CIVIC MEDIA: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF ITS RELEVANCE

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In 2007, Henry Jenkins wrote on the occasion of the founding of the Center for Future Civic Media at MIT, that civic media refers to "any use of any medium which fosters or enhances civic engagement." His intentionally broad definition was meant to expand the term from traditional conceptions of civics such as political news, town halls and voting booths to online advocacy, fan culture and public performance. He argued that civic engagement is more than just actions taken; it is inclusive of and formed by the rituals associated with those actions. So, to understand civic media, Jenkins argues, we need to understand the "mechanisms associated with that 'structure of feeling' of belonging to a community and working together to insure its long term viability" (2007). The experience of working together with other people for common purpose is at the core of what it means to be civic, according to Jenkins, and the tools, mechanisms and discourses in which that takes place, is civic media.

While Jenkins does not specifically use the term, he is articulating a specific "community of practice," which Lave and Wenger (1991) define as "an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge" and one "that implies participation in an activity system about which participants share understanding concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities (p. 122)." The concept of communities of practice has been used to describe all variations of online (Rheingold, 1993) or offline groupings (Brody, 2012), whether or not the outcome of the group's shared understanding is explicitly "civic," which can be defined as an external goal that has benefit beyond one's personal or intimate sphere. If the definition of community is a loosely organized group of people that share understanding, or as Benedict Anderson argues, can imagine the whole of which they are a part (Anderson, 1983), then the civic framework is not descriptive of a community, but rather of the *potential outcomes of acting within it*. Those civic outcomes can be either internal to the community of practice or external to it—i.e. a group of farm workers in California starting a Facebook group to protest their own working conditions or a middle class high school student in Germany using the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag on Twitter to draw attention to the activities of the terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria. What binds these two practices together is

not the specificity of outcomes—social justice, democracy, human rights—but the social practices taken to achieve them. Civic outcomes do not represent their realization, but a deliberate movement towards their potential (1993). A civic community of practice, then, is a group of people who imagine themselves as being connected, not through achieving, but through striving for a civic outcome. And civic media are the tools and representational technologies that facilitate those communities of practice.

In this sense, civic media is not a genre, but a framework for communities of practice that employ media for civic outcomes. Still, it is worth asking why this designation is important and how it might be different than other communities of practice that form around media that is instrumentalized for social impact. Is it any different than political media, neighborhood media, educational media, etc.? To answer this question, it is important to understand the context in which the term took shape. The Center for Future Civic Media was founded at a time when many scholars and pundits were reflecting on the negative impact of the media on civic engagement. In Robert Putnam's influential book *Bowling Alone*, he notes the decline in voter turnout and public meeting attendance in the United States (Putnam, 1995). Notably, he makes specific reference to television, arguing that the medium perpetuated civic decline through the facilitation of public gathering without physical co-presence; television enabled a bypassing of civic infrastructure including town halls, front porches, and bowling leagues. This argument was consistent with media scholars such as Joshua Meyrowitz who, a decade earlier, wrote of television's role in decentralizing place in social and civic life (Meyrowitz, 1985). The general premise was that television became a kind of civic prosthesis, displacing the need for the physical co-presence most recognizable as civic engagement. In many ways, social media added to this anxiety—while its connective capacity was evident, the ease in which people could connect across space and time further challenged appearances of civic life. People no longer needed to gather in the town square, if they could coordinate on Facebook. They no longer needed to march on Main Street if they could retweet something and advocate online. This tension between civic and media was common sense, one that was given a shot of reinforcement by Malcolm Gladwell's 2010 *New Yorker* article, where he criticizes the role of social media in political activism and claims, because of the placelessness of digital social networks, that "we seem to have forgotten what activism is" (2012).

The sociologist Barry Wellman provides an important counterpoint to this criticism. As a scholar of social networks prior to the rise of social media, Wellman asked how new technology was changing the way that people associated with each other. He introduced the concept of the networked individual, which suggests that people are less likely to limit their group associations because of physical proximity; online they could seamlessly and flexibly move between groups (B. Wellman et al., 2003; Barry Wellman, 2002). The concept of the networked individual influenced a large amount of scholarship in areas such as mobile media (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011), activism (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010), social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011) and civic engagement (Gil de Zuñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), all areas that sought to explore the role of proximity and formal institutions in the formation of social networks. The placelessness lamented by Meyrowitz, Putnam, and Gladwell was a quality of everyday life in Wellman's formulation. Media was not in conflict with civic life, but was constitutive of its structure.

The term "civic media" emerged within a polarized context in which can be seen the traces of two contradictory assumptions: 1) all media are civic (media define the structures of social interaction) and 2) all media are the antithesis of civic (media detract from the communities and the public institutions that comprise democracy). The founding of a "Center for *Future* Civic Media" (the "future" has since been dropped), was formulated around these assumptions, in that it captured the inevitability of a civic framework of the media, while simultaneously positioning technology as a possible future intervention to solve civic ills. In 2007, prior to the Twitter Revolution or the Arab Spring and other pro-democracy movements triggered or facilitated by social media, there was little context for imagining these possibilities outside of government services and political campaigns. The term civic media carved out a possibility space, a way of imagining a future of technology that was pro-social and for public benefit.

But why does the designation of a *civic* media matter in 2016? Certainly, the novelty of the civic application of media and the political tensions in which that novelty existed is the justification for naming the phenomenon in 2007. But we would not claim that that novelty persists today. In fact, we believe that the term civic media has very different connotations, but remains important. Unlike in 2007, there is widespread recognition that online spaces hold considerable potential for civic life (NY TIMES citation), and in fact they are central to institutional and political transformations (A Smith, 2010; Aaron Smith, 2009). The possibility space of civic media has become normalized in certain sectors, as the discourse surrounding civic or government technology demonstrates, and reduced to a set of assumptions about the composition of tools. That government offices are routinely developing civic technology departments demonstrates a mainstreaming of the civic potential of digital technologies (Open Plans, 2012). *No longer struggling for attention, civic media is now struggling for differentiation*; the danger is in the term ossifying to mean very specific things, in its reduction to the instrumental functionality of tools—i.e. digital tools can increase efficiency or scale. The work of civic media now is to combat its success, to identify a space of criticality as well as instrumentality, which reconstructs a possibility space beyond the normalizing value of the term.

This book emerges nearly ten years after the term civic media was coined, but at a time when its appropriation and function appear more significant than ever. From the widespread use of social media to aid in campaigns and democratic movements throughout the world, to debates over the public's right to data or the individual's right to protect their data from public use, to government's design and deployment of digital tools, the umbrella of civic media has widened. As a result, there is increased urgency in establishing a field of study and practice that can accommodate some organizing questions: How do mediated communities form and maintain themselves? How do people actually interact with tools or systems, hi-tech or lo-tech, meant to facilitate community connection or public benefit? What are the impacts of these mediated practices on sense of community and citizenship? And what are the connective practices, competencies, and critical discourses that define emerging practices with civic media? These questions strategically counteract the functionalist paradigm of applied civic technologies emerging across domains, wherein technological solutions dominate discourse. This book is meant to provide an example-rich, conceptual framework from which to question the assumptions of technological determinism and

solutionism (Morozov, 2013) and to bring together scholarly discourses across disciplines to develop that space of critical thinking and making that happens at the intersection of civic and media.

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