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# Opinion – Digital Disinformation, Civic Disengagement and the Future of Democracy

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ALLISON MUZYKA, MAR 27 2021

Democracy is at risk when citizens forget its value. Rising distrust in institutions and the increased digital world that proliferates disinformation create fragmented societies and citizens who do not participate. Disengagement, doubt, and absorption of polarizing facts reach today's youth that the future democracies rely upon. Youth are no longer engaging in conventional civic activities and are absorbing political content online, often without understanding socio-political context or even what information can be trusted. The limited availability and efficacy of foundational civics education and minimal engagement with critical digital literacy skills are concerning. We should be more worried than ever about the future of democracy.

Research and surveys indicate that youth find their news online and turn to the Internet to express opinions on social and political issues, commonly writing political articles or blogs to share on social media. With unregulated social media being the source of civic and political information, quality is reduced, and disinformation spreads. Research shows that too much information made possible by massive increases in online availability can have people make worse decisions and even vote against their preferences. Relying on social media for information can lead to distorted understandings and beliefs regarding political events, particularly given the prevalence of bad actors spreading disinformation to disrupt and cause conflict in democracies.

As youth are more connected online, addressing digital literacy gaps is one of the best ways to safeguard the spread of disinformation. The Government of Canada argues its best defense against interference in democratic processes is "an engaged and informed public." Research states that "media literacy training can be effective at reducing biases and improving peoples' ability to evaluate the truthfulness of information."

To tackle the digital age of disinformation, media literacy training is broadly implemented to improve online habits. Examples like Canada's *MediaSmarts* empower Canadians to critically assess digital media tailored for youth, parents, educators, and the public. It includes online resources for teachers to apply digital literacy resources in their classrooms, specific to the curriculum's grade levels. Multi-component investments made to support digital, news, and civic literacy programs like *Canada's Digital Citizenship Initiative* help citizens apply critical skills from online news reporting and editorials and be aware of exploitative activity and disinformation. Initiatives like these are simplified and user-friendly and could easily be taught in school settings; however, teachers in Canadian schools have considerable autonomy in deciding curriculum goals, leaving digital literacy and civic education widely fragmented in quality across the country.

Understanding socio-political context and how democratic governments function are crucial for youth to critically evaluate information online. Results from Australia's last two National Assessment Programs – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC), found that only 38 percent of year ten students had measured proficient understanding of democratic systems, government, and their obligations and rights as citizens. These results decreased by 44 percent since 2013. Similarly, in Canada, surveys indicate that youth do not consider conventional democratic duties, like voting, as a civic duty in the same way older generations do. In Europe, a study found that 16- to 26-year-olds from 27 national and ethnic groups chose "not to engage with conventional politics because they felt they had no voice, were ignored by politicians, and did not have the resources or the competencies needed to engage politically."

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Most democracies, including Australia and Canada, include civics classes in primary and secondary education. The problem may just be in how we, as educators and parents, teach youth the importance of being civically engaged. Civic literacy is not just school-led ‘civic education,’ “it used to be taught and fostered in families, places of worship, social groups, and workplaces” sources that are now fractured. “Social groups, community groups, and schools can be hesitant to teach civic literacy today for fear of being criticized as being too “political” or “biased.” As well as concern for creating divisions among members.

Parents play a role in the home life for instilling a sense of importance for future generations. Civic literacy is passed from generations, with parents modeling civic engagement by voting, discussing political and social events at home. Political socialization in early life “has powerful effects on the levels of civic literacy one has as an adult.” Studies have found “significant correlations between citizenship education, knowledge of democracy, and family involvement” in civic activities to youth that later are active participants in civic and political movements and show interest in social issues.

In civic education programs for youth, participation, dialogue, and experience in solving problems should be emphasized using their unique values, interests, and skills to become active citizens. Participatory and experiential methods for teaching politics and government could be stressed as an expansion of models that teach civic and foundational facts. Forms of participant-led engagement are becoming popular in higher education and organizations. For example, Democracy Talks, led by Ryerson University Democratic Engagement Exchange, supports community groups to host political discussions and community members to discuss what matters to them and what they want from their political systems. Models could also take after Democracy Innovation Hackathons, bringing together regional school groups for a day of brainstorming and sharing ideas to tackle local issues that youth are concerned about.

Lessons learned from the pandemic have taught us how digital technology can assist with learning. For example, Australia’s Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) delivers experiences in the form of exhibitions, events, learning programs, and digital activities to learn about Australian history and the underpinnings of its democracy. The virtual method allowed programming to continue during the pandemic offering a series of democracy podcasts and live-stream videos with downloadable educational activities.

With technology being a significant component of young people’s lives, a way to capture attention and curiosity could be led using gamification methods. Gamification seeks to bridge games with governance with the rationale that “games make engagement with said process fun” and allows for creative and innovative possibilities to be thought of in a “safe and inconsequential space of play.” Much research has been done on using gamification to engage citizens in local government decisions, like urban development and the resulting increase of enabling, engaging, and empowering citizens in policymaking decisions. Digitally enabled engagement with youth through gamification methods may have even more profound effects in positively impacting participation and interest in democratic governance.

If we want democratic values to sustain, we need to pay attention to how engaged our youth are. With the Internet being the source of information on socio-political content, the skills to critically evaluate information online need to be emphasized. Additionally, traditional learning methods of how governments and democratic societies function no longer instill civic engagement and empowerment. Finding participatory and student-led teaching methods can help youth realize their impact on democratic practices and reawaken their curiosity for being active citizens of their communities. The future of our democracies depends on our youth’s understanding and experiences with it.

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## About the author:

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