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## **New Media, New Civics?**

Ethan Zuckerman, MIT Center for Civic Media

### **Abstract:**

Dissatisfaction with existing governments, a broad shift to “post-representative democracy” and the rise of participatory media are leading towards the visibility of different forms of civic participation. “Participatory civics” uses tools of participatory media and relies on theories of change beyond influencing representative governments to seek change. This paper offers a framework to describe participatory civics in terms of theories of change used and demands places on the participant, and examines some of the implications of the rise of participatory civics, including the challenges of deliberation in a diverse and competitive digital public sphere.

**KEY WORDS:** Internet, politics, protest, civics, collective action,

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### **Introduction**

There’s a photo from Tahrir Square that fascinates me (Figure 1). A man stands in the square, surrounded by celebrating protesters. He holds a handwritten sign that says, “Thank you, Facebook.” (Another picture shows him holding a sign in Arabic that says “Thank you, Al Jazeera.”)

Figure 1. “Thank you, Facebook.” Tahrir Square, Cairo.



Credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/interactegypt/>

For some, this photo was proof positive that the Internet had helped oust Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and was showing its power in allowing people to organize for political change. For others, it was evidence that the self-importance of Internet advocates had gotten out of hand. After all, the Arab Spring in Egypt had far more to do with economic factors and popular dissatisfaction than with any specific communications technology (Anderson 2011; Joffe 2011). This debate between those who are skeptical of technology's role in organizing protests and those who see technology as central continues as we consider the protests in Istanbul's Gezi Park (where Twitter publicized protests that Turkish television ignored) and the government's later ban on Twitter, or the #EuroMaidan protests that toppled a government in Ukraine. (The fact that the protests are known, in part, by a hashtag suggests the possibility of a digital protest narrative.)

### **Activism and the Internet**

If it's easy to lampoon the protester in Tahrir for giving too much credit to the Internet for mobilizing and coordinating protests it's easier to belittle other, more

purely digital forms of activism. Consider the spread of the Human Rights Campaign's red and pink equals sign, which nearly three million Facebook users adopted in 2013 as their profile photo (Bakshy 2013), after HRC changed their usual blue and yellow logo to the red and pink one in anticipation of oral arguments in front of the US Supreme Court on California's Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage. As waves of pink and red swept across Facebook and Twitter, more than one wag wondered whether the Supreme Court justices would be counting Facebook profile pictures before offering their ruling (Italie and Ortutay 2013).

Is the Tahrir protester deluded when he thanks Facebook for the fall of Mubarak? Do the Facebook supporters of marriage equality imagine that their actions will affect Supreme Court deliberations? Malcolm Gladwell's widely circulated critique of social media's role in the Arab Spring—and, presumably, in later protests like Gezi Park—centers on the idea that “real” activism requires the trust developed from face to face interactions to lead people to risk arrest or assault (2010). For Gladwell, online activism doesn't involve risk of violence or arrest, and thus isn't “real”: “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice. We are a long way from the lunch counters of Greensboro.” (Gladwell 2010) (Eskinder Nega, the Ethiopian journalist imprisoned since September 2011 for his online writings, might disagree with Gladwell's risk assessments.)

Presumably, Gladwell has even less use for HRC's Facebook supporters than for those who retweeted bulletins from Tahrir. “Slacktivism,” a term coined in the 1990s, but brought to prominence by Internet theorist Evgeny Morozov, posits that online activism may detract from “real,” offline activism by persuading us that we are having an impact even when we're doing nothing. Slacktivism, Morozov (2009) and other critics like Micah White (2010) suggest, is better understood as fashion or as pack behavior than activism. We might even understand slacktivism as exploitation of the young and impressionable by media-savvy campaigners raising money for their causes, as some critics of Invisible Children's Kony 2012 campaign have argued (Oyston 2012).

These critiques presume that participants in online activism are naïve and deluded. They also presume there is something more effective the online activists could be doing with their attention and energies. In the case of the Human Rights Campaign, presumably, those concerned should have campaigned against Proposition 8 when it was on the ballot in California, or, perhaps, worked to elect a President who would have appointed more liberal Supreme Court justices. In the case of protesters brought into the streets in part via the Internet, there tends to be a lionizing in news media of some protesters and a blanket condemnation of others. If there's no other path to social change in a closed society, like pre-

revolution Tunisia or Egypt, and if protesters risk arrest or injury, they are celebrated. If there are other paths towards change, as in the U.S. or Western Europe, public protest is often dismissed as performance or self-indulgence, as with criticisms of the Occupy and Indignados movements.

I'm interested in understanding online activism in a way that avoids ridiculing a wave of civic engagement without uncritically celebrating it. I believe we're seeing new forms of civic engagement online and I want to understand them while recognizing their (sometimes crippling) shortcomings: a tendency to privilege attention over efficacy disconnects between what's easy to accomplish online and how change unfolds in the world. Rather than advocating for these forms of civic engagement over older forms, I hope to understand why many people, particularly young people, are drawn to these new forms of engagement and understand when these movements, which I'm calling "participatory civics," are effective in achieving their goals and why they fall short.

### **A Crisis in Civics?**

A narrative that's gained some traction in the U.S. is the idea of a "crisis in civics." This narrative gained visibility with Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000), which warned that Americans were less likely to join voluntary organizations than in the past, and saw a correlation between declining participation in local organizations and broader civic participation. After leaving the bench in 2006, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor also warned that young Americans weren't learning the basics of how their government functioned and called poor grades on standardized civics exams a "crisis" (Dillon 2011). She responded to the crisis by founding iCivics,<sup>1</sup> a nonprofit that teaches civics through online games.

Are the metrics chosen by Putnam and O'Connor to measure civic health the right ones? That half of American eighth graders cannot describe the purpose of the Bill of Rights is disturbing (Dillon 2011), but it may be a mistake to conclude from studies of civics exams that young people aren't interested in community or public life. Levels of volunteering are far higher among the millennial generation than their parents, and exceed 50% for American college students (Harvard Institute of Politics 2013). Joe Kahne and Cathy Cohen have been surveying American youth about their civic behaviors and see strong evidence of "participatory politics;" the use of digital media to engage in political discussion or share civic media (Cohen and Kahne 2012). They suggest we may be missing the picture if we consider only traditional measures of civic engagement, like

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.icivics.org/>

voting rates.

Given the level of disillusionment many Americans feel with the political process (Pew Research 2013; Harvard University Institute of Politics 2013), perhaps we shouldn't expect young people to get involved with traditional politics. On the left, excitement about a presumably progressive African-American president has given way to deep frustration with rising inequality, an unregulated banking system, ongoing military engagement in Afghanistan and a culture of pervasive surveillance that looks like the government's post-traumatic stress reaction to the 9/11 attacks. On the right, a prolonged economic depression combined with demographic shifts that are making the nation less racially and linguistically homogenous suggests a government so out of touch with the concerns of "ordinary" (i.e., white, English-speaking) Americans that we would be better off without it. And both left and right can share frustration over a nation so polarized that our last two Congresses have been the least productive in recent history (Viser 2013). The dominant narrative in U.S. politics is of a government so dysfunctional that it lurches from potential shutdown to potential shutdown. Given the feelings of impotence some senators and representatives are expressing, it's hard to argue that ordinary citizens should feel empowered to make change through government channels. Obama's "Yes We Can" election rhetoric has given way to a resigned, "We probably can't."

This frustration is not limited to electoral politics in the United States. In his book, "In Mistrust We Trust", Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev (2013) examines a wave of recent popular protests in Europe and concludes that while protests may change governments, as they did in Tunisia and Egypt. they are unlikely to change the underlying economic problems that drive European protesters into the streets. Krastev worries that most European governments are powerless in the face of larger economic forces—the Spanish and Greek governments may want to create jobs through government spending, but are forced into austerity by the global market consequences of increasing debt and raising interest rates. You can elect new governments, you can protest against those in power, he argues, but you've got no influence over the economic forces that make nations unlivable. If governments are as powerless as Krastev posits, a view partially echoed in Moises Naim's *The End of Power* (2013), encouraging citizens to seek change through influencing those governments may be a dead end.

Here's an unhappy, but plausible, explanation for the shifting engagement in civics: it's not that people aren't interested in civic participation. They're simply not interested in feeling ineffectual or helpless. Ron Fournier, former Washington DC bureau chief of the Associated Press, has been interviewing young Americans about their attitudes towards civics, and concludes that millennials have a deep attraction to service and a deep distaste for politics

(2013), citing supportive findings from Harvard University's Institute of Politics Spring 2013 survey. The reasons for this are a little surprising: Fournier notes that many high school students began volunteering as a way of marketing themselves for college admissions and ended up discovering their excitement for service in the process. This finding is consistent with Pew Research Center's findings on millennials and civic engagement: their polling suggests that millennials engage in voting less than other generations, but are at least as likely to boycott, boycott or sign online or paper petitions (2010).

This pattern of activism over politics is echoed in research we're beginning to conduct on the global dimensions of digital activism at MIT's Center for Civic Media. The people we interviewed were happy to be called activists but strongly resisted the "political" label (despite their projects seeming "political" to us as researchers), seeing politics as something professionalized, captured by powerful forces and entirely outside of their control.

To understand the impact of online activism and other forms of digital civic engagement, we need to understand two shifts: a broadening in the definition of civics as discussed here, and an additional shift in the definition of citizenship.

### **Becoming Effective Civic Actors**

If citizens, particularly young citizens, are disenchanted with politics—rightly or wrongly—how do we help them become effective civic actors? Implicit in most formal and informal civic training programs is the "informed citizen" model of democratic engagement. In this model, your role as a citizen is to understand the political process and the issues of the day, and to participate through voting for representatives, voting on legislation through referenda, and contacting your representative when you're concerned about an issue, whether local or global. This model is so deeply ingrained in most modern, liberal democracies that we tend to forget that it's a fairly recent development.

In "The Good Citizen" Michael Schudson (1998) argues that this model of the informed citizen is not the picture of American citizenship the nation's founders had in mind, and that it's not necessarily the apotheosis of the democratic state. Competitive elections and secret ballots weren't part of early American democracy, which functioned more as a system to collectively affirm prominent elites as elected representatives. The party system that replaced early American democracy was less about debating issues than about alliances to parties that functioned as social clubs. It wasn't until the reforms of the progressive era, in the early 20th century, that the idea that ordinary citizens should be informed about issues and active participants in political debates became a mainstream idea. Schudson (2003) notes that this model often places

completely unreasonable demands on citizens, asking Californians to read a 400-page treatise on ballot propositions before voting, and correlates to a sharp drop in voter participation from the heyday of party politics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Moving into the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, Schudson (1998) argues that we've moved away from the informed citizen model to newer paradigms; a rights-based model of citizenship that seeks change through the court system, and the idea of the "monitorial citizen," who engages in civics by monitoring governments and other powerful actors. This idea is developed at length by John Keane (2009) who sees the monitorial citizen as a natural response to "post-representative democracy" and to a media-saturated world, where citizens must choose issues to engage with based on their knowledge, interest and ability to have an impact.

Schudson (1998) is careful not to privilege one model of citizenship over another; neither rights-based nor monitorial citizenship is necessarily the correct adaptation of representative democracy to contemporary political realities. Equally, monitorial citizenship is not necessarily inferior to the informed citizen paradigm, which leaves the intriguing idea that people who are disengaged from traditional politics might not be bad citizens under an old paradigm but good citizens under a new one.

I've started using the term "participatory civics" to refer to forms of civic engagement that use digital media as a core component and embrace a post-"informed citizen" model of civic participation. One of the characteristics of this version of civics is an interest—perhaps a need—for participants to see their impact on the issues they're trying to influence. Practitioners of participatory civics have grown up on participatory media: they are used to being able to share their perspectives and views with the world, and to seeing their influence in terms of how many people read and share their words. This desire to see participation directly has been most apparent in the online giving space. Projects like Kiva<sup>2</sup> and GlobalGiving<sup>3</sup> allow people to support an individual entrepreneur in the developing world, rather than an organization focused broadly on eliminating poverty. Donors Choose<sup>4</sup> lets donors support a specific project in a specific classroom rather than supporting a whole school or an organization working on educational reform. Kickstarter<sup>5</sup> and Indiegogo<sup>6</sup> let you support a single work by an artist rather than supporting a museum or a dance company, while Spacehive<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kiva.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.globalgiving.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.donorschoose.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kickstarter.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.indiegogo.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://spacehive.com/>



and Neighbor.ly<sup>8</sup> ask individuals to fund projects that might once have been funded through tax revenues.

The rising popularity of these platforms leads to worries that they are pulling money away from traditional arts organizations (a parallel to the argument that online activism is pulling energy away from offline activism) (Tugend 2014), or hopes that they may bring new donors into the space. The desire to see a personal influence on events may not be the most efficient path towards change, as not every issue benefits from a social media campaign or crowdfunding—some of the best advocacy is done behind the scenes, in ways where it's very hard for a supporter to be a participant. And participatory models may not be as fair and inclusive as older models. Some of the debate over “civic crowdfunding” raises questions about whether wealthy, well-wired communities will benefit and poor, less-wired communities will lose out, if the desire to see an impact of your funding means you require to see how funding benefits you and your community, specifically (Zuckerman 2012).

Another aspect of participatory civics is that it tends to be driven by specific passions, not by broader adherence to political movements or philosophies. A movement like Invisible Children,<sup>9</sup> which aims to raise awareness of atrocities committed by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda and bring the warlord to justice, is hard to pin down in conventional left/right terms. Is it a left-leaning human rights movement? A right-leaning, Christian-rooted movement for military intervention? The answer is that it's neither: it's an issue that cuts across traditional party lines and creates new and unusual coalitions. We are starting to see some of the same dynamics at work around an emerging coalition opposed to NSA surveillance of communications around the globe: left-wing privacy advocates, libertarians, and nationalists furious at violations of sovereignty.

This escape from traditional political poles to explore the issues we're most passionate about is liberating, but it's worth remembering that passions have a downside. Many analysts of African policy—and more important, many Africans—argued that while arresting Joseph Kony may have been the passion of Invisible Children, it wasn't a major priority for African development or security (UN officials focused on conflict in central Africa described LRA violence in 2011 as “The last gasp of a dying organisation that's still trying to make a statement.” (Miles 2012)) Furthermore, a public sphere built of passionate, self-interested people will likely have problems coming together to deliberate possible solutions, and may not even be able to agree on what issues are worth considering. I'll examine this idea, that participatory, passion-driven politics leads

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<sup>8</sup> <http://neighbor.ly/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://invisiblechildren.com/>

to a pointillistic public sphere and how that public sphere might work, near the end of this article.

I'm not trying to argue for the superiority or inferiority of participatory civics. Such arguments are better made by experimentalists like Jennifer Earl, who make a compelling case that online tactics like petitions are often successful in achieving their objectives and in increasing engagement, especially youth engagement with civics (Earl and Kimport 2011).

Instead, I hope to document that this type of civics is on the rise and to introduce a debate about this changing space that doesn't recapitulate the decade-long "bloggers versus journalists" debate (see e.g. Rosen 2005). When blogging came to widespread public attention a decade ago, we heard predictions that loose collectives of bloggers would replace CNN or *The New York Times*. Those tech enthusiasts sound pretty silly a decade later, but so do those who argued that only trained, experienced journalists could break significant stories. (Paging Glenn Greenwald!) A decade later, we've reached a new form of journalism that incorporates aspects of old and new models and has new strengths and weaknesses; a model where newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* have blogs, columns and news stories and where writers may be bloggers one day and reporters the next. I predict similar developments around participatory civics, where it will become the norm, not the exception, for political and activist campaigns to rely on social media, crowdfunding and other digital techniques as well as advertising, lobbying and conventional fundraising.

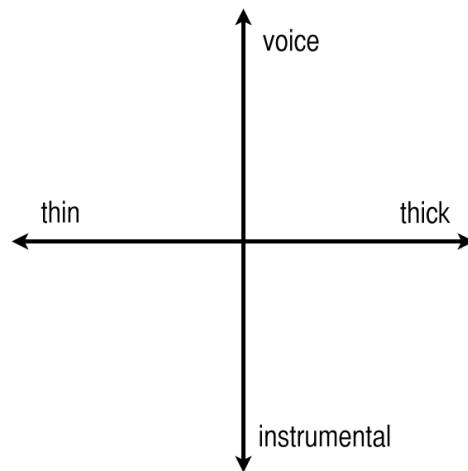
One of the reasons the conversations about the impacts of participatory media on journalism were so frustrating is that social media is an enormously broad category. It's hard to make the case that Instagramming your lunch is an act of reportage, though the same photo-sharing technologies were used to report the London underground bombings. Questions about whether participatory media is journalism aren't well answered by considering what platform was used—it's more helpful to consider how a medium was used and what it was used for. I suspect the same is true for participatory civics. We need to distinguish between different acts of participatory civics and to judge them, at least in part, on their effectiveness in accomplishing citizen intent.

### **The Thick and Thin of Participatory Civics**

Figure 2 shows how I've been organizing my thinking about participatory civics. "Thick" and "thin" (the horizontal axis) refers to what's asked of you as a participant in a civic act: do we need your feet or your head? In thin forms of engagement, your job is simply to show up: to the rally, to sign the petition, to change your profile picture. In thick engagement, someone else, presumably, has

done the thinking and concluded that what's needed to persuade or to make a point is mass participation. In thick engagement, your job is to figure out what needs to be done. Someone organizing a thick campaign knows they have a problem to solve and recruits participants as a way of finding possible solutions, as well as people capable of carrying out those solutions. Much of what occurred in the Occupy camps was thick engagement—Occupiers took responsibility for determining how the camps ran, what issues an Occupy camp focused on and how it would do so.

Figure 2: Axes of Participatory Civics



There's a tendency to dismiss thin engagement as trivial and (sometimes) to celebrate thick engagement, as Gladwell does in his comparison of online activism and the civil rights movement. First, it's worth remembering that thick and thin are a continuum, not a binary. Creating a custom version of the HRW equality campaign logo is marginally thicker than replacing your Facebook icon with HRW's logo (which is about as thin as you can get). It's also important to realize that we want and need certain types of engagement to be thin. It's not supposed to be hard to vote. If you need to brainstorm solutions that allow you to get to the polls and cast your vote—thick voting—that's probably evidence of voter suppression.

The instrumental end of the vertical axis refers to engagement that has a specific, direct theory of change: "To legally recognize equal marriage, I need to pass a law in the next cycle of ballot referenda. To get the law on the ballot

requires 50,000 signatures of registered voters. I'm emailing to ask you to volunteer to gather signatures so we can get on the ballot and pass the law." Instrumental engagement usually has a target: a law to pass, a person or entity to persuade. Instrumental engagement can also target the general public when it's trying to change norms: we might want to reach everyone with a social marketing campaign if our goal isn't to pass an equal marriage bill but to persuade people that gay and lesbian marriage is socially acceptable.

It's often easy to identify a specific sphere in which instrumental engagement takes place. In the petition example, the campaign is unfolding in the legal sphere: we want to pass a law and we're using the referendum process to do so. Campaigns that unfold in the legal sphere aren't always so straightforward—consider the DREAM activists, who are seeking a path to citizenship for the millions of undocumented young people brought to the US by their parents when they were children. Many DREAMers didn't realize they were undocumented until they applied to college and discovered they would need to pay unaffordable out of state tuition. DREAMers have become a rallying point for immigrant rights in the US because they didn't choose to immigrate to the US, and because they've been assimilated by being educated in American high schools.

Despite President Obama's stated support for special status for DREAMers, Congressional dysfunction makes it very unlikely that DREAMers will be citizens any time soon. So some are choosing to hack the legal system—a group called the DREAM 9 have left the country for Mexico and attempted to re-enter the US and demand asylum, seeking a challenge to their status through the court system rather than the legislative system (Demby 2013). They are accompanying this campaign with a documentation campaign using social and traditional media designed to give them some control over the narrative of their campaign, making clear that they're seeking a solution for all young people in their position, not just individual asylum.

We're used to seeing activism and civics unfold in the sphere of law. One of the fascinating aspects of participatory civics is that it's unfolding in other spheres as well. I've turned to Lawrence Lessig's book *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (1999) for a possible map of these spheres. Lessig's key breakthrough in *Code* was the idea that technologies were regulated not just by law, but by code, markets and norms. If copyright holders wanted to ensure movies weren't shared through the Internet, they could seek passage and enforcement of laws that equated unauthorized copying with theft. They could also pressure operating system manufacturers to make it difficult or impossible to copy certain types of files on their systems, seeking to regulate through code. (Lessig wrote *Code* not long after serving as Special Master in *United States v. Microsoft*,<sup>10</sup> and

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<sup>10</sup> *United States v. Microsoft Corporation* 253 F.3d 34 (2001).

developed a healthy fear of the power a company like Microsoft had in making behaviors difficult or impossible through code.) Lessig notes that we regulate through norms and markets as well. Copyright holders might work to make copying socially undesirable, terming it piracy. Or they might seek to make copying expensive and purchasing of digital music inexpensive.

What works for regulation works for civics and activism as well. As theories of change that focus on law and politics grow more professionalized and less accessible to new civic actors (or as those new participants lose faith in their ability to influence law and politics), we're seeing innovative strategies that work in the three other spheres: of code, markets, and norms.

### **Influencing Code, Markets and Norms**

In response to the Snowden revelations about pervasive NSA surveillance, a group of Icelandic media activists began a project called Mailpile.<sup>11</sup> Mailpile is a new email client, designed from the ground up to make it easy to use PGP encryption to protect your email from being read if intercepted. While there is some belief that the NSA can break many online encryption systems (Ball, Borger, and Greenwald 2013), possibly by intercepting the private key and user passphrase on a compromised computer (Schneier 2013), widespread use of encryption would force the NSA to do vastly more work to analyze the content of mail, and would protect users who the NSA had not explicitly targeted for intense surveillance from having their mail “swept up” in data collection efforts. By writing software to make encryption easy and commonplace, their instrumental strategy seeks change through code. (Code, in Lessig’s usage and mine, includes all technical systems—any technology, design or architecture designed to make some behaviors easy and others hard uses a code theory of change, including Latour’s door closer (Johnson 1988).)

Many social media campaigns operate in the space of norms, seeking to change public opinion, as with the Equal Marriage campaign. Some are more targeted than others. Carmen Rios is a young activist based in Washington DC, upset by a disturbing rape case in which teenage girls were sexually abused by high school athletes (Martin 2013). She started an online petition campaign, demanding that the largest association of high school sports coaches commit to teaching a curriculum about sexual violence to their athletes as part of their coaching. After collecting 70,000 signatures, she was invited by the coaching organization to meet and has been working with them to develop their intervention, working with a fellow activist who was a successful high school

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.mailpile.is/>

athlete. Rios's campaign seeks to change two norms—the deep and troubling norms around athletic success and a sense of sexual entitlement, and the norms of where and when sex education is offered in high school—and is a helpful example of thin engagement in an online petition that's led to real, offline action.

Rising interest in the space of social entrepreneurship shows the popularity of theories of change in the market sphere. My favorite example here is of a young Pakistani woman, who I'm privileged to have as a visitor in my lab at MIT. Khalida Brohi is from Balochistan, one of the tribal regions of Pakistan, where cultural practices demand that women remain profoundly isolated from society, essentially locked in their houses after they marry lest they be seen by a man other than a family member. Khalida was lucky to be educated in Karachi with the blessing of her father, who defied traditions to ensure his wife and daughters learned to read. When she returned to her village for a school holiday and discovered that a childhood friend had been the victim of an honor killing, she began a Facebook campaign against honor killings that gained international attention, but that also got her banished from her village. She returned years later with a new idea: she created a company to market the distinctive embroidery made in the Baloch region, and invited local women to come for sewing classes and training to take out microloans and start embroidery businesses. The embroidery program created a space where married women could interact with one another, something that hadn't existed previously in her village, and has become a channel for teaching women to read and write, what Islam does and doesn't teach about women's rights, as well as how to advocate for their rights within their families. While it's become increasingly clear to the men in the villages that the program is changing their relationship with their wives, the area is desperately poor and the men need the income the women are generating. Khalida's work, leveraging market mechanisms to fight for women's rights and using the Internet to find customers and supporters, has now spread to more than 25 villages and she plans to work with 1 million women in the next 10 years. (Zuckerman 2013a)

### **A Theory of Change for Participatory Civics**

Effective activism is rarely exclusive to one of these spheres. The DREAMers aren't just challenging immigration legislation in court—they're trying to win normative battles as well, producing videos where they "come out" as undocumented as a way of making documented people more visible as a step towards social acceptability, much as gay rights activists have used a similar strategy. But thinking in terms of spheres is a helpful way to think about what theory of change underlies an act of instrumental civics.

But how should we think about the Human Rights Campaign's Equal Marriage icon? If this is a strategy that unfolds in the legal sphere—i.e., if we believe that 2.7 million Facebook icons will influence the decision of a panel of judges—we're probably being stupid. We might have more of a case if we see this as a campaign about norms. An argument has been made by Nathan Matias, Molly Sauter and Matt Stempeck that, since support for gay rights correlates strongly to whether you know gay people in your family or social circle, showing people that they have friends who are supporters of marriage equality might sway public opinion, mainstreaming equal marriage and marginalizing equal marriage opponents (2013).

While I find their argument compelling, I think understanding a campaign like this purely in instrumental terms misses important nuances. The opposite pole from “instrumental” in my model is “voice;” a term adopted from Albert Hirschmann's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, a short book on economics that has important implications for political theory (1970). Hirschmann sets out to explore a question that's not well explained by classical economics: how do customers respond to a firm whose goods decrease in quality? Classical economics tells us that customers are rational actors and will leave a firm as soon as another firm offers a better product at the same price. But that's not what happens: some customers stay with a firm out of loyalty, and some go further and express their concerns to management, hoping the firm will achieve its previous level of quality.

This is an interesting observation for economists, but the implications for politics may be more important. If you're dissatisfied with your mobile phone company, you can exit and choose another one. But, despite what Americans say when our party loses an election, very few of us pick up and emigrate to Canada. Literal exit is rare in this case, though Krastev (2013) argues that many young people are figuratively exiting by disengaging with politics. The alternative is voice; expressing our dissatisfaction with a firm or a nation in the hopes that we can reverse its decline.

Hirschmann considers an instrumental case for voice—if enough of us raise our voices loud enough, we may persuade our mobile phone company or our nation to change its path. But it's likely that voice is an important path to civic engagement even when we are not directly advocating a policy or norms change. Voice may be the first step towards engagement in instrumental civics. We use voice to identify with a movement before taking more instrumental steps, whether this involves coming out as a DREAMer, or identifying as an ally by turning our Facebook icon pink. By using voice to affiliate, we identify with a cause and prepare ourselves to take other steps.

Second, voice begets voice. It's hard to come out as gay—or as undocumented—when you're the only one in your town or university to do so.

When other people talk about a controversial issue, it's easier to share your voice and experience, as the member of a marginalized group or an ally.

Third, voice sets agenda. One of the great potentials of participatory media is that it allows a large segment of the population to share their perspectives and opinions and, sometimes, find an audience. When an engaged public raises their voices, individually and collectively, on an issue, they signal interest in a topic to professional media outlets, who will often pick up the issue, exposing it to a broader audience. When social media and the professional press discuss an issue, they often introduce the issue to policymakers' agenda—Invisible Children was successful in doing this with Kony 2012, as were activists focused on Darfur a decade ago.

Finally, voice builds movements through synchronization. A symbol, like the HRC's Equal Marriage symbol, given strength through widespread adoption, can become a rallying point for a movement, bringing together participants working in different spheres around a common narrative.

My sense is that the synchronizing function of voice is critical if we are interested in effective civics, not just participatory civics. While there's a great deal of raised voices around responses to NSA surveillance, and some exciting legal and technical projects, there's still need for a common narrative and a broad movement that responds to surveillance. Legal approaches by themselves may fail, as what the NSA did appears to be outside most interpretations of existing US law—stronger laws offer no assurances they will be enforced without sustained public outcry. Projects like Mailpile will only succeed with widespread usage, which requires a shift in norms (encryption by default) and a shift in markets, by punishing companies that produce unencrypted, cloud-based email and rewarding those that enable user-friendly end-to-end encryption.

Applying this matrix—thin/thick, instrumental/voice—to case studies of digital activism, like those in the Global Digital Activism Data Set,<sup>12</sup> offers me some hope that we're experiencing not an exit from civics, but a change in the shape of participation. I predict this change will become mainstream and that debates over whether online activism is slacktivism or meaningful participation will become as uninteresting as debates about whether bloggers are journalists: some blogging is journalism, some online activism is slacktivism. Evaluating the success of any online engagement requires asking what a civic actor hoped to achieve and whether she achieved it. Does thin engagement take advantage of strength in numbers? Does thick engagement take advantage of the creativity of those involved? Do instrumental approaches have a believable theory of change? Do voice approaches build engagement and grow movements?

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://digital-activism.org/projects/gdads/>



## The Limits to Civic Engagement

While I'm excited to see the diverse ways digital media is being used for civic engagement, I am worried about some of the limits to these techniques. In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky (2008) argues that the Internet has changed politics and activism because the ability to find like-minded people online and to mobilize networks for friends makes rapid group formation incredibly easy. This argument seems to prefigure the Arab Spring and the wave of protests the US, Latin America, and Europe have been experiencing, where large movements seem to spring up overnight. Sociologist Zeynep Tufekçi examines why it's so hard for these popular movements to sustain themselves and turn into effective political movements, observing that the Tahrir youth were pushed aside in the Egyptian polls by the Muslim Brotherhood (and later the army) and that the occupiers of Gezi Park have decamped and formed neighborhood fora that seem unlikely to pressure Erdogan or achieve their political goals (2013). Some protesters are highly successful in marshaling counterpower, ousting a dictator, but they have trouble converting counterpower into governing power.

Tufekçi offers an analogy to explain this phenomenon (Zuckerman 2013b; Tufekçi 2014). In the past decades, it's become much easier to climb to the summit of Mt Everest—packaged trips promise to help non-elite climbers summit Everest supported by sherpas, oxygen, etc. While more people are summiting Everest, more are also dying—if something goes wrong, non-elite climbers are less able to rescue themselves and others on the mountain. In this analogy, social media is a sherpa, an oxygen tank for protest. In the past, bringing 50,000 people out for a protest required months or years of planning and negotiation between different interest groups. When those groups took to the streets, they represented the hard work necessary to build coalitions, and their presence was a signal to authorities that they faced well-organized, deep resistance. Gezi Park, Tufekçi argues, brought together a coalition that had no common issues other than frustration with Erdogan—nationalists, Kurds, Allawi, gay and lesbian Turks—and, because it brought them together so quickly and with little compromise, the coalition was unstable.

The problem of bringing protesters together into deliberation is a special case of a general problem: if civics is driven by passionate participation, how do we create a deliberative public space? Many democratic theories of politics rely on public deliberation as a path towards public input into processes of governance. The problem with participatory civics is not the absence of paths towards public input—it's the overabundance. If I'm passionate about UN intervention in the Central African Republic and you're concerned with legalizing raw milk sales in your town, we can both share our views and rally our forces, but it could be very

challenging to get me to listen to you, or vice versa.

This isn't a new problem, of course. When Walter Lippmann questioned the idea of an informed, engaged public in *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925), arguing that the public was more likely to be manipulated by self-interested elites, he was alluding, in part, to these issues. Average citizens, Lippmann proposed, were unlikely to know what was important enough to deliberate, and unlikely to have the information to engage in those deliberations—instead, they are more likely to be incensed and roused by issues marketed to them. John Dewey's proposed solution in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) is a free and informative press. A truly free press resists manipulation and creates informed citizens capable of deliberation. But Dewey's optimism offers little to address problems of attention and agenda-setting, and the challenge of helping a passionate and participatory public choose the issues to deliberate.

Writing at the beginning of the participatory revolution in journalism, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel offer the idea of the "interlocking public" (2001). They hope that a press that's professional and amateur, digital and analog, can solve this problem. Looking for information on the Central African Republic, I will encounter something on raw milk, and vice versa. If I don't, you can advocate for raw milk and tell me why it's important and I can explain why I care about the Central African Republic, and why you should, too.

Kovach and Rosenstiel's vision is an encouraging one, but it's unclear whether their hopes are realized in the digital public sphere. Lippmann's fears of manipulable masses suggest we may be heading into a public sphere where those loudest and most effective in advocating for their causes set the agenda for those who are quieter, as Invisible Children did through their skillful use of citizen media to promote their Kony 2012 campaign. Perhaps we will see voice become exit: in participating to further our passions, we exit from deliberation and from other discourses we are less interested in.

The result may be a pointillist public sphere where it's easy to pay attention to the small range of topics you and your friends are interested in, but where it requires a great deal of work and conscious effort to see the bigger picture. Social media allows the friends you follow online to participate in setting your political agenda, adding dots to the canvas that are in your immediate line of sight. We likely need a new class of tools and practices to help us step back and see our interests and perspectives in a broader context. As I argue in *Rewire* (Zuckerman 2013c), these are challenging tools to build due to our natural tendency to pay attention to those of similar sociocultural backgrounds and barriers of translation, context and discovery. However, if we believe in the importance of deliberation, not just about individual issues but about what issues merit deliberation, we need original thinking about how millions of points of individual and group interest resolve into an intelligible picture.

## **Conclusion: Towards a New Civics?**

While there are vast unanswered questions about how participatory media may change civics, there is a pressing and concrete question: How should we teach civic participation to a generation of “digital natives?”<sup>13</sup> I am lucky enough to work regularly with activists who work online and who organize young people around important issues. One of these people is Andrew Slack, head of a group called The Harry Potter Alliance,<sup>14</sup> which uses themes from pop culture to introduce young people to civic participation and activism. They’ve launched a campaign around *The Hunger Games* books by Suzanne Collins, which are garnering attention through a series of four Hollywood movies. The books portray a post-apocalypse nation where residents of rural districts are dominated by a wealthy urban elite. The HPA’s campaign, *We Are the Districts*,<sup>15</sup> links the film to income inequality in America and in the world, and invites fans to take arms against inequality in the ways Katniss Everdeen takes arms against a corrupt government.

Right now the campaign is quite thin, and focused on voice—HPA invites you to video yourself giving a three-fingered salute, a gesture of resistance in the books and films. But Andrew and his colleagues are building a very clever marketing campaign (Maloney 2013), and they are profoundly aware that they need to help their young participants move to thicker, more instrumental forms of civics. So I leave you with a question: Civics is changing. How do we help those inspired by *The Hunger Games* use digital tools to become participatory, passionate and effective civic actors?

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<sup>13</sup> I acknowledge that the term is complicated and disputed, but use the term in the spirit Palfrey and Gasser do in their book *Born Digital* (2010).

<sup>14</sup> <http://thehpalliance.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://wearethedistricts.tumblr.com/>

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