

# Beyond Digital Citizenship

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## Abstract

Conversations in middle school about digital citizenship tend to focus on the responsibilities of citizenship and the issues of surveillance, safety, cyberbullying, and internet etiquette. While these are important and essential conversations, digital citizenship education needs to consider youth political identity and democratic participation in digital spaces if educators wish to take full advantage of the empowering potential of participatory technology. The potential for youth to shape diverse identities through digital technologies has significant implications for youth empowerment and agency and helps dismantle reductive narratives that have tended to define middle school youth. The role of digital citizenship education must be expanded to include critical social justice education. Such a re-conceptualization of digital citizenship will result in curriculum that understands and supports the role digital technologies play in the development of youth political identity and help empower young people to impact positively on political issues. Little research has been done on the convergence of youth political identity and participatory technology spaces which are designed specifically for social justice and supported by social justice pedagogical ideals. Online social justice spaces support user empowerment through critical social justice education, community building, and orientation toward social action. If the context of youth lived experience is a technological one, the expression of youth political identity and youth activism through digital pathways requires attention and support from educators interested in digital citizenship education.

## Introduction

Citizenship education in middle school is frequently tied to behaviour management initiatives and consequently usually involves obedience to authority, compliance with rules, and learning to be polite; it rarely considers thinking critically about political issues (Westheimer, 2008). Similarly, conversations in middle school about digital citizenship tend to focus on the responsibilities of internet use and the issues of surveillance, safety, and cyberbullying. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), for example, cautions educators that while digital technologies provide important learning opportunities, young people must be “fully informed and wise consumers of modern media” (NMSA, 2010, p. 24). The AMLE, however, also maintains that at the heart of middle school education is a commitment to developing young people who are ethical and democratic citizens who express optimism about the future (NMSA). While conversations about internet surveillance, safety, cyberbullying, and

etiquette are essential, empowering students to be active and ethical citizens of a globalized world is even more important, and represents more fully the vision of middle school education identified by the AMLE.

Youth can and do express diverse political identities and engage in diverse citizenship practices in digital spaces. The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) has mobilized millions of young fans of the books to engage in social justice initiatives ranging from book donations and fundraising for Haiti to supporting fair trade and net neutrality (HPA, 2015). The social justice platform TakingITGlobal (TIG) currently has over 500,000 youth members and over 2000 youth-led initiatives all over the world. We Day attracts hundreds of thousands of young activists and has a Facebook membership of over three million subscribers. Organizations such as HPA, the Born This Way Foundation, Youth Voices.org, Change.org, TIG, the Free Child Project, and Me to We demonstrate that young people are able to leverage technology to engage in social justice

issues, mobilize for change, and organize politically to impact upon the world. Westheimer (2008) argued that meaningful citizenship education requires the inclusion of critical social justice curriculum, and this is also true of digital citizenship education; what is needed is instruction that focuses on critical exploration of equity and aims for civic action and systemic change. Digital citizenship education needs to reflect the reality of youth who are politically active in digital spaces, and support this political engagement with critical social justice education that empowers young people to act upon the world in an informed and meaningful way.

### **Youth Online Political Identity and Practice**

Lesko (2012), in her discussion of the social practice of adolescence, argued that adolescence is presented as naturally occurring and is framed by powerful and reductive narratives that define young people as too unformed, irresponsible, and troublesome to be considered capable of self-determined action and thought. Included within discourses of adolescence is the belief that youth are disengaged from political practice, a belief that participation numbers in organizations such as TakingITGlobal and Me to We would seem to contradict. What does seem true is that young people are not very engaged in more traditional politics like voting and joining a political party. However, disengagement from certain forms of politics does not mean that youth are not interested in politics or that youth political practices are somehow less meaningful than the politics practiced by adults. Me to We activist Morgan Baskin suggested that in term of politics:

Young people aren't interested in electoral politics, but they're very interested in other sides of politics in terms of things like causes and issues. We have opinions, but we don't often engage in electoral politics, which is an important distinction to make... The problem is with electoral politics, not with young

people. Young people are signing petitions, joining protests and all sorts of things. (Baskin, 2014)

Loader (2007) described young people as “culturally displaced” in terms of their political engagement: “young people are not necessarily any less interested in politics than previous generations but rather traditional political activity no longer appears appropriate to address the concerns associated with contemporary youth culture” (pp. 1-2). As we consider the potential for youth political empowerment through the use of digital technologies it becomes necessary to move beyond the concept of technologies as simply tools for education and start seeing the digital landscape as the context of youth lived experience. Ito et al. (2010) concluded in their three-year ethnographic study of youth technology use that the generational identity for today's youth is a technological one; youth are “hanging out” in digital spaces, developing knowledge, identity, and agency through the tools of participatory technology in unique and collaborative ways.

To describe digital technologies as merely tools is to undervalue the impact these technologies have on youth culture and the formation of youth identities, including political identities. Youth culture and the digital technologies associated with it provide potential for alternative forms of civic engagement and diverse pathways to political participation that are personalized and empowering. Such alternative political practice is viewed as particularly appealing to youth, who tend to be highly engaged in issue and identity politics, and largely competent with the tools of participatory technology such as social media (Ito et al.; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009; Loader, 2007; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014). Vromen, Xenos, and Loader (2015) found that social media use is pervasive among all forms of youth groups; social media is used consistently to share information, mobilize action, and “redefine political action and political spaces” (p. 80). The internet appears to impact positively on political mobilization and in particular supports youth

mobilization in offline spaces (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Serup Christensen, 2015) making digital technology an important aspect of youth political practice that must be reflected in digital citizenship curriculum.

Participatory cultures that form around interest-based online activity appear to develop individual participants' sense of agency and interest in civic engagement. A large scale, national study that surveyed nearly 3,000 American youth found that youth who are highly involved in non-political, interest-driven online activity were five times more likely to engage in the 11 indicators of participatory politics as defined by the study, such as political blogging or petitioning, and four times more likely to engage in any form of political act than youth who were not highly engaged online (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). The study also had important implications for marginalized youth as the researchers found that participatory technology appeared to support more equitable political participation, both in terms of increased participation of youth who are marginalized in the political process in general, and across racial and ethnic groups within youth culture.

The study found distribution of participation online to be far more equitable than the distribution of participation in traditional political forms such as voting, suggesting that digital spaces do provide an active political pathway for marginalized youth. Almost half of all youth surveyed had participated in at least one act of politics online; clearly digital spaces are an important dimension of youth political participation and identity. The technologies associated with these spaces provide pathways for political engagement that are more meaningful and relevant to the lives of young people, for whom the digital world is the context in which their political selves are formed and expressed. Within this context, digital citizenship education must be reconceptualised as a new form of active citizenship and digital activism as a meaningful way for young people to express their political identities and impact upon the world they live in.

## **Technology and Youth Empowerment**

Freire (1994, 1996) contended that the role of an educator is to provide the tools and create the conditions for critical awareness leading to purposeful action towards a more equitable world and technology is most certainly the tool of the learner in the 21st century. The potential for youth to shape narratives and identities through participatory technologies has significant implications for youth empowerment and agency, particularly for marginalized youth, who may have fewer safe spaces to explore alternative political practices and identities. Participatory technologies offer the possibility of social and political participation through membership in affinity communities that are fluid, non-hierarchical, and inclusive of diverse political identities (Gee, 2009). These technologies facilitate user-created content and support the ideals of a middle school curriculum that is student-centered, relevant, exploratory, and integrative (NMSA, 2010).

The social justice platform, TakingITGlobal (TIG), for example, is an online space that purposefully combines political participation with the fluid collaborative elements associated with youth culture. TIG's (2013) clearly stated mandate is to leverage technology use for social justice education and action through the connection of unstructured youth engagement to a social justice framework that provides development of critical understanding, resources, opportunities for action, and possibilities for connecting with a like-minded youth community. This process is facilitated by a technology-based delivery that connects youth to inspiration (TIG, 2015), an engaged and active community (online community, mentoring, groups), comprehensive resources (curriculum guides, toolkits, workshops, programs, virtual classrooms), and diverse opportunities (programs, initiative pages, groups) for online and offline engagement in action.

Online communities such as TIG create opportunities for non-hierarchical, user-centered learning experiences that young people frequently

identify as empowering and important (Gee, 2009, 2013; Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2009). Members of the TIG community consistently identify their experience using TIG as having a positive impact on their feelings of empowerment, engagement in social justice, and capacity to achieve their social justice goals. Member Christino Gomez identified the TIG platform as instrumental in developing his understanding and awareness of social justice issues, and in particular global issues because of the emphasis on diversity and cultural responsiveness. Michael Boampong, a TIG member from Ghana, saw the role of TIG as supporting youth social justice passion with a structured framework of education and opportunities. Michael stated:

I believe that a global education needs to be something more than just classes and lessons learned. It's about researching, discussing, and taking action on some important issues that can be dealt with using minimal resources. For some people whom I met the challenge for them was that they did not have the information and the platform to enable them to take action. (Boampong, n.d.)

Sociality is central to the potential of participatory technology to contribute to youth empowerment for political action. Wilson (2002) argued that an "information system that knits diverse people together through meaningful relationships" is important to facilitating civic participation and participatory democracy (p. 384). Sampson, McAdam, MacInobe, & Weffer-Elizondo (2005) analysed over 4,000 civic engagement events over a 30 year period in order to better describe the changing identity of civic engagement. They concluded that "meaningful relationships" have much to do with commitment to collective action within a community. Further, this study found that collective action resulted most effectively from the development of a sense of engagement and efficacy facilitated by an organizational infrastructure. Such an argument aligns with empowerment theory models (Perkins &

Zimmerman, 1995) and supports the effectiveness of online social justice communities which connect participant engagement to an organized network. Networks have always played an important role in civil activism and online networks are no exception. Social networks that support critically engaged youth in expressing their understanding and commitment to social justice politics allow youth to develop citizenship norms that include the development of collective engagement and efficacy that is essential for action. The development of such social networks through online and blended social justice programs such as TIG and Me to We should be an essential part of critical digital citizenship education.

### **Digital Activism, Critical Social Justice Education, and Technology**

The history of technology use in education is complex and contentious, but what is clear is that in order to support transformative education practices, technology must be embedded within a pedagogic approach that privileges empowerment and democratic practice (Becker, 2001; Cuban, 2001); technology must be used with intentionality to support social justice principles. Freire (1996) argued that critical understanding and action-oriented practice are both necessary components of transformative education. Even if one assumes that youth of today are a digital generation, youth competence with technology does not necessarily translate into transformative learning practices. Youth are more likely to use technology for recreational purposes, particularly in the absence of explicit instruction and support in using technology for critical thinking or innovative learning, making the necessity for critical digital citizenship education even more crucial (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Cuban, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2009).

Current work in digital citizenship has clearly demonstrated that the potential of participatory technology to contribute to youth agency and self-expression has been eroded by the challenges of cyberbullying and hostile internet interactions such as trolling, flaming, and doxing. This hostile

environment is well documented and of understandable concern to the members of the education community interested in digital citizenship; Weinstein et al. (2015) found that youth online civic expression was significantly declining in everyday social media sites due to perceived hostile environments, and young people who engage politically online and express civic identities in digital spaces are more likely to experience hostile online interactions. The declining participation patterns could be explained by the fact that some interview subjects choose to express their political identities in spaces other than everyday social media, including alternate online spaces with a more engaged audience (Weinstein et al.). Further, digital spaces with politically engaged communities may offer more than just a safe haven for youth political identity formation and experimentation; they may in fact provide the type of pedagogic support that Freire (1996) argued was necessary for the development of critical awareness leading to social activism.

TIG and Me to We, for example, provide resources, mentorship, and experiential opportunities that align with Freire's ideas around transformative education. TIG and Me to We also align with the curriculum goals set by the AMLE for education that envisions adolescents as active, aware, and ethical citizens of the world, who think critically, collaborate globally, serve actively, and reflect deeply (NMSA, 2010). In order to realize this vision, the role of digital citizenship education must be expanded to include critical social justice education that develops youth political identity and empowers young people to impact positively on political issues.

### **Digital Activism**

Empowerment for social change is not simply a group of empowered individuals. Social activism requires a sense of collective engagement that occurs through connection to an organizational framework (Sampson et al., 2005). Engaged individuals must act with intentionality as a community to enact social change, and this condition applies equally to offline and online

social justice communities. This conception of activism that it is meaningful, even though it is attached to a digital network rather than a face-to-face community, is important. Critics of the role of technology in activism frequently locate their argument in the ineffectiveness of digital activism and the possibility that virtual activism replaces more traditional forms of political participation that are seen to be more impactful (Fuchs, 2014; Morozov, 2009). *Slacktivism* refers to actions that are defined as political activism by participants but have no real impact on the world; critics argue that slacktivism leads to deterioration in the quality of participation by the politically engaged. This argument appears to be without merit; a large scale survey found that 90% of youth who reported acts of participatory politics also reported voting or involvement in institutional politics (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). The politically engaged do not appear to substitute online activity for offline activity, but rather, engage in both forms of participation.

Regardless, little research has been done on the convergence of youth political identity and participatory technology spaces which are designed specifically for social justice and supported by social justice pedagogical ideals. While not all online political acts may be equal, the slacktivism label clearly does not apply to online social justice spaces that work to actively develop critical consciousness and provide resources and education that empower youth to engage in real world change. Loader (2007) suggested that online political spaces that purposefully combine traditional political action and the world of informal, individualized youth culture represent an intersection that provides "genuine opportunities for young people's political efficacy" (p. 4) and may very well represent the future of democratic engagement.

### **Implications for Digital Citizenship Education**

Lesko (2012) asks us as middle school educators how "we can consider youth as more than just becoming?" (p. 11); we are tasked with counteracting this "ideology of emergence" (p. 2)

that is so prevalent in our understanding of adolescence and in our middle school classrooms. Digital citizenship education that recognizes and supports the alternative political practices of youth is one way to disrupt the narrative of the unformed and powerless citizen-in-waiting. The role of digital citizenship education must be expanded beyond surveillance and security to prioritize critical social justice education that develops youth political identity and empowers young people to impact positively on political issues. If the context of youth lived experience is a technological one, the expression of youth political identity and youth activism through digital pathways requires attention and support from educators interested in digital citizenship education.

The AMLE policy document outlines the vision, curriculum, and future direction of middle school education. Included in this document, however, is a section on the characteristics of the young adolescent learner, including their moral characteristics. Among these moral characteristics is the assertion that middle school students are “generally idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make a meaningful contribution to a cause or issue larger than themselves” but “owing to their lack of experience, are often impatient with the pace of change” (NMSA, 2010, p. 58). This statement implies that idealism is somehow the emergent stage of the political self; something that young people will grow out of with experience.

If we, as middle school educators, truly believe the AMLE vision of “an acute sense of the possible” (p. 27) then we should celebrate and support, as Me to We founder Craig Keilburger does, the shameless idealism of young people. Idealism should be nurtured and supported by critical digital citizenship education that seeks to help youth more clearly define their political selves, their political practices, and their admirable desire to impact upon the world. The inclusion of online social justice programs such as TIG, and the critical analysis of youth appropriation of social media spaces for political and civic action will not only disrupt the ideology

of emergence, but provide meaningful digital citizenship education in our schools. ❖

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