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Reflections on YouTube as a Site for Civic Engagement and Learning

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Abstract

This paper is based on a public lecture held at Soka University in Tokyo, on June 6 th, 2018. It explores some of the literature and my insights around young people's usage of social media platforms and YouTube specifically for civic engagement and learning. First, I address the prevalence of social media in Canada and Japan, and explore some concerns that arise around the relationships between technology and youth. I introduce concepts like civic engagement and participatory cultures to examine the relationships between their consumption and production of social media texts- on YouTube particularly- with online political participation and learning. I end this paper with my thoughts on the importance of YouTube media education for critical pedagogy. This paper aims to motivate educators to recognize the important political and educational role that YouTube plays in the lives of modern youth, and to critically explore this platform with their students.

The 21st century has shaped a new generation of young people unlike any of the previous ones. Unprecedented access to mobile and online technologies enable youth to access platforms and tools that offer creative and simple ways to communicate across the global stage and produce their own media. Many young people are using their online platforms and social networks to advocate for theirs or others' rights through hashtags, blogs, vlogs, and shared posts. The #MeToo movement exemplifies this application of technology, with large numbers of people including youth turning to Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook to bring attention to their experiences with sexual violence. Youth media production for social justice inspired my PhD research, which explores youth production of YouTube videos to raise awareness about sexual violence topics.

The following paper draws from the literature and thinking that informs my PhD research to explore how youth use social media, and YouTube in particular, for learning and civic engagement. My work acknowledges concerns around youth participation in online spaces, while also drawing attention to the positive ways in which they become involved in participatory politics and awareness-raising through digital platforms. I focus on YouTube, a popular media-sharing site that garners millions of young viewers and producers worldwide, and a well-known tool for youth self-expression. The paper ends with reflections on the importance of teachers acknowledging, learning from, and improving youth participation on spaces like YouTube. I argue that educators should critically engage with this platform and its complexities to ensure that young people thoughtfully consume YouTube media and produce their own transformative media.

Context: Youth and media usage

In both Japanese and North American contexts, we find young people are avid consumers and producers of digital media. Robb, Bay, and Vennegaard (2017) note that Japan teenagers devote approximately 4 hours a day using mobile devices, whether they are tablets, or cell phones. Of this time, the report suggests that youth spend approximately 42 minutes on social media sites, and 44 minutes are dedicated to watching videos. While 13 to 15 years olds spend less time on their devices- about 3 hours and a half- older teens in high school use their mobile devices for up to 5 hours. The GSMA and the Mobile Society Research Institute report published in 2015, which examines compares 7 European countries with Japan, found that of the most popular uses of the Internet, watching video was rated at 88% and studying at 77%.

The time and usage of social media in Japan reflects in many ways the situation in North America. The Statistics Canada 2016 General Social Survey (Canadians at Work and Home) reported that most Canadians between the ages of 15 and 24, and 25 and 34, reported using the Internet daily. The 2015 Media and Technology Habits of Canadian Youth Survey further revealed that 63% of Canadian children (outside Quebec) between 9 and 18 use smartphones daily, with 53 and 47% using a laptop and tablet respectively (Shaw Rocket Fund, 2015). Social media use is popular, evidently, amongst North American youth, as is video streaming. CIRA (2016) notes that, "Canadians are big viewers of online video, with a quarter of all users streaming one-two hours per day."

Evidently, as was the case with television and video games in the last few decades, social

media and technology use amongst young people has sparked debates around health and safety. The Internet is a contentious space, which leads to some worries around the safety of children and youth in digital spaces. For example, in recent years, cases of cyberbullying have attracted the international attention of the public and scholars, spurring dialogue around the ways young people use of digital spaces and technology to bully their peers. While we know that the Internet is a site where positive types of socialization can take place, digital and technological platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Line also facilitate cyberbullying (Media Smarts). This can take the shape of harmful messages, false rumors, photo-shopped images, and more. A Canadian study on cyberbullying and cyberstalking found that, "Nearly one in five Internet users aged 15 to 29 reported having been cyberbullied or cyberstalked." (Statistics Canada, 2016) Youth in Japan also encounter large amounts of cyberbullying in schools, with over 8,787 cases reported in 2013 (Murai, 2015). Similar to cyberbullying is the popular trolling trend. Trolls are individuals who like to cause to trouble in online spaces. These trolls may use their own websites to post their content, travel through online games, or participate in public comment feeds. Coleman (2012) writes, "Trolls value pranking and offensiveness for the pleasure it affords." (p.112) Both cyberbullying and trolling can cause distress, and are just some of the many forms of technology-facilitated violence that Internet users face.

There are also concerns around youth exposure to the misrepresentation of facts, or false information, which prevails online. In an era where "fake news" has become a prominent topic of conversation, it is instrumental that Internet consumers critique news stories, media, and propaganda that come from mass media outlets, as well as their friends' Facebook posts or their favorite blogger's video. Michela Del Vicario, Bessi, Zollo, Petroni, Scala, Caldarelli, Stanley and Quattrociocchi (2016) write:

> Digital misinformation has become so pervasive in online social media that it has been listed by the WEF as one of the main threats to human society. Whether a news item, either substantiated or not, is accepted as true by a user may be strongly affected by social norms or by how much it coheres with the user's system of beliefs. (p.57)

The argument that online spaces can be breeding grounds for violence and harm, and that misinformation online exists, are only some examples of the rhetoric around youth and their relationships with media and technology. Evidently, they affect how parents, educators and researchers envision media education and the inclusion of technology in general in the

classroom. However, studies and current events are also revealing the positive aspects of technology and media, and influencing perceptions of youth usage of media. When used responsibly, mobile technology, online games, and digital platforms can offer accessible, creative, and diverse platforms of learning, communication, civic engagement, and more.

Youth and civic engagement

The definition of engagement varies across fields and scholars, however in the context of this work, I refer to the ways that "an active citizen participates in the life of the community in order to help shape its future" (Crowley, as cited in Adler & Goggin, p.239). It is an important concept to be mindful about in 21st century education, particularly for schools and teachers who aim to create global citizens that can effectively participate in democratic society. Civic engagement can happen in both formal and informal settings, online or in physical spaces.

Youth civic engagement has always been complex. Historically, young people have had little access to political arenas where their involvement would be welcome. Their political engagement and resistance movements have often taken place in the margins of society, outside of the typical political platforms. Today, online platforms offer accessible spaces where youth can work together to bring about the change they would like to see in the world. Cohen and Kahne (2012) argue that media platforms offer youth unique opportunities to engage in political discourse, with each other or to politicians, leaders and administrators. They refer to the notion of participatory politics, which they define as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concerns" (vi).
Cohen and Kahne further note that participatory politics are a 'ground-up' means for youth to become involved in politics without falling under the umbrella of institutional activity, providing them with opportunities to explore their creativity, to share their opinions outside institutionally governed platforms, and to reach larger audiences.

Moreover, online spaces also offer useful platforms through which marginalized populations like girls and women can talk back. Several scholars have recognized the ways that girls, for instance, use their digital networks and spaces like Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and personal websites to communicate with each other, speak to topics that interest them, and in some cases, call attention to issues affecting their lives such as sexual violence and sexism (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017; Keller, 2012; Rentschler, 2014; Sills, Pickens, Beach,

Jones, Calder Dawe, Benton-Greig, & Gavey, 2016). In her work on girl bloggers, Keller (2012) draws attention to the ways that blogging communities and platforms offers opportunities for these youth to express themselves. She writes, “Participatory culture as space [...] may offer girls more political agency as cultural producers than other more traditional spaces for political activity,” (p. 434) highlight the reality that online platforms offer girls a sense of community and independence that institutional spaces might not afford them.

Henry Jenkins and his colleagues conceptualization of participatory culture offers a useful lens to understand youth communities involved in online participatory politics. Participatory cultures encompass youth digital networks where dialogue and media production occur, generally to achieve similar goals. Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison and Weigel (2009) provide the following definition:

> A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (and at least they care what other people think about what they have created. (p.4)

Participatory cultures situate youth as active rather than passive consumers and producers. Moreover, Jenkins et al. (2009) believe that making media and teaching one another within their own participatory cultures enhance opportunities for civic engagement and promote learning. This depends, of course, on the nature of the community and the youth who are participating. Participatory cultures can take different shapes (Shafer, 2011). For example, some communities may come together to ‘remix’ existing content to make their own, like comic book fans who will edit and remix movies and storylines to make their own. Others refer to archiving content, like creating a website for young people collect pictures of their experiences with sexism. Finally, some participatory cultures are concerned with making new content, like YouTube producers creating videos to spread their message. Across most of these communities, members teach one other about a variety of skills and knowledge (Jenkins et al., 2009). They learn media-making, leadership, and communication skills as they collaborate and participate within these communities. The production aspect leads young people to reflect about and research content, for instance, and as well, develop their

production skills. Further, the dialogue and discourses within these sites inevitable contribute to meaning making. In many ways, social media platforms perform similar meaning-making roles as traditional media. The videos or images that young people make can therefore similarly contribute to audiences' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes, through the messages they communicate, how these are designed, and where they are shared.

While I agree with Jenkins, Ito and boyd (2016) that YouTube itself is not a participatory culture, it does provide a space in which youth communities with political and educational goals can build and connect, share knowledge and engage in dialogue. Jenkins writes, "Participatory culture and politics seems to be an important equalizer of opportunities for engagement in the political process." Away from the institutional controls of adults and flexible to needs of the young people that build these communities, youth are claiming their roles in the political sphere. Whether they create response videos, vlogs, or public service announcements to protest sexual violence or gun control through hashtags or YouTube videos, young people are using their own systems, networks, and media to engage in political dialogue. The next section expands on this idea.

YouTube as a site of civic engagement and learning

YouTube's popularity as a social media platform makes it an ideal site to explore. Its website indicates that the user-generated content sharing platform attracts over a billion users across the world. Since YouTube does not create its own content, YouTube media-makers are instrumental to its revenues. In recent years, the company has even invested in a "YouTube Spaces" team that helps creators produce videos through programs and workshops organized in key locations across the world, including Tokyo. YouTube channels stream music videos, tv shows, tutorials, movie trailers, games, cat videos, and educational materials. A popular youth genre is the vlog, which usually features individuals speaking their opinions or stories directly to a camera.
On the YouTube platform, they write, "YouTube overall, and even YouTube on mobile alone, reaches more 18–34 and 18–49-year-olds than any cable network in the US." In late 2017, an online statistical analysis website identified YouTube (along with Facebook and Line, respectively) as a leading social media platform in Canada and Japan (StatistaA, n.d; StatistaA, n.d.)

Scholars have expressed varying opinions about the extent to which youth YouTube videos reflect civic engagement (Burgess, 2009; Caron, 2017; Lange, 2014). While most can agree

that youth-produced media texts on the platform contribute to cultural production, debates occur around the extent to which their media content fall into the realm of civic engagement. For example, in her work with teenagers, Patricia Lange observes that kids in her study did not always create civic engagement YouTube videos, but their video reflected "kids' ability to participate in civic life and develop important digital literacies." (p.98) She calls for, "Discourses on kids' civic engagement [to] respect kids' individuality and contributions, recognize their tolerance for diversity, and involve them in civically motivated media as dynamic agents of change." (p.98) Caroline Caron, whose research does look at civic engagement videos and how young people talk about bullying on YouTube, suggests that YouTube vlogging constitutes a different type of civic engagement than offline political participation. She found that her sample of videos reflect a desire for young people to share their thoughts, to create conversation, and to engage with others, which in turn promotes political conversation and awareness.

To show you a small example of the relationship between YouTube, education and civic engagement in my field, I refer to a small project I conducted last year. In this previous study and in my current work, I have argued that YouTube offers a space where young people (and others) take political positions and teach other. In 2017, I co-published an article in the journal *Girlhood Studies* with my friend and colleague Ayesha Vemuri where we carefully investigate how girls and young women use YouTube to talk about gendered and sexual violence and advocate for change. We looked at vlogs, which are videos that are usually filmed in one shot, showing an individual speak to a camera. Our qualitative study combined a thematic analysis of ten videos with a media literacy and ecological framework. We found that their videos were insightful and reflected a diversity of experiences and perspectives. Our sample reflected that young people underwent a thoughtful process in communicating their discourse. Although we did not conduct an analysis of the audience's comments about the videos, we saw that YouTubers were aware of their audiences, addressing them to offer support or calling out behaviors, and some even inviting comments. We concluded that based on our analysis, YouTube videos created by girls and young women offered opportunities for learning about difficult topics outside the classroom that may interest educators and policy-makers. That initial work also suggested that some YouTubers' communities may indeed be participatory cultures, where groups of individuals join together in similar goals and interests to teach and learn from each other.

Moreover, several YouTubers turn to YouTube to discuss and teach about controversial or taboo topics that are absent from mainstream discourse. For example, a number of young

vloggers are filling an important gap in school-based sexuality education with their YouTube videos, addressing topics that might be missing from curriculum in engaging ways (Johnston, 2017). Some young celebrity vloggers like Laci Green or Hannah Witton, attract hundreds of thousands of viewers, and thousands of comments. In many ways, these YouTubers thus engage themselves in participatory politics; with sexuality education an object of contention in North American curricula and divisive as a topic, young people who use YouTube to talk about sexuality are playing both educational and political roles.

While not all YouTube texts aim for educating audiences, some research shows how these videos may still perform political and educational functions. For example, in the literature on YouTube as a space for negotiation of identities and gender, some scholars suggested that young people's media helped promote how they and others are perceived (Christian, 2010; Potts, 2015). In Potts' study (2015) of video game players on YouTube, she noticed that some members promoted positive queer discourse, and potentially fostered better attitudes towards the latter amongst fans and audiences. Christian's (2010) work on the queer vloggers demonstrates how these communities play a role constructing and representing camp performance. Further, Kellner and Kim (2010) suggest that in cases where YouTubers pose questions to their audiences, they are initiating a learning process through dialogue. They note, "dialogues and discussion among UTers are vivid moments of learning by doing, learning as process, and learning as communication within the public sphere of Internet media." (p.13) In these instances, while the media may not be necessarily aiming to teach, they still perform some form of public pedagogy.

Problematizing YouTube

YouTube, as a popular social media site, inevitably becomes a site of conflict where forms of violence and misinformation take place. To return to the research I conducted with my colleague, we found that in a sample of ten videos, there were problematic discourses that shared potentially harmful ways of looking at the topic of violence (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017). One of our most popular YouTubers, who had over 700,000 views at the time, reinforced victim-blaming in cases of violence when she said "It's simple- there are psychos in the world. There are psychos, they will do bad things, and it's up to you, the individual, to protect yourself from these psychos" (as cited on p. 36). We also discuss in this study that YouTubers did not necessarily address all the important facets of the topic we were investigating. This reinforces that YouTube, while informative, should be viewed critically. Finally, although we did not do a study of audiences, we did notice that one YouTuber was

frequently attacked in her comments feed, confirming that YouTube can indeed be a contentious space of dialogue for youth.

Moreover, another issue with YouTube is its status as a corporation. YouTube's income largely depends on content created by YouTubers, which means the site pays particular attention to who is getting the most views. YouTube operates with algorithms, meaning the site employs an equation to make sure that people with the most views are the first to be seen, and those who are less popular remain down the list of videos (Bishop, 2017). The platform's control of who is visible, and what is heard is problematic. Sophie Bishop's work illustrates this by discussing how YouTube drives girls and women to making 'feminine content' if they want to earn money as video producers. She also notes that people or content who do not fit the mold of 'popular' are also cast in the YouTube shadows. This economic aspect of YouTube presents a problem for youth participation, insofar as youth who want to be recognized and even paid may have to meet the standards of a corporation by 'performing' what they think others want to hear and see, instead of what they might want to say or be. The implications of this performance may be that information provided by young people, even political messages, may be communicated to meet the requirements of YouTube. Since popular YouTubers can have millions of subscribers, this aspect of 'performance' is worrisome.

Calling for YouTube media education

At this point, I have explored the delicate balance between the potential of online media platforms and YouTube as sites of youth civic engagement and education, and as potential harmful sites of learning and participation. In spite of its complexity, and to a certain extent because of it, I argue that teachers need to address and facilitate youth participation in these online spaces to ensure that students become critical, empowered, and active citizens. Media education is at the foundation of critical pedagogy and a necessary tool for young people as we rapidly move towards a world dominated by technology.

As 21st century teachers, our responsibilities now extend to teaching young people how to thrive in a globalized market, and a technologically-saturated world. Media education is vital in this regard. Our duties also include both equipping young people to face the realities of the world and effectively preparing young people to become democratic citizens, online and in the physical world. UNESCO believes that this involves "educating children, from early childhood, to become clear-thinking and enlightened citizens who

participate in decisions concerning society.” For decades, media scholars, educators, and cultural studies scholars have emphasized the importance of teaching media education to warn youth about the power of the media, provide them with skills to analyze media content, or teach them to appreciate the artistic aspects of media (Kellner and Share, 2005). Young people also need to know the extent to which media shapes their culture, and how they can and need to participate in media making to express themselves and advocate for social change.

Henry Jenkins et al. (2009) point to the existence of participatory cultures online, and to their potential. But they also draw attention to the need to educate young people to effectively ‘participate’ online. They expand the notion of media education and media literacy to include the many different digital and media skills they need to be critical consumers and producers of media, like technical skills, research skills, basic literacy skills like reading and writing, or problem-solving skills. One suggestion that particularly strikes me are the ‘social skills’. Henry Jenkins and his colleagues state, “The new media literacies should be seen as social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply an individualized skill to be used for personal expression.” (p.20) Young people need support to build the appropriate critical and ethical skills to participate and interact within these globalized and networked communities.

With this in mind, I believe that educators need to focus on providing young people with the appropriate skills and knowledge to consume and produce media on commercial platforms like YouTube that explores their thoughts and invites dialogue. Bringing students’ attention to media and their power, encouraging their criticisms, and building their skills to work with media is an important part of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire’s seminal work called the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (2005) offered a foundation for critical pedagogy. He advocated for teaching conscientization, which would mean educating students to be critical and aware of the world around them, and to take action against the wrongs of the world. As media scholar Henry Giroux (2011) stresses, “Critical pedagogy becomes a project that stresses the need for teachers and students to actively transform knowledge rather than simply consume it.” (p.7) Today’s landscape points to many young people taking action through participatory politics. As educators, we must ask ourselves, how we can recognize this political agency, and how can we facilitate youth civic engagement?

Working with youth to improve and enhance participation on YouTube and other social

media platforms is a step in this direction. I am of the same mind as Kellner and Kim (2010), who argue that “new media like YouTube (UT), combined with a transformative critical pedagogy, can help realize the Internet’s potential for democratization and transformative pedagogy.” (p.6) The purpose of this paper is not to repeat existing arguments for providing media education, but rather emphasize that YouTube, and youth practices within the platform, merit specific attention from educators. Based on what I have explored, and the popularity of YouTube with young people, I believe that it is our responsibility to help young people consume and produce responsibly and critically on YouTube. Even if we are polarized on their benefits and challenges of the platform, and whether young people are using YouTube to teach other, to talk with their audiences and to advocate for change, or staying away from it out of concern or fear, I believe either case suggests that as educators, we should consider how we can include and improve youth’ YouTube practices in the classroom.

Kellner and Kim write, “It is an important practical question how critical pedagogy practitioners should take advantage of UT in order to construct an alternative Internet culture and, in turn, to promote values of human agency, grassroots democracy, and sociopolitical reconstruction.” (p.26) my experience in the field suggest that we still have progress to make in this regard. In Canada, many teachers continue to refer to YouTube to play videos in their classroom, to post assignments, or to record material. I believe we need to have a stronger understanding of what the platform is and can do, beyond offering a medium to show a movie or assignment instructions. We also need to consider how we can enhance our practice when working with YouTube, to adapt to the realities of modern society and technology use amongst youth.

So while I recognize that YouTube has its flaws, I advocate that teachers move beyond using YouTube as a platform to show videos, to a platform that merits further attention as a site for learning, a political site, and a site of creativity and expression for young people. While youth may be aware to some extent of the commercial nature of YouTube, teachers should consider in-depth explorations of this site as a whole, and of messages in popular videos. The platform also offers opportunity to create, edit and post media (publicly or privately). Educators interested in teaching civic engagement could explore the ways in which youth participation on YouTube and their videos contribute to our political and cultural climates, and instruct students on ways to democratically engage in online debates and share their thoughts via media platforms.

There are barriers to my suggestions that educators should turn to social media platforms, to YouTube, to teach about the power of media and about youth civic engagement. For instance, media education is constantly evolving, and curriculum tends to be different across contexts. Parents, schools, and teachers may not share views about media, and concerns around social media platforms can arise. For example, some school networks in Canada ban access to YouTube in the classroom, which would prevent teachers as well as students from being able to work with the site (Steeves, 2012).

Moreover, technology rapidly evolves, as do online platforms. What is popular today may not be tomorrow. Teachers are therefore under a lot of pressure to know what sites youth visit, and to understand and be critical of these sites. They also need to be able to engage with them effectively in the context of their classroom. Finally, they should also be able to produce content within these sites, like a YouTube video, to teach their students. These may seem to many teachers a daunting tasks. In Canada, teacher education programs, professional organizations and websites offer workshops, tutorials and lessons that are useful for teachers interested in professional domain. However, this may not be the case everywhere. In these cases, barriers such as stakeholders' perceptions of media and teacher training certainly need to be addressed in the current landscape.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this paper presented some of the literature and my reflections on civic engagement and learning that occurs within and through social media platforms and YouTube particularly. While I adopt a positive stance towards the role of YouTube in youth online political participation, teachers must remain aware and critical of the complexities of this as well as other social media platforms. However, given the current climate, and the important space and community YouTube offers youth, I advocate that educators cautiously but enthusiastically seek to incorporate YouTube media education in the classroom. As consumers and producers of YouTube, youth will benefit from a critical pedagogy and media education approach to the platform that explores the potential uses and challenges of YouTube for promoting social change, as well as teaching and learning.

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市民参加、市民学習の場としての You Tube に関する一考察

クロエ・ガルシア

この論文は、2018年 6 月 6 日に東京の創価大学で開催された公開講座を基にしたものである。特に市民参加や市民学習の目的における青少年のソーシャルメディアのプラットフォームや You Tube の使い方に関する言説や私見を紹介している。

まず、カナダと日本におけるソーシャルメディアの現状について言及し、科学技術と若者の関係において生じるさまざまな事柄について考察する。

オンライン（とりわけ You Tube）での政治参加や政治学習におけるソーシャルメディアテクストの生産と消費の関係性を確認するために、市民参加や参加型文化といった概念について説明する。批判的な教育を行うための You Tube メディア教育の重要性に関する私見をもって本論文は、締め括られている。

本論文は You Tube が現代の若者の生活において、重要な政治的、教育的な役割を果たすということを、教育者が認識すること、そして、教育者が生徒達と共に、このプラットフォームを批判的に検討する動因となることを企図している。