

Digital Media, Participatory Politics, and Positive Youth Development

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Research on the social implications of adolescent technology use often focuses on identifying and preventing risk. However, adolescence is also a time of rapidly expanding capacities, expectations of autonomy, and identity exploration. In this article, we highlight findings from research in the field of youth civic development, which point to the importance of youth civic engagement during adolescence for later adult civic engagement as well as for promoting positive developmental outcomes. Researchers suggest that certain forms of Internet use (such as information seeking, social network site use, media production, and participation in online communities) promote civic engagement and that digital tools play an important role in youth empowerment efforts. In this article, we suggest a need for greater attention to efforts to promote digital media competencies among adolescents and for greater coordination of research on adolescent risk and adolescent autonomy and empowerment related to Internet use.

abstract

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Drs Middaugh and Clark conceptualized and drafted the initial manuscript; Dr Ballard contributed to the conceptualization and writing of the revised manuscript and conceptualizing and drafting the section on civic engagement and adolescent development; and all authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

The analysis, conclusions, and recommendations contained in each article are solely a product of the individual workgroup and are not the policy or opinions of, nor do they represent an endorsement by Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development or the American Academy of Pediatrics.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-1758Q>

Accepted for publication Apr 19, 2017

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PEDIATRICS (ISSN Numbers: Print, 0031-4005; Online, 1098-4275).

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FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE: The authors have indicated they have no financial relationships relevant to this article to disclose.

Adolescence is widely considered a critical period for civic development. Civic engagement during adolescence predicts adult volunteering and voting. Furthermore, civic engagement during adolescence can promote positive developmental outcomes, particularly for marginalized and at-risk youth. In contrast to literature that focuses primarily on risks associated with technology use, researchers of youth civic engagement find that a number of online activities facilitate civic engagement. Furthermore, researchers have begun to highlight the critical importance of digital media literacies to advance informed, effective civic engagement, suggesting a need for greater attention to bolstering digital media competencies for individual and social well-being.

In this article, we examine the role of digital media in fostering youth civic engagement, the supports needed for youth to use digital media for informed and effective civic engagement, and the benefits and risks of such engagement. For our purposes, digital media include both media content that can be shared via the Internet and digital media practices focused on how people use such media. Youth include adolescents and emerging adults (through age 25). Civic engagement includes a broad range of activities such as volunteering, voting, activism, staying informed, and raising awareness of issues. Much of this article is focused on the role of digital media in a specific form of civic engagement termed participatory politics, defined as actions through which individuals or groups seek to exert their voice and influence on issues of public concern.¹ Social media and mobile technology facilitate the rise of participatory politics.

CURRENT STATE

Civic Engagement and Adolescent Development

Participating in civic life is proposed to play an important role in youth development. For example, civic participation shapes civic and political concerns,² identity and purpose,³ academic engagement and achievement,⁴ and health and well-being.⁵ The distinguishing characteristics of participatory politics activities in particular (that they are focused on gaining agency and empowerment, are peer based, and are interactive¹) might promote positive outcomes for youth. Studies show that a sense of sociopolitical empowerment is associated with self-esteem and well-being.⁶

In addition, civic activities that are peer based and youth led may increase youth connection and engagement in school settings by providing youth with opportunities to influence their social contexts.⁷ Civic activities that are engaging and interactive rather than passive may especially empower youth, effectively teaching them about social issues,⁴ engaging them in school,⁸ and reducing risky behaviors.⁹ Importantly, civic engagement activities that enhance abilities to acquire voice, power, and influence in systems they are often left out of might be especially relevant in the positive development of marginalized youth.¹⁰

Digital Media and Participatory Politics

The Impact of Digital Media Practices on Youth Civic and Political Engagement

When considering the impact of digital media on youth civic and political engagement, researchers tend to focus not on whether young people are online, but on what kinds of activities they engage in online. For example, researchers find that information seeking is positively related to democratic

engagement for youth,¹¹ even after controlling for previous civic engagement, suggesting that online news seeking reinforces and expands engagement.¹² Furthermore, researchers conducting studies of youth find a stronger relationship between online (versus off-line) information seeking for internal political efficacy¹³ and political action (online and off-line).¹⁴ Although the motivation for information seeking is likely similar for online and off-line media, the participatory nature of online media facilitates translation of information into action.¹⁵ Those who get their news and information through social media are able to immediately follow-up on the information they receive by forwarding, commenting, or following a link to donate money or sign a petition. The distance between information and action is reduced. However, research also continues to find that involvement in online political and civic activity is strongly correlated with income,² pointing to a persistent wealth gap pervading both online and off-line civic and political engagement. Additionally, research has highlighted the disincentives to online political and civic engagement, particularly as youth encounter social pressures to conform to peer norms.¹⁶

Another strand of research is focused on online activities that are not explicitly political in nature, but build skills or social ties that support civic and political engagement. Although the social side of teenagers' digital media use is often a topic of concern for parents and clinicians who seek to mitigate exposure to risk, when it comes to civic engagement, the social ties fostered through social media can play a more positive role. Youth social network site use has been found to promote civic engagement,¹⁷ and the use of digital media to create and share user-generated content (like videos, poetry, and music) has been found to be associated

with political engagement.¹⁸ The explanation for such findings is that producing and sharing media fosters audience (which builds efficacy and confidence), collaboration, and deeper engagement with information (which builds critical media literacy skills).¹⁸

These findings are reinforced by researchers of online communities, which Ito et al¹⁹ identify as interest-driven communities organized around hobbies. Ethnographic research has found that these communities provide opportunities for more intensive social interaction as participants give each other advice, collaborate, and share information, similar to the face-to-face recreational associations of the past (such as bowling leagues).¹⁹ Panel studies of US youth reveal participation in such communities is associated with exposure to political perspectives²⁰ and political participation.²¹ Such research has also found that youth involvement in media production contributes to self-identification as a citizen, the development of a collective sensibility,²² and an appreciation for mutual reciprocity.

Digital Media and Youth Empowerment: How Politically Active Youth Use Media

Another approach to the study of digital media and participatory politics is to examine the role of media in the work of youth who are currently politically active. A recent national survey of US youth aged 15 to 25 revealed that 41% were engaged in some form of participatory politics, a rate similar to that of youth who had voted in the most recent election.^{1,15} This suggests that rather than serving as an alternative means of engagement, the use of media to find, share, discuss, and mobilize around political issues is a critical part of the repertoire of modern civic and political engagement.¹ Another survey reveals that in contrast to the

attention placed on cyberbullying and online harassment, many teenagers also practice online citizenship and responsibility, actively seeking to improve their online communities.²³

For teenagers in communities that are often defined by risk (risks related to health, violence, or discrimination), the Internet creates opportunities to seek social support, advocate for themselves, and investigate resources for resilience. The authors of ethnographic studies have documented youth in vulnerable positions by using digital tools and networks to band together to gain access to education,²⁴ counter negative stereotypes by producing and sharing media,²⁵ and insert themselves into local governance.^{15,26} Researchers have productively engaged youth-led organizations in the crafting of research questions and measures as well as the framing and dissemination of research findings on a variety of topics relevant to youth.²⁶ This kind of collective action and activism is greatly facilitated by the Internet, particularly for youth who find themselves in vulnerable minority positions in their community.²⁴

Balancing Opportunities for Empowerment With Exposure to Risk

At this point, the majority of the literature on digital media and youth civic engagement focuses on whether, how, and for whom digital media participation supports civic engagement. However, there is also reason to believe that there are risks inherent to participatory politics. These tools may be used for exploitation, as evidenced by studies of political extremists who tailor online propaganda to youth audiences.²⁷ At the same time, online information is not always accurate,²⁸ and messages can be misconstrued or have unanticipated consequences.²⁹

Finally, when young people seek political information or express political voice online, they may

expose themselves to stereotypes and hate speech, which can have a negative impact on well-being, particularly for minority youth.²⁷ Studies of media use by politically active youth reveal that many are aware of the potential consequences of online political expression and navigate those risks in varied ways.²⁴ However, there is far less understanding of the impact of exposure to risk through participatory politics or strategies that can help youth navigate such risks.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Adolescent civic engagement has become an important subject of study because research has established that such involvement promotes positive outcomes both for the individual development of the adolescent and for the sustainability of a democratic society. However, additional research is needed to better understand the interaction of risk and opportunity in online environments where youth are encouraged to participate and flourish. We believe this requires the combined efforts of ethnographic studies and survey research (cross-sectional and longitudinal). Ethnographic studies of youth involved in online communities or political media use can sharpen our understanding of the benefits and risks of participatory politics, adolescents' strategies for managing risk, and adolescents' access to support in this area. Survey studies of digital media use and youth participatory politics that include developmental outcomes (positive and negative) will help build an empirical base for understanding the impact of such engagement on adolescent well-being and the relative moderating impact of varied supports provided by parents, schools, and others.

Additionally, further research is needed to understand the

relationship between civic development and existing school and extracurricular programs of media literacy that focus on both critical analysis and production. Research has demonstrated a promising connection between media literacy education and child and adolescent well-being. Studies of media literacy programs (existing or designed as interventions) to clarify and provide evidence of promising practices in civic education will be helpful.

Notably, youth themselves are our best informants for what they do online, what they need help with, and what will influence their behavior.^{15,19} Because of the rapidly changing dynamics of digital media, we suggest this is an area where it is critical to draw on youth expertise for research as well as for the development of best practices regarding youth digital media use and for insights into policies that affect youth and their families. Youth participatory action research has played a significant role in the field of youth civic engagement,

and we suggest this strategy is an important one for understanding how young people use media, the challenges they face, supports they need, and practices that work best.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the article above, our recommendations prioritize developmentally appropriate practice with adolescents and include the following:

- Place greater priority on the coordination of opportunities for exploration, expression, and empowerment through digital media with risk prevention efforts; adolescents need to learn to manage, rather than simply avoid, risks inherent to life online.
- Change the focus from time with screens to the quality of activities with which youth engage in digital spaces.
- Provide media literacy education that focuses on both critical

analysis and opportunities for production.

- Involve youth themselves (through youth councils) in efforts to set policy and inform practice related to digital media.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the Working Group on Participatory Politics and Civic Development for their helpful review and comments on this document. Members include Jerusha Conner, Chris Evans, Carrie James, Lisa Jones, Joseph Kahne, Ben Kirshner, Nicole Mirra, Justin Reich, Paul Oh, Sangita Shresthova, Amy Stornaiulo, and Emily Weinstein. Although the authors bear primary responsibility for the content of the article, all working group members made contributions through review and feedback during the process of conceptualization and drafting of this document.

FUNDING: This special supplement, “Children, Adolescents, and Screens: What We Know and What We Need to Learn,” was made possible through the financial support of Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development.

POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors have indicated they have no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Pediatrics 2017;140;S127

DOI: 10.1542/peds.2016-1758Q

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The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:

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