Digital Civics

Supporting youth voice and action in a networked age

Erica Hodgin is the Associate Director of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at the University of California, Riverside and the Project Director of the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) Initiative. Erica has also helped design and develop a range of digital civic learning resources for educators, including the Teaching Channel's Deep Dive on Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age and the Digital Civics Toolkit.

Carrie James, PhD, is Research Associate and Principal Investigator at Harvard Project Zero, a lecturer on Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a recurring faculty member at Project Zero's institutes for educators. She is the author of *Disconnected: Youth, new media, and the ethics gap.*

Sangita Shresthova is the Director of Research at the Civic Imagination Project (@civicpaths), based at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at University of Southern California. Her work focuses on the intersection between popular culture, performance, new media, politics, and globalization. She is one of the authors of *By Any Media Necessary: The new youth activism.*

BY ERICA HODGIN, CARRIE JAMES AND SANGITA SHRESTHOVA

IN OCTOBER 2017, Quebec's National Assembly passed Bill 62, "which bans Muslim women who wear a niqab or burqa from obtaining government services — including [using] public transportation — without showing their faces."[1] In short order, various legal challenges were posed by the Canadian Civil Liberties Union and the National Council of Canadian Muslims. At the same time, Québecois residents who opposed the measure turned to other strategies to demonstrate their solidarity with those affected by the ban - marching in the streets and riding the Metro[2] wearing niqabs and face coverings. Another facet of the protest and solidarity movement involved posting selfies[3] on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook with faces fully or partially covered, either with traditional head scarves or with other coverings including motorcycle helmets, sunglasses and winter scarves, and surgical masks. These kinds of online expression show how traditional forms of civic action (like rallies) may be enriched by social media. They also show the potential power that digital tools and platforms have to circulate photos and other content with a civic or political message to a wide audience. Importantly, the potential here doesn't end with expressing one's voice; tweets with catchy photos, hashtags or memes can potentially change the conversation. Educators need to pay attention to this landscape as they consider what and how to teach for civic agency in today's world.

Youth civic participation in the digital age
Online tools and social media platforms have become a central part of civic and political life. A recent study found that eight in ten social media users reported that
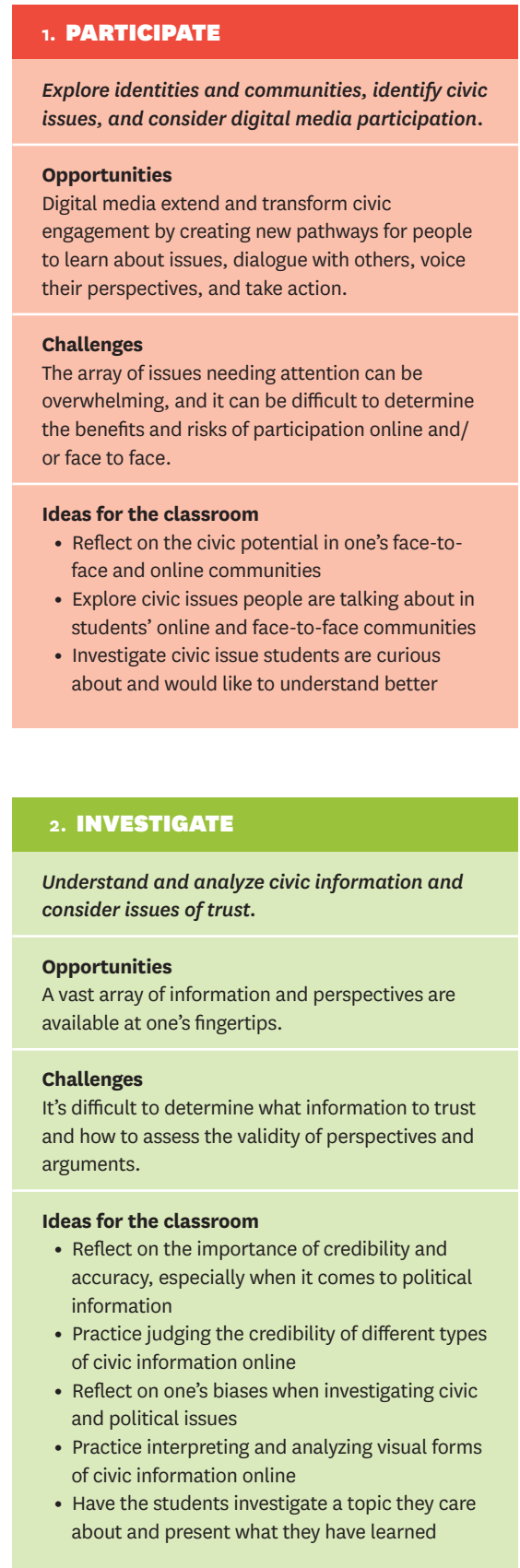
they feel social media platforms "help users get involved with issues that matter to them" and "helped bring new voices into the political discussion."[4] The digital age has opened up new ways to learn about issues, engage in dialogue, circulate ideas to a wide audience, and mobilize others to get involved. Yet, there are also unique challenges: assessing the credibility of online information, recognizing echo chambers and filter bubbles, learning to handle contentious online exchanges, determining potential risks of online content, reaching unexpected audiences, and considering the digital afterlife of one's tweets, status updates, or snaps.

This digital landscape creates distinct pathways for youth to participate. Young people use social media as *the* primary way to communicate about politics.[5] Despite perceptions that digital media distract youth from civic and political matters, 48 percent reported social media made them more aware of political issues and over 85 percent disagreed with the idea that social media lessened their awareness and commitments. In fact, one study found that 90 percent of youth who engaged in online civic and political activities report that they *also* vote or participate in institutional activities like letter writing and volunteering for a campaign.[6]

Digital media expand opportunities for a set of practices we call *participatory politics*. These practices differ from institutional politics in that they are peer-based and interactive; they tap into youths' social networks; and they often draw on popular culture. In digital spaces, youth can participate without deference to adult-led institutions and bureaucratic structures that dictate the what, when, and how of civic and political action. For example, youth are blogging, engaging in online discussions, and creating and circulating clever memes and pointed hashtags. They are also using online petition sites like Change.org in order to influence the conversation and, in some cases, legislation around issues such as immigration, racist policing practices, gun control and climate change.

The changing nature of civic learning

Just as democratic participation is changing in the digital age, so should our approaches to civic education. New knowledge, skills, and dispositions are needed to navigate this changing landscape. And just because young people know how to text or tweet, doesn't mean they know how to use these tools for civic and political purposes. Data from a 2015 survey suggests that only 10 percent of youth engage at least weekly in such online political activities – meaning that 90 percent are *not* engaged or only occasionally engaged online.[7]

Therefore, bringing digital civics into classrooms and schools is essential. While this is already happening in some places, research points to an equity gap: youth who are White, from upper-income families, and high achieving academically receive far more of these learning opportunities than others.[8] In addition, exposure to digital learning opportunities appears to be both inequitable and low overall. In a 2013 survey, 33 percent of U.S. high-school-age youth did not report having a single class session focused on how to tell if online information was trustworthy, and only 16 percent reported more than a few sessions.[9] Therefore, it is critical to integrate digital civic learning opportunities for all youth across grade levels and content areas.

The core practices of digital civics

As educators consider teaching digital civics, we suggest the following framework that parses online civic engagement into four core practices. We also think it is essential to acknowledge the double-

Figure 1:
5 Ways to Learn About Digital Civics

1. PARTICIPATE

Explore identities and communities, identify civic issues, and consider digital media participation.

Opportunities
Digital media extend and transform civic engagement by creating new pathways for people to learn about issues, dialogue with others, voice their perspectives, and take action.

Challenges
The array of issues needing attention can be overwhelming, and it can be difficult to determine the benefits and risks of participation online and/or face to face.

Ideas for the classroom
- Reflect on the civic potential in one's face-to-face and online communities
- Explore civic issues people are talking about in students' online and face-to-face communities
- Investigate civic issue students are curious about and would like to understand better

2. INVESTIGATE

Understand and analyze civic information and consider issues of trust.

Opportunities
A vast array of information and perspectives are available at one's fingertips.

Challenges
It's difficult to determine what information to trust and how to assess the validity of perspectives and arguments.

Ideas for the classroom
- Reflect on the importance of credibility and accuracy, especially when it comes to political information
- Practice judging the credibility of different types of civic information online
- Reflect on one's biases when investigating civic and political issues
- Practice interpreting and analyzing visual forms of civic information online
- Have the students investigate a topic they care about and present what they have learned

3. DIALOGUE

Exchange ideas about civic issues and navigate diverse perspectives.

Opportunities
Online spaces can bring diverse people and perspectives into conversation, offering opportunities to listen and learn from others.

Challenges
Youth may encounter uncivil, even hostile, exchanges in online spaces.

Ideas for the classroom
- Explore the opportunities and challenges of in-person vs. online dialogue about civic issues
- Examine the qualities of good and not-so-good online discussions of civic issues
- Create opportunities and practice strategies for respectful, productive online dialogue across different perspectives

4. VOICE

Explore purposes, opportunities, and strategies for expressing one's civic voice in networked publics.

Opportunities
Digital and social media offer unprecedented opportunities for "voice" in the public sphere. Social media platforms enable youth to amplify messages on issues.

Challenges
Crowded newsfeeds may make it difficult to build an audience. Managing the persistence or "digital afterlife" of voicing one's ideas in a networked public is a further challenge.

Ideas for the classroom
- Provide opportunities for students to find their stories and express their civic voices in meaningful ways
- Reflect on what to share publicly versus keep to one's self
- Consider goals and strategies for spreading one's story and message to target audiences
- Explore challenges and ideas for managing the "digital afterlife" of expressing one's voice

edged nature of digital life – the positive opportunities and genuine challenges connected to each practice.

- **Investigation:** At a time when information flows freely and rapidly from a diverse array of online sources – some credible, some not – it is vital to support youth to be thoughtful and savvy investigators.
- **Dialogue:** Social media provide ample opportunities for youth to share their perspectives on public issues, learn about the views of others, and perhaps even engage in debate. Yet, the risk that conversations will turn toxic may deter youth. Providing youth with strategies and tools for engaging in online dialogue can help them feel prepared.
- **Voice:** Online contexts offer nearly boundless opportunities to express and amplify one's ideas and perspectives on important issues. As with dialogue, these positive potentials bring risks – including surveillance and backlash. Helping youth make thoughtful decisions about where, when, how, and to what ends to express their voices in networked spaces is essential.
- **Action:** The role of social media in supporting civic action is contested. Some describe e-petitions and mobilization via Twitter as "slacktivism" while others see great promise (if not clear evidence) of positive impact. In our networked age, we must help youth understand the potentials and limitations of tweets, likes, and hashtag activism in social change efforts, as well as the enduring role of face-to-face civic practices.

A classroom example of teaching digital civics

In order to attend to these opportunities and challenges, Nina Portugal and other educators in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in Oakland, California integrate civic and digital civic learning experiences into their core curriculum. In one project, Nina engaged her Grade 9 students in learning about various tactics of social change, both face-to-face and online. Students worked in small groups to identify an issue affecting their community and then **investigate** the history, root causes, and effects of that issue. Students then wrote a proposal outlining what they learned, what audience they wanted to reach, and what tactics they would utilize to respond to the issue. Next, students put their plan into **action** over the course of a week, posting media online using a common hashtag to document their actions. For example, one group of students focused on the negative effects of gentrification on communities of colour in Oakland. They mobilized people to write letters to the mayor and tweeted information about the effects of gentrification at the mayor every day during the action week.

After the week of action, students reflected on the effectiveness of their tactics, what they learned, and what they would do differently in the future. This reflection, along with their proposal and documentation of their action steps, were all posted to their class blog. This enabled students to **voice** their perspectives and raise awareness about their issues. It also gave other students the chance to read and comment on their classmates' projects, opening up a **dialogue** amongst the various groups.

While the project undoubtedly provided students with exciting opportunities to learn about issues they care about, express their perspectives on a public platform, and take action, there is a lot to consider to facilitate such a project. For example, teachers have to navigate a number of concerns – such as juggling all the topics students choose, ensuring students' work is ready for online publication

5. ACTION

Consider new tactics and strategies for acting on civic issues in the digital age.

Opportunities
Online posts and campaigns can raise awareness about issues, mobilize people to take action, and exert influence on decision-makers.

Challenges
Identifying effective tactics and strategies can be challenging, and critiques of "slacktivism" may denigrate the potential of online civic action.

Ideas for the classroom
- Examine tactics and strategies in social change efforts from the past
- Consider new avenues for taking action around social issues in the digital age
- Explore perspectives on online activism as "slacktivism" versus a new, valuable set of tools for action
- Consider ways to incorporate social media when developing a civic action plan

Suggested Resources

Digital Civics Toolkit:
www.digitalcivicstoolkit.org

Teaching Channel's Deep Dive: Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age:
www.teachingchannel.org/blog/deep_dive/ed4democracy/home
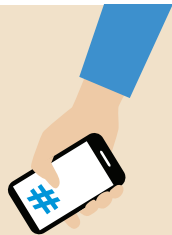
and circulation, helping students reach an authentic audience, and monitoring the depth and academic tone of students' comments. However, as Nina describes in a recent blog post, it is all worth it when students have opportunities to express their civic and political views in authentic contexts and to reach an expansive audience.[10]

Five ways to bring digital civics into the classroom

The Digital Civics Toolkit (DCT) is a new resource that offers educators tools they can implement in the classroom to support their students as they engage with practices linked to participatory politics (see Figure 1). Created by members of the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics, the DCT contains modules and activities that explore opportunities and tensions associated with participatory politics. It offers five ways to integrate digital civic learning into your classroom.

Teaching digital civics: A necessity today

Youth today are growing up in a world in which digital media is not just about socializing with friends. Public issues and social change agendas can be – and are – raised, explored, discussed, and responded to on the Internet. While there are inevitable challenges and tensions, there are also positive opportunities, especially for youth. Further, the networked nature of civic and political life isn't likely to go away. The potential of digital media to bring about a more equitable democracy won't be fully realized unless we ensure that all young people have access to high quality digital civic learning opportunities.

Teachers can, and should, play a pivotal role in supporting all youth to develop the sense of agency, motivation, and skills to use digital media to participate in democratic life. And all educators have a role to play regardless of discipline, grade level, and learning context. By teaching digital civics, educators can enable more youth to recognize and, hopefully, seize new opportunities for civic and political engagement that are empowering, equitable, and impactful. **EC**

NOTES

1 https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/10/19/women-scarf-selfies-bill-62_a_23249363/?ncid=tweetlnkcahpmg00000002

2 https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/bill-62-metro-protest-1.4366483

3 https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/face-covered-selfies-social-media-protests-over-quebec-s-bill-62-1.3641563

4 M. Duggan and A. Smith, *The Political Environment on Social Media* (Pew Research Center, 2016).
www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/the-political-environment-on-social-media

5 P. Mihailidis, *Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, engagement and participation in digital culture* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2014).

6 C. Cohen, J. Kahne, B. Bowyer et al., *Participatory Politics: New media and youth political action* (YPPSP Research Report, 2012).
http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/publications/107

7 J. Kahne and B. Bowyer, *Can Media Literacy Education Impact Digital Engagement in Politics?* Manuscript submitted for publication (2018).

8 J. Kahne and E. Middaugh, *Democracy for Some: The civic opportunity gap in high school* (CIRCLE Working Paper 59, 2008).
www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP59Kahne.pdf

9 J. Kahne, E. Hodgin, and E. Eidman-Aadahl, "Redesigning Civic Education for the Digital Age: Participatory politics and the pursuit of democratic engagement," *Theory and Research in Social Education,* no. 1 (2016): 1-35.

10 N. Portugal, "Confronting the Monster Under the Bed: Integrating blogging into the classroom," *Teaching Channel* (May 14, 2018).
www.teachingchannel.org/blog/2018/05/14/integrating-blogging