
NEW MEDIA AND NEW VOICES

April McAllister

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OFFER YOUTH THE OPPORTUNITY to communicate their desires and have their voices heard. But young Canadians do not participate in community life, for example, political elections, political campaigns, or interest groups, in the same capacity as older Canadians. They are less interested in and have less knowledge of politics (O'Neill, 2007), even though they are affected by political decisions. These facts demonstrate the importance of encouraging young people to have a voice in Canadian policies and legislation.

Fortunately, as this article will show, new technologies and social networking tools have been successful in engaging young people in community organizations and decisions. The article begins by defining information and communication technologies. It then discusses the implications of these new technologies and of education for the civic engagement of young people. The education system is a socialization tool for youth (the process of inheriting norms, values, and customs to provide skills to participate within society) and therefore, it is vital to investigate its influence. Next, it will give three examples of how new technologies are fostering community development among youth. Finally, it will consider future trends for youth involvement in community development and make recommendations to increase their participation.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES DEFINED

Information and communication technologies include social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, which are referred to as social media. These websites provide the opportunity to create profiles that include personal information, friends, photographs, and text (Ahn, 2011). A 2009 national survey in the United States identified that 73% of teenagers with online access use social networking websites, up from 59% in 2006 (Ahn, 2011). Other information and communication technologies include blogging and YouTube. Blogs are a type of webpage where people can regularly post information, such as photographs, text, and videos; they are similar to online journals (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010). YouTube is a website that allows people to upload, share, and view videos (Moore, 2012). What is common to all of these information and communications technologies is that they allow users to share information quickly, regardless of their geographical location. These new technologies are changing the face of community engagement because of their ability to recruit people to causes, organize collective action, raise awareness, influence attitudes, raise funds, and communicate with decision makers (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010).

APRIL MCALLISTER is a graduate of the Bachelor of Community & Criminal Justice program at Conestoga College in Kitchener, Ontario. Email: aamcallister1@gmail.com .

The widespread reliance on new technologies in our communities is indicative of a shift in values. Young people, in particular, have embraced new technologies and social networking tools (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010). As of 2009, Facebook claimed 200 million active users who together spent an estimated 3.5 billion minutes on the site. MySpace claimed 184 million users, Friendster claimed 50 million, and there are at least 130 other social networking websites available (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010). Social networking has expanded far more significantly than any other online feature, including email (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010).

The popularity of social networking websites and new technologies raises important questions about the structure of some social institutions, especially educational ones. Some would argue that the digital generation may throw off the need for culture and knowledge, which could have a negative impact on educational practices (Bers & Chau, 2006). Conversely, new media advancements have established new opportunities for youth to learn and engage outside of the school system.

New technologies are opening new doors to access information. According to Haste (2009), “many traditional boundaries such as geography, communication constraints and outmoded ideas are dissolving and interaction across such boundaries has become normative and essential” (p. 207). This has created a new environment where youth can learn and develop skills. According to Haste (2009), “these developments have the potential to turn upside down many of the models and beliefs about learning that traditionally underpin educational practice, and they have particular relevance to civic education” (p. 2008). Yet, despite the popularity of new technologies, educational institutions have been slow to make use of them in the classroom. Indeed, use of these technologies is typically minimal and often confined to library access or available only through teachers control (Luschen & Bogad, 2010). There have been some successes, however, such as class projects that have used new technologies to engage students. For instance, some schools have used blogging to engage youth outside their own communities and to link with other groups in other countries (Luschen & Bogad, 2010).

The new technologies can have many implications for learning: “It [technology] locates the learner-user as an active agent in obtaining, ordering, modifying and communicating information. The role of teacher becomes less a conduit and director, and more a facilitator and guide, enabling the initiative to be taken, productively by the student” (Haste, 2009, p. 216). Technology invites youth to learn independently, and helps to guide knowledge, changing traditional ways of learning. One way it does this is through its “bottom-up” rather than a “top-down” structure. For instance, “the starting point is the individual user, who connects with other users whether individually or via existing networks, and with information resources” (Haste, 2009, p. 209). Information and communication technology allows youth to distribute knowledge and become the agent of that knowledge, a cooperative learner, and distributor of thought (Ito et al., 2009). As well, new media offers active teaching techniques that are more effective in increasing young people’s participation in the classroom and in the community (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008). For example, “these techniques include fostering young people’s abilities to express opinions, take part in discussion, participate in public life, practice civic problem solving or decision making and engage in group learning, project-based learning and simulations of real-world civic events” (Bachen et al., 2008, p. 295).

A large portion of the recent literature discussing youth and new media focuses on the impact of information and communication technologies on literacy and writing. Young people who participate in social networking environments must be literate, and online interaction is different from interaction within educational systems. Studies on youth participants in social networking websites demonstrate that young people produce volumes of work through Facebook, blogs, and Twitter (Ahn, 2011). Also, social networking websites can be ideal for identity building, allowing users to explore different characters, voices, and perspectives during the learning process (Ahn, 2011). New media sites provide a place for youth to participate, acquire, and practice skills within the community (Luschen & Bogad, 2010). Research has found that learning and literacy are influenced by social groups and that new media has been an effective way to offer new methods of learning for the current generation. New technology has provided educational institutions with a unique method of learning and a way for youth to learn outside of the school system. Others have expressed the view that the use of new media has become a hindrance to learning and using proper grammar and language and that, with limited space to produce thoughts (e.g., when texting), technology limits the use of proper language and promotes the use of abbreviations, which has an impact on literacy and writing (Kemp & Bushnell, 2011).

HOW TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL NETWORKING CAN ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE: THREE EXAMPLES

The new technologies have been effective in extending opportunities for young people to participate in community development and engagement (Bers & Chau, 2006). As well, “technology makes it easy for people to participate. It also lowers the nonfinancial costs [engagement is practically free with access to the internet], improves the quality of participation and increases the types of advocacy activities in which they [youth] engage” (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010, p. 579). New technologies also allow youth to challenge the social norms and educational agendas of older generations (Ito et al., 2009). Youth are more likely to use the Internet. By grade twelve, 94% of youth are online and use the internet regularly (Bachen et al., 2008). Also, “a number of studies show that, counter to moral panics about technology reducing community cohesion, when face to face communities also connect via technological links their communication and mutual support is strengthened” (Haste, 2009, p. 217). What follows are three examples of how new technology and social networking is fostering community development among youth.

The 2008 US presidential campaign

Barack Obama’s 2008 election win has been attributed to Internet campaigning and the use of blogging to create discussion about the issues raised during the campaign. Youth were given the opportunity, through their preferred method of communication, to make their voices heard and participate in the electoral process. For instance, “no one pretends that millions of young people just spontaneously ‘joined’ (though many undoubtedly did). But using the existing networks alongside the familiar mode of communication enabled the mobilisation and extensive action of the campaign” (Haste, 2009, p. 209). Obama’s campaign tactics were a clever way to draw in a generation of people who typically

do not get involved in civic engagement. “Mr. Obama’s campaign took advantage of YouTube for free advertising... those videos were more effective than television ads because viewers chose to watch them or receive them from a friend instead of having their television shows interrupted” (Miller, 2008, para. 8).

Mental health

Youth have used information and communications technology to connect with others around the world about mental health. For instance, “the *Toronto Star* published an online article about Matthew Calvin, a student from Meadowvale Secondary School, who made a video about depression for a class project. ... After his own battle with depression, producing this video was a way for him to reach out to other youth who may be dealing with similar circumstances but let stigma keep them from seeking help or speaking out” (Moore, 2012, para. 2). Also, “Jonah Mowry uploaded a video titled ‘what’s going on’ to YouTube. The video featured Jonah tearing up while holding cards with text explaining the state his life was in at that point in time. Dealing with depression, bullying and suicidal thoughts...” (Moore, 2012, para. 3). Community engagement seeks to organize individuals and allow them a voice to tackle pressing social issues. The examples presented above used technology such as YouTube to allow youth to break down stigmas and offer supports to others suffering within their communities or around the world. Social networking websites, as well as YouTube, offer youth the opportunity to share their experiences and solutions to social issues, and to raise funds for those affected.

Free the Children

The international movement Free the Children involves youth in an annual We Day. This free educational event asks youth to commit year-long to at least one local and one global action. It uses blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to stay connected with and invite the participation of youth in volunteering and fundraising (We Day, 2012). Since 2009, We Day has raised \$20 million for 500 causes, received a total commitment of 3.4 million hours of volunteering, and had the participation of 5,700 schools (We Day, 2012). It also reaches the families of youth participants: “Eighty percent of youth attendees talked to their families about issues discussed at We Day” (We Day, 2012). We Day would not be as successful as it is without using new technologies and social networking to engage youth in global change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The three examples above demonstrate that the new media provide young people with a voice in their community to organize collective action and participate in the formal policy process. However, there is room for expansion to broaden and deepen youth engagement. The future of community engagement depends on youth participation. Young people’s lack of involvement does not necessarily indicate lack of interest. Rather, “they are disengaged because they are alienated from the institutions and processes of civic life and lack the motivation, opportunity, and ability to overcome this alienation” (Delli Carpini, 2000, p. 345). The new technologies can help to counteract this alienation.

To further involve youth, institutions such as schools will have to help students develop creative new-age interactions. Older generations must be open to exploring the potential of new technology and adapting their current political and civic practices to use these

technologies (Ito et al., 2009). Educational institutions may need to change in order to capitalise on and facilitate the use of new technologies in community development. Youth's participation in new media greatly surpasses that of older generations, therefore, these new ways of using technology cannot be mere add-ons but must become an integral part of structures and learning. Haste stresses this: "The implications for education are primarily in making effective use of these skills to enhance civic awareness, especially by building on them for making links to other communities" (Haste, 2009, p. 218). The education system should adopt a "bottom up" approach to help guide it in implementing new methods of learning and implementing civic and community development.

Finally, community members and youth must recognize that social media and new technologies are not the universal antidote to the lack of youth engagement. New technologies have increased youth participation and involvement, but there needs to be still more opportunities for civic action. New technologies are a gateway to involvement and to organizing collective action. Projects like We Day use social media and social networking websites to give youth the opportunity to get involved and contribute in issues that matter to them. Other projects in the future can build on this, seeking contribution from young members in the community. One caution: Internet access is not equal; there are disparities. Young people who do not have access to new technologies do not have the same opportunities to contribute to community engagement (Metcalf, Blanchard, McCarthy & Burns, 2008). Therefore, it is important to use a variety of ways to involve young people, including those that do not rely heavily on the new technologies.

In conclusion, new technologies and social networking websites are engaging young people in community development, and this involvement is vital to our communities. Youth need to be given a voice to contribute and shape their future. The education system has a huge role to play in offering and supporting the use of new technologies to engage youth in important social issues. The examples presented demonstrate the success that new technologies have had among youth. In the future, youth must be given more opportunity for engagement, as well as support from educational authorities and older generations in order to continue community integration. Above all, ask how your community can further support and facilitate youth's creativity for community engagement.

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