countered, however, by other trends. We see the emergence of a very politically active extreme Right in many European countries, movements that not only mobilize against immigration, but also express the frustrations and sense of disempowerment that many people at the lower end of the socio-economic hierarchy experience. In the United States, the Christian Right and the Tea Party movement manifest other versions of such mobilization. Also, today, as economic and financial crises lead to pronounced social devastation, there is considerable reemergence of political engagement, particularly in southern Europe. On other fronts, we also can observe new forms of political engagement, often of a progressive kind and frequently involving younger people making use of the applications of digital media; notable in this regard is the vast number of groups engaged in the broad alter-globalization movement, often connected to the World Social Forum.

Existing “democracy” does not automatically guarantee universal and extensive civic participation, either in parliamentary or extra-parliamentary contexts. There are always mechanisms at work that can delimit participation. Democratic systems offer varying patterns of opportunity for participation: access to and impact within public spheres can vary a good deal. Thus, such participation is always contingent on structural circumstances. This suggests that any perceived lack of participation cannot be seen as simply a question of failed civic virtue, but must be understood in the contexts of the dilemmas of late modern democracy, more generally, and of the specific socio-cultural factors that shape the lived realities of various groups of citizens. Democracy is being transformed as its social, cultural, and political foundations develop, and the evolving media landscape and the character of participation are part of these larger phenomena.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley, Hants, England: Zero Books, 2009), and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> These themes have given rise to an extensive literature; see, for instance, Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2010); Jeff Lewis, *Crisis in the Global Mediasphere: Desire, Displeasure and Cultural Transformation* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave, 2011); Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 2007); and Zigmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2007).

## The Web Environment as Everyday Reality

At a general level, the ubiquitous Web environment is where more and more young people with a minimal degree of affluence spend much of their time for an array of purposes.<sup>4</sup> Young people, especially, are using various functions of communication technology, often summarized under the rubric of Web 2.0, not just to send written and spoken messages, but also to upload, remix, link, and share, in increasingly complex and developed ways. Many are becoming what is called “producers,” that is, they are users who in a variety of ways are generating their own media content. For young people in Europe and elsewhere, the net, and social media in particular, are not just something they “visit” on occasion in order to seek something special; the net and social media are increasingly part of the terrain of their daily lives. From social interaction with friends to gossip blogging, from music perusals to news, from shopping to finding a partner, what we can call the Web environment is becoming the taken-for-granted site where the lives of young people are increasingly embedded.<sup>5</sup>

Online media offer possibilities that are harnessed and mobilized in varying ways across the societal landscape, and thus impact the strategies and tactics of everyday life and the frames of reference that provide them with meaning. Whether they always make use of the net in the best manner can be discussed, and certainly there are a variety of risks and even some threats of which young people, especially, need to be aware. However, the fact remains that the functions of the Web environment are such that social life today has an inexorable online component.

Participation online can take many forms. Most of it, of course, has to do with consumption, entertainment, social contacts, and so forth; only a small portion can be called political participation, even if consumption and popular culture are always to some extent of potential political relevance. We must acknowledge the permeable character of the boundaries between politics and nonpolitics. As Mouffe argues, the political, in principle, can emerge anywhere on the social landscape, and we cannot *a priori* specify where such conflict will arise.<sup>6</sup> However, political participation usually is easily specified, especially by the participants themselves, even if its practices can vary considerably. In fact, as the applications of online media become more widespread, ever new and creative practices develop, a point to which we will return later. Online media, of course, are a part of the larger social and cultural world, intertwined with the offline lives of individuals as well as with the functioning of groups,

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<sup>4</sup> For some recent statistics on access and usage among European young people, see Sonia Livingstone and Leslie Haddon, *Young People in the European Digital Landscape* (Göteborg, Sweden: Nordicom, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Sonia Livingstone, *Children and the Internet* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

organizations, and institutions. These media are embedded in prevailing relations of power, though their uses can also on occasion run counter to prevailing hegemonies.

## **Digital Media and Democracy: Cautious Optimism**

After more than a decade and a half of massive Internet research, we understand that, in terms of politics, this technology is indeed of major importance.<sup>7</sup> Given that it has dramatically transformed the life of society in so many ways, it is not so surprising to learn that it also has altered the ways in which politics is done. At first, researchers felt that, at best, the Internet was of significance only for those involved in alternative, extra-parliamentarian politics. Gradually, however, even mainstream party politics began to make use of it, and after the Obama campaign in the presidential election of 2008 in the United States, it was clear that social media had a very important role to play even in traditional party politics of the Western world. (That platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have played significant roles in the dramatic events in North Africa and the Middle East during 2011 is also to be underscored, but the social and political circumstances there are considerably different, and would require a lengthy discussion that space does not permit here).

There has been considerable research specifically on young people, participation, and digital media in recent years.<sup>8</sup> A key upshot of this research is that the net should not be seen as something that can be instrumentally used to engage young citizens who at present lack involvement. Also, this work affirms the importance of connections between the on- and offline realms (i.e., links to the experiences of everyday life, to the local community, and to processes of identity formation and its politics). The research underscores the significance of interacting with other young citizens online, but also with those in power: there must be communicative links between young people and those who make decisions, if anything resembling democratic engagement is

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<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *Civicweb Final Report (2008)*, <http://www.civicweb.eu/> (accessed September 2, 2011); Lance W. Bennett, ed., *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); David Buckingham, ed., *Youth, Identity and the Digital Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Peter Dahlgren and Tobias Olsson, "Facilitating Political Participation: Young Citizens, Internet and Civic Cultures," in *The International Handbook of Children: Media and Culture*, ed. Sonia Livingstone and Kirsten Drotner (London: Sage, 2007); Brian Loader, ed., *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media* (London: Routledge, 2007); Sonia Livingstone, *Children and the Internet* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2009); Thomas Tufte and Florencia Enghel, eds., *Youth Engaging with the World* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Nordicom/Unesco International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media, 2009); and Tobias Olsson and Peter Dahlgren, eds., *Young People, ICTs and Democracy* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Nordicom, 2010).

to be sustained. Thus, in short, we can say that the significance and impact of the Internet on young people's democratic participation must be understood as fundamentally contingent upon other social and cultural factors; it never operates in a vacuum.

At the same time, if this research has been cautionary in the sense of not offering any neat technological solutions to democracy's difficulties, it has continued to underscore the vision of the Internet's potential for extending and deepening democratic involvement. The Internet clearly can make a difference: in contributing to massive transformations of contemporary society at all levels, it also has dramatically altered the premises and infrastructure of the public sphere in a variety of ways. In making available vast amounts of information, fostering decentralization and diversity, facilitating interactivity and individual communication, while also providing seemingly limitless communicative space for whomever wants it, at speeds that are instantaneous, it has redefined the premises and character of civic engagement.

Moreover, while civic engagement among the young in the West continues to decline in regard to traditional party politics, we can note that the domain of alternative politics, with its social movements, networked activists, and spontaneous discussions, continues to grow. And certainly, as economic and social tensions rise, and many people in Europe and elsewhere take to the streets, it becomes questionable how valid it is to continue to speak about a generalized political apathy.

The question often arises to what extent we should be optimistic in regard to the role of online media in the future of democracy. Indeed, the force fields of optimism and pessimism are often visible in discussions and research about it. While many proponents enthuse about how this new world of information is having an immensely positive impact on everything from personal development to the character of our civilization, other voices, such as Carr's, argue that it is undermining our capacity to think, read, and remember.<sup>9</sup> If many observers side with Sunstein<sup>10</sup> in regard to how the participatory "wisdom of the many" (as manifested, for example, in Wikipedia and the blogosphere) is producing new and better forms of knowledge, others such as Keen<sup>11</sup> warn of the dangers, arguing that participatory Web 2.0 erodes our values, standards, and creativity, as well as our cultural institutions.

Still more pertinent to the discussion at hand, the democratic potential of the Internet is a topic that evokes diverse views. Morozov argues that the idea has been seriously oversold, and that Internet technology not only is failing

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Cass Sunstein, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

to democratize the world, but also is used by authoritarian regimes to control its citizens and suppress dissent.<sup>12</sup> Castells takes a much more positive view. In his recent book, he continues with his optimistic paradigm of “the network society,” established in his trilogy from the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> His new work can be seen as a conceptual update, including in regard to his more extensive use of research literature from the field of media and communication studies. He treats power as a relational concept, and conceptually underscores the communication dimension of power relationships. He does not reduce power to communication (he acknowledges the role of violence and coercion), but rather argues strongly for the centrality of communication for power in the modern world. This still leaves open the question of how power, in turn, shapes the conditions for and consequences of communication.

Clearly, we are in no position at this juncture to make any final commitment to pure optimism or pessimism in regard to the digital media and democracy. If it would seem rash to proclaim that “the Internet will save democracy by enhancing participation,” we can at least note that the ongoing media metamorphosis is having a profound impact on the conditions of participation, and on the dynamics of democracy. These are important openings to pursue, particularly in regard to power relations and the question of empowerment. It would seem that we at least have the grounds for what we might describe as cautious optimism.

## **Toward Civic Cultures and Agency**

### ***Shaping Civic Agents***

If the motivation for participation cannot be reduced simply to the presence of the digital media *per se*, then the disposition for engagement obviously must come from other sources. Nonetheless, it is clear that these media certainly help to facilitate the preconditions for participation, by providing access to resources that can foster civic agency. This process of “becoming citizens,” of taking the step into the domain of political conflict, seemingly remains undertheorized, oddly enough. It is as if democratic theory implicitly assumes that, at the legal age of eighteen, people will somehow take on civic responsibilities—and believers become upset when they do not. The normative theories about the public sphere, for example, have made major contributions to our understanding of democracy and the role of the media, yet cannot explain how or why people choose to participate or not. This literature simply does not engage the ground-level experiences of people in their everyday lives. There is also the traditional research in political sociology, which can show major patterns of democratic

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<sup>12</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

participation within specific communities or national populations. However, it, too, does not engage the question of agency, and the specific conditions that affect the subjectivity of individuals and groups in this question, nor does it have much to say about the media.

Thus, we must look elsewhere to understand the factors that shape civic agency. If politics as a topic does not rank among subjects most pursued on the net, it is still the case that when young people turn to it, the Web environment has a central position. Concretely, how can we conceptualize the role of digital media for political participation? The framework of civic cultures can provide us with some analytical insight.

### ***Resources for Participation***

Civic agency—citizens’ participation in politics—cannot be enacted in a vacuum; it must be supported by and integrated with a larger cultural milieu that has relevance for politics and enables participation. What I call civic cultures is an analytical framework intended to help illuminate the specific conditions that are necessary for participation, and which offer ports of entry for empirical analysis.<sup>14</sup> Civic cultures comprise those cultural resources that citizens can draw upon for participation because they are available to them in their everyday lives. Moreover, in the modern world, civic cultures operate to a great extent via the media. Thus, the framework seeks to specify the ways in which the media—in our case here, the Internet—actually can facilitate—as well as hinder—civic agency.

It is more accurate to speak of civic cultures—in the plural—since the argument rests on the assumption that, in the late modern world, there are many ways in which participation can be accomplished and enacted. Civic cultures, to the extent that they are compelling, operate at the level of citizens’ taken-for-granted horizons in everyday reality, or, in Habermasian terms, the lifeworld. (From a Bourdieu perspective, one might experiment with a notion of “civic habitus.”) Civic cultures are shaped by an array of factors. Certainly, family and schools lay a foundation. More broadly, we can say that the basic parameters of civic cultures derive from the structural social relations of power, economics, the legal system, and organizational possibilities—all can have their impact. However, as we shift the discussion here to an actor’s perspective, underscoring civic agency, the centrality of the media comes into view. The forms, contents, specific logics, and modes of use of the media become the most accessible tools of civic cultures.

In terms of viability, civic cultures are both strong and vulnerable. They can shape citizens’ sense of what is politically possible; they can serve to

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<sup>14</sup> For a more extensive treatment of this theme, see Peter Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

empower. Citizens, in turn via their practices, can influence the character of civic cultures. Indeed, it is not impossible that civic cultures can develop even in circumstances that may seem on the surface unlikely, as we saw in several countries when the communist system began to collapse, and in the recent Arab Spring. Alternatively, the weaknesses or absence of civic cultures becomes disabling and undercuts citizens' capacities to act, and unfavourable circumstances can readily result in suppressed or atrophied civic cultures.

I am arguing that robust civic cultures are necessary prerequisites for participation and for the vitality of public spheres—and, thus, for the functioning of democracy. The perspective of civic cultures is interested in the processes of how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as members and potential participants in societal development, and how such empowered senses of self are maintained.

## **Civic Cultures and the Internet**

The notion of culture easily can appear nebulous, and civic cultures are no exception. Thus, for conceptual precision, I model civic cultures as integrated circuits of six dimensions of mutual reciprocity.<sup>15</sup> The first three are familiar from the established tradition of political communication; the latter three emerge from currents in contemporary cultural theory: (1) knowledge, (2) values, (3) trust, (4) spaces, (5) practices and skills, and (6) identities. The circuit metaphor underlines their interaction, but there is never anything mechanical or inevitable about how culture operates.

### ***Knowledge: New Modes***

That citizens need knowledge in order to participate politically is obvious and basic. People must have access to reliable reports, portrayals, analyses, discussions, debates, and so forth, about current affairs and society, in general, if the public sphere is to be viable. This can be accomplished in many ways; however, in the modern world, the media play a key role in this regard, though not an unproblematic one. We are familiar with such issues as journalism's inadequacies; moreover, the sources of knowledge must be comprehensible as well as accessible—in technical and economic terms, as well as in regard to linguistic and cultural proximity. Some degree of literacy is essential, which reiterates the importance of education within a democracy; people must be able to make sense of that which circulates in public spheres in order to understand the world in which they live. Precisely what kinds of knowledge are required for the vitality of civic cultures can never be established once and for all, but must always be open for discussion (and debates on this are in progress, as noted above).

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<sup>15</sup> For a more extended discussion, see *ibid.*

What is particularly significant for the discussion at hand is that modes of knowledge, perhaps even some people's cognitive architecture—are evolving with new generations growing up with new media technologies. The net leans toward shorter texts, multimedia formats, and visual information. These attributes have been raising issues of how classroom pedagogy can best deal with children who already may have logged many net hours before they entered school, and for whom the net serves as a sort of parallel source of knowledge and cognitive development during their school years. Not only teachers, but also democracy itself must come to terms with this growing alternative to traditional text-based knowledge with its linear logic.

### ***Values: Anchored in the Everyday***

Democracy will not function if such values as tolerance and willingness to follow democratic principles and procedures do not have grounding in everyday life. Even support for the legal system (assuming it is legitimate) is an expression of such virtue. Just which are the “best” or “real” democratic values, and how they should be applied, can be the grounds for serious dispute—and should be. While civic cultures do not presuppose homogeneity among citizens, they suggest minimal shared commitments to the vision and procedures of democracy. Different social and cultural groups can express civic agency in various ways, with discrete inflections. For example, the civic culture that might characterize a group of community activists in an immigrant neighborhood no doubt will differ considerably from that of a national environmentalist group.

Values reflect taken-for-granted sensibilities; fundamentally, democracy is as much about a democratic society—how people live together and treat each other—as it is about a system of formal institutions. It is difficult to generalize about the values prevalent on the Internet, given its almost infinite scope. In specific political settings on the net, say in party organizations, discussion groups and forums, or social movements and social networks, research has shown mixed tendencies. Democratic values are often manifested in civility, respect for opposing opinions, openness, accountability, and so on, yet the inverse is also true. To the extent that patterns of communication on the net reflect some degree of allegiance to democratic values, the struggle for enhanced communication ethics online is an important contribution to the democratic character of society.

The patterns of behavior online vary enormously, but I would argue that there is much activity that expresses and supports values that are at base democratic, especially among those who are politically involved: networking, linking, sharing, and, perhaps paradoxically, the prevalent anti-commercial (but proconsumer) mentality that “if it's on the net, it should be free.”

### ***Trust: Optimal, in Networks***

Trust has long been seen as an important component for democracy; it has been reiterated in theory and studied empirically. It has been presented as a self-

evident “good thing”—the more trust, the better; declines in trust signal trouble. Certain degrees of general trust in society are necessary to make life bearable, but trust balanced with a built-in antenna for scepticism and criticism becomes optimally prudent. The bearers of trust are usually seen as the citizens, and the objects of trust are the institutions or representatives of government. More recently, however, the theme of trust among or between groups of citizens also has been highlighted, and in the context of political participation and the collective action it requires, horizontal civic trust is clearly vital.

In the Web environment, the growth of what is sometimes called “network culture”—extensive but socially thin links between people—can be seen as a manifestation of such civic trust. The capacity to extend a suitable degree of trust to strangers encountered on the net is a valuable element of what we might call “democratic capital,” which facilitates collective civic efforts. Widespread mistrust, of course, becomes debilitating for participation.

### ***Spaces: Communicative Contexts of Action***

Democracy must take place some place: the participation of citizens requires the communicative spaces of public spheres. Certainly, the Internet in this regard is becoming the premier space for many young citizens, and we need not dwell on this obvious fact. I would just underscore one particular feature whose significance I am convinced will only deepen, namely the growing mobility of the Web environment. With the net under the regime of Web 1.0, people could be co-present with others who were physically removed. With Web 2.0, together with the new telephony where cell phones are developing into pocket computers that can link to the net, we are seeing the emergence of a new, mobile “publicness.” This can make “space” a more malleable entity, one that can be defined, constructed, and appropriated in yet unforeseen ways in the context of participation. The capacity to send and receive net-based text, sound, and images while on the move enhances the connections between on- and offline contexts, and no doubt strengthens the efficacy of young people’s participation.

### ***Practices: Embodied Agency and Skills***

A viable democracy must be embodied in concrete, recurring practices—individual, group, and collective—relevant for diverse situations. Such practices help generate personal and social meaning to the ideals of democracy, and they must have an element of the routine, of the taken-for-granted, about them, if they are to be a part of civic cultures. Practices can be and are learned; they often require specific skills, especially communicative competencies. Thus, to be able to read, write, speak, work a computer, and get around on the Internet can all be seen as competencies important for democratic practices. Education always will play a key role in nurturing democracy, even if its contents and pedagogical approaches periodically need to be scrutinized and debated.

Participating in elections is usually seen as the paramount concrete practice

for democracy's citizens. Discussion, too, has a prominent position, and has been associated with democracy and opinion formation from the start. Yet, civic cultures require many other practices as well, pertinent to various political projects and circumstances. For example, having the social competence to call and hold a meeting, managing discussions, and organizing and administering collective activities are all important practices involving skills. Opinion-building, lobbying, bargaining, negotiating, mobilizing, initiating legal action, networking, and other activities can all be a part of a repertoire of civic practices. Agre emphasises the capacity to define and promote specific issues, articulate positions on them, recruit support, cement relationships, and follow up with the necessary organizational skills to keep the momentum going.<sup>16</sup> The net's potential unquestionably looms very large here.

New practices and traditions can and must evolve to ensure that democracy does not stagnate. We see today how the lack of civic practices and skills is an obstacle for citizens in many societies attempting to develop their democratic character. Skills can develop through practices, and, in this process, foster a sense of empowerment. Practices interplay forcefully with knowledge, trust, and values; practices involve defining, using, or creating suitable spaces; and, most compellingly, practices help to foster civic identities. For young citizens, the array of practices afforded by the net—from communicating individually and group-wise horizontally, to making materials instantly public—dramatically increase the repertoire of civic agency. And, given that the Web environment is so embedded in their lives, they continually develop their skills in using these technologies.

### ***Identities: Empowered Collective Agents***

Identity has to do with our conception of self. In the late modern world, identity is understood as plural: in our daily lives, we operate in a multitude of different “worlds” or realities; we carry within us different sets of knowledge, assumptions, rules, and roles for different circumstances, and we operate in varied registers in different contexts. Sociological and cultural studies have emphasised “identity work” among the young, and the links to the theme of civic identities readily can be developed. While civic identities have an individual component and are a part of each person's subjectivity (see the next section), in terms of civic cultures, they also involve some sense the self as part of a political community, and some level of affinity with other like-minded people. The emergence of sets of “we-they” polarities in politics, with the corresponding degrees of trust and suspicion, is an important manifestation of civic identities.

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<sup>16</sup> Philip E. Agre, “The Practical Republic: Social Skills and the Progress of Citizenship,” in *Community in the Digital Age*, ed. Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

Fundamentally, a civic identity empowers people to feel that they can participate in democracy; it is a precondition for agency. Recognition and dignity are key components as well—attributes often denied to various groups today. People need to sense that they, in concert with others, can have some type of impact on political life. At some point, of course, empowerment must be experienced as resulting in some kind of results. This does not necessarily mean that victory must be achieved each time, but it is important for individuals and groups to feel that their efforts at least make a meaningful contribution in a political context. Hence, mechanisms of exclusion in the long run can undermine civic identities. Also, the more available opportunities for consumption lead to consumer identities by and large being much more prevalent and stronger than civic identities. In late modern culture, especially among the young whose political engagement is low, civic identities, in fact, could be viewed in some circles as a form of “deviancy.”

What about “young people” as a category for civic identity? Analytically, as suggested at the outset, this category can carry us only so far. There is great diversity in views and basic assumptions, and we should be very careful in making generalizations. In Sweden, the intense public debates in 2008-2009 around file-sharing of copyright material, and the launching of the Pirate Party (which attained a seat in the European Parliament) certainly had an age dimension to it: politicians were saying things such as, “We can’t put a whole generation behind bars.” Yet, the piracy advocates were not necessarily all young, and many young people took an explicit stand against the free file-sharing. Moreover, as the debate continued to address new legal proposals about registering users and permitting surveillance of individuals’ net traffic, the theme of privacy emerged as a focus of the debate, and it had no clear generational tendency.

Knowledge, practices, values, and trust can all bolster civic identity; civic identity, like all identities, is strengthened via experience. The Web environment is a dominant arena for experience in the everyday lives of the young; whether experiences veer toward politics and promote civic identities has much to do with the encounter between the two tiers of opportunity structures and civic cultures. In a Swedish research study,<sup>17</sup> it was found that, among young activist citizens, the dimensions of trust and values function in more long-term and less visible ways, and are generally infrequently observed or the focus of comment by the respondents themselves.

From the standpoint of their own participation, the respondents are able to reflexively note the importance of their growing knowledge and practices/skills. Civic identity, perhaps paradoxically, is the dimension that is least likely to be identified as something pertinent by these young citizens themselves. Yet, I would argue that schematically it is precisely this dimension of civic

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<sup>17</sup> Dahlgren and Olsson, “Facilitating Political Participation.”

cultures that provides the most fundamental resource for action. That it is not so immediately visible to the activists may well have to do with the fact that identity resonates at both collective and individual levels. We may easily see and understand our affinity to specific collectivities, but to analytically specify one's own sense of self can often be a challenge for anyone.

### **The Digital Media as a Central Factor**

Let us recall that there are many factors that can affect civic cultures, including social class and institutionalized power relations, but in the context of late modernity, one of the most important is the complex and dynamic system of the ever-evolving media matrix. In looking at our circuit of six dimensions, all of them potentially impact each other, and each of them, in turn, is shaped by developments in the other five. It is no doubt the case that their respective saliency will vary in different contexts, including for individual citizens. However, in a tentative manner, we might order the dimensions in a general way in terms of their respective valence.

Sets of interviews with young political activists that were done in the context of the Swedish research project noted above, suggest that the dimensions of trust and values function in more long-term and less visible ways, with their changes having gradual impact;<sup>18</sup> also they generally were infrequently observed/analyzed by the participants themselves.

From the standpoint of civic agency, knowledge and practices/skills tend to be the dimensions that citizens can most readily analyze in a self-reflexive way, charting one's development in such terms. Spaces of communicative access offer the necessary opportunities; at times they may become the focus of much attention—for example, if a new space suddenly becomes accessible (e.g., Twitter), or they may simply remain taken-for-granted. Civic identity is, perhaps paradoxically, the dimension that is least likely to be formulated, at least in verbal terms, as something pertinent by civic agents themselves, yet this still clearly functions, I would argue, as the most compelling link between civic cultures and the sense of agency that engages people and can help turn them into political participants.

While the perspective I have developed here derives from a Western context, it can be noted that similar mechanisms seem to be at play in, for example, the insurrections of the Arab Spring of this year. In Egypt, for instance, observers note how the applied knowledge, the impetus of democratic values and civic trust, plus the practices and skills of media use during the upheavals not only had concrete political consequences, but also affected identities. The people participating in these struggles gained a sense of individual and collective empowerment; a new, robust dignity emerged as they made a subjective

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

transition from being oppressed victims of an authoritarian regime to agents who were making history. These themes are explored in a very recent research effort analyzing social media use in the Egyptian context.<sup>19</sup>

The digital media's centrality for both civic identity and practices—as well as for knowledge and the other dimensions—is indisputable. The framework of civic cultures helps us to analytically grasp the notion of citizenship in a manner that can mediate between specific political contexts and larger perspectives of situated human agency and subjectivity. It offers a compelling account of the experiential and practical links between media and citizenship—and it helps us avoid any reductionist or mechanistic determinism in regard to how it impacts political life. And, even if it does not give us any quick answers to the larger questions about democracy, this framework helps point to specific phenomena that we can examine empirically and scrutinize critically.

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<sup>19</sup> Eike M. Rinke and Maria Röde, "Media Ecologies, Communication Culture, and Temporal-Spatial Unfolding: Three Components in a Communication Model of the Egyptian Regime Change," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1-20.

