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Publisher: Routledge

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Curriculum Inquiry

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcui20>

Learning connected civics: Narratives, practices, infrastructures

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Published online: 03 Feb 2015.



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To cite this article: Mizuko Ito, Elisabeth Soep, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson & Arely Zimmerman (2015) Learning connected civics: Narratives, practices, infrastructures, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 45:1, 10-29

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2014.995063>

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Learning connected civics: Narratives, practices, infrastructures

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Bringing together popular culture studies and sociocultural learning theory, in this paper we formulate the concept of “connected civics,” grounded in the idea that young people today are engaging in new forms of politics that are profoundly participatory. Often working in collaboration with adult allies, they leverage digital media and emerging modes of connectivity to achieve voice and influence in public spheres. The rise of participatory politics provides new opportunities to support connected civics, which is socially engaged and embedded in young people’s personal interests, affinities, and identities.

We posit three supports that build consequential connections between young people’s cultural affinities, their agency in the social world, and their civic engagement: 1. By constructing hybrid narratives, young people mine the cultural contexts they are embedded in and identify with for civic and political themes relevant to issues of public concern. 2. Through shared civic practices, members of affinity networks lower barriers to entry and multiply opportunities for young people to engage in civic and political action. 3. By developing cross-cutting infrastructure, young people—often with adults—institutionalize their efforts in ways that make a loosely affiliated network into something that is socially organized and self-sustaining.

Drawing from a corpus of interviews and case studies of youth affinity networks at various sites across the US, this paper recasts the relationship between connected learning, cultural production, and participatory politics.

Keywords: participatory politics; connected learning; digital media; youth culture

Slam poets who have grown up competing individually for high scores decide to join forces, launching sustained campaigns related to violence prevention and environmental justice. Harry Potter fans organize collective actions for fair trade chocolate and marriage equality. Young activists fighting for U.S. immigration reform appropriate iconography and storylines from popular comics to make their case. These are all examples of youth mobilizing their cultural contexts and productions to pursue civic and political action.

Today’s networked ecosystem offers near-constant opportunities for young people to engage with peers in a range of ways. They can “hang out” together while physically apart, sharing photos, videos, captions and comments all throughout the day and night; and they can “geek out” together by swapping ideas, techniques and critiques related to projects that tap their deepest interests and aspirations (Ito et al., 2009). Whether by curating a public presence through Tumblr or Twitter, remixing videos and memes, or moderating an online discussion, young people cultivate skills and dispositions that do more than promote personal expression for its own sake. These same skills and dispositions are indispensable within “participatory politics” (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014). Through participatory politics, young people use digital tools and other emerging forms of social

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connectivity to express voice and influence on issues of public concern (Kahne, Middaugh & Allen, 2014).

Commentators bemoaning youth apathy worry that digitally-mediated, expression-based forms of civic activity will make young people less likely to take part in institutionalized politics (such as voting), but recent research has indicated the opposite. Involvement in participatory culture—meaning contexts that actively encourage members to make and share creative products and practices that matter to them, supported by informal mentorship (Jenkins, 2006)—can be a gateway to political engagement (Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, & Rogowski, 2012). Moreover, participatory politics are much more equitably distributed across racial and ethnic groups than conventional measures of political engagement, like voter turnout (Cohen, Kahne et. al., 2012). A growing body of ethnographic case studies on participatory politics advances these quantitative findings by delving into the nuances and mechanics of how connections between participatory culture and politics are forged (Gamber-Thompson, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013; Pfister, 2014; Shresthova, 2013; Zimmerman, 2012).

This groundswell of research on participatory politics shows young people linking the experiences of belonging, voice, leadership, and mobilization that they are developing through participatory culture to practices more conventionally thought of as civic and political in nature. Young people are also working in the opposite direction. Those who start off with civic and political commitments bolster those efforts by linking them to participatory culture. The research indicates that these connections between participatory culture and politics don't necessarily form automatically and can be actively brokered by peers and adults, and through organizational infrastructures.

In order to understand the unique conditions for learning that this emerging digital media landscape affords, this paper brings together the conceptual frameworks and case studies from two research networks established by the MacArthur Foundation that focus respectively on participatory politics and connected learning. What are the characteristics of the environments that support these connections between social and cultural activities, civic and political practices, and developmental outcomes for young people? And how can we better support these connections and outcomes?

We propose “connected civics” as a form of learning that mobilizes young people’s deeply felt interests and identities in the service of achieving the kind of civic voice and influence that is characteristic of participatory politics. Of course there is nothing new about the idea that interest, affinity, and identity are drivers of political action, but too often when it comes to learning, we can default to civic educational experiences that fail to tap the kinds of cultural practices young people produce through their everyday symbolic expression. “Learning” connected civics does not entail individually-driven “transfer” between the personally meaningful cultural projects young people actively create and modes of concerted political engagement, but is centered instead on building shared contexts that allow for what we elaborate below as “consequential connections” between these spheres of activity.

We describe three kinds of supports for these consequential connections: 1. by constructing *hybrid narratives*, young people mine their cultural contexts and products for civic and political themes relevant to issues of public concern; 2. through *shared civic practices*, young people lower barriers to entry and multiply opportunities for young people to engage in civic and political action that can be temporary or more lasting in nature; 3. by developing *cross-cutting infrastructure*, young people—often working in collaboration with adults—institutionalize their efforts in ways that make a loosely affiliated network into something that is socially organized, self-sustaining, and recognized as such by those outside the original interest-driven community. Our focus throughout the article is

on identifying the features of environments that build consequential connections rather than the “in the head” work (for example, knowing who controls the judiciary branch or which party holds the majority in the U.S. Senate) that very often draws attention within debates about the state of civic education or youth political participation.

Conceptual Foundation

Our central question is, how can we support young people’s learning and development of deeply personal and culturally resonant forms of civic agency? In order to address this question, we draw from two bodies of theory and research—studies of youth popular culture and sociocultural approaches to learning.

Since well before the advent of digital networks, researchers have documented how young people’s social and recreational pursuits offer avenues for participation in public and political life. Youth ethnographers have described the complex micropolitical dynamics of teen social status negotiations (Eckert, 1989; Milner, 2004; Pascoe, 2007). Cultural studies scholars have a long tradition of locating politics in popular culture, taking special interest in the subcultural engagements of youth and the civic and political activities of young people who’ve been marginalized on the basis of race, class, and gender (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Hall & Jefferson, 2006; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1990). These studies have helped us to see how decorating the walls of a bedroom, or cultivating and sharing tastes in music, or styling hair in a particular way, can amount to potent forms of cultural production and contestation. Young people producing these practices are often expressing and in some cases organizing resistance to institutions and ideologies they deem problematic, obsolete, or oppressive.

More recent research has interrogated how these dynamics are playing out in contemporary digital environments (boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2009; Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012). Through remix and other forms of media appropriation, popular culture fans and other consumers can exercise citizenship and create frameworks for activism (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Deploying a “logic of connective action,” young people circulate civic content across fluid social networks that don’t necessarily require joining hierarchical political institutions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In so doing, they enact forms of citizenship that privilege meaning, identity, and inter-subjectivity as everyday forces that shape political life and opportunity (Bakardijeva, 2009; Dahlgren, 2005). The notion of participatory politics identifies the conditions under which young people’s everyday social and cultural engagements can foster forms of civic and political agency that are increasingly accessible due to emerging modes of social connectivity and the spread of digital and networked technology.

While we begin with this appreciation of the political *potential* of youth-driven online activity, we also feel it is critically important that we do not end there. Our approach to participatory politics recognizes that these activities can be tied to meaningful learning and development as products of participation in civic, political, and public life. Simply circulating civic content among peers does not necessarily do much of anything for the people who hit “share,” nor does it necessarily advance the set of concerns they aim to address (though it can, and sharing information can sometimes be anything but simple and carry serious risk). The overwhelming dataflow that results can sometimes blur specific political messages and distract from the arduous work of organizing sustained, connected action; in other words, as Jodi Dean (2005) has argued, the waves of content can start to feel like part of a never-ending stream. Thus, we need to actively support learning and consequential connections between spaces of youth cultural production, their agency, and their civic and political worlds.

This brings us to a growing body of research in the learning sciences that has examined how learning is connected, reinforced, or disconnected across settings. Much of this research is concerned with the relationship between in-school and out-of-school learning, puzzling over: how classroom learning gets applied (or not) to everyday life (Hull & Shultz, 2002; Lave, 1988); how children's home and peer cultures inflect school achievement (Carter, 2005; Goldman, 2006; Varenne & McDermott, 1998); or how educators can intentionally design digitally-rich, production-oriented communities that bridge divides in access to robust learning environments (Barron, Gomez, Pinkard, & Martin, 2014). The process of connecting learning across settings is not a simple matter of acquiring generalized knowledge, skills, and frameworks that an individual can "transfer" across diverse settings of life. It turns out that the ability to connect learning across settings rests on a host of other contextual factors, social relationships, and mediating practices (Beach, 1999; Bransford & Schwartz, 2001; Engestrom, 1996). It also hinges on young people's own judgments about the extent to which they even want their civic and political activities to follow them across digital contexts (Weinstein, 2014). Indeed, as a 2012 National Academies report on "deeper learning" concluded: "Over a century of research on transfer has yielded little evidence that teaching can develop general cognitive competencies that are transferable to any new discipline, problem or context, in or out of school" (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012, p. 8).

At first blush, issues of transfer and cross-site learning may seem less relevant to progressive approaches that already stress cultural relevance, real world learning, and civic and political engagement. We have observed however, that these questions of learning across settings are actually highly salient for understanding how young people's everyday settings and cultural practices relate to civic and political engagement. Just as, for example, school math and everyday math turn out to be quite different sorts of things (Goldman, 2006; Lave, 1988), young people's everyday experiences of agency in their social worlds, and of citizenship and community involvement turn out to be largely disconnected from what most educators might think of as sites of civic and political engagement. A young person who is active on Facebook and Instagram, or who organizes a gaming league or fan community, will likely not recognize these activities as relevant to political engagement, or to the activities for which they might earn community service credit at school. And civic educators are much more likely to stress involvement in civic and state institutions than they are to look towards popular culture and youth-centered identities and affinity for evidence of students' political imaginations and actions.

What counts as "civic" is a normative designation grounded in specific cultural values and institutionalized practices. We use the term to designate activities that include involvement in state apparatuses (what is traditionally deemed "politics"), as well as activities tied to community problem-solving and social justice that do not necessarily lead to or even involve direct governmental action, for example, through so-called "hashtag activism" campaigns inviting peers to share first-person experiences with racial profiling or violence against women. By social justice, we mean efforts geared towards equity, freedom, and sustainability. As articulated within the framework of participatory politics, these activities can involve: production and circulation of information about a matter of public import; carrying out dialogue and feedback related to that issue; investigating topics that are consequential to the community; using that information to hold accountable people in power; and mobilizing others on questions of justice, rights, and equality (Soep, 2014). This normative definition of the civic is unavoidably situated in our own U.S.-inflected progressive traditions, and we feel it is important to recognize and make explicit this cultural and historical specificity. It's also worth noting that the young people who have been a part of our research sometimes disavow "politics" as an apt

description of what it is they are doing when they participate in just these kinds of activities, whether they are explicitly targeting the state or not. Many have grown disenchanted with the role of “capital P” politics in everyday life and want to distinguish themselves and their work from the figures who self-identify as politicians and from the kinds of events typically understood to be motivated by politics.

By stressing these boundaries between expressive and civic culture, our intention is to recognize these existing distinctions in order to find ways to cross and bridge the disconnection between them. We build on how King Beach (1999) has described learning as “consequential transitions.” “Transitions are consequential when they are consciously reflected on, often struggled with, and the eventual outcome changes one’s sense of self and social positioning” (p. 114). Also highly relevant to our framework is Kligler-Vilenchik’s (2013) notion of “mechanisms of translation” that young people deploy to link participatory culture and participatory politics, forming a hybrid mode of engagement she and Shresthova (2012) describe as “participatory culture civics” (Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova, 2012).

Building on these frameworks, our view takes into account the fluid nature of young people’s engagements, where new interests and affiliation are explored, abandoned, revisited, or brought together in ways that are not fully captured by a notion of “transition” from one role or activity to another—hence our use of consequential *connections* instead. Young people continue to value their interests—in slam poetry, for example, or gaming, or comics, or reading and writing back into wildly popular texts like *Hunger Games*—for their own sake and not just to the extent that these activities advance a civic or political agenda. Further, many sociocultural affiliations, such as immigration status, are not matters of individual choice, and young people’s enlistment into civic and political commitments is not simply a matter of personal interest or engagement in peer or popular culture. The pivot between the cultural and the political can be enduring or ephemeral. In either case, it can be transformative for the young people involved, and for the issues of public concern they take on through their work and play (Jenkins, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, Shresthova, & Zimmerman, forthcoming).

This view of civic learning as “connected” brings together peer culture, personal interests and identities, and opportunities for young people to be recognized in sites of power in the wider world (Ito et al., 2013). Young people’s entry points to connected learning and connected civics can be through their everyday social, creative, and community engagements, or through formal adult-guided programs and learning institutions. What is distinctive about a connected approach to civic learning is that it brings together these spheres in a meaningful and efficacious learning experience. In contrast to more fleeting or institutionally-driven forms of learning, connected learning experiences are tied to deeply felt interests, bonds, passions, and affinities and are as a consequence both highly engaging and personally transformative. Importantly, though, among the key learning tasks within connected civics is understanding *shared* experience and what it takes to “take turns accepting losses in the public sphere” while acknowledging and honoring “the losses that others have accepted” (Allen, 2012, p. 1). This means not mistaking interest for entitlement to be a part of something, but rather recognizing affinity as a point of access through which to pursue thoughtful collaboration.

Our use of the term “interest,” then, is not meant to signal an individual or innate quality; we see interests as cultivated through social and cultural relationships and located within what we call an “affinity network” of commonly felt identity, practice, and purpose. We draw from Jim Gee’s (2005) term “affinity spaces,” which he uses to describe online places where people interact around a common passion and/or set of commitments, but broaden our focus to civic and political action and wider networks. We use the term

affinity network to signal contexts that can span multiple sites and platforms but hold at their center joint interests, activities, and identities. Within these contexts, young people form social bonds, collective expressions, and shared practices. Like affinity spaces, affinity networks include groups with tight-knit relationships that might be characterized as a “community,” or what Jenkins describes as “participatory culture.” But as a result of open, online infrastructures, these networks are often visible and accessible to those outside the tight-knit community.

We want to be clear here that by highlighting affinity as a driving force among, for example, fans of Harry Potter advocating for fair labor practices and, for another example, undocumented youth fighting for their own rights and dignity, we do not mean to create an equivalency between the two (Jenkins, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, Shresthova, & Zimmerman, forthcoming). What is at stake, how close it is to the given struggle, and how embedded the affinity is in direct experiences of inequality and marginalization, are among some fundamental differentiators. By highlighting the role of identity, interest, and affinity across the range of cases we consider here, our aim is not to elide these differences but to offer a concept of learning that is sufficiently expansive to embrace the broad range of activities we are seeing among young people who are connecting the cultural and the political in transformative ways.

As pictured in [Figure 1](#), “Connected civics” is a way to describe the learning that takes place at the intersection of three realms of activity: young people’s agency within peer cultures and public spheres; their deeply felt identities, interests and affinities; and civic engagement and opportunity. Connected civics is a specific form of participatory politics where all three circles in [Figure 1](#) intersect. Not all forms of participatory politics are tied to a deeply felt interest; signing an online petition or liking a cause of Facebook are expressions of civic agency and potentially impactful (Earl, 2013), though not necessarily tied to a personal interest, social bond, or affinity network. Likewise, other worthwhile learning opportunities take place at the intersection of two but not three circles within the figure. For example, young people can be engaged in interest-driven participatory cultures of fandom or gaming, and through that engagement they can achieve agency within public spheres—it just may not happen to be civic in nature. Or, young people can possess deeply felt and highly sophisticated civic or political interests, identities, and skills that are never connected to or activated in highly agentic ways. For example, they may be



Figure 1: Connected Civics Diagram.

moved by a cause they are exposed to through the media or in their life experiences, but not take action or share their commitment to the cause to their peers or online. Neither connected learning nor connected civics is intended to encompass *all* of the learning that young people are or should be engaged in, but rather describes a *specific* form of social and consequential learning that is tied to deeply felt affinities and personal interests. For educators and designers, the framework points to ways in which we can help young people *learn connected civics* no matter where they start—be it peer culture, interest and affinity, or civic opportunity—by cultivating experiences that connect these spheres of activity.

Valuing the interests, identities and social relationships of youth is a means towards more equitable and diverse routes to civic and political participation as well as learning. As a dimension of participatory politics, connected civics sees the interests of youth in all walks of life as potential starting points for deep and consequential forms of civic and political involvement, though their pathways into this kind of engagement, the ways in which their politics form, and the kinds of supports they depend on to carry out critically-informed work, can be quite different. In this frame, a key role of education and positive youth development is to support the connective narratives, practices, and infrastructures that make learning and accomplishment in one sphere consequential in another.

Our Research

This paper represents a qualitative meta-analysis drawing from research conducted by two networks of scholars and educators supported by the MacArthur Foundation to explore the implications of digital and social media on youth learning and democracy: the Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network (YPP) and the Connected Learning Research Network (CLRN). These networks represent a range of disciplines and research in both in-school and out-of-school settings. Studies include two national surveys of young people, interviews with civically engaged youth, large-scale inventories of digital sites and platforms, meta-analyses of existing research, and international comparative ethnographic studies (Allen, 2012; Cohen et al., 2012; DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010; Earl, 2013; Gardner & Davis, 2013; Jenkins et al., n.d.; Kahne et al., 2014; Soep, 2014; Zuckerman, n.d.) In order to understand the range of mechanisms that support consequential connections, we have considered cases that vary in the degree that they centered on youth culture or more formal and adult-driven organizational structure. Beyond our strategic selection of cases to represent that spectrum, our mode of analysis across these cases has focused by and large on evidence of youth-driven activities and their outcomes. We have explored qualitative data sets (interviews, observations) collected by researchers over time as well as publically available documents—digital assets, physical materials, testimonials—linked to civic and political campaigns. Out of these raw materials, themes emerged, which we elaborate below, related to the specific supports that enable young people to form the consequential connections that link their interests and affinities to agency and civic opportunity.

Cases from the CLRN Leveling Up project (Korobkova, 2014; Kow, Young, & Tekinbas, 2014; Martin, 2014; Pfister, 2014; Rafalow & Tekinbas, 2014), led by Ito and Katie Salen Tekinbas, and Ito's prior work on digital youth practices (Ito et al., 2009) provide a baseline understanding of youth affinity networks as sites for learning and include case studies of communities centered on creative arts, gaming, and fandom. Two case studies from the Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) project of the YPP Network, headed by Henry Jenkins at the University of Southern California, function as anchor cases, which have produced key conceptual insights that lay the groundwork for connected civics. The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) is a non-profit organization, uniting

fans and activists who take inspiration from the characters and events contained within that blockbuster series to mobilize for literacy, equality and human rights, all the while asking “What would Dumbledore do?” The study of HPA was led by Neta Kligler-Vilenchik (2013). Arely Zimmerman (2012) led the study of the second anchor case, based on her fieldwork in 2010-2011 with DREAM activists—young people who were undocumented and seeking immigration reform. Also known as the Developing Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, the legislation young people in Zimmerman’s study were working towards at the time of her research would grant conditional residency rights to qualifying immigrant students who’d grown up in the United States with undocumented parents. Also represented among the MAPP case studies we take up here are examples drawn from a study of Libertarian youth by Liana Gamber (2012) and a study of the Nerdfighters by Kligler-Vilenchik (2013). Nerdfighters are a community of millions that has grown up around video blogging brothers John and Hank Green and defines itself as working together to “decrease world suck.” As noted above, frameworks emerging from these studies that deeply inform the notion of connected civics include the concept of “participatory culture civics” (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012, 2014) and mechanisms of translation (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013) that connect participatory culture and participatory politics, by tapping content worlds (Kligler-Vilenchik 2013), shared production and practice (Gamber-Thompson 2012; Zimmerman 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik 2013) and building institutional networks from existing communities (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova 2012). Finally, Soep’s (2012) research with youth media and its digital afterlife provides additional case materials from more structured programs that support connected civics.

Connecting Affinity-Based and Civic Practices

So far we have developed the concept of connected civics as a form of learning fostered via participatory politics that emerges when young people achieve civic agency linked to their deeply felt interests, identities, and affinities. Now we pivot to the question: What supports enable young people to move along a pathway towards learning connected civics? Three supports have emerged out of our research, which we take up in the following sections, centered on: 1. What young people produce when they engage connected civics (hybrid content worlds), 2. How they work together (shared practices), and 3. What conditions (cross-cutting infrastructures) render their activities increasingly sustainable and poised to achieve learning effects at scale.

Hybrid Content Worlds: Narrative Connections

One of the hallmarks of today’s networked and participatory youth culture is the centrality of cultural production and sharing. With the advent of low-cost digital production tools and online platforms for sharing media, we have seen an explosion in the growth and visibility of youth creative production, including varied formats such as podcasts, YouTube videos, blogs, tweets, memes, fan fiction, and game mods. These settings can provide opportunities for young people to develop capacities for networking, media production, and public performance that are supported by peers and centered on interests (Gee & Hayes, 2010; Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, Clinton, Puruchotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2009; Rheingold, 2012). The connections between these affinity networks and the civic and political realm can be elusive, however. While recognizing how social media offer powerful new tools for activists, Ethan Zuckerman (n.d.) also suggests that it is challenging for political content to compete with cat memes. “The sharpest limit to the utility of

social media as a tool for advocacy may be simple limits to attention. While access to social media tools provides the ability to publish content, it does not guarantee that anyone will pay attention to the content in question” (p. 18). Others have raised concerns about negative or harmful forms of cultural expression, such as images tied to self-harm, bullying, sexting, trolling or racist expression (boyd, 2014; Chun, *forthcoming*; Phillips, 2011). While young people are clearly exercising new forms of agency and voice through these creative activities, we certainly cannot assume that they will apply these capacities to purposes that are civic or even prosocial in nature.

Henry Jenkins (2012) and his collaborators have found that young people mine popular culture and everyday creative production to create “content worlds” that connect their deeply held identities and resonant narrative referents to issues of broader social, civic, and political concern. In her study of two fan groups, the Nerdfighters and Harry Potter Alliance, for example, Kligler-Vilenchik (2013) has described the “mechanisms of translation” that enable connections between the cultural and civic, which include tapping content worlds and communities, creative production, and informal discussion. Andrew Slack, the founder of the Harry Potter Alliance, has used the term “cultural acupuncture,” to describe elevating themes from popular culture to a social justice agenda (Jenkins, 2012).

HPA campaigns bring together narrative elements from social justice and the Harry Potter content world. For example, their annual book drive to support libraries is called “Accio Books,” referencing a charm in the Harry Potter story that summons objects from a distance. They are also running a campaign for fair trade chocolate to be used in Harry Potter branded sweets under the banner, “Not In Harry’s Name.” Through the Imagine Better Project, HPA members have more recently been conducting campaigns that are tied to other popular media content, such as the Hunger Games and Superman. One recent campaign is the “Superman was an Immigrant” campaign to support immigrant rights, tied to the release of Man of Steel. Lauren, one of the organizers, explains:

We invited people to share their stories of their family histories, to change the conversation about immigration . . . So that campaign was very popular when we did it because both Superman and immigration were very popular at the time. And it continues to have value because the ideas are larger and broader.

In this way, the HPA encourages participants to produce their own media products like these immigrant stories, forming a hybrid content world that lies at the intersection of popular culture and social justice narratives.

To get to those “larger and broader” themes, participants in another youth-driven affinity network argue that content worlds need to be deeply personal and specific. Youth Speaks is a non-profit based in San Francisco that leads an international Brave New Voices network of spoken word poetry projects with wildly varying levels of formality and funding. “Being personal and vulnerable with your own experiences . . . creates a ripple effect,” says Joshua, a longtime participant. “If your poem is very general, then it’s easy to ignore or dismiss it. But if you’re speaking about something you’ve actually experienced, that’s work that is beautiful and can help change things.”

In recent years, Youth Speaks has grown more deliberate in its use of digital and social media to organize concerted efforts to raise awareness and instigate action related to specific civic and political issues. Working with University of California researchers, they created an online video series about diabetes as a social justice issue. In collaboration with the Center for Investigative Reporting, they launched an Instagram campaign organized around the writing prompt, “What hurts you or your community more than fists?” Efforts like these aim to “make poems immortal,” in Joshua’s words. The organization’s ultimate goal in

these and other digitally-enabled narrative projects is to surface issues through fact-based poetry that can be used as organizing tools and spark legislative change.

Like the HPA and Youth Speaks, DREAM activists working towards U.S. immigration reform recontextualize cultural narratives in ways that draw out civic and political dimensions. For example, artwork developed by the Orange County DREAM Activists recontextualizes the iconic “illegal immigrant crossing” road sign to signify opportunity and educational attainment. The DREAM activists’ image depicts the silhouettes of three youth in caps and gowns in a yellow sign, with the words CAUTION, echoing the iconic sign of a mother and father fleeing with their daughter. Jose explains: “For me, it portrays educated people who have legitimized themselves through an education because this system . . . asked them to . . . but still remain a little hidden, but they have that potential” (Zimmerman, 2012, p. 51).

Images such as these have made their way into websites, posters, campaigns and T-shirts. DREAM activists use T-shirts as a potent tool for displaying affiliation as well as new narrative framings. One T-shirt that was widely worn at DREAM activist events features white text on a dark blue shirt reading “I AM UN-DOC-U-MENT-ED” with the pronunciation, “(ŭn-dōk’yə-mĕn’tĭd)” in small type below. Augustin, the designer, says his T-shirt is intended to reframe the stereotype that it is immigrants who are illiterate. “A lot of conservatives that I have seen online with images have signs that are anti-immigrants and sometime, they don’t know how to spell the word undocumented . . . these people are the ones standing for being American, yet they don’t know how to spell their own language”. (quoted in Zimmerman, 2012, p. 53)

These DREAM activist creations demonstrate how the work of cultural hybridization is multi-directional; popular culture and products can be used to infuse the dry domain of policy and governmentality with relevance, interest, and immediacy. This is similar to how the HPA mines popular culture in its work towards social justice, and how poetry lends itself to personal narratives tied to the civic and political. The case of libertarian youth, which Liana Gamber-Thompson (2012) has investigated in depth, provides examples that are explicitly about youth with political interests translating their identities into popular idioms. Gamber-Thompson documents the wide range of memes, art, and videos that libertarian youth have produced in order to depict their interests as fun and accessible. One of the more high profile examples is a series of fan tribute videos produced by 19-year old Dorian Electra. Instead of professing her love for a boy band or a TV character, she swoons over libertarian economic theorists such as Friedrich Hayek. She explains that her goal is to present academic ideas “in a more entertaining and accessible format” (Electra quoted in Gamber-Thompson, 2013, p. 151).

These hybrid cultural products, and the contexts out of which they emerge, are selected examples among a much larger array of narratives through which young people connect their interests and affinities with agency and civic opportunity. Taken together, they reveal the many ways in which young people take up characters, scenes, and tropes from within their culturally resonant story-worlds and mobilize these narrative materials to support public calls and campaigns for equity and justice.

Building Shared Practice

Hybrid narratives highlight the kinds of products and contexts that emerge out of connected civics. These products and contexts can only be understood against the backdrop of a set of shared practices that young people deploy in their work together. Part of what it takes to connect with an affinity network is to *learn* and in some cases help shape the norms, rituals, and codes of conduct that structure participation, including within activities aiming for

civic and political outcomes. That learning balances mastery with humility—in other words, getting better and better at participating fully, while cultivating practices that keep key questions in play: how do my actions affect others, especially those with the most at stake? How can even my best intentions cause harm? When do I step up and when do I step back?

Young people are connected to their peers 24/7 through text messages, a diverse array of social network sites, and mobile apps that provide new platforms to pursue familiar practices of negotiating status, popularity, and romantic relationships. Through these modes of operation, affinity networks that are tied to a specific cultural or expressive pursuit can lay a foundation for a pivot—sometimes fleeting, sometimes enduring—to the civic and political (this process, of course, can move in the opposite direction as well, with groups that form around civic and political goals connecting their activities to participatory culture). For example, gaming groups generally have competitive play as a core practice, while also supporting sub-groups and more “elite” or high-investment practices such as designing and coding new levels, creating fan videos, or curating knowledge on a shared wiki. In the *StarCraft II* community, for example, contexts for competition can range from casual games with others through the online platform, to international tournaments with millions of dollars of prize money awarded to professional players (Kow, Young & Tekinbas, 2014). Other gaming groups, like *Little Big Planet*, center on competitive play as well as creative production. An active creative community of level designers spans a wide range of online forums, where participants get together to create and submit work for shared challenges (Rafalow and Tekinbas, 2014). For young writers, fan fiction sites and writing forums for content worlds as varied as boy bands and professional wrestling provide contexts to reach an audience, get feedback, and collaborate (Kobrovka, 2014; Martin, 2014).

Even when centered on fun and games, the sense of agency that young people get from contributing to the culture and life of their community can be profound. For example, one young woman Ito interviewed as part of her study of fans of Japanese animation described the immediacy of the feedback she received when she released her translations of anime online:

The compulsion was unbelievable . . . because the feedback’s immediate. . . . You say something. People say something back a lot of the time. We weren’t in the same time zone at the time so you’d have people jubilating because you’re doing something at the time . . . they’re like, ‘Oh my God. That’s awesome. Thank you so much.’ You don’t get that kind of feedback. (quoted in Ito, 2013, p. 195).

This kind of immediacy and social connection, which is at the heart of fan and game activities, can also drive contributions to causes that are more explicitly civic in nature. For example, a pro-gaming group might host a livestream to raise dollars for a cause like *Doctors Without Borders* [Figure 2], and a high school physics teacher and *League of Legends* player in Des Moines sponsors LAN parties after school to keep failing students engaged in academics (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWysttc6aqw>).

In the case of the *Harry Potter Alliance*, members have created a toolkit of strategies to mobilize campaigns addressing issues as varied as voting, body image, marriage equality, fair trade, literacy, child slavery, disaster relief, and hunger. Some campaigns involve shared media production, such as the *Body Bind Horcrux* campaign that encouraged participants to blog, create videos, and share stories about acceptance of their body and different ways of staying healthy. Campaigns also center on partnerships and contributing to causes outside of the HPA community. *Helping Haiti Heal* mobilized the fandom to provide disaster relief in the wake of the devastating 2010 earthquake. The HPA partnered with a *Harry Potter* themed “wizard rock” group as well as well-known vlogging duo



Figure 2: Photograph of Dario Wunsch (Starcraft II name TLO) by silversky of TeamLiquid Pro.

John and Hank Green to raise funds through an auction and awareness raising campaign. They raised over \$123,000 for the relief group Partners In Health. In all of these campaigns, organizers work to define a concrete set of actions that structure participation, whether it is donating books, writing a blog entry, or helping register voters at a fan event.

Kligler-Vilenchik (2013) describes the close relationship between the HPA and the Nerdfighters, who share common values, cultural referents, and members. Unlike the HPA, however, the Nerdfighter community comes together through practices that are not explicitly civic in nature. The community grew around a daily video blog by writers, activists, and brothers John and Hank Green. Nerdfighters also engage in collaborative media production, particularly “collab channels” on YouTube, mirroring the ways in which John and Hank Green have vlogged collaboratively over the years.

Members of collab channels often set a theme for the week (e.g. ‘the Oscars’ or ‘your first kiss’) that solves the problem of deciding what to talk about. Being assigned a regular day means you have a responsibility to the other group members and don’t want to disappoint them. Some collab channels even impose playful “punishments” for not creating a video on your day, often consisting of dare-like tasks such as smearing peanut butter on the face while talking. (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013, 34)

Kligler-Vilenchik describes how vloggers have been able to discuss electoral politics and social issues within the context of collabs centered on other topics. Vloggers often struggle with how to weave political topics into community or conversation that is not

explicitly political in nature. But the fact that the community is connected through shared practices and affinity creates a context for meaningful political conversation and civic engagement at opportune moments.

Unlike activities that are framed in terms of “charity,” or giving to groups distant and less privileged, connected civics are grounded in a strong sense of personal affinity and identity. Self-protection and self-interest are not anathema to meaningful civic and political engagement; young people leverage their own life circumstances and struggles as well as deep engagement with participatory culture to ground their activities in what they know, relationships that matter to them, and experiences they have shared. In this way connected civics opens new points of entry for youth who might not otherwise pursue official pathways into institutional politics. Even with Nerdfighter and HPA campaigns, where the concerns taken up by the issues can be socially and culturally distant for some members, we see altruism to others framed by a deep sense of identification, stitched together through cultural acupuncture.

Even when a mobilization is clearly centered on a policy issue, young people are often drawn through their participation in activities that tap personal interests and affinity spaces. In Korea in 2008, for example, ‘Candlelight Protests’ were organized against American beef imports, resulting in calls for President Lee Myung-bak’s impeachment and the largest protests South Korea has seen in 20 years. Over 3.5 million people took to the streets, and over half were teens (Yun & Chang, 2011). Teenage girls in particular were central to this protest movement and were dubbed “candlelight girls.” The Korean candlelight protests have been held up as an example of youth mobilization with social media as they organized in a highly distributed fashion through a variety of online sites and text messaging, bonding around everyday concerns over the educational system and food safety. It turns out that in addition to these real life concerns, they were mobilized around a different shared interest. HyeRyoung Ok (personal communication, 2009) followed this movement as part of her research on mobile media in Korea. Ok also happens to be a fan of a popular boy band, Dong Bang Sin Gi. In one of the massive online fan forums, she saw that the young women fans were mobilizing to attend the protests. They carried placards: “We don’t want our boys to get sick because of mad cows.” Their participation in the protests was grounded in a combination of the concrete conditions of their everyday lives, and in their solidarity with the shared practices that define a particular media fandom.

This stitching together of personal identity and civic action is even more evident in the case of DREAM activists, who are mobilizing to promote their own stories and needs to push for policy reform. The merging of personal interests and identities with a social justice agenda is, in this sense, seamless (though deeply challenging, strategic, and risky) for young people actively contending with threats to freedom, safety, and equal access to opportunity. The successful mobilization of DREAM activists is built on a layering of practices that sit between the social bonds and affinities developed among undocumented youth, and visibility and influence in the political sphere. The young DREAMers are their own best advocates, organizing events where undocumented youth are placed center stage. For example, in 2011 DREAMers staged a symbolic graduation in front of the Senate dressed in graduation caps and gowns.

The collaborative production of DREAMers centers on the stories of the undocumented youth themselves. One key activity of DREAMactivist.org is to provide media training for undocumented youth so they can produce content and messages and spread them through social media to build a following. They also support the sharing of “coming out” narratives where young people shoot videos of themselves declaring they are undocumented and telling their stories. Zimmerman (2012) quotes a young man who shared one of these narratives:

[When I watch it] I feel proud. I feel something that's a positive feeling, you know, it was a very – I didn't feel ashamed anymore. I feel like I came out and I felt safe to come out. We have to come out of the shadows. I think it's time where we should not be afraid of saying who we are. Why be afraid? . . . I think we had enough, now let's stop being afraid and let's start taking action because if there is no action there is never going to be a change. (p. 46)

This young DREAM activist articulates his own movement along a trajectory from personal circumstances that he'd kept "in the shadows" for most of his life, into a community that is unafraid to come out and in so doing "take action," by mobilizing deeply felt identities, interests and affinity networks to achieve agency and seize civic opportunity.

Developing Cross-Cutting Infrastructure

In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky (2008) argues that "we are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations" (p. 20-21). The youth collectives described here leverage digital and networked tools to organize at a lower cost and larger scale than would have been possible in a pre-digital era (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Whether it involves a campaign orchestrated through a tight-knit affinity network or lightweight circulation of a political meme among peers on a social media site, participatory politics are enabled by the accessibility of media production, circulation, and communication. Participatory politics calls attention to what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have described as "the logic of connective action" that mobilizes through "personal action frames" and distributed social networks and differs from collective action centered on organizationally brokered groups and actions. The narratives and practices of connected civics draw their power from personal investments and interests supported by social media and affinity networks. At the same time, building consequential connections to civic opportunities and agency also involves tying these networks and interests to durable infrastructures and existing institutions, constituting what Bennett and Segerberg have described as hybrid forms that sit between connective and collective action networks.

In high-tech countries like the U.S., youth access to networked and mobile communications infrastructure has increased steadily, and the vast majority of young people are connected to social media sites and apps where they communicate with peers from their local settings as well as more far-flung affinity networks (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Whether it is the "news" about a newly minted couple shared through a Facebook status update, or a call to participate in a political activation, more and more of young people's connection to public life is mediated through these online infrastructures. Youth affinity networks vary widely as to how formally they are organized and what kinds of digitally-connected, place-based, and hybrid infrastructures they rely on. They run the gamut from networks that rely entirely on free and widespread commercial infrastructure such as Twitter, Reddit, or Facebook, to home-grown sites like animemusicvideos.com or ravelry.com, which are designed, coded, and created by members of the affinity network themselves in order to serve the specialized needs of their core participants (video remixers and knitters in these cases) (Ito, 2013a; Pfister, 2014). From the growing array of social network sites, mobile apps, and affinity-centered platforms, young people are finding a rich set of tools and infrastructures they can use to connect with the civic and the political.

For example, DREAM activists have established multiple websites and networked organizations to build these connections. DREAMactivist.org was founded by students who only met in person several years after the site was established. It has grown over the years to become a coalition of 30 organizations that sponsor activities such as a new

media intern program as well as campaigns such as the National DREAM Graduation, petitions, and fundraising (Zimmerman, 2012, pp. 22-23). A more formal organization like dreamactivist.org provides the focus for the more diffuse range of blogs, online videos, art, and twitter chats that comprise the broader movement. Without this formal organization, it is unlikely that the DREAMers movement would have had the kind of visibility or legislative successes that they have.

Like the DREAM Activists, Nerdfighters mobilize through a range of different online platforms. The Green brothers' videos are hosted on YouTube, and have over two million subscribers. Nerdfighters have uploaded hundreds of videos to their network of personal video blogs, donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Foundation to Decrease World Suck, and are the largest lending team for the small loans platform Kiva.org, at over \$4 million in loans and over 45,000 members.

In contrast to the Nerdfighters, which is a loosely organized affinity network centered around a set of video blogs and varied online platforms, the HPA relies on a more formal, traditional organizational structure of chapters located at schools or other community organizations. Hundreds of HPA chapters have been established across the country and overseas and represent the core of the network that can be activated for campaigns. Becoming an HPA chapter requires having leadership in place, establishing some kind of online presence, and a commitment to participating in campaigns and other activities. In addition to this core network, the HPA also relies on the substantial infrastructure and organizational heft of the Harry Potter fandom as well as other fan groups such as the Nerdfighters. Collaborating with networked groups like the Nerdfighters and Harry Potter podcasters for campaigns and awareness-raising, the HPA will organize activities in tandem with fan conventions and Wizard Rock events in order to reach constituencies that are broader than its core membership. For example, in 2012 HPA members partnered with Wizard Rock artist Paul DeGeorge for their Wrock the Vote Campaign, and registered people to vote at concerts around the country (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013, pp. 21-22).

Though different in important ways, the HPA and dreamactivist.org are examples of youth-led organizations that sit at the intersection of youth-centered peer networks and formal, adult-led institutions like schools and the state. Organizational structures that combine peer-to-peer engagement and youth-adult collaboration can also be initiated and led by educators and professional producers, as is the case with many youth-centered media programs and organizations.

At Youth Radio in Oakland, California, for example, young people are often drawn to apply for the organization's free, after-school multimedia classes initially based on a friend's recommendation or because they heard it was a place where they could get on the radio and learn to deejay and produce beats. Once young people come into the organization, they do get to make music. But they are also called upon to facilitate roundtable discussions, write opinion pieces and news spots, produce public service announcements, and learn to spread all this youth-generated content via social media. For the young people who opt to join the organization's newsroom after six months of classes taught by peer educators and adult faculty, there is the opportunity to reach audiences in the tens of millions. Youth Radio is National Public Radio's official Youth Desk and distributes stories through a range of other online and broadcast outlets including Marketplace, The Atlantic, Salon, Medium, The Huffington Post, National Geographic, Boing Boing, and local public and commercial radio stations around the U.S.

What started with a small group of teenagers collaborating with journalist Ellin O'Leary on a series of radio commentaries has developed a cross-cutting infrastructure that has been crucial in supporting young people's individual trajectories as well as the production of media that achieves civic impact. More than 80% of the teenagers and young

adults (ages 14-24) at Youth Radio are low-income youth and young people of color. The organization provides academic, career, and health counseling as well as a network of peer and adult collaborators and escalating opportunities for young people to play leadership roles within the organization and in the wider community. The organization creates more than 250 paid jobs for youth per year in the center of Downtown Oakland.

One context that specifically supports young people's engagement in connected civics is Youth Radio's investigative unit. A recent project, the 2014 Double Charged series, was a year-long investigation into the hidden costs of juvenile incarceration (Soep is Youth Radio's Senior Producer and Research Director and was an editor on this series). The back-story behind the series highlights the importance of infrastructures for support. As part of their efforts to support young people at Youth Radio who are court-involved, staff members sometimes go to court with youth for hearings and other consequential events. They started to notice that many of the young people reporting for court dates were not there for sentencing but to pay fees. This observation triggered a large-scale, sustained investigation into the growing trend within juvenile courts across the country to offset costs by charging families, the majority low-income, for fees associated with their children's crimes.

Producing a series at this scale and with its daunting reporting demands requires considerable curricular infrastructure. Youth Radio has developed a methodology that combines peer education and adult collaboration or "collegial pedagogy" to prepare young people to conduct interviews and analyze data from fellow youth (in the case of this story, teens coming out of incarceration or probation) as well as senior government officials (e.g., District Attorneys, Public Defenders) and experts on criminal justice (Soep & Chávez, 2010). The capacity to produce this level of reporting depends on sustained, structured learning opportunities, which turned out to be crucial to the team's ability to create a series that culminated in two national radio pieces, articles in *The Atlantic*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Medium*, two data-driven info-graphics, a Tweet chat, an interactive news app, four lesson plans developed by young people to help teachers integrate the stories into their classrooms, and plans for briefing county officials on the implications of the investigation for law enforcement and youth communities.

Institutionalization and increased infrastructure can run the risk of undermining the youth-driven affinities that drew together a group in the first place, through the emergence of outward-facing concerns (for example, funding deliverables) or the development of internal factions. When affinity networks *are* able to successfully navigate these tensions, their infrastructures: tend to be organized around youth interest; facilitate alliances with adults on young people's terms; allow for youth participation to take a range of forms; connect with young people on- and off-line; and invite investigation and critique on the part of those involved. In turn, the participants are empowered to change course when circumstances call for iteration. When young people are able to connect *both* flexibly networked as well as more formalized and capitalized kinds of infrastructures and institutions, we see the largest impacts, both personal and societal.

Conclusion: Developing Civic and Political Affinity Networks

In this article we have proposed a framework for identifying and supporting points of connection and synergy between young people's agency in peer networks, their interests, and civic opportunity in an era of participatory politics. We have described this site of intersection as "connected civics," where young people can experience civic agency in a way that is embedded in meaningful social relationships, tied to deeply held interests and

affinities, and powered by their various modes of creative expression and cultural production. We have dissected the properties of narratives, practices, and infrastructures that constitute “consequential connections” that tie together these more conventionally disconnected spheres. As a dimension of participatory politics, connected civics offers a powerful mode of learning and civic agency because it engages young people through deeply held identities and compelling cultural narratives, is driven by shared practices and purpose, and is grounded in a robust but accessible networked infrastructure. Further, by drawing together interests, agency, and civic opportunity, it infuses each sphere with the power of the other, making civics compelling—sometimes fun—and socially connected, and making social activity and cultural production reach for a higher calling. Groups that support connected civics include those that start with a youth affinity network (like the Harry Potter Alliance), as well as those that begin with a shared identity that is both embraced and politically imposed (like DREAMers), as well as programs structured around youth-adult collaboration with explicit educational and professional goals (like Youth Radio). In these consequential connections built by youth and adult leaders, we see a source of positive inspiration for other groups seeking to support youth civic engagement. We also see growing opportunities for supporting these connections and building multiple points of entry to connected civics with the growth of participatory politics that has accompanied the spread of digital and networked media.

By focusing on consequential connections, we have turned our attention to social and cultural contexts rather than individual skills, capacities, and ladders of engagement. Rather than limit our educational interventions to “engaging” or “developing” youth who are assumed to be in some way deficient, we might instead consider that the lack lies in the stories, identities, activities, and organizational roles that are open and available to them. Put differently, the “problem” may not be that young people are disengaged, but that there are critical disconnects between the social, cultural, and institutional worlds of youth and adults. Too often, young people are given the message that the issues they care about are trivial, lack broader relevance, and/or are beyond their grasp and therefore require officially recognized expertise to address. Very rarely are they invited to participate in activities of consequence that make a real difference in the adult-facing world, even though they may be engaged in meaningful and consequential forms of organizing and production in their digitally networked lives and peer communication.

Clearly young people are developing skills, literacies, and social connections in their peer social exchanges and affinity networks that can be mobilized for contexts outside of these settings. These include the ability to tell stories, mobilize publics, conduct research, code, and manage publicity (Soep, 2014). By stressing the importance of *consequential* connections, we call attention to the importance of building contexts where these capacities can be meaningfully applied and exercised. It is not enough to develop these capacities, whether that is in a peer setting, gaming community or in an educational program, if there are not narratives, practices, relationships, and infrastructures that enable the translation and shared purpose that knit these worlds together.

Indeed, if we do turn our attention to the individual journeys that young people take through their educational, social, recreational and civic worlds, we see a marked absence of clear “ladders” or sequential “pathways” of civic development. Instead we see moments of activation when an affinity space is under threat, or periods of engagement when a cause becomes relevant to a deeply held identity or value. Achieving a broader purpose does not require transcending or abandoning affinity and identity, and can involve finding specific causes and activities that make an individual’s identity and social relationships consequential and urgently relevant.

Acknowledgments

This paper is indebted to the researchers in the YPP and CLRN networks who have offered not only rich data and case materials but key insights that have informed the analysis represented here. Special thanks go to Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, Cathy Cohen, Howard Gardner, Henry Jenkins, Joseph Kahne and the members of the Leveling Up team: Ksenia Korobkova, Yong Ming Kow, Crystle Martin, Rachel Cody Pfister, Matthew Rafalow, Katie Salen Tekinbas, Amanda Wortman, Timothy Young.

Funding

This work was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grants [13-103229-000-USP] and [10-97572-000-USP].

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