

# Civic Engagement through Digital Citizenship

## ▶ Engaging youth in active, participatory citizenship through digital media

Participatory digital media — broadly defined as media such as the Internet, social network sites and cell phones that allow users to interact — are ubiquitous among today’s youth. Among teens ages 12–17, 95% have access to the Internet; 70% go online daily; 80% use social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter; and 77% have cell phones.<sup>1</sup>

Many schools, however, have been reluctant to allow students to use digital participatory media for learning during the school day. Because digital media are so pervasive among youth and offer new avenues for civic participation, schools must rethink how they prepare students for active, participatory citizenship. In short, the civic mission of schools has broadened to include the mission of preparing “digital citizens”<sup>3</sup> — those who use digital media to fulfill their civic duty.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* includes a closer look at the characteristics of digital natives and provides a summary of research about digital natives’ civic engagement habits and the implications of this research for education policy aimed at promoting digital citizenship for today’s youth.

### Digital Natives

Overwhelmingly, youth today are “digital natives” — they have never known a life without the Internet and cell phones. The pervasiveness of participatory digital media in their lives has had substantial impact on how digital natives interface with the world.<sup>2</sup>

### What’s Inside

- ▶ Who are “digital natives” and how do they perceive civic action?
- ▶ How has digital media provided and shaped opportunities for the civic engagement of digital natives?
- ▶ How can policy better address the civic learning of digital natives?



2012  
FEBRUARY  
Vol. 13, No. 1

THE PROGRESS OF  
Education Reform



## Who are “digital natives” and how do they perceive civic action?

### *Changing Citizen Identity and the Rise of a Participatory Media Culture*

W. Lance Bennett, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, in Lonnie R. Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta and Constance A. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010, pp. 393-423).

This study provides a description of how digital natives’ conceptions of civic action and communication differ from those of previous generations. For the majority of the 20th century, “Dutiful Citizenship” reflected the dominant belief that civic engagement is a “matter of duty or obligation.” For digital natives, however, citizenship is not a duty. Their civic actions originate from their “personally expressive politics” and “peer-to-peer relationships that promote engagement.” This search for self-actualization is often referred to as “Actualizing Citizenship.” Table 1 compares differences between previous generations’ ideal of “dutiful citizenship and digital natives’ ideal of “actualizing citizenship.”

**Table 1: Dutiful and Actualizing Styles of Civic Action and Communication**

	Dutiful Citizenship of Previous Generations	Actualizing Citizenship of Digital Natives
<b>Civic Style</b>	<p>Oriented around citizen input into government or formal public organizations, institutions and campaigns</p> <p>Rooted in responsibility and duty</p> <p>Channeled through membership in defined social groups</p>	<p>Open to many forms of creative civic expression, from government to consumer politics to global activism</p> <p>Rooted in self-actualization through social expression</p> <p>Personal interests channeled through loosely tied networks</p>
<b>Communication Logic</b>	<p>Primarily one-way consumption of managed civic information (from news, partisan organizations and political ads)</p> <p>Individual expression most often aimed at specific institutional targets (contacting elected officials, letters to newspapers)</p>	<p>Lines between content consumption and production blurred</p> <p>Peer or crowd sourced information (e.g., Wikipedia) is authoritative</p> <p>Interactive Content sharing over peer networks that personalize citizen identity and engagement</p>

Adapted from W. Lance Bennett, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, *Changing Citizen Identity and the Rise of a Participatory Media Culture*, p. 398.

Because digital natives’ conception of civic action is rooted in self-actualization, the types of learning experiences they need to become active, engaged citizens are fundamentally different from the civic learning experiences historically provided by schools. Table 2 describes how four types of civic learning opportunities — knowledge, expression, joining publics and taking action — differ for those who hold dutiful and actualizing conceptions of citizenship.

**Table 2: Dutiful and Actualizing Forms of Four Civic Learning Opportunities**

Civic Learning Opportunity	General Description	Dutiful Form (appropriate for previous generations)	Actualizing Form (necessary for digital natives)
Knowledge	Information that citizens should know	Information provided by authorities (e.g., teachers, news reports)	Information created and shared by peers
Expression	Training in effective public communication skills	Training for traditional forms of public address (e.g., letters to editors, government officials)	Training for self-produced digital media (e.g., blogs, wikis)
Joining Publics	Learning how to connect to others through networks and groups	Membership in site-defined, structured organizations	Membership in self-defined networks and groups
Taking Action	Actions that engaged citizens can take	Activities defined and offered by authority figures	Activities generated or reported by peers

Adapted from: W. Lance Bennett, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, *Changing Citizen Identity and the Rise of a Participatory Media Culture*, p. 409.

## Skillful Digital Participation Requires Training – For Natives, Too

While digital natives use participatory media extensively, they need formal training to help them use it most effectively. Unfortunately, those who do receive such training are in the minority, leaving this “elite” class of skillful digital citizens to make the majority of contributions to participatory media, and to dominate digital dialogues.

### Failing to Reach Digital Natives

While they target digital natives, most civic engagement Web sites do not attend to the actualizing civic ideals of digital natives. The authors reviewed 61 youth engagement Web sites to determine whether or not the Web sites were attempting to engage and educate youth through the older, more traditional “dutiful” or newer “actualizing” conceptions of civic action. Over two-thirds of the Web sites attempted to engage youth through the old lens of dutiful civic action; they didn’t speak through digital natives’ language actualizing citizenship. Of those that were based in actualizing conceptions of civic action, most were from online-only organizations (i.e., the organization produced only online forms of media and held no in-person meetings). The authors conclude that the civic engagement world has not caught up with the realities of digital natives: “an apparently powerful inertia prevent[s] many sponsoring civic organizations from productively deploying social networking and participatory media affordances for youth.”

*...the civic engagement world has not caught up with the realities of digital natives*

## How has digital media provided and shaped opportunities for the civic engagement of digital natives?

### *Civic Engagement, Pedagogy, and Information Technology on Web Sites for Youth*

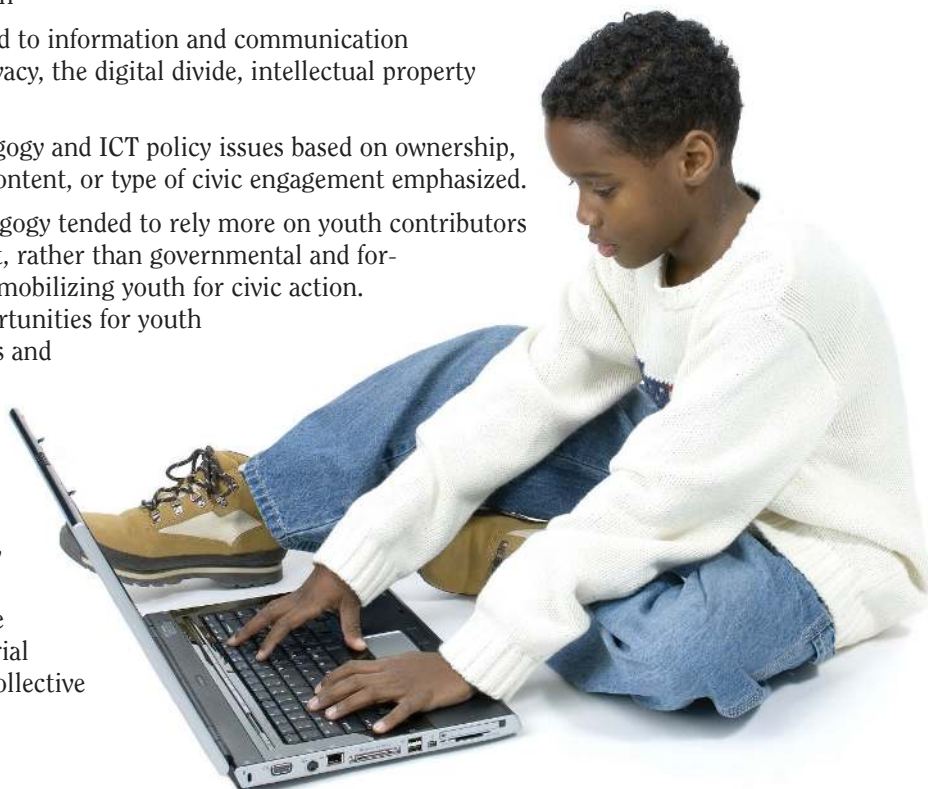
Christine Bachen, Chad Raphael, Kathleen-M. Lynn, Kristen McKee and Jessica Philippi, *Political Communication*, Vol. 25, 2008, pp. 290-310.

The authors of this study reviewed 73 civic youth Web sites in an effort to determine if the sites:

1. Employ active pedagogical techniques that research suggests are effective in civic education
2. Include features that permit interaction
3. Introduce youth to policy issues related to information and communication technology (ICT), such as Internet privacy, the digital divide, intellectual property and censorship
4. Differ in their inclusion of active pedagogy and ICT policy issues based on ownership, age of those responsible for editorial content, or type of civic engagement emphasized.

The authors found that sites using active pedagogy tended to rely more on youth contributors than other sites; tended to belong to nonprofit, rather than governmental and for-profit, organizations; and tended to prioritize mobilizing youth for civic action. Approximately two-thirds of sites offered opportunities for youth interaction, primarily through message boards and listservs. Few sites addressed ICT policy issues or helped prepare youth to engage in civic action around ICT issues.

The authors argue that civic youth Web sites should be a place to link civic action, active pedagogy and examination of ICT policy issues that connect youth with “larger forums for civic discussion and action, allowing ample opportunities for youth to contribute to editorial content, and promoting both individual and collective means to participate in society.”





## ***Digital Media Literacy Education and Online Civic and Political Participation***

Joseph Kahne, Jessica Timpany Feezel and Namjin Lee (Youth and Participatory Politics and DML Central, November, 2010), [http://dmlcentral.net/sites/dmlcentral/files/resource\\_files/LiteracyEducationandOnlineParticipation.WORKINGPAPER.pdf](http://dmlcentral.net/sites/dmlcentral/files/resource_files/LiteracyEducationandOnlineParticipation.WORKINGPAPER.pdf).

## ***Youth Online Activities and Exposure to Diverse Perspectives***

Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, Nam-Jin Lee and Jessica Timpany Feezell (Youth & Participatory Politics and DML Central, December, 2010), [http://dmlcentral.net/sites/dmlcentral/files/resource\\_files/YouthOnlineActivityDiverseExposure.WORKINGPAPERS.pdf](http://dmlcentral.net/sites/dmlcentral/files/resource_files/YouthOnlineActivityDiverseExposure.WORKINGPAPERS.pdf).

## ***The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood***

Joseph Kahne, Nam-Jin Lee and Jessica Timpany Feezell, The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood (Youth & Participatory Politics and DML Central, February, 2011), <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/OnlineParticipatoryCultures.WORKINGPAPERS.pdf>.

The authors of these three studies used a common dataset to examine the online civic participation habits of more than 900 high school students in California. They found:

- ▶ While many youth receive digital media literacy education, not all do. A little less than 20% reported never receiving educational opportunities associated with consumption of online civic and political information; fewer than half reported receiving such opportunities “often” or “very often.” Students who received digital media literacy education were more likely to participate in politically driven online activities than those who did not receive such opportunities. This finding suggests that when youth have opportunities to learn how to engage in online political activities, they are more likely to do so.
- ▶ The Internet is not an echo chamber for politically active youth. Rather, those who engage in politically driven online activities tend to interact with those whose views both align with and diverge from their own.
- ▶ Youth who engage in either politically driven and/or nonpolitical interest forms of online activity are more likely to be exposed to diverse perspectives. The authors argue that because most online activity — political or not — seems to provide youth with exposure to diverse perspectives, online contexts can be important tools to reach youth “who lack strong civic and political interests...” Friendship-driven and interest-driven online participation may be a gateway to various forms of online civic and political participation.

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## How can policy better address the civic learning of digital natives?

Collectively, these studies suggest that the civic mission of schools has indeed broadened to include preparation for digital citizenship and that such participation holds promise for increasing the active civic participation of digital natives. Consequently, these studies' findings should inform the development of policy aimed at promoting digital citizenship:

1. *Digital natives learn and think about citizenship in fundamentally different ways than previous generations.* If schools are to meet their civic mission, education policies and practices need to take digital natives' conceptions of citizenship into account.
2. *Broadband availability, accessibility and affordability are the determining factors separating youth who are digital natives and youth who are not.* If policymakers do not address these factors, non-digital native youth, who are largely poor and largely minority, will continue to be less likely to be civically engaged than their digital native peers.
3. *Policymakers should carefully consider how technology usage policies impact civic learning, as well as potential civic engagement, for digital natives.* While well-intended, policies that forbid student use of Facebook, Twitter, message boards, blogs and texting during the school day effectively close off many suitable and worthwhile opportunities for civic learning, participation and activism for digital natives.
4. *Young citizens, digital natives included, need educational opportunities to prepare them for participation in digital media.* Students do not possess inborn skills for technology and civic participation. These skills must be taught and therefore should be addressed in school standards and curricula.

## Conclusion

Digital natives possess fundamentally different conceptions of citizenship and civic action than their predecessors. While digital participatory media provide numerous avenues for digital natives to engage in active citizenship, many schools have not yet implemented policies and practices that capitalize on these opportunities.

## ECS Resources

### The National Center for Learning and Citizenship

Assists education leaders to promote, support and reward citizenship education and service-learning as essential components of America's education system.

[www.ecs.org/nclc](http://www.ecs.org/nclc)

### The Progress of Education Reform issues on Service-Learning and Citizenship Education

Provide concise review of other research relevant for civics and civic engagement in general.

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/84/95/8495.pdf>

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/87/95/8795.pdf>

### Citizenship Education: Online Database

Allows users to generate profiles of the state policies for citizenship education in individual states and view 50-state reports on state policies for citizenship education.

[http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/CitizenshipEducation/CitEdDB\\_intro.asp](http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/CitizenshipEducation/CitEdDB_intro.asp)

### Citizenship and Service Learning Issue Sites

Includes links to a rich set of resources from other organizations, states and experts.

<http://www.ecs.org/html/Issue.asp?issueID=19> and <http://www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=109&subissueid=0>

## Other Resources

### The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

The Campaign is a coalition of 40 organizations committed to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning in American schools. The Campaign's goal is to increase and improve civic learning in grades K-12 by working for policies that implement the recommendations of the Civic Mission of Schools report.

[www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org)

### iCivics

iCivics is a Web-based education project designed to teach students civics and inspire them to be active participants in our democracy. iCivics is the vision of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who is concerned that students are not getting the information and tools they need for civic participation, and that civics teachers need better materials and support.

<http://www.icivics.org/>

### Peter Levine: A Blog for Civic Renewal

Peter Levine is the director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education (CIRCLE) and the research director for the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University. He blogs regularly about youth engagement, civic renewal and digital citizenship.

[www.peterlevine.ws](http://www.peterlevine.ws)

### Youth and Media

Led by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, the Youth and Media project at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University encompasses an array of research, advocacy and development initiatives around youth and technology. The project includes a wiki on digital natives ([http://youthandmedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://youthandmedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) that explores impacts of this generational demarcation between those born with these technologies and those who were not.

<http://youthandmedia.org>

## Endnotes

- 1 Amanda Lenhart, Mary Madden, Aaron Smith, Kristen Purcell, Kathryn Zickuhr and Lee Rainie, *Teens, Kindness and Cruelty on Social Network Sites: How American teens navigate the new world of “digital citizenship”* (Pew Internet & American Life Project, November 2011), [http://pewinternet.org/-/media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP\\_Teens\\_Kindness\\_Cruelty\\_SNS\\_Report\\_Nov\\_2011\\_FINAL\\_110711.pdf](http://pewinternet.org/-/media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP_Teens_Kindness_Cruelty_SNS_Report_Nov_2011_FINAL_110711.pdf) (accessed on Dec. 27, 2011).
- 2 Don Tapscott, *Growing up digital: The rise of the net generation* ( New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997); W. Lance Bennett, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, “Changing Citizen Identity and the Rise of a Participatory Media Culture,” in Lonnie R. Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta and Constance A. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. , 2010).
- 3 Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert and Ramona S. McNeal, *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society and Participation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

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The Progress of  
Education Reform  
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This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* was made possible by a grant from the GE Foundation. It was written by Paul Baumann, Acting Director of the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States, [pbaumann@ecs.org](mailto:pbaumann@ecs.org).



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