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FORMATIVE EVENTS, NETWORKED SPACES, AND THE POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION OF YOUTH

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Introduction and theoretical framework

The 2016 US elections brought into sharp relief the question of citizens' relationship towards politics, with a particular concern for young people. While much scholarship over the past two decades has been concerned about the disengagement of youth from political life (e.g. Zukin et al., 2006), other scholars have been pointing at a revitalization of civic life, one occurring in unexpected places, such as online communities where young people come together around shared interests and passions (e.g. Bennett, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2016). This scholarship emphasizes new ways in which young people enact voice and agency in networked spaces, ones characterized by sociability, creativity, and self-expression.

While there has been optimism about new avenues for youth to find their way into civic life, the more worrying tendency this research has pointed at is a reluctance of many young people to engage in traditional, partisan politics, which is perceived as dirty, divisive and out-of-touch (Jenkins et al., 2016). This article engages this divide, to examine to what extent young people's participation in networked spaces can also extend into constructing a productive relationship with traditional politics.

We focus on youth because they are avid participants in online networked spaces (boyd, 2014), and because youth is a time period of particular significance for political socialization (Youniss et al., 2002). Formative political events that occur during one's youth often carry particular significance, and may come to shape one's political perceptions for life (Mannheim, 1952).

We thus examine youth responses to the results of the 2016 US elections, as a potential formative political event. We look at these responses across a variety of networked spaces catering to youth—spaces that are not devoted to politics, but rather revolve around shared interests and passions. If the 2016 US elections are a potential formative event for young

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people that may shape their connection to traditional politics, we ask how they experienced this event on networked spaces, and what kind of relationship to traditional politics ensues.

Method

We examine youth participation in three networked spaces: KnowYourMeme (a site dedicated to meme production), Pixilart (an online pixel drawing site), and Scratch (a platform for programming games and animations). These cases represent networked spaces that cater to youth, facilitate creative expression, and are not explicitly civic / political. On each of these sites, we examined youth activity during two weeks following the 2016 US elections (November 8-22). To focus on *election-related* content, we used certain search words (e.g. election, Trump, Donald, Clinton, Hillary). We examined both artifacts--memes, games, art--and the discourses around them, in comments and reactions. In our analysis of the material, we used Grounded Theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) to identify recurring concepts, and coalesce these into characterizing themes. Here we focus on one central theme that characterizes each case study in terms of the relationship youth construct with traditional politics.

Findings

KnowYourMeme: Spectatorship, skepticism and cynicism in relation to election results

On KnowYourMeme, young people responded to the election results cynically. The elections were experienced in a form of spectatorship, reflecting a skepticism towards the political process, and even towards the role that memes played in the elections.

The election of Trump was interpreted by some users--to varying levels of seriousness--as having been caused by the memes themselves:

“WE’RE ACTUALLY GONNA MEME HIM INTO THE WHITE HOUSE NOW HOLY SHIT”
(Justanime, November 9)

“She [Clinton] just got memed out of Pennsylvania” (TheLegendOfMeth, Nov 9)

It’s unclear to what extent KnowYourMeme users are referring to the power of memes to elect the US president jokingly. Elsewhere, online-savvy Trump supporters have expressed the belief that it is their production and spread of online memes that has won Trump the election (Chace, 2017). Alongside this belief, other users critiqued the election campaign as having been focused too much on memes—the notion of some KnowYourMeme users that “the meme has gone too far”.

Pixilart: Emotional responses to politics and an acknowledgement of youth’s limited agency

The Pixilart case study offered a safe space for young people to express emotionally-loaded responses to the election results, which included much concern about implications for minorities. EeyoreIsReal writes:

Yeah, I definitely cried a bit. (...) Basically this election ended up justifying racism, discrimination of gay people and sexual abuse. There are some white boys at my school who’re now harassing hispanics and muslims (...) This is so f’ing screwed up.

While youth passionately discuss the elections on Pixilart, many voices underscore youth's limited agency, and encourage a somewhat passive acceptance of the new status quo. Fresno (17) underscores this when she writes:

For those of you saying that they're going to Canada or something - you aren't going anywhere: you have school tomorrow.

Scratch: Creating media as catharsis vs. fear of speaking out

Our Scratch case study showed youth creating and sharing media as a creative outlet for political frustrations, yet at the same time expressing worry and concern about the potential consequences of political critique.

Many of the games that young Scratch participants created in the aftermath of the election have a strong cathartic nature, including numerous games where players physically assault Trump's avatar. At the same time, some of the comments on election-related games show significant fear and uncertainty regarding the potential consequences of criticizing Trump, e.g.:

Cherry078: if i can suggest something, make Trump blow up when he touches the cement border (I hope Trump doesn't see that I wrote this)

Responses by peers on the site don't mitigate these concerns but rather further recommend caution and suggest that Trump might punish dissenters. This serves to exacerbate youth concerns about political expression online.

Discussion: Youth Online Political Socialization around the 2016 US elections

In addition to the political socialization factors of schools, family, and community organizations (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin & Keeter, 2003), networked spaces offer young people outlets that, particularly during prominent political events, can also become loci for political socialization. These spaces are important for young people to express their hopes, fears and frustrations with their peers, and to do so while using various preferred modes of expression. But they can also be places where political cynicism, fear or despair can be amplified. This fear or uncertainty might also lead youth to self-censor, and we have seen examples of posted political content that was removed in the weeks after the elections. A fear of speaking out has significant implications for youth political socialization. These findings underscore the importance of listening to young people where they're at, but also of civic education programs that take into account the preferred modes of expression and participation of young people (see Jenkins et al., 2006).

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