

RAPID ANALYSIS

Digital civic engagement by young people

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Synopsis

Many of today's youth take to digital spaces to develop their civic identities and express political stances in creative ways, claiming agency that may not be afforded to them in traditional civic spaces. The key difference between civic engagement by youth today and older, more traditional forms of action is the availability of digital technology, which provides a low-barrier-to-entry canvas for young people to create content that is potentially vastly scalable. Here's what else we know:

01

Data from 11 countries show that between 43 and 64 per cent of 9 to 17-year-olds look for news online, while 12 to 27 per cent of children discuss political problems online.

02

In the contexts of widespread digital access, digital civic engagement by youth may be more equitable than traditional forms of civic engagement

03

Young people are less invested in 'dutiful' citizenship acts, favouring personalised engagement through digital networking, self-expression, protests and volunteerism.

04

They use humour, memes, satire and other acts of engaging with or remixing popular culture as important tactics in the repertoire of digital civic engagement.

05

Civic engagement by adolescents educates and exposes them to civic issues at an early age and contributes to a sense of socio-political empowerment.

06

Which digital platforms young people choose to use for civic engagement depend on the range of functions and features offered by these platforms.

07

Young people who engage in digital participatory politics are much more likely to engage in 'real' offline political participation such as voting.

08

Active enablers of digital civic engagement by youth include equitable access to technology and digital skills, civic education, and existence of civic space for activism.

09

Key deterrents to civic engagement are: lack of trust in the internet due to high prevalence of false news and misinformation, declining trust in political processes, harassment and trolling, data breaches, and digital surveillance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS



Account

for blended contexts. Digital engagement is contiguous with, complementary to, and inseparable from offline engagement.



Appreciate

youth creation of varied content: videos, memes, artwork and blogs.



Appraise

local context to better understand the scale, content and platforms young people use.



Consider

how digital civic engagement can drive youth participation in more traditional forms of civic engagement.



Consider

the risks of digital civic engagement by youth.



Promote and support

civic education and development of digital literacies and skills.

Introduction

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A teenage boy in a Brazilian favela circulates a selfie on social media that highlights drug-related violence in his community.¹ Catalyzed by the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, at least 2,800 public protests to date have demanded attention to police brutality against African Americans.² A trans teen learns a new, liberating vocabulary to articulate their identity and finds emotional support through online interactions with 'strangers' — precisely those whom young people are instructed to avoid online.³ Organized over social media, hundreds of thousands of young people around the world take to the street in a synchronized 'climate strike' to demand government action on climate change.⁴

Digital civic engagement by youth can look like any of the above; it can include digital instances of more conventional hallmarks of civic engagement, such as reading and circulating news, writing emails to an elected representative or community organization (or interacting with them on social media), or belonging to a campus or community group online. Yet, growing up with low-barrier-to-entry digital media creation and editing tools, many of today's youth also take to digital venues to develop their civic identities and express political stances in creative ways, such as with videos, memes and artwork⁵ to claim agency that may not be afforded to them in traditional civic spaces and reimagine the concept of 'the political' writ large.

1 Nemer and Freeman, 2015.

2 Elephrame, 2020.

3 Dame 2016.

4 Sengupta 2019.

5 Jenkins et al 2016.

Aim and approach

As academics and practitioners theorize new ways to understand and evaluate these kinds of digital civic engagement, this paper aims to compile evidence and explain available analytical frameworks to help UNICEF understand this rapidly emerging area of adolescent engagement.

This analysis presents an overview of relevant research literature across the topic of digital civic engagement by young people. The core questions it endeavours to answer are:

1. What do we mean by digital civic engagement by young people?
2. What are the dominant platforms used by young people for digital civic engagement around the world?
3. What do we know about the nature and consequences of digital civic engagement by young people?
4. What are key enablers or constraints to digital civic engagement by young people?
5. What compelling examples are there of digital civic engagement by young people?
6. What are key considerations for organizations seeking to partner in digital civic engagement with young people?

The paper purposefully focuses on instances of spontaneous civic engagement in which adolescents and young people themselves seek to participate and look for the tools and means to do so. This paper does not focus on adolescent and youth engagement cultivated by UNICEF or similar organizations, in which young people are scaffolded into the activities by adults. The authors note that this is a somewhat false dichotomy as different types of involvement already co-exist in this sphere. Our focus on 'organic' digital mobilization of young people presents an opportunity for UNICEF to simultaneously learn of emerging trends in digital engagement for social change, and the issues children and young people care about, and to understand what we as an organization can learn from contemporary civic engagement and social movements as we develop our own priorities for youth participation. Maintaining a distinction between 'spontaneous' and 'cultivated' engagement is not sustainable beyond the limits of a rapid scoping exercise such as this.

This analysis is meant as an introduction to and summary of broad themes across published academic literature as well as reports from polling organizations on this topic. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive meta-review of all existing research studies on this issue and largely avoids private sector market research. The paper does not provide an evaluation or analysis of the effects of young people's digital civic participation, nor does it make programmatic recommendations or report on specific stakeholders' efforts in this area. In keeping with UNICEF's commitment to gender-disaggregated data, gender-specific data is reported when indicated in the research; when aggregated, the source publication has presented only gender-aggregate data.

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What do we mean by digital civic engagement by young people?

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Today, young people's civic engagement is inseparable from the digital media landscape, and research suggests that older frames which view the 'online' and 'offline' as entirely separate experiences are inaccurate for today's youth.⁶ Fundamentally different from broadcast, print, or cinematic media, today's digital media afford what have been called 'participatory cultures'. In other words, digital media allow a degree of agency previously unexperienced, together with the ease for an 'audience' to author, remix and remake popular culture themselves. In turn, these new versions can spread across distributed internet networks in a peer-to-peer flow (as opposed to a centralized mode of cultural production such as a TV station or newspaper press) and at great potential scale.⁷

Our approach in this paper borrows from this understanding of digital participatory culture while also heeding recent critiques that underscore the persistence of capital, labour, and power imbalances that surround digital participatory cultures (especially regarding private sector ownership and control of digital platforms and users' data).⁸ It is a core tenet of this paper that we cannot fully understand the contours of digital civic engagement by young people without also paying attention to the context of the media ecosystems involved (see [section 4](#)).

BOX: DEFINITIONS

Civic engagement is defined by UNICEF as: "individual or collective actions in which people participate to improve the well-being of communities or society in general".⁹ This has traditionally taken the form of actions such as voting, attending community meetings or functions, contacting public officials, attending protests, signing petitions, or writing articles about one's community. There is a robust debate as to whether this suite of activities may be too narrow in terms of what is considered 'civic engagement', especially in the digital era and from a youth perspective.¹⁰ Others advocate for a focus on the everyday life practices of 'cultural citizenship' that range from affective bonding to strategic consumption.¹¹ Still others challenge the voice and participation-oriented focus of these perspectives and advocate for practices of active and empathetic listening as a necessary component of the civic sphere.¹²

⁶ Nakamura, 2002; Cohen and Kahne, 2012.

⁷ Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013.

⁸ Couldry and Mejias, 2014; Langley and Leyshon, 2016.

⁹ Forthcoming UNICEF guidelines

¹⁰ Bennett, 2008.

¹¹ Burgess et al, 2006.

¹² Couldry, 2009.

Digital literacy
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digital citizenship.

Digital civic engagement by youth refers to civic engagement activities specifically done by young people and involving digital media of some kind. We have, when data is available, focused this analysis primarily on data on individuals under the age of 18 (adolescents, ages 10–18). The definition of ‘youth’ varies across research. Some studies cited here focus on ‘teens’ (ages 13–17), and others adopt a definition of ‘youth’ that ranges into young adulthood (for example, ages 15–24). Specificity about age cohort when discussing digital civic engagement by youth is important because use patterns and styles of engagement for different cohorts may vary greatly. Throughout, we summarize research data on any of these subgroupings, indicating ages accordingly.

Digital citizenship has been defined as “the ability to participate in society online”, including an understanding of digital citizens as people who “use technology frequently, [...] for political information to fulfill their civic duty, and who use technology at work for economic gain”.¹³ Other definitions emphasize the quality or character of online participation, including “safe and responsible behavior online ... comprising the concepts of responsibility, rights, safety, and security”.¹⁴ ‘Digital citizenship’ may be thought of as a combination of digital civic engagement and respectful digital deliberative practices.¹⁵

Digital literacy has been defined for youth as “the knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow children to flourish and thrive in an increasingly global digital world, being both safe and empowered, in ways that are appropriate to their age and local cultures and contexts.”¹⁶ Digital literacy is necessary to enact digital citizenship. In other words, ‘digital civic engagement’ as explored here is a repertoire of practice that falls under ‘digital citizenship’ and that assumes and requires ‘digital literacy’ in order to happen.

FOCUS QUESTION: WHY IS DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY YOUTH IMPORTANT?

Over the last several decades, young peoples’ participation in traditional measures of civic engagement in wealthy democracies, such as voting and political party affiliation (in the case of young adults), has been steadily declining.¹⁷ In the European Union, voting is in overall decline but this is especially true for young people aged 18 to 24, whose voter turnout is nearly 20 percentage points lower than the voting population as a whole.¹⁸ In the United States, young peoples’ (18–29 years) trust in government institutions declined significantly from 2010 to 2014,¹⁹ with only 20 per cent expressing trust in the federal government in 2014 versus 29 per cent in 2010; similar trends applied to the United States Supreme Court, Congress, the President, the military, and the United Nations. And while low levels of trust in institutions actually increase partisanship in older cohorts, they have the opposite effect on young people.²⁰

13 Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2007.

14 Jones and Mitchell, 2016.

15 The term ‘digital citizenship’ has come under some scrutiny for a potentially uncritical use of the term ‘citizen’, possibly ignoring or even reinforcing structures of power that dismiss the civic contributions, or ignore the contexts and needs, of immigrants, refugees, undocumented people, and the incarcerated. See Vargas and Jenkins, 2016.

16 Nacimbeni and Vosloo, 2019.

17 Xenos, Vromen and Loader, 2014; Barrett and Pachi, 2019.

18 Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell, 2007.

19 Della Volpe, 2014.

20 Shea, 2015.

SNAPSHOT

“Friday used to be ordinary”

In 2018, Ugandan teen Leah Namugerwa learned of Swedish teen Greta Thunberg's Friday school strikes to protest against her government's inaction on climate change. Inspired, Leah went online to learn more and — aged 14 years old — started her own version of the global youth Fridays for Future climate strike in Kampala in 2019. She told one news outlet, explaining her exasperation in terms of a lack of attention to the problem, “I noticed adults were not willing to offer leadership and I chose to volunteer myself.”²¹ As she picketed, bewildered adults looked on from the road; her first significant protest was blocked by the authorities, but she continued. In her latest action, she led a team of youth to clean plastic from the shores of Lake Victoria, which she documented to her almost 10,000 Twitter followers. She is now

This is not due to general apathy; rather, research suggests that young people today approach the concept of citizenship differently than their predecessors. They are less invested in ‘dutiful’ citizenship acts, such as voting, favouring instead a “personalized politics of expressive engagement” such as digital networking, self-expression, protests and volunteerism.²¹ Research in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia finds that social media use strengthens the relationship between these moments of ‘self-actualising’ citizenship and political engagement — in other words, social media may be the catalyst for political engagement between the self and the broader civic sphere.

However, this specific literature²² is heavily concentrated on wealthy democracies and the narrative of a turn toward a politics of ‘self-actualisation’ may not be the case in other countries. For example, researchers in Mexico found that a history of extreme disenfranchisement from government, which ranked at the bottom of 18 Latin American countries in terms of citizens’ satisfaction with democracy, led to almost 87 per cent of youth saying they would never engage in political discussions on social media and only 36.4 per cent reporting that they follow the news.²³ In contrast, researchers found that Egyptian youth’s extreme disenfranchisement during Hosni Mubarak’s authoritarian rule actually fueled the creation of robust, collective, youth-led alternative civic engagement organizations.²⁴ Clearly, more global perspective in research is needed to flesh out this narrative.

Nevertheless, young people globally are turning to new, digitally-mediated forms of civic engagement that are more difficult for tools such as traditional polling to measure and may be less analytically straightforward — for example, acts of ‘participatory politics’ such as youth creating and circulating photos, memes and videos to their networks.²⁵ A 2018 survey across 14 countries concluded that young people aged 18 to 29 are more likely to participate in political discussions online than older adults. The same study found that social network site usage — which skews younger and more educated than non-users — was positively correlated with respondents’ likelihood to take political action across all the issues studied.²⁶ In addition, instead of engaging in isolated, discrete events or practices, young people are adopting a repertoire approach to civic engagement that blends an array of digital and ‘real life’ actions in a cumulative and recursive fashion.²⁷

Civic engagement by adolescents is particularly important because:

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