

Does the Internet make for more engaged citizens? For many youth, the answer is yes, according to a new study by civic learning scholars.

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IRVINE, Calif. –Youth who pursue their interests on the Internet are more likely to be engaged in civic and political issues, according to a new study of student Internet usage by a group of civic learning scholars. Youth who use the Internet are also more likely to be exposed to diverse political viewpoints, the study shows.

The study's findings run counter to two commonly held assumptions: first, that the Internet makes exposure to divergent political viewpoints unlikely, the so-called "echo chamber" effect; and second, that the Internet promotes shallow activism among youth, so-called "slacktivism."

The first-of-its-kind longitudinal study by civic learning scholars of high school students' Internet use and civic engagement found that:

- **For many youth, their interest in the Internet translates into engagement with civic and political issues.**
- **Contrary to popular belief, it is rare for individuals on the Internet to only be exposed to political perspectives with which they agree, but many youth are not exposed to political perspectives at all.**
- **Teaching new media literacies such as credibility assessment is essential for 21st century citizenship.**

The study results are being announced by a newly-formed research network of scholars, Youth and Participatory Politics, that will build on the study results and launch further investigations into the ways in which the Internet and digital media are impacting democratic and political engagement, particularly among youth. The formation of the Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) research network and the announcement of the study's findings come in the wake of numerous high-profile uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in which digital media, the Internet, and social networking appear to have played a role.

"Youth participate via new media in countless ways. Those habits and skills appear to have been key supports in these protests," said [Mills College](#) education professor [Joe Kahne](#), the author of the study. "Both in the U.S. and abroad, so much civic and political life is online. We've got to pay attention to new media when we think about civic learning.

"Research demonstrates that many youth are disengaged from traditional forms of civic and political life but are very engaged with new media," Kahne said. "Our study findings strongly suggest is that there are ways to build on their engagement with digital media to foster engagement in civic life."

First-of-its-Kind Study on Youth and the Internet

The study is unique, tracking hundreds of students over time and asking about online practices and civic and political engagement. Overall, more than 2,500 youth were surveyed and more than 400 youth were followed for several years. The participants came from a highly diverse set of 19 school districts throughout California. “We followed the same youth for up to 3.5 years. We assessed whether particular kinds of online activities were associated with increased or decreased youth civic and political activity,” Kahne said.

The study, which was supported by both the MacArthur Foundation and the [Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning](#), examined three types of behavior: politically-driven online participation, online exposure to diverse perspectives, and interest-driven online participation.

“This study reveals how participatory political practices among youth are upending our uninformed assumptions,” said David Theo Goldberg, director of the system-wide [University of California Humanities Research Institute](#) and co-director of the [Digital Media and Learning Research Hub](#) at UC Irvine. The Youth and Participatory Politics research network is one of three major new research initiatives of the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, which is part of the UC Humanities Research Institute.

The study examined, for example, how often students:

- Used blogs or social networking sites to share or discuss perspectives on social and political issues;
- Used the Internet to get information about political or social issues;
- Used email to communicate with others who are working on a political or social issue.

The students self-reported their answers to questions on digital media literacy and exposure to political diversity by indicating how much they agreed or disagreed with statements such as:

- (a) I’ve gotten new perspectives on societal issues because of my online activities.
- (b) I’ve had online conversations with people who have different values or political views than I do.
- (c) I’ve been able to connect with people who care about the same things that I do through the Internet.
- (d) I’ve been able to connect with people who share my views about ways to create a better world through the Internet.

To assess the access, effectiveness and potential value of digital media literacy programs, students were asked how frequently in their classes they:

- (a) Had learned how to assess the trustworthiness of online information;
- (b) Were required to use the Internet to get information about political or social issues;
- (c) Were required to use the Internet to find different points of view about political or social issues;
- (d) Were given an assignment where they had to create something to put on the Web.

Findings Contradict Conventional Wisdom

A comprehensive analysis of the students’ responses found that:

- **Spending time in online communities appears to promote engagement with society.** Many worry that youth who spend significant time on fan sites or in online communities tied to hobbies, sports or other interests will become socially isolated. The study found the opposite to be true. Youth engagement in interest-driven online communities was associated with increased volunteer and charity work and in increased work with others on community issues. The Internet can serve as a gateway

to online and offline civic and political engagement, including volunteerism, community problem-solving, and protest activity.

- **More youth are in empty chambers than echo chambers.** Individuals tend either to see many differing perspectives or none. Few youth, 5%, reported being exposed only to political views they agreed with. However, 34% of youth said that they didn't encounter any perspectives at all. "Many youth are largely disengaged from discussions and debates surrounding civic and political issues," Kahne said
- **Many think of youth as knowing all they need to know about the Internet and that adults have little or no role to play, but youth are not all "digital natives."** The study found that digital media literacy education dramatically increased students' exposure to diverse perspectives and boosted the likelihood of youth online engagement with civic and political issues. This finding has serious implications for school and after-school programs as well as for parents. Many young people will benefit if they learn how to tap the full potential of digital media.

"We found that being part of online participatory communities tied to youth interests, political or not, exposes youth to a greater degree of diverse viewpoints and issues and is related to higher levels of civic engagement," Kahne said. "Both of these outcomes are good for democracy."

New Research Network to Expand Probe of the Internet and Democracy

Chaired by Kahne, the new research network on Youth and Participatory Politics will conduct national surveys and launch in-depth qualitative studies of the relationship between digital media, youth and political engagement. It will focus on the potential of digital media to inform and empower youth and foster constructive collective action and social enterprise both in the US and internationally. It will also examine ways to guard against the problematic dynamics associated with digital media, including the spread of misinformation, and the relationship between anonymity, responsibility and ethics.

"It's hard to imagine a more pressing issue than the next generations' involvement in our democracy," said Connie M. Yowell, director of education programs for the MacArthur Foundation in the U.S. MacArthur supported the civic engagement survey and study and is supporting the Youth and Participatory Politics research network as part of its [Digital Media and Learning](#) initiative. "Social media has clearly altered the nature of participation with implications for the economy, learning, and as we are now witnessing almost daily - civil society - both in the United States and globally," Yowell said.

"The Youth and Participatory Politics Network is an extraordinarily diverse group of scholars and practitioners," Yowell said, "who will bring both a fresh perspective and new evidence to the question of democratic participation in the 21st century."

The YPP's seven scholars bring collective insight from the domains of political theory, citizen media, ethics, participatory culture, social movements, education and interest-based learning:

- **Danielle Allen**, political theorist who has published broadly on democratic theory, political sociology, and the history of political thought, *Institute for Advanced Study*;
- **Cathy J. Cohen**, expert in American politics, African-American politics, women and politics, lesbian and gay politics, and social movements, *University of Chicago*;
- **Howard Gardner**, one of the world's leading experts and writers on intelligence, creativity, leadership, and ethics, *Harvard University*;
- **Mizuko "Mimi" Ito**, cultural anthropologist with deep expertise in the implications of how youth are engaging with technology and digital media, *University of California, Irvine*;
- **Henry Jenkins**, expert on new media and participatory culture, *University of Southern*

California;

- **Joseph Kahne**, YPP Chair, expert on how school and new media practices influence youth civic and political development, *Mills College*;
- **Ethan Zuckerman**, co-founder of an international force of citizen bloggers called *Global Voices*, leading scholar on the Internet and democratic engagement, *Berkman Center for the Internet and Society*, Harvard University, and *MIT Media Lab*.

The MacArthur Foundation launched its Digital Media and Learning initiative in 2006 to explore how digital media are changing the way young people learn, play, socialize and participate in civic life in the 21st century.

“At a time when social media are transforming how youth engage with each other, with adults, and with the world more largely, the YPP research network is leading the way in understanding the changes in youth participation in politics, and the extraordinary possibilities and challenges that follow,” said director Goldberg from the Humanities Research Institute. “I can't wait to see further results from the network.”

For More Details About the Study Findings and YPP Research Network:

[“The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures and Youth Transitioning to Adulthood”](#) (Working Paper)

[“Youth Online Activity and Exposure to Diverse Perspectives”](#) (Working Paper)

[“Digital Media Literacy Education and Online Civic and Political Participation”](#) (Working Paper)

[Video of Professor Joseph Kahne discussing digital media, youth, and participatory politics](#)

Youth and Participatory Politics website - www.ypp.dmlcentral.net

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