Online/Offline Communications Pedagogy:
YouTube and the Development of an Electronic Citizenry

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Abstract: This paper challenges existing theories of youth disengagement and demonstrates some of the ways that new media technologies may be re-defining popular conceptions of civic engagement and political identities. Drawing from cultural displacement theorists this paper argues that social networking sites like YouTube are a more appealing venue for political and civic action and demonstrate that young people are engaging in new, non-traditional ways. This paper suggests that communications pedagogy must re-conceptualize the use of social media platforms in higher education in order to exploit the potential they hold for fostering civic identities through innovative and culturally relevant usage in and outside the classroom. The author suggests a number of practical ways that YouTube can be incorporated as a pedagogical tool in communications curriculum that addresses and promotes civic-building activities and experiences such as participatory cultural production, discursive participation, and building social trust.

Over the past decade there has been a growing concern over young people's lack of interest in the political process, indicated by statistics that show 18-25 year olds do less voting, are declining in political memberships, have fewer political conversations, read fewer newspapers and are doing less things in groups than previous generations (e.g. Bennett, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, Larson, 2004). Reported declines in face-to-face interaction, local participation and interest in news and public affairs also contribute to this general cause for concern about society's perceived disengagement (Bennett, 2008). A myriad of statistics account for the depreciating sense of unity and importance of community reported by young people and adults alike (e.g. Bennett, 1998, 2008; Putnam, 2000). As a result, much research has been dedicated by both academics and the public sector to finding ways to re-engage youth in the political process.

While a number of social, cultural and economic factors have been blamed for youth disengagement, the role of mass media is often theorized as the largest contributor of all. Scholars across a number of fields – including political science, communications, sociology and psychology – "have speculated about the negative effects of mass media on civic life" (Keum et al., 2004, p. 369). Putnam (1995, 2000) effectively popularized the view of mass media's role in civic disengagement with his book *Bowling Alone,* where he contends that time displacement and the privatization of leisure created by

television and the Internet can be blamed for young people's failure to engage in communal activities. Conversely, some researchers argue that media technologies are not causing disengagement but fostering a new *kind* of engagement (Coleman, 2007; Loader, 2007). For instance, Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles (2006) argue that while activity within the public sphere may be dissipating, participation in "cyber spheres" have soared. Young people especially are spending an increasing amount of time with online communities and video games, often forging group associations within the digital realm. The highly interactive and communicative aspects of the Internet have some scholars pondering, therefore, what positive political affects may be possible from this shift in media consumption (Sharp, 2000; Zukin et al.,2006).

This paper thus aims to address the growing body of literature that rejects youth disengagement theories (e.g. Bennett, 1998; McChesney, 2004; Putnam 1995; 2000; Turow 1997) to demonstrate how new media technologies may be fostering non-traditional forms of civic engagement and political identities. Specifically, this paper looks at the role of the enormously popular website YouTube.com as a potential vehicle for youth civic engagement – or, at the very least, as a way to re-introduce young people to the notion of discursive participation. Beginning with a review of the literature on youth civic engagement, this paper establishes the groundwork for how young people engage with one another through technology in new ways. By taking a generative approach that challenges youth disengagement theories, this paper demonstrates how new media technologies may be capable of fostering civic engagement and political identities of a new kind. By combining literature in the field of media and civic engagement with perspectives in the field of media literacy, this paper offers a number of pedagogical tools and classroom activities that might work towards bridging the individualistic nature of new social media with collective or community processes. Specifically, the goal here is to introduce classroom activities that aim to exploit social media's potential as a vehicle for youth civic engagement that, at the very least, encourages students to position their "social selves" into larger social and cultural processes.

Defining Civic Engagement

Scholars have generally agreed that civic engagement is vital to a functioning democracy which explains why shifts in civic attitudes and behaviors of young people have warranted a great deal of attention (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Loader, 2007; Bennett, 2008). From a normative standpoint, the decline in civic engagement is often perceived as a depreciation of people's faith in democracy, and thus the relationship between civic engagement and democracy is typically unquestioned. As McCoy and Sully (2002) point out: "Implicit in every civic engagement process is a vision of how democracy and civic life ought to work" (p. 119). What scholars debate, therefore, are the *types* of processes and activities that constitute civic engagement.

As a normative concept, civic engagement is usually defined as involvement in politically-oriented activities associated with direct democracy such as voting, political associations and volunteering. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, civic engagement is defined as "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of

public concern" ("Definition of Civic Engagement," 2008). These actions may occur either locally or within the various institutions of a representative democracy. In this sense, engagement can take many forms – from individual volunteerism, to group associations, to direct political participation.

While some conceptualize civic engagement as political (e.g., McCoy & Sully, 2002), many scholars echo Flanagan's (personal communication, 2007) contention that "non-partisan acts happen in the context of activities that have little to do with electoral politics" (p. 1). The qualities learned in more conventional forms of civic engagement – such as voting, political protest, or community volunteerism – can be developed through participation in apolitical contexts, as well. For adults, Flanagan (2003) has shown that participation in extracurricular activities and community-based organizations as a child tends to be a positive predictor of civic engagement in adulthood. According to Flanagan, community-based organizations and institutions can foster "a sense of collective identity…which keeps young people out of trouble and sets them on a path towards life-long civic participation" (p. 257).

Levine (2008) extends the definition of civic engagement beyond even general community participation and into the production of culture, "at least insofar as cultural expression shapes norms and priorities" of its constituents (p. 121). Shaping national identity and self-image, he argues, is as equally a function of civic duty as the contribution to more functional and traditional government matters. Participatory cultural production is essential to cultural diversity – and thereby democracy – because it creates a space for deliberation. Levine suggests that the homogenous tendency of mass culture threatens liberty in that the top-down dissemination of culture weakens people's ability to produce and circulate their own ideas; thus, the act of cultural production is a collective expression of identity that in turn, reflects a national identity free from bureaucratic imposition.

The circulation of ideas necessary for the production of culture thereby requires good communication which civic engagement is perceived to both hone and foster (McCoy & Sully, 2002; Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004), According to McCoy and Sully, the importance of conversation to civic engagement "is why a growing number of civic engagement processes feature some form of public talk or conversation" (p. 118). The idea of "public talk or conversation" is closely linked with theories of deliberative democracy but can be best understood as what Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs call "discursive participation." Discursive participation "arguably provides the opportunity for individuals to develop and express their views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to understand and reach judgments about matters of public concern" (p. 319). The goal of discursive participation is that the deliberative process will enhance empathy between disparate groups and broaden the self-interests of those involved "through an egalitarian, open-minded and reciprocal process of reasoned argumentation" (quoting Mendelberg, p. 320). In turn, this type of public deliberation promotes the type of attitudes, values and trust necessary for a more engaged and active citizenry.

Just what exactly constitutes civic engagement, therefore, is largely subjective. It is both talk and direct action, political and non-political. Interestingly, most of the literature referenced thus far fails to operationalize civic engagement at all. Moreover, research on civic engagement often fails to distinguish itself from *political participation* despite the near-consensus that civic engagement does not necessarily have to be directly political. Borrowing their definition from Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), Zukin et al. (2006) define political engagement as, "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (p. 6). Voting, political campaigning or other types of direct participation typically make up the activities associated with political participation, and more definitively stratifies the level of activity amongst age cohorts (Zukin et al.*)*. Civic engagement, however, is defined by Zukin et al.as "organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others" (p. 7). Unlike political participation, the range of activities involved may be performed individually or collectively to facilitate change. Further, in terms of civic engagement the authors discovered that the rate of youth civic engagement is closely matched to that of elder populations. Thus, it is possible that youth civic engagement has not declined but has "spread to a wider variety of channels" (p. 3). Studies increasingly show that young people are active in civic society through volunteering, affiliating with social causes and political consumerism, where people voice their political opinions through the products they chose to buy (Selwyn, 2007).

Disaffected Citizens or Culturally Displaced?

Loader (2007) argues that discourse about political and civic disengagement can be categorized into two perspectives: the *disaffected citizen perspective* and *the cultural displacement perspective.* [1] Researchers who take the position of the disaffected citizen tend to emphasize the decline of direct participation of youth in politics and typically focus on the electoral process, formal institutions and political procedures. Central to this perspective is a critique of the depoliticizing effects that excessive media use, spectacular consumption (McAllister, 2007), and hyper-commercialism (McChesney, 2004) common to late capitalism have had on the voting public. While such theories are not invalid, those who seek to understand political apathy from the cultural displacement perspective instead aim to re-conceptualize what constitutes engagement, suggesting also that disengagement is largely tied to the fact that "traditional political activity no longer appears appropriate to address the concerns associated with contemporary youth culture" (Loader, p. 1-2). As a result, cultural displacement researchers are more willing to widen the definition of what constitutes civic and political participation.

Rather than measuring political engagement by voting numbers, civic engagement from the cultural displacement perspective encompasses "deinstitutionalized forms of political engagement which are enacted within networks and spaces characterized by loose social ties and informal social structures" (Loader, 2007, p. 3). Unlike traditional forms of political participation, interactions with (and across) new media technologies tend to be non-hierarchical, flexible, and less regulated than older forms of media (Spurgeon, 2008). They also tend to be highly individualistic and user-controlled. These descriptors

characterize nearly all of today's most popular media devices including cell phones, iPods, social networking sites, Blackberries, laptops, personalized news pages (i.e. the "daily me,"), digital video recorders, and, of course, YouTube. These technologies all offer a form of control and self-efficacy (if you know how to use them) unmatched by prior media technologies.

Feelings of control and self-efficacy are not typically the first descriptors young people attribute to the electoral process. Cultural displacement theorists like Loader (2007), Gerodimos and Ward (2007) have pointed out that the relatively disenfranchising, top-down nature of electoral politics does not coincide with the way new technologies have re-shaped the social worlds of young people. As Loader notes, "Parliamentary and congressional forums, voting booths and the restrictions of social-class based party allegiance contrast strongly with the self-expression induced communication spaces of *MySpace, MSN, Flickr* and mobile texting as a potential means to enable young people's political efficacy" (p. 2). The divergence from the sender-receiver models of the past may no longer appeal to generations used to engaging in an interactive, two-way space (Jenkins, 2006). Based on his 2007 study on youth participation in the reality show *Big Brother,* Coleman arguesthat the disempowering relationship of one-way models of communication accounts for one reason why young people report frustration political participation; while their opinions can be expressed freely, they do not necessarily feel their opinions are being heard (Coleman). In reality television, however, those who participate in the program experience an "obligation-free relationship…as entertained viewers, discriminating judges, interactive participants and empowered voters [and] signals a new kind of citizenship which combines the autonomy and flexibility of the audience within the collective decision-making of the traditional political public" (p. 170). Coleman's point is not to argue that reality television is socially progressive or beneficial to democracy but to urge politicians not to overlook the new participatory models emerging from popular culture. These new models converge "popular and political communicative styles [that] could have an invigorating effect upon democracy, releasing civic energies that have atrophied over the long years of separation" (p. 167). It is a much different model than politics that, when constructed by the news, becomes more like a spectator sport than a welcomed participatory process (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2007).

Rationale and Theoretical Framework

This paper suggests ways that communications pedagogy might promote the civic and political potential of social media. If young people are currently using online media in a manner that mirrors the qualities inherent to offline forms of civic *and* political engagement then it seems imperative that higher education facilitate such practices within the classroom, as well. In selecting an online social media site for analysis, I wanted to isolate a part of the interactive media phenomenon that might best represent the application of civic values in a non-partisan way. Following Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles's (2006) assessment of the ways new networking technologies can potentially foster forms of civic engagement amongst users, this research looks specifically at the pedagogical possibilities of Internet video-sharing site, YouTube.com. This research is

aimed specifically at communications instructors who want to, or already do, utilize social media in the classroom in a way that can also exploit the political and civic-building potential of such technologies. While social media sites other than YouTube may offer similar opportunities for engagement, this research limits its scope to YouTube for practical purposes; however, the site's popularity, multi-functionality, collaborative capabilities, accessibility, and familiarity amongst young people are other reasons for focusing on this particular site.[2]

YouTube's interactive features provides an essential forum to engage in civic processes as it offers an avenue for participatory cultural production (Levine, 2008), deliberative talk (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacob, 2004), and a space to be heard and taken seriously (Coleman, 2007; Flanagan, 2003; Wray &Flanagan, 2007). Additionally, the collaborative nature of video production also parallels the type of group negotiations and collective participation inherent to most definitions of civic engagement (e.g. Zukin et al.,2006). Since engagement tends to be based upon inclusive, meaningful connections amongst citizens, civic participation requires characteristics tangential to political action that include things like giving participants a voice, a sense of agency and a space to effect identifiable change. As Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles (2006) assert, the web is capable of developing the appropriate values, behaviors and perspectives for a civic identity "by encouraging young people to articulate their views and positions, by creating the expectation of talking back and debate, and by welcoming youth initiative in responding to problems" (p. 140).

In exploring the implications that YouTube may have for communications curriculum, this research is grounded within the theoretical framework that perceives young people not as disaffected citizens but as "culturally displaced" (Loader, 2007). In other words, this research is grounded in the belief that young people are not disengaged from civic and political processes so much as their engagement occurs in new and non-traditional ways. Therefore, this research offers a number of examples for utilizing YouTube as a pedagogical tool in the classroom with the objective of engaging students in collaborative projects that promotes opportunities for online collective participation. The goal is not only to demonstrate how YouTube can enhance lesson plans for communications studies curricula, but to do so in a way that simultaneously fosters the attitudes, values, behaviors and qualities foundational to civic identities and cultures.

Integrating social media into communications pedagogy requires a student-centered learning environment in order to avoid an antagonistic or "protectionist" dynamic between instructor and student. In doing so, instructors should move away from a "deficit model" approach to education (Desmond, 2001), where the primary rationale for intervention is to assuage the negative "direct" effects that media have on a young person, towards a model that accounts for the pleasure of media consumption.[3] From an "acquisition model" of learning (Desmond), students are exposed to the tools with which they can produce and engage with media in a way that does not alienate or embarrass them for their pleasure. Thus, instructors must work to suspend judgment about the quality or value of a text uploaded, produced or linked by a student in order for deliberative talk about the video clip to manifest in a functional and progressive way. For

Masterman (2001), such restraint is essential because drawing conclusions about a text's cultural worth can impede the complexity of meanings and issues from becoming apparent; stifling discursive participation can suppress the political potential of productive "talk" (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004). Thus, whereby the dichotomization of YouTube videos (or any popular media content) into "good" or "bad" may be relevant to a class discussion, such discussions should be framed in a way that allows young people to come to such conclusions on their own. Therefore, incorporating new media into communications curriculum requires that both students and instructors acknowledge their enjoyments but interrogate them accordingly. In other words, we must always ask ourselves why we find media texts, like online video, pleasurable. Furthermore, as instructors we must tread the fine line between not assuming we know the reasons why students like the things they do and recognizing that in their desire for any text both student and instructor inevitably take part in particular economies.

Implications for Communications Pedagogy and Curriculum Development

Communication pedagogy can incorporate participatory cultural production and the interactive capabilities of YouTube with the above goals in mind in a number of ways outlined below. However, because communications as a field of inquiry encompasses a vast array of subject matter from any number of ontological and epistemological frameworks (and often meaning different things for different universities), these recommendations are meant to be appropriated as general teaching strategies within various communications subfields (Lederman, 1992). In other words, activities should be modified to "fit" the various tracts within communications – be it journalism, media studies, film studies, communications sciences, international, organizational or interpersonal communication, etc.

Class "Channel" and Playlists

A simple way to encourage collective participation via YouTube is through a course "Channel" that enables contribution through its openness and accessibility. Setting up a YouTube Channel should be specific not just to the course, to but the class section within the course; this encourages students to shape the Channel and its playlists in a manner complimentary to the dynamic experienced offline during actual class time, rather than comparing or competing with other course sections that share a different set of on- and offline relationships. Creating a course YouTube Channel is free and open to anyone over the age of 18 but for practical reasons the instructors should facilitate the set-up of the class YouTube Channel in order to ensure its proper maintenance until students become actively involved in its co-construction.

Setting up the Channel requires opening a YouTube account, an activity that can be collectively determined by student input during class time (pending accessibility to a wired classroom). Students' voices should be present in the discussion about user name, password, and shaping the parameters for participation so they recognize this is, indeed, collectively "theirs" and not "yours." Student voices should also be present in the discussion and construction of a YouTube "Code of Conduct," particularly as it pertains

to what other channels, content, or playlists might be added as "Friends" or "Favorites." Failing to set boundaries leaves the activity open to abuse of user privilege and can have negative repercussions for how seriously students take their participation or view the effectiveness of the overall project. For example, boundaries about what constitutes viable content, or determining what justifications must be made for uploading or linking content may be central to this discussion. While linking funny but irrelevant videos about cute cats or laughing babies may be relevant in some instances, such choices should be justified in order to legitimize the project's larger objective of creating a space for participatory cultural production and engagement. Including students as part of this discussion allows them to set their own agenda for engagement while giving them a sense of ownership over the project. Moreover, allowing students to set boundaries and partake in decision-making processes from the beginning can also promote a student-centered dynamic while clarifying the expectations and objectives established and designed by the instructor.

Uploading content relevant to the course on YouTube provides a means for co-constructing knowledge amongst peers in the context of their everyday lived experiences (Choy & Ng, 2007). Since the Channel allows students to upload content they deem relevant to both the course and their lives, it also provides a social space to engage in discussion with others. These affordances have the potential to extend dialogical learning processes into the everyday by providing immediate access to class discussions at all times. For example, the ability to hyperlink, share content, embed or link videos and even other social networking accounts to the course's YouTube Channel provides unprecedented access to knowledge building in and out of the classroom.

Even where discussion or collaboration does not occur immediately online, the Channel still offers a portal for collecting and assembling material relevant to course topics that can later be discussed in the classroom. While such activities require a more flexible syllabus and lesson plan design, I have found that often some of the semester's most stimulating discussions were prompted by a review of videos collected by students that week. Even showing the videos five minutes prior to the beginning of class and then posing the simple question, "How is this video relevant to this week's readings or discussion?" inspires students to pragmatically articulate their own feelings and understandings of course material. Not only do such video postings and deliberation *about* the videos yield a continuity of experiences (Dewey, 1938), these activities also blur the boundary between online and offline / in-class and out-of-class learning environments.

As a socio-cultural form of collective knowledge building, a YouTube class Channel offers a means by which "students take control of their own learning, make connections with peers and produce new insights and ideas through inquiry" (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007, p. 668). Further, by adapting the site as a pedagogical tool, students are encouraged to approach their educational and personal life-worlds dialogically so that both experiences are always informing the other. As it pertains to building civic identities, the collaborative production of collective knowledge inspires not only deliberative talk with potential towards the political, but potentially inspires the creation of affective ties and

trust ([Uslander, 2006](#)) within a classroom community. By treating the class Channel as a collaborative network, students should be encouraged by instructors through class discussion and feedback to recognize their role in co-constructing knowledge. Further, taking time to interrogate the accumulated content on the class Channel may also yield considerable insight into what *kind* of knowledge has been constructed, as well as what this knowledge says about the class's learning processes and developmental trajectory.

Video Blogs (Vlogs)

Another way that the affordances of YouTube can be appropriated by communications pedagogy is through the production and distribution of video blogs ("vlogs"). Each week individuals or groups can create vlogs that recount something(s) they learned, noticed, or encountered relevant to course readings or discussions. In order to incorporate vlogs into class curriculum, students will need to access a standard digital camera with a video function, a digital video recorder or a cheap webcam that can be hooked up to a personal computer. While many universities boast computer labs with high-end editing technology, almost all standard computers contain free editing software such as Windows MovieMaker (for PCs) and iMovie (Macs) which even the most elementary user can access and learn in relatively little time.

Vlogs may be done individually or in groups, can be as creative as students want to make them, and can be uploaded to the class YouTube Channel for collective viewing and discussion. Once uploaded, users have the option of marking them "private" so they cannot be viewed by member outside of class. Sharing personal vlogs might be difficult for some students, so keeping their work private should always remain an option; however, public sharing of vlogs can also serve the purposes of building social trust – a value largely understood as fundamental to democracy and an antecedent for participation civic life ([Putnam, 2000](#); [Uslander, 2006](#)).

Why vlog? For one, establishing a personal video log is away of journaling experiences with course material in a way that students may be more likely to revisit or thoughtfully consider than traditional hand-written reflections. Two, it is a way of engaging students dialogically about performing identity. How is it different, for instance, to talk about experiences with a faceless audience than to an audience you know (or the "all powerful audience of one" – the instructor)? How does the presentation of self change accordingly? Further, how does one's identity performance change when the student starts receiving reactions (or interactions) from members of YouTube's online community or the class itself? All of these issues can be bridged to topics commonly discussed in most communications courses such as news writing, cultural theories of representation, or the political economy of media. To unpack these questions, students could be asked at times to address their vlogs for a specific intended audience or to vlog on the same subject more than once with a different audience in mind each time. Requiring students to conceptualize their vlogs in this way asks them to think about how "truth" or the performance of self changes when performing for different types of people. (For instance, who am I when performing for my parents versus my friends? An international audience versus a local audience? Adults versus children?). Questions about

the construction of media messages are not only an important part of communications pedagogy, but "exploring power dynamics around message production and message consumption creates opportunities for meaningful social and political action" (Hobbs, 1998, p. 22). Instructors should therefore act as a guide to learning by encouraging students to interrogate their own meaning making processes, and to unpack just how those processes relate to student understanding of the larger social and cultural contexts in which communication studies is grounded.

Utilizing vlogs towards a civic-building purpose requires that students investigate the way their own values and beliefs impact their understanding of principles in communication. In other words, how does the course's overall subject matter, or that week's lesson, coincide with the student's personal values and belief systems? How can students reconcile their views with this new information or perspective, or express their opinions in more creative, interesting, and socially relevant ways? Again, vlogging responses to these types of questions may be particularly revealing for topics in journalism, the sociology of newsrooms, communication and gender, effects studies and other areas of communication research. Furthermore, asking students to structure their vlog responses around a loose set of pre-determined questions also provides enough guidance to make the exercise effective while still permitting students the freedom to express themselves. In this sense, asking students to negotiate structure and agency frames – without determining – their use of social media in a manner not unlike traditional offline democratic processes (Livingstone, 2008). Discussing and commenting on vlogs through the portal of the class's YouTube Channel therefore draws students into a discourse about message construction that may not have been as notable during a standard lecture's question-and-answer session. How the student came to his or her vlog response becomes just as important to the debate as the response itself.

Group Collaboration

The collaborative production of user-generated video content is another means by which social media can be exploited for its potential towards the political. As already mentioned, the opportunity to exercise rights, to fulfill obligations to a group, and to participate in a space where a student's voice is taken seriously has been shown to promote the attitudes and values necessary to the developmental roots of participatory citizen engagement (Wray & Flanagan, 2005). With the same technology required for vlogging, students also collaborate to produce video projects in place of written essays and exams whereby part of the assignment is to deliberate or engage with other groups about their own video essays. YouTube is also an online community where users can comment on videos, provide feedback, share playlists and subscribe to specific user accounts. Since the process remains interactive even after videos are uploaded onto the YouTube server, they are constantly subject to praise, heckling, or outright insults by other users for as long as the video remains online. These affordances provide a rich context for assessing how a young person responds to and deals with criticism, conflicting opinions and even the ability to *trust* others not unlike the experiences people encounter in more traditional forms of community and civic spaces.

Constructive Criticism and Discursive Participation

Deliberative "talk" is largely understood as a part of civic engagement, and "talk" of nearly any kind yields a potential towards the political (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004). YouTube thus enables users to create social networks and engage in deliberative talk around any number of issues. The "tags" assigned to uploaded videos on YouTube (i.e. adding keywords to the video that characterize its content), for instance, do a good job of linking different content to one another to form a web of interrelated ideas, programs or material. As Cheng, Dale and Liu (2007) note, this social networking feature enables communities and groups to form a more organic way of organizing and communicating with one another. As online content becomes less independent from other content that deals with the relatively same issues, users become less isolated as well; embedding most YouTube videos into other social media sites expands student classroom activity into other online spheres – inviting anyone to participate in the classroom dialogue. YouTube's potential to expand discourse is further facilitated by the thumbnails of "related videos" that appear at the bottom of the video screen at the end of each clip. For example, after watching news coverage of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle on YouTube a series of related videos about the WTO – or protesting in general – appear beside the clip just watched. Thus, the footage is no longer viewed as an isolated incident, which may be especially relevant for a young user unaware of the WTO ornotions of protest in general. Also within each video is a link to "video responses," where users have uploaded videos specifically in response to a particular clip. Many responses include commentary, counter-arguments, alternative perspectives or further evidence that may support or refute subject matter in the original clip. This sort of webbed network not only provides an opportunity for young people to encounter multiple perspectives and discourses at once but also triangulates their experience in unprecedented ways through the interconnectedness social media affords. Further, the option of creating a video *response* to any video on YouTube facilitates direct engagement with the material in unmatched ways, as well. Thus, the highly interactive nature of YouTube can facilitate civic participation through the very features that make the site so appealing to users in the first place. Moreover, creating video responses to pre-existing YouTube videos is yet another way by which students can utilize vlogging as a form of discursive participation that also regards YouTube as a democratic space.

Yet another way of participating in the discussions taking place on YouTube is through the user feedback function. Underneath each video uploaded onto YouTube is a space where viewers can leave comments or feedback about what they just watched. While this function is optional (channel managers can disable the ability for others to leave comments if desired), most users tend to leave the comment boxes active. This feature is perhaps one of the most obvious ways that YouTube can parallel the more obvious aspects of civic engagement, especially as it pertains to tolerance of others' opinions and participation (Sullivan & Transue, 1999). However, while YouTube's policies have some general guidelines regarding "appropriate" interaction, user feedback can range anywhere from outright insults, inappropriate accusations or hate speech, to thoughtful, generous, contemplative comments or constructive criticism. As Lange (2007) notes, "Severe feedback at extremely early stages risks choking off experimentation, learning, and

personal expression of genres that are seen as degraded forms of true art" ([p.25](#)). Yet on the other hand, Lange argues that setting rules or instituting moderators to reduce the hateful behavior of others on YouTube may be an equally negative proposition, since a significant part of the community's discourse thrives on the right to free speech. Setting the boundaries for participation within the class's "Code of Conduct" may be one solution for countering such abuse. On the other hand, unwarranted or inappropriate criticism from other YouTube users offers an opportunity to promote deliberative forms of democratic communication and thus provides an opportunity for instructors to once again bridge communications pedagogy with principles foundational to civic engagement and processes of political participation.

Conclusion

This research aims to present ways that communications pedagogy can appropriate the affordances of social media to introduce students to the types of collaborative and collective processes inherent to many forms of offline traditional civic activities. A review of the civic engagement literature demonstrates that many scholars feel the qualities necessary to a civic identity can be developed and promoted through participation in apolitical contexts found online ([Coleman, 2007](#); [Loader, 2007](#)), through participatory cultural production ([Levine, 2008](#)), and through discursive participation ([Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacob, 2004](#)). This paper argues that YouTube.com can be a valuable pedagogical tool for communications instructors who want to exploit social media not as a means of disengaging youth but as a means to reengage them in civic and politically oriented processes on their own terms. While this is not to undermine the importance of traditional electoral or partisan politics, this paper does contend that perhaps the "disaffected citizen" perspective is a bit short-sighted in its characterization of contemporary youth populations. By narrowly restricting the concept of engagement to conventional political processes, communications pedagogy is complicit in society's failure to acknowledge that other forms of participatory culture and engagement may still offer the same set of skills, values, traits, beliefs and experiences necessary for the development of civic and political identities.

Social media like YouTube can therefore be incorporated in the study of communications through practical and experiential learning that includes collective knowledge building through content accumulation, vlogging, video production, and discursive participation. Through these activities students are introduced to many of the same processes and interactions experienced in offline and traditional forms of civic and political engagement. Further, the fluidity of the spatial and temporal boundaries in cyberspace equips active participants with new resources for interacting and participating in local, national and global discourses; with the proper guidance, students can learn to articulate where they themselves are located within such discourses. Getting students to think about themselves *in relation to* a larger social and cultural structures aims to encourage the participation in spaces where people are communicating across borders (and borders as defined by nation, race, gender, class, etc.), which can have enormous implications for fostering civic identities.

Notes

1 Although Loader acknowledges that a continuum might be more accurate, he limits his discussion to these dichotomous measure.

2 According to the web trafficking database Alexa (www.alexa.com), YouTube accounts for approximately 17-19% of all *global* Internet traffic, with a nearly 20% growth rate each month (Cheng, Dale & Liu, 2007). It is currently the fourth most frequently visited site on the Internet (www.alexa.com). As a site that contains over forty million user-uploaded videos and twenty million visitors each month.

3 Noting, of course, that sites of pleasure are always constructed.

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