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Navigating Context Collapse: A Strengths-based Approach to Building Youth Civic Empowerment.

A Response to *Blended Spaces: Reimagining Civic Education in a Digital Era*

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Abstract

In the article "Blended Spaces: Reimagining Civic Education in a Digital Era," the authors joined a new area of research on "civic media literacy," or the capacity to use media with civic intentionality. Building on previous scholarship that examined how to support youth capacity for effective civic inquiry, dialogue, expression, and action in the digital age, the authors contributed to this literature by usefully elaborating on the phenomenon of "context collapse" and the challenges this blurring of the boundaries between public and private spheres may present, particularly in the liminal spaces where the shifting boundaries most clearly depart from the pre-internet era. A central premise of the feature article is that youth and adults are entering into this context with "no training." However, it has been more than a decade since social media emerged, and we respond by pointing out that in some sense, youth have been training for this for most of their lives. In our response, we reinforce many of the major points of the feature article, but we elaborate to draw focus on youth-driven practices and adaptations that have emerged in our own research and discuss the implications for civic education.

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Introduction: The Importance of Liminal Spaces between Public and Private Spheres for Civic Life

The internet and social media have become critical spaces for sharing ideas and information. At its best, the online world can expose youth to diverse perspectives beyond their geographically local environments, put them in conversation with people with differing life experiences, and expose them to people who may question their beliefs. These experiences can promote intellectual curiosity and willingness to question their own beliefs, hallmarks of intellectual humility. However, recent scholarship regarding the threat of echo chambers (Quattrociocchi, 2017), the role of algorithms in shaping information we receive (Noble, 2018), and the tendency of media producers to use outrage language to win attention in a distributed marketplace of ideas (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014); Middaugh et al, 2017 suggest the need for active cultivation of experiences with the online public sphere that are supportive of meaningful youth engagement.

In the article "Blended Spaces: Reimagining Civic Education in a Digital Era," Lo et al. (2022) joined a new area of research focused on defining and examining the role of education in the development of *civic media literacy*, or the capacity to use media with civic intentionality (Mihailidis, 2018). The past 10 years have seen a growing number of researchers ask what it means to prepare youth for effective civic inquiry, dialogue, expression, and action in the digital age (Blinded; Kahne et al., 2016, Mirra & Garcia, 2017). Lo et al. have contributed to this literature by usefully elaborating on boyd's (2014) identification of context collapse (i.e., blurring and shifting boundaries between public and private spheres) and describing two specific changes that we all must navigate when engaging with civic issues online.

The first question asks what "private public participation," or the ability to "lurk" and participate anonymously in online civic discourse, means for youth empowerment and the quality of public life. Lo et al. (2022) reinforced concerns about the potential for anonymity to encourage "uncivil" discourse like trolling, hate speech, and outrage language (Elder, 2020; Graf et al., 2017; Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). On the flip side, they asked what "publicly private participation," or communication meant only for friends, family, or close-knit community that can be accessed by strangers, means for youth civic engagement. In the most dramatic cases, we see youth expression taken out of context and repurposed in the "digital afterlife," described by Soep (2012), and high-profile stories of youth being "canceled" online with implications for their future (Weil, 2022). Less dramatically, we see youth demonstrating awareness that their online civic expression may be seen by acquaintances within their networks who might take offense or respond negatively (Weinstein & James, 2022; Blinded).

Articulating the boundaries of the public and private spheres is an important tradition in democratic theory and civic education. Indeed, the spaces where the two spheres meet have long been identified as important entry points for civic engagement (Dewey, 1927/1954; de Toqueville, 2000). Youth-led organizing often follows a process of building awareness with youth that the problems they face as individuals in their local communities are actually shared public concerns that are shaped by public policy and influenced by public institutions (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Kirshner, 2015).

As Lo et al. (2022) correctly pointed out, the internet has intersected with and influenced how we think about the boundaries between the public and the private sphere. In 2009, Middaugh's review of emerging literature on online communities identified the internet as creating new forms of "local" communities of people who interact in sustained small groups with many features of a local community, but geographically distributed, thus creating opportunities for youth to practice the skills of identifying issues of shared concern, negotiating differences of perspective, and making decisions about community resources and rules. At this point, online communities have been well-established sites of civic learning and engagement (Jenkins et al., 2016; Literat & Markus, 2020), and efforts have begun to consider how educators can take lessons learned from these online localities to scaffold participation in online

mini-publics (Middaugh & Evans, 2018) toward participation in the broader online public sphere, as Lo et al. (2022) noted in their description of the move from participation in the protected site Youth Voices toward broader online participation.

At the time of writing, concerns about the internet and the blurring of the personal and political domains have been drawn into stark relief with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. As activists use social media to share information about access to reproductive health in restricted states and work to reframe the narrative to emphasize "forced birth" and share stories of the harm done following the decision, we see a similar trend, which Shresthova (2016) described in "Storytelling and Surveillance: The Precarious Public of American Muslim Youth," in which youth navigated the opportunities and risks in the blurred boundaries between public and private. The ability to lurk and see stories shared by others can provide youth in politically polarized communities access to perspectives they may not otherwise see and access to a group with whom they may wish to join in solidarity and tell stories more publicly. At the same time, presumably, private conversations can be subject to surveillance.

Lo et al. (2022) began with a description of the challenges presented by the liminal spaces between public and private spheres as they are mediated through technology and the premise that youth and adults are entering into this context with "no training." However, it has been more than a decade since social media emerged, and the term "context collapse" was coined by Marwick & boyd (2011). If we take a youth-centered, youth-development perspective, we can argue that in some sense, youth have been training for this for most of their lives. The challenges identified by Lo et al. are real and echoed in our own research with youth and teachers. However, we have also seen that there is much to be learned from youth themselves as they develop strategies to negotiate those challenges in their everyday contexts.

In what follows, we highlight some lessons learned from our research with youth, reflecting on their everyday practices of civic inquiry, dialogue, and expression through social media, as well as from our work with teachers to integrate these insights into their practice. We pay particular attention to the ways in which classroom activities can more authentically represent the everyday practices of civic life so that we as a community can develop systematic strategies for attending to participation in online life with civic intentionality.

A Holistic Approach: Balancing the Cognitive and Social-Emotional Elements of Civic Engagement

The question of what capacities and educational supports are needed for youth to become "good citizens" is inherently shaped by our theoretical perspectives on youth development and democracy. Our research is guided by assumptions that youth development is best understood through the study of ecological systems and the interactions between young people and their environment, including online microsystems (Navarro & Tudge, 2022). Our conceptualization of the democratic practices for which young people are being prepared is guided by a similar framework as the one in "Blended Spaces: Reimagining Civic Education in a Digital Era," focusing on

participatory politics and citizen capacity for expressing voice and influence on issues of shared concern (Barber, 1984; Cohen & Kahne, 2012) and the related framework of deliberative democracy, which prioritizes dialogue and deliberation as critical to enhancing the quality of participation (Gutman & Thompson, 1996). This requires knowledge and cognitive capacity to understand and analyze social issues, but also social-emotional capacities of empathy, conflict management, persuasion, and inspiration (Mirra, 2018; Blinded). Finally, we align with the "lived civics" approach, which begins with understanding the range of civic experiences of young people, with a particular emphasis on historically marginalized communities (Cohen et al., 2018; Mirra & Garcia, 2017).

Learning from Youth Adaptations: New Considerations for Navigating Liminal Spaces

Our recent individual and collaborative research examining online civic discourse and youth civic media literacy practices aligns, in many ways, with the lessons learned from the case study in "Blended Spaces: Reimagining Civic Education in a Digital Era." Here, we suggest additional considerations that emerged when we shifted our focus outside of the classroom to examine everyday features of the online ecological context and associated practices of civic inquiry, dialogue, and expression. The full description and discussion of these findings are available in other places (Middaugh et al, 2022; Felton et al, Under Review a; Felton et al, Under Review b; Middaugh et al, in Press). Following, we put them in conversation with Lo et al. (2022) regarding their implications for navigating the publicly/private and privately/public liminal spaces in the online public sphere.

Need for Attention to Endorsement and Circulation

As social network sites became popular in the 2010s, media scholars called attention to the practice of circulation as playing a larger role in information engagement (Jenkins et al., 2013; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). The practices of endorsing (liking, hearting, saving, up/downvoting, following) and sharing (retweeting, reposting to other platforms, sending links to others) posts are small acts that, at scale, have substantial impact. Who we follow in our friendship/acquaintance networks and the posts we endorse shape the kinds of information and perspectives on public social issues that we consume. Our participants have described these acts as relatively private (lower risk) forms of public expression and, alternatively, a way to help a private perspective become public and wield influence.

Reliance on Incidental Exposure and Noninstitutional Sources

Another consequence of the blurring of public and private boundaries is mixing of news, opinion, entertainment, personal updates, etc., in social media feeds. Research suggests that as people rely on social media for news, we also see a trend toward reliance on incidental exposure to news (Walker & Matsa, 2021). In our own research, we've seen that youth are aware of issues of credibility and the need to follow reputable sources, but the accounts they find most engaging and relevant to their interests tend to be noninstitutional accounts ranging from activist

organizations to socially responsible businesses to individual mission-driven influencers or issue-focused aggregator accounts (Middaugh et al, 2022).

Social and Emotional Considerations

When civic inquiry, dialogue, and expression are carried out in the liminal spaces between public and private, they become social acts that youth are doing with the combination of friends, families, acquaintances, and strangers in their social media networks. Not surprisingly, decisions about what to pay attention to, how to engage in dialogue, and what to share or express are highly influenced by social and emotional considerations. Not only did our participants express awareness of the potential for conflict or reputational damage when choosing to post or share but they also referred to a desire to express solidarity or uplift the voices of people in their decisions (Middaugh et al, 2022).

Attention to Platform Differences

"Social media" is an umbrella term for what can be very different platforms with differing norms, affordances, and content type (Kligler-Vilenchik & Baden, 2020). Our research examining online dialogue on Twitter and Reddit has suggested differing affordances in terms of how people participate, expectations for providing evidence, and potential for mobilization. For example, within Reddit, which has many qualities of "privately public," in that the norms are to engage anonymously, we saw that sub-Reddit community norms and the level of moderator activity to enforce those norms differed considerably and the level of information sharing and interactivity of the threads also differed (Felton et al, Under Review a). Our analysis of "topical" (Rossi & Magnani, 2012) Twitter discourse, which involves tweets organized around a hashtag, rather than a network of people following each other, suggested that this kind of discourse tends to prioritize the voices and perspectives

of high-powered users with many followers (as opposed to regular people) and political opinion (Middaugh et al, in press).

Our participants have also demonstrated awareness of platform differences, noting their own differentiated use of platforms, for example using Twitter or Instagram for news consumption, Facebook to keep up with older relatives, and taking conversations private (via text or direct messaging) to manage the risks of publicly private conversations (Blinded).

Understanding Internet Culture

A final consideration for preparing young people, particularly when wanting to move from the liminal spaces between public and private and to move into the fully public space, is the need to keep up with and understand how Internet culture is constructed and played out amongst a given audience. Our youth participants are highly conscious of the role of aesthetics, humor, and engagement indicators (likes, shares and followers) as factors in whether posts will catch attention or be taken seriously (Middaugh et al, 2022). These norms are continuously evolving, and youth themselves can be important sources of knowledge regarding them. For example, at the time we conducted the work that is published or under review, TikTok was just emerging as a widely used platform, and now it has become one of the fastest-growing platforms with its own set of norms in terms of stitching, dueting, and use of popular songs to drive engagement. These norms are in addition to the graphics, hashtags, and @ing that users associated with platforms like Twitter and Instagram. In previous research, (Bell & Kornbluh, 2022) identified "digital savvy," or the ability to use internet norms strategically, as a predictor of youth ability to draw an audience and gain attention for their posts within a peer-driven online community.

Building on these considerations, we have proposed a model of civic media literacy that encompasses these emerging considerations (see Figure 1).
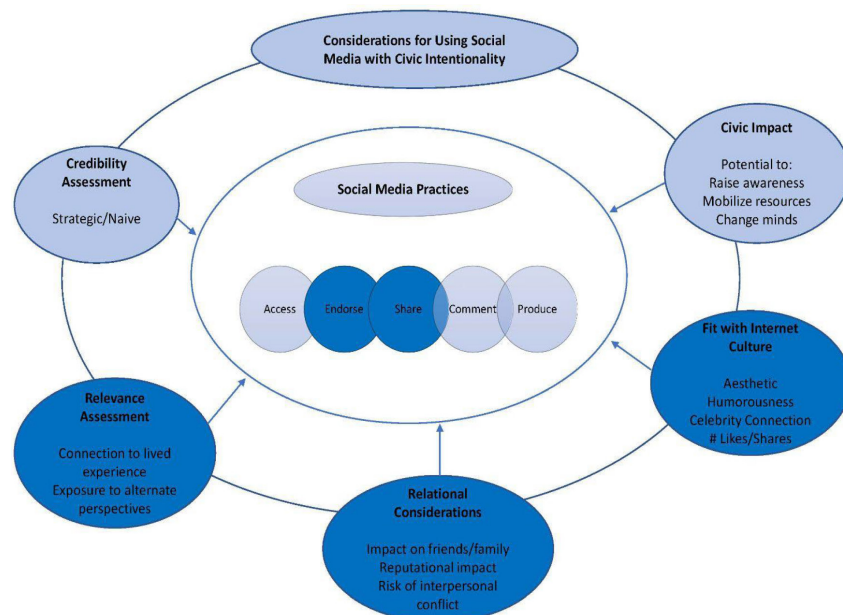

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Civic Media Literacy: How Youth Reason about Using Social Media to Advance Civic Goals

Note. Figure excerpted from Middaugh et al, 2022.

Developing Civic Habits of Mind: A Pedagogical Framework for Building on Youth Assets for Digitally Savvy Civic Engagement

In translating our observations from research into practice, we have grappled with the issues presented by Lo et al. (2022) as we sought to develop pedagogical strategies that build on youth assets and expand their capacity for digitally savvy civic engagement. Next, we describe some strategies we have been developing in collaboration with high school teachers as part of an ongoing design process. Our model is similar to others in terms of a focus on teaching for civic inquiry, dialogue, and action. However, we stress the integration of circulation practices, attention to internet culture and digital savvy, knowledge of platform differences, and use of traditional and nontraditional sources.

Our work is organized around preparation for students to complete a project similar to what is presented in Figure 2, A New Millennium Project, that focuses on using social media more effectively for learning about and producing knowledge products that can be circulated to accomplish civic aims.

To get to this goal, we work with teachers to focus curricular opportunities for inspiration, inquiry, deliberation, expression and action that will position students to create their own New Millennium Project. We have written more extensively about the design process and the lessons learned as we work toward these goals (Felton et al, Under Review b) Here we share the broad strokes of the approach as they intersect with the question of participation in the liminal spaces of public and private.
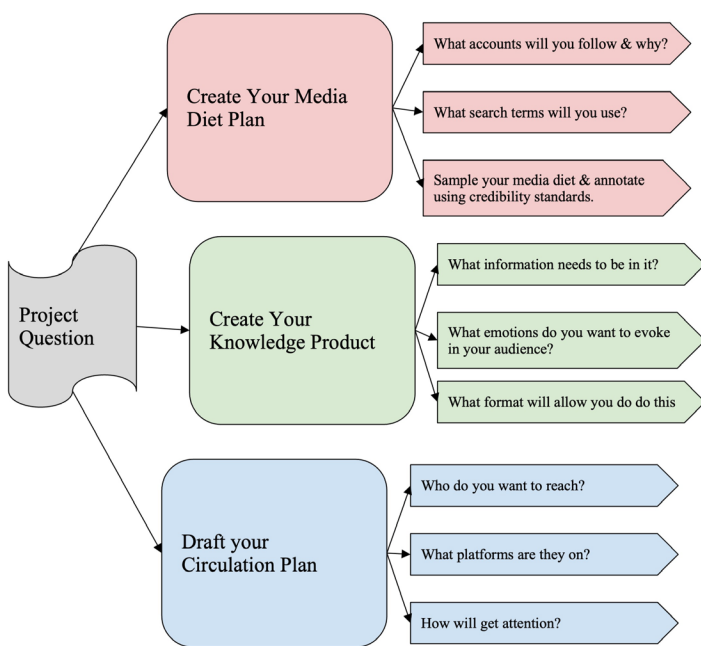

Figure 2. New Millennium Project

Inspiration

One advantage of using social media in the classroom is the opportunity to represent perspectives that may not be seen in legacy media. While 95% of teens use social media (Vogel et al, 2022), this does not necessarily translate active engagement with civic media or comfort with producing civic posts. A 2020 survey of emerging adults (18–24) found that creation of content about social or political issues was associated with feelings of representation and empowerment but that only one in three create content (Booth et al., 2020). In our work, we have discovered the importance of inspiration. For example, working with teachers on climate change, we explore posts representing different framings on climate change—all from youth activists or youth driven organizations—and talk about the framing of #climatecrisis, #climatehope, #climatejustice, etc., and how messages under different framings inspire action. In Middaugh's undergraduate course *Social Media and Youth Civic Engagement*, students have commented on the importance of seeing posts by youth aligned with their identities as a critical component for engaging interest and motivation to go deeper into their own topics of interest.

Inquiry

Civic inquiry is an area where significant work has been accomplished in the fields of library sciences, media literacy education, and civic education as it applies the processes of searching for and evaluating sources, and we integrate established strategies, such as advanced search evaluation of information using the CRAAP Test (Blakeslee, 2004), and online civic reasoning strategies, such as lateral validation (Hall et al., 2021). Additional strategies, drawn from our research on how youth consume and evaluate information on social media combined with research in epistemic cognition, include a focus on curation and using the AIR model of epistemic cognition (Chinn & Rhinehart, 2016) to help students synthesize information from legacy media and noninstitutional sources.

If people rely on social media feeds to bring them information, it becomes important to develop the habit of critically examining feeds and using the practices of following and endorsing to take an active role in creating them to ensure that high-quality sources and varied perspectives are being delivered. In our "New Millennium Project" model, we suggest creating a media diet plan that involves making decisions about what accounts to follow and what hashtags and search terms to use and then reflecting on samples of information that show up in feeds over time. This can be done in individual accounts held by students or in classroom-based social media accounts dedicated to the project. This allows students to get in the habit of thinking about how information comes to them and how they can influence the quality of information that comes to them.

For evaluating information, we emphasize the need to synthesize information from different kinds of sources. Garcia and Mirra (2022) recently wrote about the different purposes of composition for civic engagement: composition for understanding, dialogue, persuasion, solidarity, mobilization, and resistance. This aligns with our observations of how youth balance social-emotional, informational, and civic priorities when engaging with social media. Evaluating the quality of media and information depends on one's purpose for consuming it or sharing it. To aid with the task of balancing these priorities, we draw on the AIR model of epistemic cognition (Chinn & Rhinehart, 2016), which calls on a user to evaluate the aims, ideals, and reliable processes associated with different goals. For example, in the task of

understanding the scientific evidence regarding the major drivers of climate change (aim), high-quality information is understood to be that which uses the scientific method, is rooted in empirical evidence, and is replicated (ideal), and the best way to get this information is through peer-reviewed research by experts (reliable processes). However, understanding the societal impact of climate change action (aim) requires surfacing a range of lived experiences (ideal), which is better accomplished through a combination of news reporting and social media accounts (reliable processes).

This requires a scaffolded approach inviting students to seek out and evaluate information at multiple times to allow for varying the purposes without creating undue cognitive burden.

Deliberation

In civic education, the importance of dialogue has been well-established as a mechanism for increasing understanding of civic and political issues as well as for building tolerance for political disagreement (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). The online space is notoriously challenging when it comes to dialogue across political differences, both in terms of concerns about the echo chamber effect (Quattrociocchi, 2017) and in terms of conflict and incivility (Graf et al., 2017).

Our approach focuses primarily on deliberation, which is dialogue for the purpose of coming to agreement on a course of action (Walton, 2020). Felton's previous research on dialogue across differences in online spaces suggests that the purpose set for a dialogue can have a significant impact on how productively participants engage with each other (Felton et al, 2015; Felton & Crowell, 2022). For example, entering a conversation with the goal to persuade the other party yields very different results than when entering with a goal of understanding. Dialogue for the purpose of deciding on a course of action to address a civic issue sets a cooperative goal that balances critical engagement with listening and the refinement of solutions.

To set up the conditions for productive dialogue, we emphasize the importance of first developing a community. This may be drawing on the existing classroom community, joining a moderated online community, like Youth Voices (as the teacher in "Blended Spaces: Reimagining Civic Education in a Digital Era" did), or joining a network or online community where people have the opportunity to get to know each other and establish norms for productive critical dialogue. Dialogue with an unknown group of people who have no motivation for sustained dialogue is unlikely to be a beneficial experience for youth. However, even with anonymity present, we see productive dialogue in intentional, moderated online communities like those found in some (not all) online communities (Felton et al, Under Review a).

Thus, we stress this element of paying attention to the community context before encouraging youth to engage in dialogue or deliberation, clarifying their purpose for engaging in dialogue (enhancing understanding, deciding on a course of action, etc.), and reflecting on whether and how the dialogue was productive.

Expression and Action

When it comes to expressing views or taking civic action in the digital age, Lo et al. (2022) correctly identified safety and security as issues to consider in online expression. This concern is echoed in our research with youth and our practice of designing curriculum with teachers as people make decisions about how to manage the risks of civic expression and action–online and off. In this section, we grapple with a different risk, which is that of the "audience problem" (Levine, 2008) and the potential that youth will share perspectives or calls to action that are seen by few or buried in the sea of voices online. This risk is one where youth are given inspiration and asked to invest in expressing their voice on issues that matter to them and yet feel unheard and disempowered.

Toward that end, our approach to civic expression and action focuses on integrating lessons learned regarding the differing purposes of civic expression (e.g., for solidarity, resistance, mobilization, per Garcia & Mirra, 2022), internet savvy (Bell & Kornbluh, 2022), and circulation with civic intentionality (Middaugh et al, 2022). In our work with teachers and students, we focus on the process of developing a theory of action that takes into account (a) what change needs to happen, (b) who has power to make a difference on the problem they identify (individuals by changing their behavior, elected officials, corporations, activist networks, etc.), and (c) how to reach and capture the attention of that audience.

As seen in Figure 2, this means attention to creating effective knowledge products (videos, audio clips, Instagram posts, TikToks, infographics, etc.) that pay close attention to the visual elements and emotional response the product is seeking to evoke and why those will be effective for the chosen audience. Importantly, we also pay attention to the role of internet savviness in circulation and uptake. This includes considering which platforms the desired audience is likely to be paying attention to. Currently, elected officials tend to be active and responsive on Twitter, whereas youth are rapidly taking up TikTok as a platform of choice. These platforms function differently in terms of how to gain an audience. Since technology is constantly evolving and what works varies by audience and platform, our approach focuses on inviting students to engage in analysis of how attention is gained for posts in different settings and among different audiences and to use that information to draft a circulation plan.

Conclusion

In this era of shifting boundaries between public and private, we agree with Lo et al. (2022) and much of conventional wisdom that there are new challenges to navigate. As we discuss throughout our response, however, we also see periods of societal change as presenting windows of opportunity. The practices of democracy are inherently messy and risky, especially when focusing on the most important issues of social justice and equity for those outside of power centers. As youth experiment with and learn lessons from the emerging practices we described, we stress the importance of learning from their practices and asking how these forms of experimentation can take advantage of the opportunities while simultaneously managing risks.

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