

*Education, Power and Empowerment: Developing Transnational Educational
Spaces through Social Media*

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Introduction: Social Media as the New Transnational Educational Space

The ambiguous relationship between the educational potential of social media and youth's civic engagement is examined in this paper. The paper examines the potential of social media in providing a transnational space for global networked youth's education and civic engagement. This paper, in its first part, will provide a survey of the field on social media's educational potential. The second part of the paper will briefly present some initial results of the lead author's 3-year project on the potential of social media for civic engagement¹. Arguments in this section problematize the romantic and over-optimistic expectations attached with social media in relation to its educational potential. The third part of the paper will make connections between globalization, social media, education, and empowerment and examine the barriers and hurdles that prohibit social media in achieving its full potential especially in providing the type of transnational space conducive to empowering and engaging youth in civic issues.

Social media are ubiquitous features of contemporary Canadian society; they are unique spaces where the participants are not mere consumers of the discourses but also active producers of these discourses. Almost one in every two Canadians uses social media in one form or another. Canadians are one of the most 'networked' people in the world. According to Facebook Canada, more than 19 million Canadians log onto Facebook at least once every month, while 14 million check their newsfeed every single day (Facebook Use in Canada, 2013).

An average Canadian user has 190 friends as compared to 30 friends of an average global Facebook user. S/he is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events. On average, the Canadian users share 30 billion pieces of content each month. While these figures are significant in their own right they also point out to the fact that the space for conversations and contestations over civic and social justice related issues has expanded exponentially. Significantly, it is important to ask if the new participatory transnational space created by the social media has the potential to alter the epistemology of the digital subjects.

One example would be to look at the online discussions taking place regarding civic issues and those related to justice and equity (Arshad-Ayaz, A. 2015). Do online interactions change youth's level of engagement in civic issues; how do young people define their use of the transnational space made available by social media; do they engage more in local or global issues; how youth is engaged in understanding and articulating the 'self' and the 'other' in the current interconnected global world? Do social networking sites provide a space which has the potential to re-shape, re-interrogate and re-create knowledge that is outside of the hegemonic, normative media and cultural locus and how do young people see and evaluate their own use of this transnational networked space in terms of their civic engagement?

Debates on role of social media in relation to civic participation and engagement have increased since recent world events. Events as diverse as the Arab Spring, 2008 US Presidential elections, the occupy movement, and the student protests in Quebec have

¹ These are initial results from Dr. Arshad-Ayaz's research on Facebook and civic participation funded by FQRSC.

one thing in common—the role played by ICTs and social media such as Twitter and Facebook in mobilizing citizens in the context of civic engagement and active citizenship. Youth involved in various social movements used the new social and political spaces to identify issues, engage with their fellow citizens, participate in the political processes, and articulate demands for social, political and distributive justice.

These events also ignited the debate in the educational contexts between those who argue that the use of the social media is primarily for entertainment and thus results in a decline of interest in social issues (Leung & Lee, 2005; Nie & Hillygus, 2002; Shah, Cho, Eveland & Kwak, 2005; Kraut, et al., 2002,) and their detractors who argue social media actively enhance civic engagement, and political participation and result in active participatory citizenship (Arteaga-Sanchez et al. 2010; Lamanauskas et al. 2014; Lordache, 2014; Delli Carpini, 2000; Stanley & Weare, 2004). Bouliane (2009) in a meta-analysis of 38 studies examining 166 effects argued that there was inconclusive evidence on Internet having a negative effect on political life or having any substantial impact on civic engagement. The development of Web 2.0 with a host of interactive social network sites has only complicated this debate further.

With respect to the potential of social media to engage youth in civic issues, there has been a growing realization that the youth is increasingly disengaged from the traditional political process and the polity (Dougherty, 2015). There have been concerns about the declining public sphere and the weakening of the spirit and sense of citizenship. These concerns have resulted in calls for a renewed effort to revive citizenship education in order to reinvigorate civic engagement and participation.

While many have argued that there has been a decline in youth's civic engagement since neoliberal economic globalization gained momentum some 30 years ago, concerns about youth's disconnection from public life, have become paramount in the recent years.

Evidence from politics and social movements has led to a view where many within education are looking at social media as community-building and mobilization tools that can be used to educate students in becoming more engaged in civic and political issues. At the same time research has identified professional and ethical issues, especially with regards to in-service teachers' questionable online conversations (Horvath, 2008; Shapira, 2008). Nevertheless, scholars working on social media in the educational context agree that faculties of education, staff and students need to know more how to use the medium to fully engage stakeholders.

This agreement among scholars is in consonance with the Canadian Policy and Research Network's (CPRN) recommendations on civic education. CPRN recommends creation of conditions and spaces for "authentic interaction with young Canadians on issues of civic engagement and governance" (Llewellyn, et al, 2007: p.18). The popularity of social media and their potential role in fostering civic engagement raise some important questions within the educational context: Are social media being used as spaces for conversations on and education for civic engagement? How do youth define their experience of the participatory technology to engage in issues related to civic participation?

Social Media's Educational Potential

Literature on Social Media/Facebook (FB) and Education can be divided into, a) research that deals with social media in general and, b) research that specifically focuses on Facebook. The popularity of Web 2.0 (Social/participatory media) has led to an increased interest for educators to explore how participation in social media in general can fulfill certain academic purposes (Arteaga-Sanchez et al. 2010; Lamanaskas et al. 2014; Lordache, 2014; Collins & Halverson, 2009; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Kist, 2009).

Researchers argue that, owing to their interactive platform, social media allow for the collaborative exchange of ideas, which can help students acquire critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Beach, et al, 2009; Beach & Doerr-Stevens, 2009; Erduran & Jiménez-Aleixandre, 2007). The social networks also provide multiple audiences, better chances of “dialogic argumentation” (Clark & Sampson, 2008, p.294) and the potential to promote debate on civic and community issues (Bagley & Shaffer, 2009; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Research shows that youth are interested in social media to explore identities and experiment with social interaction (Xenox and Foot, 2008; Montgomery, 2008). For youth technology (including the social media) is as much a part of everyday life as other amenities, experiences and artifacts of contemporary life.

As networked publics these networked citizens actively participate in production and consumption of social, cultural and political meanings and knowledges (Rheingold, 2008; boyd, 2008, 2012). Social media provide the space where these networked individuals gather as publics, and the private voice of the networked individual can be transformed into a public voice (Rheingold, 2008). Finally, social media understood as participatory media provide the networked publics the possibility for participation and engagement with various “genres of participation” (Ito, 2008, 2009).

Facebook specific research (Robert et al., 2012) shows, that a quarter of the research on Facebook is based on descriptive analysis such as demographic patterns and time-use trends (Chang, Rosenn, Backstrom, & Marlow, 2010). Remaining studies focus on a variety of issues such as, age related usage (Quinn, Chen, & Mulvenna, 2011); users' abilities (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008); motivation factors for using FB (Joinson, 2008; Saleh et al, 2011; Sheldon, 2008); maintaining and strengthening relationships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lewis & West, 2009; Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010); social grooming (Tufekci, 2008); ease of use and social bonding (Gosling 2009; Burke, 2010); differences in user engagements (Wise, Alhabash, & Park, 2010); self-promotion (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008); influence of cultural norms on FB identity construction (Karl, Peluchette, & Schlaegel, 2010); and FB as a business tool, (Dholakia & Durham, 2010; Pantano, Tavernise, & Viassone, 2010). There is limited research on FB within educational contexts, which includes research on student–faculty relationships (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009; Lipka, 2007; Hew 2011) and use of FB by prospective employers (Karl, Peluchette, & Schlaegel, 2010; Kluemper & Rosen, 2009).

While scholarly work on social media provides important insights with which to understand youth in the context of the new media, there are three important issues that emerge from such literature, that need to be considered. First, different social media differ in terms of specific demographics, functionality, and network developments and

hence should not be treated as a single general category. The broad generalizations offered by many studies are not sufficient for concrete educational policy making. There are dangers in treating all SNS as a single general category, as each SNS has specific technological affordances, and using multiple sites can lead to misleading findings.

Thus for our study we decided to use Facebook as a representative social media for the following reasons: (a) various activities performed on Facebook (status updates, friending, posts) provide solid, observable data (Graham, Sandy, & Gosling, 2011) that can be used for empirical and qualitative analyses; (b) Facebook is by far the most popular social medium (Kreutz, 2009), that has become an important part of students' lives (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006); (c) Facebook provides linguistic and cultural transcendence, (d) methodologically, for the proposed research, it makes sense to use one (well-recognized) social networking site instead of multiple SNS.

Since FB is the most frequently used SNS by postsecondary students, it is imperative to understand the influence of Facebook on student identities and perceptions. Second, the relative lack of research on Facebook in relation to educational issues reflects an under appreciation of Facebook as a source of relevant data for educational research. Robert et al. (2012) after reviewing 412 articles on Facebook research concluded that there is a sheer lack of cross-cultural research in the field, which, they argue “ is unfortunate because behavioral data gathered from Facebook is well suited to explore cultural differences” (p.208). Third, whatever little educational research so far has been conducted is primarily quantitative. Less research attention has gone into qualitative examination of how participants describe their use of Facebook for learning and civic engagement.

While examining the role of social media and their educational and civic potential scholars discuss issues such as: constructive impact on student-teacher communication when professors ‘friend’ students (Helvie-Mason 2011), enhancement of civic engagement, and political participation thus active participatory citizenship (Stanley & Weare, 2004; Weard, 2002), collaborative exchange of ideas and acquisition of critical problem solving skills (Beach, et al, 2009; Beach & Doerr-Stevens, 2009; Erduran & Jiménez-Aleixandre, 2007), multiple audiences, better chances of “dialogic argumentation” (Clark & Sampson, 2008, p.294), debate on civic and community issues (Bagley & Shaffer, 2009; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009), support, motivation and encouragement of peers (Fahy, 2003), critical thinking and collaboration (Thomas & Macgregor, 2005), development of community of practice (Schrire, 2004), connectedness among the students (Aspden & Helm, 2004), self-directed learning (Wu & Hwang, 2010), and mentoring (Ellison et al., 2007), multiple audiences and debate on civic and community issues (Shaw, et al., 2014; Vromen, et al., 2014).

Majority of studies noted above focus on psycho-sociological aspect of students' engagements in social media such as Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe, 2007, 2011; Yu et al., 2010; Pempek et al., 2009). Recently increased attention is directed to examine the potential of social media as an educational environment. Literature in this respect shows that there is a strong indication that students prefer Facebook (Deng and Tavares, 2013; Roblyer et al., 2010; Arteaga-Sanchez et al., 2010; Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009) to other knowledge management systems used at universities such

as Moodle, Web CT etc. (Staines and Lauchs, 2013). Overwhelming use of Facebook by students has led educators to seriously examine the role Facebook can play in educational environments (Karl and Peluchette, 2011).

Some researchers argue that social media such as Facebook offers exciting possibilities for effective cultural integration and intercultural understanding (Ryan et al. 2011; Christie and Bloustien, 2010). Scholars (Carrington and Hodgetts, 2010; Ryan, Magro, Sharp, 2011) show that virtual space can play a significant role in providing cultural and textual information to young people and help in their cultural adaptation. Birky and Collins (2011) observed the power of social networks in minimizing the gaps between cultures. Yu et al., (2010) while examining Facebook's impact on acculturation report positive social learning outcomes.

Research Results

Over optimism and romance of social media in relation to their educational potential In this section we present initial results of an ongoing three-year qualitative research project on social media, pedagogy and civic engagement². This ongoing research examines how networked youth defines civic engagement in non-territorialized space provided by social media where all associations are fluid, issue based, overlapping, and subject driven. Particularly, the aim of the project is to investigate how young people perceive the role social media particularly FB plays in their learning about social issues and civic engagement. Initial results shed light on some of the reasons for disengagement with 'traditionally defined civic issues' voiced by the youth.

The study uses a methodological approach situated on the intersections of critical ethnography and critical discourse analysis. This approach combines diverse insights to juxtapose the working of multiple discourses with the participants' experience of these discourses. So far 25 graduate and undergraduate students have been interviewed for this study. Participants who: maintain Facebook pages, define themselves as citizens interested in civic and social justice issues, have sizable and diversified 'friends' lists, update their pages regularly, and actively engage with their 'friends,' were identified and recruited for ethnographic interviews (based on reflection of their activities on their Facebook pages over a three week period).

Based on popular definitions of civic engagement used in literature (Warren et al., 2014; Raynes-Goldie & Walker 2008; Hay, 2007; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Crick, 2002; Niemi, and Finkel, 2006; Dalton, 2004), civic engagement was operationalized as individual and/or collective actions that aim to identify, address and improve issues concerning the quality of life in the context of social media usage.

The definition was deliberately kept broad (including areas such as engagement in ecological, social justice, poverty, electoral reform, etc.). For this study the concept of civic is not confined to 'traditional civic engagement definitions'³ usually understood

² The results being reported here are from Dr. Arshad-Ayaz's research on Facebook and civic participation. Dr. Arshad-Ayaz wishes to acknowledge the funding support from Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture: FRQSC

³ In traditional sense civic engagement is emphasized through public and collective forms of engagement and is measured through quantifiable actions for example, how many people voted, made

as individual and collective involvement in local and national political contexts. This is for two specific reasons. First, the research aims to explore the empowerment and civic engagement potential of new transnational space provided by social media which transcends beyond the local/national boundaries. Second, research aims to see how youth are broadening, narrowing or redefining the idea of “new civic” as opposed to more traditional understanding of civic participation.

Since this is a research in progress initial results presented in this paper do not warrant generalization. However, on the basis of the preliminary findings some interesting aspects of civic engagement and reasons for disengagement of the youth in and through participatory social media come to light. In the following section we present some of the themes that emerge from the responses of the participants interviewed so far.

Youth Generally Perceive Themselves Engaged in Civic and Juristic Issues

It is interesting to note that although literature and research points towards youths’ apathy and disengagement the respondents interviewed so far, described themselves as engaged in various civic and social justice issues. Participants believe that Facebook definitely provides them with a social space where they can reach out to the wider network of ‘friends’. Majority of the respondents see social media like Facebook as a useful source of information, which they nevertheless used for connecting with friends and leisurely activities. All except two participants were of the opinion that what appeared on Facebook pages is more informative than television news.

Ninety-eight percent of the respondents believed that social media was far more informative and easy to access than television news, print newspapers, radio, and magazines. The participants rated, speed, bulk of information, freedom from geographic limits, multi-media (audio, visual, and print), peers sharing, etc. as top features of Facebook that attract them to use this particular social medium. Despite having an agreement on Facebook and social media as useful informational spaces, which allowed easy networking opportunities, 80 percent of the respondents had not consciously reflected on how they were using this space for engaging in civic issues, before they were interviewed.

Young People’s Perceptions of Their Usage of FB Are Rhetorical

When probed about how participants were using Facebook pages for civic engagement, it turned out that participant’s perceptions of their usage of FB were more rhetorical than the actual engagement. For example, the participants were asked to analyze their activities on Facebook over the last three weeks. It turned out that in majority of cases the engagement with issues which could be broadly defined as civic or social was not consistent. Only five respondents had engaged with issues on regular bases, writing a comment, sharing a post, challenging something they considered unjust, in a consistent manner. These five participants revisited the same thread/post

contacts with government offices, took part in a boycotts or protests etc. However, sticking with traditional ways of looking at civic participation can overlook the ways in which youth are voicing their concerns today without participating collectively in obvious public activities (see Levinson, M. 2010 for a good discussion of problems with definition)

many times and engaged with networked members on their Facebook pages. However, 80% participants moved on to new topics and did not revisit issues⁴ they had liked/posted or shared in any consistent manner. In simple words, the engagement patterns with various civic issues changed with what caught the fancy of 80 percent of the young participants' and did not show a consistent pattern.

Confusion on What Counts as Civic

Majority of the participants interviewed so far are indecisive about what counts as 'good citizenship'. Five respondents who were able to answer questions related to what behaviors and attitudes count as citizenship, in more definitive terms, had one thing in common. They had recently discussed citizenship and social justice related issues in the courses they were taking. One participant had been exposed to social justice issues in student protests, and had a lot to contribute to the discussion on 'good citizenship and social justice'. Remaining 80 percent of the participants had more fluid definitions which kept on changing.

Many tensions in definitions of 'good citizenship' and 'social justice' were a result of subscribing to a dichotomous worldview, where local/global, national/international were seen more in binaries rather than a unified global world. It is interesting to note that although social media provide a transnational space to youth where they can engage with global networked publics, educational systems are lagging behind in preparing young citizens to reconcile with the tensions between the local and the global. The lack of knowledge about mechanisms of global governance at all levels—social, political and economic, creates 'shaken self-identity' among the youth which deters them to take concrete actions or an assured and confident point of view about the nature of things.

Differential Expectation of Youth and Teachers about the Efficacy of Social Media

Educators generally expect adding social media like Facebook will increase sociality and interaction among learners. The assumption is that students will be immersed in learning beyond the classroom time. This assumption is flawed on a number of accounts. First, although social media increases the chances of sociality and interaction among its users, however, as research indicates most interaction ends up in forming likeminded groups and networks. This is the expected outcome when those interacting in transnational spaces have very different lived realities.

Unless education is directed towards creating a more nuanced understanding of social, political and economic differences resulting from current neoliberal economic globalization which impact those living in the global South differently than those living in the global North, it is impossible to generate true interest in each other's issues for those interacting in the transnational space provided by social media. Second, the transnational space provided by social media is neither equally accessible to all parties involved, nor is the flow of information equitable. The dominance of Western values, language systems, knowledge systems, standards of beauty, culture

⁴ Although they revisited more personal likes and shares and engaged in conversations about personal issues but this was not true for likes/shares or posts that could be termed civic or justice oriented.

industry etc. are well established facts. Transnational space made available by social media can and does provide tools and opportunity to challenge dominant values. However, it is simply too naive for educators and policy makers to assume that youth either in North or South will simply take advantage of this space to educate themselves and become active citizens. Third, the assumption by educators that since youth is connected and wired hence educators can rely on technology for students to be immersed in learning beyond the classroom time is flawed. Majority of the participants did not want Facebook to become an academic space. They preferred to keep it for non-academic activities. Eighty percent of the respondents categorically stated that their use of Facebook time was for relaxation and leisure.

Analysis

There has been some interesting research on how social media have the potential to bring people closer together, especially as neoliberal economic globalization has widened the divisions between people and societies. While neoliberal globalization is primarily an economic process, it has profound social implications directly related to youths' apathy towards civic processes. This apathy should not be seen as lack of agency on the part of youth rather it is an expression 'shaken self-identity' which is fluid and not fixed to a particular geographical region or national issue. Globally youth are the new marginalized class at the forefront of social and economic changes (Miles, 2000). Social media with all its affordances does not liberate youth from constraints and limitations of economic and social crises.

Social media certainly provide a space where worldwide social relations can be discussed. The question that begs to be asked is how much students know about the machinery that forms the nuts and bolts of global socio-political and economic working. While it is true that events taking place in distant localities are reported on social media, educators and policy makers need to ask if youth can make connections on how local happenings are shaped by events occurring in other parts of the world and vice versa.

The focus of research has so far been on technology; do educators understand how students use technology; do educators understand various affordances of technology; are educators apt at using new technologies as youth is; and so on. What has not been considered is the fact that using social media to facilitate youth engagement and involvement in civic issues cannot happen without educators developing a profound understanding of youth' needs and priorities. For this to happen we need to ask very different set of questions. We need to understand the marginal position of youth; we need to understand their insecurities. We need to ask what it is in the wider society that is disengaging young people to acquire attitudes or the willingness to get involved in their communities.

Various social media should be seen, as sites where young people are struggling to establish themselves in the context of predatory capitalism, which marginalizes them and makes them, feel vulnerable. It might be easy, but it is extremely naïve, and potentially dangerous, to portray youth as apathetic and disengaged. Our research results show that Facebook is used differently by different young people some use it to react, some use it to negotiate, some have an activist agenda but majority use it to get away from the worries and troubles faced in daily life. Few participants who

somewhat understood the global mechanics (through taking courses in philosophy, sociology and social justice) used the transnational space provided by Facebook to engage in civic and social justice issues. Majority of the participants felt that the transnational space provided by Facebook was a space where they could relax, be themselves, hang out and engage in leisure time. We conducted most of the interviews at an urban university in Montreal. While we were analyzing the initial responses by our twenty-five research participants we looked around us. All we could see was a concrete jungle, there are no green spaces, no spaces where one could truly relax, hangout, talk to each other without yelling due to high levels of noise pollution.

The spaces that youth could have occupied have been granted to contractors to build more condo building and shopping plazas. It is not difficult for us to imagine why majority of young people find this space not worthy of their engagement. Young people like to occupy the transnational space provided by social media for many different reasons but the fact of matter is that there are very few things in their immediate surroundings competing for their attention or action.

We feel it is important not to either overstate or understate the impact of social media on networked youth. Social media by themselves cannot engage youth in civic issues. Just as social media by themselves cannot provide opportunities or freedoms nor can they provide skills young people would need in the long-term to deal with social, cultural and economic issues. This is where the role of education, especially critical education, becomes imperative. Youth uses social media according to their own interests and personal circumstances but never outside and beyond the framework of wider economic, social and political disparities that impact their lives and marginalize them.

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