

A Transnational Public Sphere for a Digital Generation?

Written by Brian D. Loader

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The striking similarity of digitally mediated political actions by young citizens in different parts of the world in recent years has raised the intriguing possibility that these may be indicators of an emerging transnational public sphere. Many of these political actions have spread rapidly and haphazardly from country to country, sharing and coordinating their repertoires using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Moreover, their focus of discontent has also often been transnational in nature, frequently arising from global concerns shared and experienced by many millions of young people, often as a consequence of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, the contemporary youth generation, raised within the digital ecology of the Internet, might be seen as ideally placed to shape a transnational public sphere predicated upon a global communications network that has largely developed outside the direct control of nation-states and older media conglomerates. But what evidence is there that young people's political engagement is being significantly changed by new media technologies? Are they becoming more connected transnationally? What might be the nature and relevance of this transnational public sphere for democratic politics? These are big and challenging questions and I make no claim to provide comprehensive answers here. Instead, what I want to undertake in this short discussion piece is to address these questions somewhat speculatively by briefly outlining some of factors that give rise to them and some cautionary lessons we should bear in mind when discussing them.

There can be little doubt that networked digital media technologies have been extensively adopted by young people in economically advanced and developing countries around the world. This trend has been significantly strengthened in recent years with the advent of social media platforms accessed through mobile apps and wireless technologies. By opening up new mobile spaces for interactive sociability, communication, and shared identities, social media increasingly facilitate global mass collaboration, creativity, and discussion between individuals around the world. Their ubiquitous infusion into the everyday social practices of young people therefore makes them an obvious focus of attention not only for academics, but also political activists, campaigners, pollsters, and commercial marketers, as well as servants of the state.

The politically disruptive potential of social media took centre stage in 2010, when its utility was highlighted in the major demonstrations often referred to as the Arab Spring. This led to the now-familiar hyperbolic descriptions of 'twitter revolutions' which, fortunately, have been replaced by more scholarly explorations of these protests to reveal the significant, but contingent, role that social media platforms played for many young protesters (Lotan et al. 2011; Islanker 2011; Howard & Hussain 2013). Such innovation was to be replicated in other protest actions elsewhere in the world, such as the 15 May in Spain (Sampedro 2011), 5 Star in Italy (Nizzoli 2012), the Occupy movements, or Gezi Park; and indeed, its transnational transferability became a characteristic feature in attempts to provide conceptual definition (Bennett & Segerberg 2012, 2013; Brian D. Loader, Vromen & Xenos 2014). Less notable, but equally important for understanding how the everyday social networking practices of young citizens perform as public domains, is the plurality of civic examples of new media communications from responses to natural disasters, such as the earthquake in L'Aquila, Italy (Farinosi & Trerè 2010, 2014), to housing emergencies (Haro & Sampedro 2011).

Increasingly, therefore, social media can be seen as the multiple public spheres where the experiences of young citizens become intertwined with the social, economic, and cultural issues affecting their lives. It thus shares with conceptions of civil society the notion that these are places and spaces outwith the domains of the state or commercial sector. Consequently it is seen as vital for the formation and dissemination of political discourses: an

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important means by which the public opinion of young citizens is formed. It is no coincidence, therefore, that politicians now frequently tweet their policy choices and make YouTube videos (embarrassing or otherwise) to reach those Facebook spaces inhabited by young citizens. But to what extent do these social networking practices take on a transnational focus?

Young People as Global Citizens?

Many of the challenges facing this current generation of contemporary youth are certainly transnational in character. Growing up in the neoliberal global economy, their futures have become bound-up with the baggage of previous generations: a legacy of climate change, the politics of fear, precarious employment opportunities, and austerity cuts in state support, to name the most obvious. Yet many national and local media fail to adequately address the problems confronting these young citizens. Faced with an impoverished public sphere that all too often restricts the pluralistic expression of diverse interests, and instead favours the voices of the most powerful groups in their societies, many young citizens have sought alternative digital channels to find expression for their discontent. In this way, social media become the communicative tool of choice for many young citizens to express their indignation and sense of outrage at their bequeathed plight (Castells 2012).

Turning their backs on the conventional politics of voting, political parties, trades unions, and NGOs, many young citizens seem instead to prefer to engage in loose network organizations with little or no leadership that are facilitated by new media. In a series of publications drawing upon in-depth empirical investigation into recent protests in Europe and the USA, Bennett and Segerberg have notably referred to this emergent form of political engagement as the 'logic of connective action' (Bennett, Segerberg & Walker 2014; Bennett & Segerberg 2013). In contrast to the more familiar 'collective action', which requires individual participants to submit to a collective political consciousness, these new forms of unconventional engagement enable young citizens to use digital media networks to organise around shared concerns, but through identity frames which are more personalised. Thus the use of memes, such as 'we are the 99%', enables diverse individuals to identify with the transnational concern of rising social inequality exacerbated by the global financial crisis and experienced in a variety of ways in different parts of the world. Such networked spaces have also enabled the rapid scaled-up manifestation of large-scale offline protests (Bennett & Segerberg 2012:742). Social media further enables multiple political issues and contestations to be flexibly tracked around the globe and 'mashed-up' or bridged in creative ways. Connective action does not replace collective forms of political participation, but it points to the possibilities for more self-actualising engagement by young citizens seeking to find a voice outwith mainstream public spheres. Moreover, many of these actions both learnt and gained inspiration from other instances around the globe, and sought to send their messages to a global audience.

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One can see from the foregoing why it is tempting to regard these uses of social media networks by young citizens as evidence for an emerging transnational public sphere. Early debates about the Internet as a harbinger of a global public sphere, however, should alert us to the need to be more cautious about such inferences (B. D. Loader 1997). Just as today, so in the past we can find claims that, unrestricted by commercial or state monopolistic media, citizens anywhere in the world could use their computers 24/7 to create content, share it across borders, and participate in democratic discussions. Online access, it was suggested, would enable a wider number and range of citizens to engage in reasoned deliberation in order to create and inform public opinion on matters of public interest. In the event these optimistic accounts, which saw the Internet as a remedy for the ills of the democratic polity, foundered on the rocks of hard evidence and a misguided formula of democratic governance. In the first place, studies searching for instances of reasoned deliberation on the Internet were instead confronted by a replication of the factionalism and narrow-mindedness more typical in the offline world (Hill & Hughes 1998). Second, by adopting a model of the public sphere formulated by Jurgen Habermas (1962), they remained coupled to a conception which had already become discredited by feminist and radical scholars as privileging spaces and practices which they argued were frequently gendered, racist, and valorised forms of communicative power that were often white, male, and middle class (Fraser 1990; Pateman 1989).

In contrast, what is distinct about the use of the latest generation of web technologies, or social media, for political

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participation is not that they are concerned with re-engineering or reforming broken democracies, but rather that they are circumventing them. Young citizens are more likely to use Facebook, Twitter, and the like to network and share information with each other, rather than with political institutions or politicians. They approximate to an ideal type we have described elsewhere as the 'networked young citizen' (B. D. Loader et al. 2014): using social media to increasingly personalise and construct their own political identities through peer discussion on non-hierarchical networks, rather than adopting dutiful citizenship identities prescribed by political parties, trades unions, or other mainstream institutions. Instead of being confined by the regulatory regimes of exclusive national public spheres, the potential strength of the networked young citizen is their capacity to challenge the discourses of the most powerful social groups, who increasingly derive their power from global networks. By questioning and disrupting these everyday dominant narratives through the creative use of a repertoire of media including text, video, and images, the networked young citizen is thereby able to contribute to the generation of alternative public opinion. Rather than deliberative, it is better understood as a 'discursive' form of democratic engagement (Dryzek 2000), and its influence can be readily seen in the recent series of connective action mentioned earlier.

Competing Generational Narratives

This is an intriguing picture of the potential strengthening of a transnational public sphere through the discursive engagement of young citizens acting through an emergent digital media ecology. However, I want to suggest that a more accurate understanding of developments, and their possible consequences for democratic governance in the future, requires us to consider at least two further aspects that produce a more complex and contested image. The first is what we might call the 'homogeneous youth fallacy'. Much of the discussion of young citizens falls into the trap of talking about them as a unified generation. Yet in reality, young people do not comprise a homogeneous population, but are instead divided by the same social distinctions of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and the like, which characterise older cohorts. These socio-economic divisions experienced by young people will often shape their political attitudes and their sense of political efficacy. Thus social inequality continues to be a key indicator in relation to civic engagement and political participation (Scholzman, Verba & Brady 2012). Gender, 'race', ethnicity, as well as social class, may all be significantly related to civic engagement, and may also shape the specific contexts, processes, and outcomes that young people encounter in their lives.

In many of the recent protests around the world, it was the educated middle class youth who were in the vanguard. In the BRIC countries, a pronounced feature of their economic ascendancy has been the expansion of their middle classes. A significant aspect of the Arab Spring uprisings was that they were typically organized by young, highly educated, middle class protesters intent on introducing aspects of western meritocracies into their societies. Indeed, even in established late modern societies, it is very often the middle class youth who are making political and social demands more consistent with their individualised aspirations. An established body of literature has, for the past twenty-five years or so, outlined how the political norms of young people have become more individualized and less deferential (Beck 1992, 1994; Giddens 1991; Inglehart 1990), self-actualizing (Bang 2004; Bennett, Wells, & Freelon 2011), and critical (Norris 2002). The use of social media within a transnational public sphere can therefore be seen to be largely undertaken by those very networked young citizens who can be seen to emerge from the work of these scholars.

Highly significant and influential as these networked young citizens are, they do not, however, represent an entire generation; only the most educated and advantaged who are able and incentivised to engage in a transnational public sphere. Many other less advantaged young people do not easily fit this individualised, reflexive, and networked model. Subject to the growing levels of social inequality experienced in many countries around the world, these young people do not have the resources to make actualizing lifestyle choices. Socially excluded in the real world, they may therefore also be in danger of becoming marginalized by academic social theories of contemporary society. We need also to gain in-depth understanding and a more inclusive picture of how socially diverse young people use social media, and how this influences their political norms and sense of identity (Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014). What we may be witnessing is not so much the emergence of a transnational public sphere by a new digital generation, but rather a social and cultural cleavage between middle class young citizens with a global outlook, on the one hand, and a more numerous majority of young people more parochial in outlook, on the other.

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This raises the second factor of importance to this debate; namely, what might be the influence of the excluded youth for democracy? For it is surely worth considering that the very same global developments that have given rise to transnational protest also act to inculcate concerns over migration, fear of terrorism, and threats to employment opportunities, which are often used by right-wing parties and/or religious fundamentalists advocating nationalistic solutions. For young people experiencing the negative consequences of globalization (perceived or otherwise), those political groups championing a return to protectionism and border controls may seem like a more relevant alternative than anything provided by a transnational public sphere.

Conclusion

The young have, of course, frequently been active historically in contributing to social change. An examination of the ages of the fallen carved onto the tombstones and memorials of any modern conflict are a poignant reminder of their role as agents of political contestation. But unlike these past instances, where young citizens were more usually the subjects of national policy directives, the recent forms of engagement cast the young citizen more as self-determining agent finding civic expression through global digital networks to confront the activities of nation-states, corporations, and even the complicity of many NGOs. Yet as Karl Mannheim was at pains to point out in his seminal essay outlining his theory of generations, not all contemporary young people from a particular empirical period experience the same subjective condition or dominant influence. Instead, he argued that, within a generation, different groups and individuals may interpret their historical condition in competing ways (Mannheim 1952). Whilst the figure of the networked young citizen, politically engaged through a transnational public sphere, is a compelling one, we do not yet know whether competing fundamentalist, nationalist, or other alternative models may come to be seen as more significant.

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