Educational, Psychological, and Behavioral Considerations in Niche Online Communities

Vivek Venkatesh
Concordia University, Canada

Jason Wallin
University of Alberta, Canada

Juan Carlos Castro
Concordia University, Canada

Jason Edward Lewis
Concordia University, Canada

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Chapter 13

Citizen In/Action:
Analyzing Online Forums for Pedagogical Insight

Tieja Thomas
Concordia University, Canada

Nicole Fournier-Sylvester
Concordia University, Canada

Vivek Venkatesh
Concordia University, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a study that explored how citizens enact their citizenship within one niche online community dedicated to teaching about and supporting issues related to global citizenship. The research highlights the limitations of existing conceptualizations of citizenship paradigms and associated educational programming. In the discussion, the authors suggest that the integration and use of the Internet—specifically the use of forum-based social media platforms—as a curriculum supplement may effectively address the challenges and limitations that exist within traditional citizenship education classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past conflicts, but all political struggle is now mediated by media, computer, and information technologies and increasingly will be so. Those interested in the politics and culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the new public spheres and intervene accordingly. (Kahn & Kellner, 2007, p. 33)

Citizens in post-industrial democracies are becoming increasingly disengaged from thinking critically about political issues and, more broadly from participation in civic activities (Chareka & Sears, 2006; Flanagan, Syversten, & Stout, 2009). However, current research suggests that although this may be true when it comes to traditional political involvement many citizens – notably the younger generation of citizens – engage with social and political issues through social media (Bennett, 2008). For example, through the use of online communication platforms such as social network sites and forums, many young people

educate themselves and mobilize others around issues that are directly relevant to them (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Bers, 2008). As such, we are increasingly required to acknowledge that citizenship within an era of globalization reflects not only the socio-political, but the communication worlds that individuals inhabit, as well. Now into the second decade of the 21st century, the Internet can be understood not only as a means to obtain political information but also as a space where engagement, organization, and political interaction already occur.

This chapter describes a study that explored how citizens enact their citizenship within *TakingITGlobal* (www.tigweb.org), a niche online community dedicated to teaching about and supporting issues related to global citizenship. Our research highlights how emerging forms of civic participation fit into current citizenship paradigms, as well as how the use of the Internet – specifically the use of forum-based social media platforms – contributes to civic education outcomes. This line of inquiry adds to the nascent body of research that speaks to the impact of Internet communities on civic engagement and generates unique evidence relating to democratic citizenship, both from a theoretical and practical standpoint.

Our objectives in pursuing an inquiry of this nature were threefold. First, we aimed to highlight the complexity of citizen identity paradigms; second, we endeavored to demonstrate how the dynamics of democratic participation and authority evolves in online environments; third, we sought to underscore the potential of online forums as a tool for developing critical thinking and literacy skills. In what follows, we aim to make a positive contribution to citizenship education scholarship by revealing how the types of interactions that are enabled by social media can impact participants' citizen identity development, as well as help citizens to cultivate the skills and attitudes necessary to navigate the complex relationship between themselves and society. Our discussion points to the limitations of existing conceptualizations

of citizenship paradigms and associated educational programming. Further, we offer practical recommendations for civic educators interested in using social media in their classrooms as a means of promoting discussions of controversial socio-political issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Citizenship Paradigms

The notion of democracy occupies a relatively privileged position in many post-industrial societies. Many "educators, policymakers, politicians, and community activists alike pursue dozens of agendas for change under the banner of furthering democracy" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 237); however, beliefs concerning what underlies the notion of democracy vary greatly, as do the processes through which it is believed to be attained. These varying conceptions of the nature and practice of democracy bring with them differing visions of citizenship, which reflect relatively distinct theoretical and curricular goals.

Actualizing vs. Dutiful Citizens

Recently scholars have begun to explore the implications of the use of new technologies for citizen identity development and ultimately, citizenship education. These scholars assert that due to the proliferation of new communication platforms, which stimulate increased connectivity over time and across borders (Merryfield & Duty, 2008), citizens are approaching learning about and engagement in civic issues differently than in previous decades (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009). Seeking to respond to these changes in citizen identity and learning, these scholars suggest that we are now living in a time of two citizenship paradigms.

Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) propose that changes have occurred with regards to youth's civic orientations, as a result of the effects of

globalization – i.e. increased connectivity across geographic and cultural borders, economic restructuring, weakening of national ties. They argue that these changes have had a profound impact on the manner in which young people identify and the political structures with which they affiliate. Bennett (1998) was among the first to suggest that youth's disengagement with traditional political participation such as voting, is not a total abandonment of politics; rather, he argues that younger citizens are more inclined to become engaged with issues more closely connected to lifestyle values, such as environmental and moral causes. Nevertheless, these shifts in citizens' political interests and commitments have given rise to two distinctly meaningful citizenship paradigms: the dutiful citizen and the actualizing citizen.

The archetypal dutiful citizen is one for whom citizenship consists primarily of the duty to participate in elections, public service, community organizations, political parties, and other government-centered activities (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Voting is *the* core democratic act and a high degree of trust is placed in political leaders. Within this paradigm, citizenship education privileges transmitting civic knowledge – i.e. knowledge of formal institutions and processes (Josic, 2011; Starkey, 2002) – via authoritative sources, such as textbooks, political leaders, or mainstream news outlets.

The archetypal actualizing citizen is one for whom citizenship consists of engagement with a brand of politics that allows for self-expression and self-actualization (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Palfry & Gasser, 2009). Engaging with issues related to lifestyle politics and social activism are important democratic acts and peer-to-peer communication is highly valued. Within this paradigm, citizenship education privileges learning that results from participatory media creation, engaging in interactive and experiential opportunities for social action, and the use of digital media.

Personally Responsible, Participatory, and Justice Oriented Citizens

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) maintain that citizenship education curriculum develops according to the particular vision of democracy that its developers hold. Each of these visions is believed to build citizens who are able to contribute and support an effective democratic society. Westheimer and Kahne contend that while there are multiple conceptions of what makes a 'good citizen', three visions of citizenship predominate among citizenship education practitioners and scholars: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice oriented citizen.

Educational programming that caters to the development of personally responsible citizens is that which emphasizes personal character development and acting responsibly within society. Programs falling under this category espouse values such as abiding the law, volunteering for causes that assist those less fortunate, and working and paying taxes. The core assumption within these programs is that by building good character, by being honest, and by acting responsibly, citizens will be able to solve any social problems that they encounter.

Educational programming that caters to the development of participatory citizens is that which emphasizes active participation in civic issues at the community, provincial/state, national, or international level. Programs belonging to this category teach citizens about the structures behind political and community-based organizations so that they may one day participate in collective efforts for social action. The core assumption within these programs is that by developing procedural understanding and leadership skills, citizens will be able to actively participate in established systems and structures in order to solve any social problems that they encounter.

Educational programming that caters to the development of justice oriented citizens is that which emphasizes social critique of the structures

underlying the processes of political and community-based activities. Programs of this nature call attention to social injustice and emphasize the need for citizens to take steps towards creating social change and social justice, while considering the varying perspectives held within society. The core assumption within these programs is that by questioning and critiquing the hegemonic forces at play within society, citizens will be able to solve any social problems that they encounter.

Both the literature surrounding actualizing versus dutiful citizens and the literature surrounding personally responsible, participatory, and justice oriented citizens acknowledges that these paradigms are not distinct. The scholars associated with each of these paradigms assert that citizen identity is fluid, dynamic, and changing. However, educational programming has not yet caught up with this reality. For example, often citizenship education is conceptualized as an actualizing process at the level of policy; however, once in the classroom, citizenship education efforts most often involve processes of creating dutiful citizens. The reasons for this are numerous: actualizing processes take time, few authoritative texts exist that offer support for self-actualization, understanding traditional political processes is important, etc. However, often even the most well-meaning citizenship education efforts fail when they treat citizenship paradigms as distinct and privilege one vision of citizenship above the others. Different situations call for different citizenship characteristics and practices to come to the fore – a fact that is only amplified when citizens interact within increasingly heterogeneous online spaces.

Democracy Online

Since the advent and proliferation of citizens' access to the Internet in the early 1990s, scholars have posited it as a democratic space. Its potential as an environment wherein interactive, transnational, and arguably accessible public commentary and argumentation take place has oft been highlighted

and linked to democratic outcomes (Dahlberg, 2007). However, to date little attention has been paid to how the dynamics of power – i.e., participation and authority – are gained and sustained within this relatively heterogeneous and unmediated space. While there are a range of democratic models embraced by Internet-researchers and commentators (e.g., liberal individualist, communitarian, technocratic), the following discussion focuses on the dynamics of power within two conceptualizations of online democracy that demand a robust form of democratic interaction (Dahlberg, 2001): deliberative democracy and radical democracy.

Deliberative Democracy

Many Internet-democracy scholars and practitioners advocate a vision of citizen political participation that has at its core, a deliberative public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007; Forst, 2001; Gimmler, 2001). Grounded in Habermasian theory, this public sphere is identified as involving "rational debate or argumentation between citizens over common problems [that] leads to critically informed public opinion" (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 49). Citizen autonomy, as well as respect for and emphasis on difference are central to the deliberative process, wherein citizens come together to inter-subjectively produce public rationality and opinion that allows for critical scrutiny of formal politics. Ideally, this rational communication is inclusive, non-coercive, communicatively equal, honest, respectful, well-reasoned, and reflexive (Dahlberg, 2007).

Critics of this model of democracy argue that by emphasizing rational communication, deliberative scholars and practitioners do not take into account the normalizing and exclusionary effects of designating a particular form(s) of "communication as *the* rational and democratically legitimate norm" (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 53, emphasis in original). As such, participation and authority are limited to those citizens who adhere

to forms of communication and social norms that are *a priori* deemed to be democratically valid and accepted. Citizens whose modes of expression do not align with the predetermined rules of communication are excluded on the basis that their discussion is irrational, private, non-democratic, etc. However, sophisticated deliberative theorists argue that the respect for difference emphasized within this democratic model maximizes inclusion and ensures that only non-democratic voices are excluded.

Radical Democracy

Recently, scholars interested in Internet-democracy have begun to explore the Internet's potential for radical democracy. Seeking to subvert models of democracy that support online practices that reproduce existing power structures, radical theorists forward a vision of "cyberspace as a site of struggle, supporting both the reproduction of dominant social relations and their contestation by excluded groups" (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 48). Like deliberative democracy, deliberation occupies a privileged position within the radical conception of democracy; however, in this version citizen deliberation occurs primarily within an informal public sphere where linkages between citizens excluded from the mainstream public sphere are facilitated rather than repressed. Within this model, participation happens from the margins and authority is given to those who critique dominant discourses and practices, as well as those who forward counter-discourses within self-created deliberative forums. Radical forms of deliberation are viewed as "crucial to just and effective governance, for it is only in [the informal] public sphere that free, undistorted discussions about society's values and goals can take place" (Cohen & Fung, 2004, p. 28).

Critics of this model of democracy argue that its forms of communication may have little political relevance, as they are necessarily indirect in their

impact on formal politics (Cohen & Fung, 2004). However, proponents of radical democracy argue that it fosters more egalitarian forms of participation and deliberation, as it supports autonomy in the face of pluralism, which in turn produces conflict that does not aim for consensus (Mouffe, 1996). This tendency to forgo consensus in favor of conflict keeps deliberation alive and politics in motion, which in turn heightens the chance of informal communication ultimately influencing formal deliberation.

Research Question

Following from our literature review, the research question we tackled was: How can frameworks of democratic theory and practice help us to understand interactions within forums on *TakingITGlobal*? Specifically, our research focused on the democratic discussion of one controversial socio-political topic because we share Webber's (1994) belief that "the core of any democratic community is not ethnicity or language or some catalogue of shared values. It is the commitment to a particular debate through time" (p. 223).

METHODOLOGY

Method

This study used computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004) in order to explore the structure and meaning of individuals' interactions, social behavior, and participation within the context of one forum-based social network site, *TakingITGlobal*. Our procedures were as follows: 1) articulate a research question, 2) select a computer-mediated data sample, 3) operationalize key concepts in terms of discourse features, 4) apply methods of inductive content analysis to the data, and 5) interpret the results.

Context

TakingITGlobal

We sampled publicly available discussions drawn from *TakingITGlobal* (www.tigweb.org), an open online community that has been recognized as being an exemplary Website that teaches about and supports issues relating to global citizenship (Bell, 2005). This niche social media platform brings together a community of individuals interested in citizenship education and civic engagement. It encourages cross-cultural dialogue and exchange within a series of discussion forums, which we explored in our process of data sampling between December 2011 and January 2012. We applied quantitative criteria in order to identify the issue(s) that *TakingITGlobal* users were most engaged with. Using the *quantity* of responses as an indication of engagement we were able to isolate the discussion thread that generated the greatest amount of debate, and then proceeded to analyze the *quality* of the conversations therein.

At the time of sampling (January, 2012), there were a total of 10, 305 threads within the *Featured* and *Issues* discussion forums. The thread with the most number of responses was titled "Saddam's Paranoia = Reality (?)" and was found in the *Peace & Conflict* section of the *Issues* forum. This particular thread, active from March 29th, 2004 to November 8th, 2004, began with an individual posing the question: "Was the war in Iraq justified?", and contained 911 responses.

Super-Users

We further refined our sampling strategy by focusing on six 'super-users' (Venkatesh, Shaikh, et al., 2012) who contributed frequently to the discussion thread over the course of the seven months that it was active. These super-users all self-identified

as being male, lived in the United States (4), Sri Lanka (1), and Iraq (1), and contributed an average of 850 posts to various forums on the Website. Table 1 outlines further demographic information.

Analysis

Once the discussion thread was identified, we operationalized the five citizenship paradigms forwarded by Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) and Westheimer and Kahne (2004) in terms of discourse features (see Table 2). We then used the names of these paradigms and their associated discourse features as 'citizen codes' in order to classify the comments offered by our six super-users. Using the citizen codes, we were able to analyze how individuals working from and within divergent citizenship paradigms came together in order to democratically discuss a controversial socio-political topic.

In proceeding through our analysis, we focused on three critical points within the discussion (see Table 3). The first critical point occurs at the beginning of the thread when one forum user poses the question: *Was the war in Iraq justified?* The second critical point occurs when a self-identified Iraqi citizen joins the discussion, two and a half weeks after the discussion was started. The third critical point coincides with an event,

Table 1. Demographic information for 6 super-users

Screen Name	Country	Total Site Posts
Zephyr	United States	464
Tully	Iraq	151
Marshall	United States	171
Stuart	United States	3007
Ives	United States	255
Fabian	Sri Lanka	1055

Note. Screen names have been changed.

Table 2. Discourse features of five citizenship paradigms

Bennett, Wells, & Rank (2009)	
Actualizing Citizen	**Dutiful Citizen**
Discussion surrounds issues connected to lifestyle values. Discussion promotes social activism, creation of peer-to-peer networks, and self-actualization. Knowledge is cited from new and digital media.	Discussion connects to issues within traditional political and community structures. Discussion reflects a belief in the importance of conventional political participation (e.g., voting). Knowledge is cited from traditional knowledge sources (e.g., textbooks, mainstream media outlets).

Westheimer & Kahne (2004)		
Personally Responsible Citizen	**Participatory Citizen**	**Justice Oriented Citizen**
Discussion emphasizes individual character development, morality, and pro-social behavior; promotes community-driven activities (e.g., volunteerism).	Discussion reflects heightened involvement in community, often in a leadership role; promotes active participation in civic issues.	Discussion involves questioning, critiquing, and challenging the existing socio-political system(s); promotes participation in activities that aim for social justice.

Table 3. Timeline of events

	Critical Point 1	**Critical Point 2**	**Critical Point 3**
Event	'Initial Question': *Was the war in Iraq justified?*	'Insider Perspective': Tully (self-identified Iraqi citizen) joins discussion	'Handover': US troops pull out of Iraq, hand over sovereignty to Iraqi people

external to the forum; this critical point occurs when the US troops were preparing to pull out of Iraq, three months after the discussion was started.

Citizenship Paradigm Complexity

Our analysis reveals that citizen identity is not manifested as a set of distinct characteristics, but rather that citizens exhibit multifaceted, dynamic, and fluid identities. Many of the super-users articulate discourse features belonging to different citizenship paradigms, both concurrently and over the course of the discussion (see Table 4). In what follows, we present a selection of our analyses, focusing on the presence of the citizenship paradigms occurring at the three critical points identified previously (see Tables 5, 6, and 7).

Multiple and Shifting Citizenship Paradigms

Arguably, every user interacting within the *TakingITGlobal* forum can be categorized as an Actualizing citizen, because they use social media platforms in order to build and participate in peer-to-peer communication networks. In addition to this, however, many of the super-users also explicitly articulate discourse features that characterize other citizenship paradigms, both concurrently and over the course of the discussion thread. For example, discussion comments such as the one offered by Marshall exemplify the presence of discourse features belonging to two different citizenship paradigms simultaneously. He writes:

Table 4. Super-users' membership in the citizenship paradigms at different critical points

Screen Name	Initial Question	Insider Perspective	Handover
Zephyr	Actualizing citizen; Participatory citizen; Personally responsible citizen		Justice oriented citizen
Tully		Personally responsible citizen; Participatory citizen; Dutiful citizen	Personally responsible citizen; Actualizing citizen
Marshall	Actualizing citizen; Dutiful citizen	Actualizing citizen; Justice oriented citizen	
Stuart	Personally responsible citizen; Dutiful citizen	Participatory citizen	
Ives		Actualizing citizen	Justice oriented citizen; Dutiful citizen; Personally responsible citizen; Actualizing citizen
Fabian	Dutiful citizen	Dutiful citizen	Dutiful citizen

To call it a war for oil is a bit simplistic. It goes beyond much more than oil. Really, it is a question of hegemony. Perhaps some of us who lack a framework in which to understand Iraq, might try to read some Iraqi history [...] so we can stop patronizing the hell out of them by making them out to be this failed group of people who need the help of others to decide what they should do as a country.

Pointing to hegemonic forces signals a social justice orientation (Justice oriented citizen), while chastising himself and others for patronizing the Iraqi people can be viewed as promoting their self-actualization (Actualizing citizen).

Similarly, there are times at which a super-user concurrently articulates discourse belonging to paradigms that are approached differently from a pedagogical standpoint (e.g., Actualizing citizen and Dutiful citizen). During the discussion surrounding the Initial Question, Marshall writes:

I happen to believe in the idea of 'self determination'. Pardon me for allowing the belief that Iraqis will decide what they want to do. Will it mean factional fighting? Possibly. Could it lead to an islamist [sic] government? Sure, but I don't see

that as anyone's business but the Iraqis. Look, you need to read Iraqi history. The country has a history of conquer and resistance, liberation - then the cycle starts over again. Why? Well, it's the cradle of civilization, rich in the resources time immemorial. During the Byzantine Empire, it was conquered 4 times because of its water channels. In the 19th/20th century, it has been for oil among other resources/strategic needs (the Ottomans and the Brittish [sic], and frankly, the Americans to some extent).

At the start of this particular comment, Marshall explicitly states his interest in self-determination, which indicates that he's operating within an Actualizing citizenship paradigm. Then later on in the same comment, he goes on to point out the importance of reading history, which is an indication of Dutiful citizenship processes.

Another example of citizenship paradigm complexity can be found within the comments offered by Stuart, who exhibits a paradigmatic shift. His comments at the beginning of the thread can be characterized as Personally responsible discourse, as he points to the necessity to 'take out' the Taliban, which signals his belief in pro-

Table 5. Initial Question: Super-users' citizenship paradigms at Critical Point 1

Screen Name	Paradigm(s)	Quote/Behavior
Zephyr	Actualizing citizen;	"I needed to be reminded about the global warming issue. I had actually been blindsided by the Iraq war and forgot all about it. I guess that's the whole idea! Now think about this...if someone conscious like me can forget about such an important issue for a while because of media bias then what about people who are more casual? How are they even going to be really informed?" "I've heard Howard Zinn's audio, *People's History*. Great stuff. Another reason why we should go beyond the "media" like CNN and FoxNews"
	Participatory citizen; Personally responsible citizen	"I believe it is possible to weave both Stuart and Fabian's plans together. I think a lot more should have been done per-9/11 and I also believe that we need to act more responsibly when it comes to bullying other countries into doing what we want. This will have a natural, not pandering, effect of reducing terrorism. Remember US greed is the long term root of many of our problems, not just terrorism."
Marshall	Actualizing citizen;	"If you are going to fight a resistance movement (if you want to call it terrorism, that's fine, just make sure to apply that equally to the US and its 'coalition' and call it state terrorism), you've got to do it smart. That means in the streets, as Guirellas *[sic]*." "I happen to believe in the idea of 'self determination'. Pardon me for allowing the belief that Iraqis will decide what they want to do. Will it mean factional fighting? Possibly. Could it lead to an islamist *[sic]* government? Sure, but I don't see that as anyone's business but the Iraqis. Look, you need to read Iraqi history. The country has a history of conquer and resistance, liberation - then the cycle starts over again. Why? Well, it's the cradle of civilization, rich in the resources time immemorial. During the Byzantine Empire, it was conquered 4 times because of its water channels. In the 19th/20th century, it has been for oil among other resources/strategic needs (the Ottomans and the Brittish *[sic]*, and frankly, the Americans to some extent)."
	Actualizing citizen; Dutiful citizen	"I happen to believe in the idea of 'self determination'. Pardon me for allowing the belief that Iraqis will decide what they want to do. Will it mean factional fighting? Possibly. Could it lead to an islamist *[sic]* government? Sure, but I don't see that as anyone's business but the Iraqis. Look, you need to read Iraqi history. The country has a history of conquer and resistance, liberation - then the cycle starts over again. Why? Well, it's the cradle of civilization, rich in the resources time immemorial. During the Byzantine Empire, it was conquered 4 times because of its water channels. In the 19th/20th century, it has been for oil among other resources/strategic needs (the Ottomans and the Brittish *[sic]*, and frankly, the Americans to some extent)."
Stuart	Personally responsible citizen; Dutiful citizen	"It was a declaration of war on us and our values." "Attacking Downtown New York is like if the US were to attack the Kaaba *[sic]* in Mecca. If we were to do that - the most concerning thing about the attack on the Kaaba *[sic]* - a holy site - would not be the death toll - but the fact that hostile forces had desecrated Holy ground - that they had attacked and spilt your blood on your own Holy Ground. […] No - New York is not some ancient religious site. It is the epicenter of American Western Democracy. It is the New World."
	Personally responsible citizen	" …what is amazing - is that even though we have all of these different people - there is no violent conflict in America beyond common street crime. All of these different people are not at war with one another - they are united - we live in a land of law."
Fabian	Dutiful citizen	*Contrasts death tolls resulting from the September 11th, 2001 attacks with death tolls resulting from the Iraq war (as of 2003); provides links to government agencies' Websites to corroborate his comments.* *States that he's done research into the numerous countries that the USA has gone to war with or assisted with war efforts; lists these.*

Note. Fabian's posts are summarized, as he provided many hyperlinks to news articles, rather than his own prose.

Table 6. Insider's Perspective: Super-users' citizenship paradigms at Critical Point 2

Screen Name	Insider Perspective	Quote/Behavior
Tully	Personally responsible citizen;	"America is the most powerful country in the world and I think this is a responsibility, to be the policeman of the world. And I want you to show some understanding, please. And just put in your consideration that we waited too long for someone, anyone to save us from saddam *[sic]* and we died waiting but at last America gave us freedom and I think this is something that we (Iraqis) should spend our lives thanking America for what America has done for the Iraqi people."
	Participatory citizen;	"I see that the Iraqi people and America have common goals so why not work together to achieve these goals, like we both wanted to get rid of saddam *[sic]*, we both want a free and secure Iraq, we both want Iraq to be built and we both do not want Iraq to be a resort for the terrorists."
	Dutiful citizen	"I think the solution to the problem of Muslims turning into terrorists can be solved by establishing free democratic governments in their countries, you see for example a group of enthusiastic people in an Arabic country don't have any choice but violence to achieve their goals but in a democratic country they can join political life and if they are backed by the people they can affect the country's behavior by peaceful means."
Ives	Actualizing citizen	*Speaking to Tully*: "We are really so fortunate on this forum to have you as a regular member as you provide us with, I think, the most direct observations of what is happening today in Iraq. In spite of all of our rhetoric and speculation and repeating of what we see in the media, your accounts are easily the most valued of any that I get from Iraq. [...] I hope that you will continue to provide us with your perspective on everything. We all have a real thirst for the "truth" about what is going on in your country and you really help us. I hope that you will not only tell us about what the US Forces are doing (both good and bad) as well as what your fellow citizens are feeling and doing. [...] While I know what had been in the media, I had no idea how various actions by the previous regime impacted average Iraqis in their daily lives...this is really quite helpful. I would trust your views on, for example, negative actions by the US Military even more than that of my own media."
Marshall	Actualizing citizen; Justice oriented citizen;	"Look, something I recognize and this goes for all of the people on the Internet, is that if you are here, then you are wealthy enough to afford the Internet. […] So if someone in Iraq is able to afford the Internet and speaks English, he or she comes from a wealthy enough background to afford an Internet connection - be that at a cafe or at home. A lot of Americans do not use the Internet, because they are poor and cannot afford it. The same is so for all other countries."
	Justice oriented citizen	"… inequality - it upsets me. Because a lot of Americans want to continue the wealth that they have, without actually realizing the social, holistic and environmental costs to them."
Stuart	Participatory citizen	"How about you put your own politics aside - your own hatred of America - and listen to the Iraqis - not the ones with the rocket launchers - listen to the common peaceful Iraqi. I plan to listen hard - because we require their friendship if we are to turn a stable government over to Iraq - which should be everyone's goal regardless of politics." "I think Tully & I have a common interest - the stability of Iraq - so I would like to work with him towards this goal."
Fabian	Dutiful citizen	*Posts links to and text from news articles.* *Challenges Stuart's interest in working with Tully to bring stability to Iraq and writes:* "You had said: 'we require their friendship if we are to turn a 'stable government over to Iraq' – rather, 'we require their friendship if we are to have some sort of a government which would allow us to suck up their oil'." *and then proceeds to point to economic and historical facts concerning the USA's interest in gaining access to oil in the Gulf region.*

Table 7. Handover: Super-users' citizenship paradigms at Critical Point 3

Screen Name	Handover	Quote/Behavior
Zephyr	Justice oriented citizen	"…it is getting easier and easier to be critical of the government. Believe it or not, I would like nothing more than to have nothing better to do than just sit back and worry about problems in other countries and their government. There's just too much (and too many people!) that needs fixing in the US not to make a stink." "Sounds like we will all be waiting with baited breath to see what happens after June 30th. Personally, I hope Iraq tries to at least put a leash on US control and open things up to Iraqis and other countries of their choosing." "Well, the handover happened two days ahead of schedule. Is this our "justification" for the war we've been waiting for?"
Tully	Personally responsible citizen;	"I will summarize the Iraqi situation in this: - saddam *[sic]* is a cruel ignorant dictator who was ruling Iraq - America saved the Iraqi people from saddam *[sic]* - America helps Iraq to build and advance"
	Actualizing citizen	"Do you really think the media is the only way of knowledge?"
Ives	Justice oriented citizen; Dutiful citizen; Personally responsible citizen	"It is one thing to disagree with current policy or the administration (we all *should* do that from time to time), but we also need to honor the good things that other citizens just like us have done throughout history to make our lives to easy and to help many other nations to be free from oppression, dictatorship, or all - out slavery. Believe it or not, I am certain that most of the young people who are serving the US in Iraq today are doing so for these very ideals."
	Justice oriented citizen; Actualizing citizen	"I am proud that guys like Zephyr, myself, Stuart, and again everyone else (sorry again) from the US can sit here and totally disagree with each other about not only foreign policy but problems with our own government without fear. Because we were raised and educated to think for ourselves and speak out against injustice at home, we can participate in such candid discussions. So, I'm thankful that I am free and I am thankful that I have so much opportunity in such a great land. I hope that someday the rest of the world will feel the same way about their own homes...I know that very soon Iraqi citizens will begin to feel it."
Fabian	Dutiful citizen	*Posts links to and text from news articles.* *References government reports:* "I hope you are aware of the internal reports of USAIDS which would give you some idea about what US wants to do to the Iraqi economy."

social behavior that seeks to end any mischief – i.e. unlawful behavior. He writes:

The Taliban were [sic] providing security for Bin Laden and his organization to train, arm, recruit, and plot further mischief. They were financing themselves with Opium grown in Afghanistan, and running a number of training camps indoctrinating and crafting a more lethal terrorist force. We had to take them out. Pretty simple.

However, as the discussion thread progresses and Stuart begins to interact with Tully (a self-identified Iraqi citizen), his comments begin to reflect Participatory citizen discourse as he expresses a desire to join forces and actively par-

ticipate in bettering the socio-political situation in Iraq. He writes, "I think Tully & I have a common interest - the stability of Iraq - so I would like to work with him towards this goal."

Over the course of the seven months of exchanges within this discussion thread, every super-user, with the exception of Fabian, exhibits either multiple concurrent or shifting citizenship paradigms. This finding aligns with the assertions made by both Westheimer and Kahne (2004) and Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) that citizenship identity is multifaceted, dynamic, and evolving. In Fabian's case, his responses to assertions made within the thread were most often links to news articles, which purportedly refuted other super-users claims.

Evolution of Participation and Authority

Our analysis reveals that the spaces afforded by online forums, such as the ones contained within *TakingITGlobal* hold the potential to be highly deliberative. They allow for publicly available (open), non-centralized communication to occur outside the limits of temporal and geographic boundaries. As such, they hold the potential to encourage citizens who may be alienated from or indifferent towards traditional forms of political participation to engage with socio-political issues that they deem relevant.

Within online forums, citizens are able to exercise their autonomy and to come together in order to inter-subjectively produce meanings and opinions on informal and formal political issues. While we acknowledge that online forums still pose barriers to participation for citizens who do not have Internet access nor the requisite technical or information literacy skills to participate meaningfully, we do feel as though these online communication platforms provide a favorable space in which participation and deliberative action can take place for those citizens who are inclined and able to do so.

It is difficult, however, to categorize the mode of participation within a forum such as the one contained on *TakingITGlobal* as either wholly deliberatively or radically democratic. In the analysis that follows, we highlight how evolving dynamics of participation and authority oscillate between a democratic and radical vision of democracy.

Deliberative Democratic Perspective

True to a deliberative democratic perspective, Tully attempts to establish norms for the discussion soon after he joins the forum. He states:

I want to tell you about my two rules to lead a fruitful discussion with someone who has different ideas. First RESPSCT [sic] OTHER PEOPLES' [sic] THOUGHTS, whatever they are, because if you want to convince people you have no other way than talking nicely. Whereas if you try to make their thoughts seem silly, then for sure they won't listen to you even if you are right. Second IF YOU DO NOT BELIEVE IN SOMEONE'S THOUGHTS AT LEAST UNDERSTAND THEM, for example Stuart has certain ideas about Israel that I do not believe in, but I understand why he has such ideas and I understand his reasons and motives.

Additionally, our analysis shows that adhering to unspoken norms regarding the quantity (e.g., frequency, length, and timing) and quality (e.g., complexity) of discussion posts seems to positively contribute to one's status within the forum. For example, throughout the seven months that the discussion was active, the six super-users posted multiple times per hour and per day; so much in fact, that at times it appears almost as though the discussion is happening synchronously. Furthermore, the length and complexity of these posts is substantial with individual posts numbering between 200 to 1,000 words and exhibiting a high level of vocabulary use and argumentation.

Over the course of the discussion, characteristics of rational communication seem to predominate, except in the area of communicative equality. Our analysis reveals that users who do not adhere to the communicative norms are largely excluded from the discussion. With the exception of Zephyr and Tully, the other super-users routinely ignore the comments made by other users within the forum, preferring to communicate amongst themselves.

On the other hand, aspects of rational communication such as sincerity, respect, reason, and reflexivity are all present. Sincerity is signaled by any attempt to know and understand fully the position that another user is attempting to take. Fabian provides an example of this when he asks for clarification about a particular statement made by another forum user. He writes: "Before going into comment on your words, I would like to ask you on your definition for the 'state terrorism'."

Respect is signaled by role taking within the forum, responding directly to points made by oth-

ers, and by avoiding the use of flames, insults, or foul language. When these norms are not followed, super-users regulate themselves. For example, responding to Marshall's use of foul language, Stuart states: "Marshall - try to keep the profanity down a hair bro." And at another point, Fabian censors himself and says, "Sorry Stuart if I offend you with the above comparison, I really did not intend to do so!"

Attempts to create well-reasoned arguments are made both by providing internal and external justification. Internal justification consists of users arguing a particular point on the basis of knowledge they have previously internalized. For example, Marshall routinely cites history as the basis of his arguments and offers comments such as, "I have studied US history and have a pretty good handle on it." External justification consists of providing links to articles from such mainstream news sources as the New York Times and the BBC, as well as from non-mainstream sources, such as Al Jazeera.

When external justification is not provided, the super-users once again regulate this practice. On one occasion Zephyr apologizes for not providing evidence (justification): "Sorry I meant to provide a source or two for the '91 rebellion." Or if justification is missing, super-users ask for it, as with Ives who writes:

Could you please post a link to these reports or a link to the statement by those who have read them? What was the context? When you say "US," who exactly was stating or creating policy in these reports? Has any world news agency seen these or confirmed them?

Ives then proceeds to reinforce the practice of providing external justification by expressing gratitude once it is offered: "Thank you for your well - reasoned response."

Lastly, while admittedly less straightforward to detect, reflexivity is apparent among the super-users who experience a paradigm shift. This evolu-

tion signals that super-users are re-examining the validity of their previously held views, in light of others' views and opinions.

Radical Democratic Perspective

To a lesser extent, the forum exhibits features of radical democracy. Arguably, since all of the users self-select to participate in this user-created deliberative forum, the space can be categorized as radically democratic. Moreover, super-users within the space comment on their ability to forward counter-discourses. Ives writes:

I am proud that guys like Zephyr, myself, Stuart, and again everyone else (sorry again) from the US can sit here and totally disagree with each other about not only foreign policy but problems with our own government without fear. Because we were raised and educated to think for ourselves and speak out against injustice at home, we can participate in such candid discussions.

In addition to providing counter-discourses, citizens participating from the margins are encouraged to engage in the debate. Unlike the deliberative perspective, where typically the majority voice is given authority, within this forum Tully's voice, which is arguably a minority voice, is the one that is given authority. In speaking to Tully, Ives writes:

We are really so fortunate on this forum to have you as a regular member as you provide us with, I think, the most direct observations of what is happening today in Iraq. In spite of all of our rhetoric and speculation and repeating of what we see in the media, your accounts are easily the most valued of any that I get from Iraq.

The complex nature of interactions within the discussion forum analyzed above cannot be categorized as either uniquely deliberatively or radically democratic. Rather, the evolving dynam-

ics of participation and authority surrounding interactions within this deliberative forum touch on both the deliberative and radical democratic perspective.

DISCUSSION

As is shown by the above analysis, our findings reveal super-users' overall adherence to a deliberative democratic form of online participation. This is not surprising given the fact that deliberative democracy is embraced as the dominant form of political participation within the post-industrial democratic society from which many of the super-users work. However, what is surprising is the presence of radical democratic political participation. The words of super-users such as those offered by Ives, signify a change in the timbre of online interactions. By calling for previously silenced voices to be heard, a space is opened up in which potentially different and antagonistic perspectives can be forwarded and legitimized. This results in a heightened potential for conflict as the established norms surrounding the form and content of discussion dictated by deliberative democracy is abandoned. However, it would be foolish to assume that conflict necessary leads to unfavorable outcomes.

Radical democracy stipulates that agonistic forms of political association are capable of and necessary for dislodging dominant hegemonic structures and profoundly impacting relations of power (Mouffe, 2000, 2005). By engaging in dialogue and deliberation over claims about the meaning of justice and the good life, conflict undoubtedly arises surrounding what these claims entail; however, it is through this conflict that new understanding is produced. Moreover, through the inclusion of multiple political alternatives within the deliberative process points of affinity and dissonance can be discovered, which helps citizens to navigate increasingly heterogeneous and dynamic societies. As such, the type of agonistic

interaction supported by online environments is vital for socio-political progress.

We believe that the emergence of radical democratic practices within the online forum that we examined signifies a change not only among the form and quality of online interactions, but also within offline interactions among citizens as well. Therefore, we contend that the time has come to reexamine and rearticulate what it means to be a citizen within today's technologically-rich and interconnected world. In what follows, we discuss how this transformation might be achieved by means of civic education curriculum.

Civic Education

Since the 1990s, hundreds of Websites such as *TakingITGlobal*, have been developed with the goal of connecting students with opportunities for civic engagement and political debate (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008). The results from this study highlight the important role that an online discussion tool, such as *TakingITGlobal*, can play in civic education classrooms. In addition to reflecting multiple citizenship paradigms, a close look at the interaction of super-users on the *TakingITGlobal* forum reveals how online discussions may be used to address some of the challenges and limitations of classroom discussions while also expanding the possibilities of an egalitarian and intercultural dialogue. Analyzing transcripts of the discussions may also be used to meet civic curriculum objectives by developing critical thinking skills.

Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) suggest that one of the reasons that current civic education programs are often ineffective is that they are typically built on a dutiful conception of citizenship. Although perfectly valid, this conception does not reflect or address all the actualizing ways that youth experience, express, and learn about citizenship. In order to appreciate the roles, responsibilities, and institutions that are emphasized in a dutiful conception, curriculum developers and educators

need to integrate actualizing conceptions and recognize, as is confirmed by our study, the fluidity of citizenship paradigms. The integration of social media into citizenship education classrooms would effectively allow for the expression of both dutiful and actualizing conceptions of citizenship.

Classroom Discussion and Its Challenges

Current research suggests that one of the most successful teaching strategies for civic engagement is the open discussion of controversial political and social issues. These types of classroom discussions are positively correlated with interest, knowledge, feelings of efficacy, support for democratic values, and the intention to vote (Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Jamieson 2007, 2008; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002). Research also shows that discussions of complex policy issues have a positive relationship to the development of tolerant attitudes and democratic thinking (Avery, 2002). Despite the evidence that supports the connection between political discussions and the civic commitments of youth, the presence of these discussions in classrooms is limited (Hess, 2004; Llewellyn, Cook, Westheimer, Giron, & Suurtamm, 2007).

Teachers often resist these types of discussions because they do not feel like they have the knowledge or skills to work through complex social and political issues. Many teachers report that they have had no training in this area and that they feel ill-equipped to deal with the unpredictability of student reactions. Additional concerns include fear of repercussions from administration or accusations from parents that they are trying to push a political agenda (Galston, 2004; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004).

There are also many reasons why, despite a teacher's best efforts, students may be reluctant to engage in political discussions in the classroom. Common reasons for withdrawing from these discussions include shyness, feeling ill-prepared, large classrooms, and having insufficient time to think about a response. The fear of not having adequate knowledge and looking stupid in front of peers and teachers has also been widely reported. In many classrooms students avoid saying anything that could elicit criticism and put their peer relationships at risk. This is particularly true for students from non-dominant groups who may feel easily discredited, as they may not fit into the perspective of the "norm" (Hess, 2001; Lusk & Weinberg, 1994). In addition, in-class discussions are limited by the fact that some students simply participate more than others, just as some students have a tendency to monopolize the conversation (Dutt-Doner & Powers, 2000).

The Pedagogical Potential of Online Forums

Online discussion forums provide a space for a more egalitarian exchange of ideas by providing opportunities to students, who may typically be introverts or self-conscious, to share their ideas in the written form (Johnson, 2001). Internet forums also give students time to think and reflect about different perspectives before taking a position. By responding and posting in the written form students are also accountable for how they present their positions. Jenkins and Thorburn (2003) point out that when participants do not see each other they are relieved of obvious markers of social status. These characteristics are important because they encourage students to focus on the content of messages instead of the person. Virtual discussions and debates also transcend temporal and geographical boundaries, and instead focus on the issues and causes that the participants deem to be relevant and important (Johnson, 2001).

Social media, such as online discussion forums, also provide students with opportunities to talk to other students holding divergent views with whom they may not otherwise have the opportunity to come into contact (Johnson, Zhang, Bichard, & Seltzer, 2011; Middaugh &

Kahne, 2009). Through the use of Internet-based technologies students gain access to a diversity of people and viewpoints that allow them to challenge what they know and to become involved in an increasingly global and interactive world. In fact, Bowman's (2010) meta-analysis revealed that intercultural dialogue was a significant predictor for civic engagement. Similarly, as suggested in Clark and Brown's (2011) article on the impact of international videoconferencing on classroom discussions, including participants from around the world develops a "deeper understanding of global interconnectedness, multiculturalism, and attributes of democratic citizenship and society" (p. 16).

Although many scholars acknowledge the potential of online discussion forums as a pedagogical tool, they also warn against inadequately addressing the necessity for pedagogy and digital literacy skills in its implementation (Barab & Squire, 2004). Following from our findings, we observed that there were multiple forms and levels of participation within the forum that we analyzed, including some users (e.g., super-users) who dominated the discussion. As such, it is vital for educators to remember that the mere presence of an online discussion tool will not necessarily have a democratizing effect on dialogue. As in many classroom settings, certain participants will have a more significant presence and articulate their positions with a greater degree of confidence and authority.

In order to create a more participatory and democratic environment, Brookfield and Preskill (2005) recommend that teachers apply many of the same techniques that facilitate effective classroom discussions. For example, all students should respond to the question being discussed before allowing for a more open debate. As each student comments they should make explicit reference to another comment so that the thread of dialogue is coherent. They also suggest that teachers maintain a presence through "brief, concise observations, questions, clarifications,

affirmations, and acknowledgements," (p. 235) that aim to focus and direct the conversation and broaden participation.

In addition to concerns over the equality of participation in online environments, citizens are also facing an ever-increasing level of diversity of ideas and interaction amongst people from across the globe. As such, students are now responsible for grappling with and assessing the credibility of large amounts of information. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010a; 2010b) many adolescent students in industrialized countries are unable to demonstrate advanced reading, writing, and information literacy skills (see Coulombe, Tremblay, & Marchand, 2004; Knighton, Brochu, & Gluszynski, 2010 for specific results). To emphasize the importance of these skills for citizenship education, Kahn and Kellner (2007) exhort:

Active citizens need to acquire multiple forms of technological literacy to intervene in the ever-proliferating public spheres of the media and information society. […Moreover,] engaged citizens and public intellectuals need to learn to use the emergent technologies to engage the public and participate in democratic discussion and debate. (p. 33)

Within the Canadian context (the home of the *TakingITGlobal* Website), 15 to 16 year old students encountered difficulties in "locating straightforward information, making low-level inferences of various types, working out what a well-defined part of a text means, and using some outside knowledge to understand it" (Knighton, Brochu, & Gluszynski, 2010). Thus, an important instructional platform to consider integrating into school curriculum is an online environment that supports and scaffolds the critical thinking components associated with Internet-based reading and writing.

Transcripts of selected threads from online discussion forums can have pedagogical uses for

the development of critical thinking skills. For one, taking a step back to analyze the evolution of certain discussions could help develop critical thinking skills through argument analysis and evaluation. Equally, students could identify what types of citizenship are being enacted and how. Students could also unpack how power, leadership, and credibility is acquired and maintained in an online setting and compare it to how power dynamics are played out in the political arena.

FINAL REFLECTION

By providing citizens with opportunities to participate in online discussions they are freed from pre-conceived paradigms of citizenship and can experience civic engagement first hand. By also providing a space for students to come into contact with a diversity of participants and ideas, civic educators can help their students reflect on how to deal with conflicting social and political views in both virtual and real world situations. Our research suggests that the integration of an online discussion forum as a curriculum supplement may effectively address the challenges and limitations that exist within traditional citizenship education classrooms. As such, future research should look at how these forums could be integrated and impact school-based civic education and the civic commitments of youth (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012; MacKinnon, Pitre, & Watling, 2007).

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Citizenship Education: An area of study within formal education that pays attention to the development of particular skills and dispositions related to effective citizenship.

Civic Education: An area of study within formal education that focuses primarily or exclusively on teaching the information and knowledge deemed necessary in order to become a productive citizen.

Deliberative Democracy: A political theory borne out of the liberal democratic tradition and built on the fundamental principle of mutual respect – i.e. reciprocity. At its most basic level, deliberative democracy "affirms the need to justify

decisions made by citizens and their representatives" (Guttmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3) in order to deal with moral disagreements in politics. It encourages citizens to aim for a form of justification that is both substantive and procedural, as this is considered to assist citizens in judging the reasonableness of said justification.

Online Forum: An Internet-based discussion board where people hold conversations by posting messages.

Radical Democracy: Articulated as a "theory of discourse, as well as a political discourse in its own right" (Townshend, 2004, p. 269), radical democracy purports to be a model capable of providing both a theoretical as well as a political account of ideology. It has the aspiration of not only interrogating the meaning associated with ethico-political discourse, but also helping to determine how particular meanings become fixed and gain legitimacy in the process.

Social Media: A group of Internet-based communication platforms that are built on the foundation of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and dissemination of user-generated content.

Social Network Sites: A form of participatory social media that "allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211).