

Youth Empowerment in the Digital Age: Harnessing Digital Activism and Navigating Political Information

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ABSTRACT: The widespread adoption of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the political sphere, providing young people with previously unheard-of avenues for collective action and political information dissemination. This article discusses the interconnectedness of youth empowerment, digital activism, and citizens' ability to navigate political information within present-day democracies. By building upon recent research and empirical findings, the article describes the means by which young activists can mobilize and the difficulties they encounter in distinguishing credible information from dubious sources, as well as the educational strategies for increasing youth's ability to process information more effectively. Situated within current debates on civic participation and digital citizenship, the article provides an in-depth understanding of both the positive and negative aspects that define the digital sphere of youth activism.

KEYWORDS: Digital technology, digital activism, civic participation, digital citizenship, youth empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

In less than two decades, the internet and mobile devices have become indispensable to the everyday lives of the majority of teenagers and young adults worldwide. Pushed to further action by events of political significance in recent years, young Americans aged 18-29 increasingly utilize social media for following news updates and engaging in civic participation. While this trend can be observed in numerous countries throughout Europe, Asia and Latin America, 71% of young American citizens now report using social media for news, an issue that has resulted in the changing modes of consumption and creation of political news, but not solely that. In fact, young citizens are no longer passive consumers of political messages that are disseminated by powerful actors but possess tools that allow them to actively create, organize and distribute politically oriented information. As a result, the phenomena of youth empowerment, digital activism and navigation of political information have become intricately linked.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Empowerment can be defined as the enhancement of an individual or group's ability to exert an influence on the social or political environment in which they are embedded (Selin, 2004). The digital realm can be said to contribute to empowerment through three connected affordances: low barriers to entry, network amplification, and multimodality (Loader & Mercea, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci, 2022). Low barriers to entry on digital platforms, such as a public Twitter, Facebook or Instagram profile, are particularly beneficial as they "democratize" discourse. By providing users with a platform to express their viewpoints directly on an established platform, gatekeepers like traditional media are bypassed, "empowering" citizens to disseminate their own information without much restriction (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Second, the viral nature of social media is a crucial aspect of empowering young citizens as "a single message or call to action can rapidly reach thousands, even millions," translating an individual expression of concern or opposition into a larger civic movement or protests (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The example of the Fridays for Future protests, inspired by one hashtag on social media that "sparked a global climate movement within days," indicates the potency of such movements (Hara et al., 2020). Lastly, the affordance of multimodality allows diverse forms of participation, "drawing in individuals with varying skill sets and levels of technical expertise," by utilizing text, images, audio and video (Cohen & Lemish, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). The combination of such affordances together "lowers the psychological cost of participation for young people who might otherwise feel disempowered by dominant forms of media and politics" and allows youth to overcome psychological and spatial barriers to participation. In certain contexts, anonymity and pseudonymity on some digital platforms are also important for allowing young people to participate without fearing repercussions from authoritarian regimes.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM: FORMS, OUTCOMES, AND LIMITS

Digital activism takes many forms, which have different impacts on civic engagement and the political sphere as a whole: Awarenessraising campaigns-using visual memes and trending hashtags to shine light on social issues and concerns by a large proportion of citizens. Examples can be seen in movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, in which many young women took part by creating and spreading visual content on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (Cohen & Lemish, 2020).

Organizing Offline Actions-this refers to how digital technologies have been used to promote, coordinate and organize offline, or real-world activism. For instance, the use of platforms such as Telegram for coordinating the 2019 protests in Hong Kong allowed thousands of young protesters to mobilize over several weeks (Tufekci, 2022).

Crowdsourced Policy Making-youth are encouraged to contribute ideas to the legislative and policy-making process by using platforms such as Consul, which allows citizens to submit and vote on policy proposals for local governments. The success of Consul in Madrid, for instance, showed the effectiveness of these online initiatives for bringing about changes at a community level (Starr, Fernandez & Schuss, 2022).

Despite having positive impacts such as prompting discussions of controversial issues, influencing voting patterns and motivating political and social reform, limitations to digital activism remain. While young activists may have successfully engaged the public, these types of activities may not always translate into substantial outcomes. Instead, they can devolve into "slacktivism," a phenomenon where digital activity requires minimal commitment, such as "liking" a cause, as opposed to more involved actions such as attending rallies or writing to legislators (Gladstone et al., 2019). Moreover, the filtering and prioritizing of news content that happens on social media, due to algorithms, tends to confine users to ideologically similar content, creating an "echo chamber," which has limited citizens' exposure to diverse points of view (Pariser, 2011).

NAVIGATING POLITICAL INFORMATION: CHALLENGES AND SKILLS

The abundance of digital political information brings forth the challenge of discerning accurate information from that which is misleading or fictitious. These are vital skills to acquire as many teenagers and young adults rely on social media for receiving their news updates:

1. **Source Attribution**-many posts circulating on the internet lack information about who produced them, which is a crucial element to have when assessing the reliability of the information. This poses a challenge when distinguishing authentic sources from those that are less so (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).
2. **Algorithmic Filtering**-recommender systems are more inclined to promote news content that provokes strong engagement rather than what is accurate. Such algorithms, in turn, generate content that could increase traffic by "creating sensational and emotionalized narratives that encourage clicks, shares and emotional responses" (Ribeiro et al., 2020).
3. **Emotional Manipulation**-by using emotions like fear, anger or even joy, political actors can manipulate youth into sharing content they come across, without rationally evaluating the credibility of the information (Brady et al., 2017).

Conversely, there are several skills required in the navigation of political information, such as:

- a. **Media and information literacy (MIL)** - having these skills, which consist of finding, analyzing and using media and information, is associated with decreased belief in and susceptibility to false information (UNESCO, 2022).
- b. **Lateral reading** - involves using one's knowledge, a skill experts use during investigations and research that encourages users to open multiple tabs to seek more context on the information they are presented with. This skill is essential in discerning a source's reliability and in obtaining a broader view of any given subject (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017).
- c. **Digital civic literacy** - the ability to access, evaluate, and produce political information, while also developing awareness of individual rights, responsibilities, and mechanisms for accountability within digital spaces (Kahane et al., 2022).

Since educational programmes can directly contribute to the improvement of these MIL skills, those involving them in curricula are crucial. Examples include the News Literacy Project in the US and the MediaWise initiative in the European Union which together have proven to enhance youth's capability in identifying credible news (McGrew et al., 2021).

BUILDING CAPACITIES FOR RESILIENT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

To leverage youth empowerment and digital activism for sustained civic benefits, a comprehensive approach from multiple stakeholders must be utilized:

Formal education - embedding MIL within the curricula of primary and secondary school systems equips young individuals with the core evaluation skills needed to become informed citizens.

Platform governance - social media companies are responsible for upholding clear policies for content moderation, furnishing users with user-friendly fact-checking tools, and preventing the spread of intentional misinformation.

Community-based programmes - interactive workshops, hackathons, and youth forums can offer hands-on learning opportunities and provide space for co-creating useful digital tools for civic engagement.

Policy frameworks - governments are expected to protect digital rights, such as freedom of expression and privacy, while simultaneously establishing regulations to ensure algorithmic accountability and the open sharing of data (World Economic Forum, 2022).

A case in point of a well-rounded approach to these initiatives is the Civic Digital Initiative in Taiwan. Through a platform for data dissemination, various civic hackathons, and the compulsory teaching of digital citizenship in all high schools across the country, the initiative has led to a notable increase in the voter turnout of youth, from 25% in 2018 to over 71% in 2022 (Chen & Liu, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Youth empowerment in the digital age cannot be separated from the proliferation of digital activism and the ability of all citizens, particularly young people, to navigate an ever more intricate information environment. While digital platforms offer unprecedented potential for mobilization and political engagement, they simultaneously present obstacles to navigating these challenges that require media literacy, strong institutional support, and careful planning. By investing in education, demanding transparency in platform governance, and fostering the development of civic-enhancing policies and programmes through participatory frameworks, societies will be empowered to harness the full capabilities of digitally engaged young citizens to reinforce democratic discourse and create inclusive governance structures.

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