

Masters Long Project

**Young Adults and Virtual Public Spheres:
Building A New Political Culture**

by

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MASTER OF ARTS
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PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

Abstract

Young adults, facilitated by the Internet, are building a new political culture that is more fluid, decentralized, diverse, and global than cultures of the past, which may move society beyond traditional political oligarchies towards greater participatory democracy, flexible coalitions and networks managing political affairs, and communication and information processes that are more influential than in previous generations.

Young adults are using the multi-faceted, online media platform to inform themselves, discuss public policy, and organize political activity. From texting and email, to chat rooms, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, interactive web sites, and virtual worlds such as Second Life, youth and young adults are building new local, regional, national, and global, virtual public spheres with thriving democratic debate and effective political organization.

Keywords

virtual public sphere, Internet, young adults, Second Life, online media, virtual worlds, political communication, politics, global democracy

Citation

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Online Constituencies...

Networked political constituencies are beginning to self-organize faster than the governments and political organizations that have traditionally served them. Thanks to the web, constituencies are becoming better informed, smarter, and more demanding of qualities missing from most political organizations.

— *The Cluetrain Manifesto for People-Powered Politics*
(*culturekitchen.com*, 2007)

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research project was to better understand the influence of the online media on the political awareness and engagement of young adults and the Internet's roles in the modern public sphere.

By online media I mean any medium that requires an Internet connection, such as texting and messaging, podcasts, video streams, web sites, email, online gaming, blogs, news feeds, chat rooms, RSS, special online applications such as Second Life, etc.

Political awareness is general knowledge of current political events, politicians, issues, etc., from the local through to the international. Political engagement (or involvement, or activities) is one's personal participation in politics such as:

- Reading, watching, listening to the news.
- Talking with friends and associates about news and issues.
- Communicating with politicians, bureaucrats, and other persons about political issues.
- Donating time or money to political issues, organizations, or campaigns.
- Organizing activities such as letter-writing campaigns, educational meetings, protests, media events, etc.
- Activities in a political party or political organization (e.g. New Democratic Party, Amnesty International, neighbourhood association, etc.).

Young Adults Are Building Virtual Public Spheres

In western democracies there have been concerns about declining voting rates, particularly among young adults (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000 ; Pasek et al., 2006), increasing mass media concentration (Chomsky & Herman, 1998), declining participation by young adults in traditional media consumption (Mindich, 2005), and a perceived general lack of involvement of young people in politics (Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000). If it is true that young adults no longer care about politics, and do not wish to be involved, then these are dark days, for a

healthy democracy requires the active debate and participation of informed publics for its continued functioning.

This long paper however, takes another view, speaking with and observing young adults directly to determine what they think and are doing about politics, media, and communication. The conclusion I reach is that youth and young adults feel disenfranchised from political parties and governments and believe that the traditional mass media produce biased political reporting. Young adults may follow news in the mass media, but visit a myriad of trusted online sites to seek additional information, research political positions, engage in issues dialogue, and organize political action, all with friends, colleagues, strangers, and people from other nations and cultures. Habermas' traditional public sphere is being augmented by a multitude of virtual public spheres where young adults improvise politics directly online, and bypass the mediation of politicians, governments, and corporate interests by utilizing the interactive, interpersonal, and mass communication opportunities that the Internet, in all its many forms, offers. Young people are building a new political culture that is more fluid, decentralized, diverse, and global than cultures of the past, which may move society beyond traditional political oligarchies towards greater participatory democracy, flexible coalitions and networks managing political affairs, and communication and information processes that are more influential than in previous generations.

The paper begins with a review of existing literature which shows that young adults favour the Internet for news and information gathering; describes how youth and young people use the Internet for interactive communication; outlines the role of the online media in modern political activity; and examines the scholarly debate about the role of the Internet in the modern public sphere.

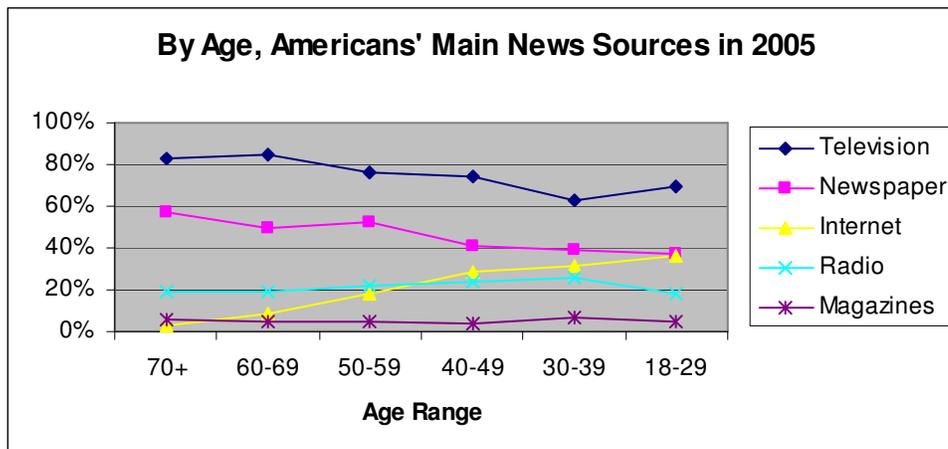
Finally, a wide-ranging analysis of a large body of primary research data, gathered through diverse methods, triangulates the conclusions with a variety of complementary methods.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Youth and Young Adults Find News and Information Online

A recent study of young adults and the media (Pew Research Center, 2004) found that the main medium after television where young adults go to get news is the Internet. In Pew's bi-annual survey, 82% of the 18-29 year old cohort said they had online access, and 36% sought news online three or more days per week.

One of the few upward trends in media consumption in recent years has been the percentage of Americans who turn to Internet sources for news. As the public has moved away from traditional news sources—local and network television news, newspapers and, to a lesser extent, radio—online news consumption has increased dramatically. The online crowd tends to be young and well-educated (Pew Research Center, 2004, p. 8).



(data sourced from Pew Research Center, 2005)

More recent studies, and studies of younger cohorts, show a growing penetration of Internet media. A June 2006 study of 14 to 22 year old Americans, published in *Communication Research* (Pasek et al., 2006) and titled *America's Youth and Community Engagement*, found that, “using the Internet to get information was the most popular form of media use, with 58.3% of youth reporting that they do it most days of the week.”

An annual survey completed by the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future, and recently released, found that for all U.S. age groups below 66 years that, “at least 74% are online, with penetration hitting 99% for those 18 and under [emphasis added]” (Cole et al., 2007).

In short, in North America the Internet has become a very popular medium for obtaining news and information among youth and young adults. Other studies show increasing Internet access around the world with penetration growing dramatically and currently estimated at 17.2% of the global population (Chen & Wellman, 2004;

Internetworldstats.com, 2007). The globe-spanning Internet provides a flexible, communications vehicle for the virtual, global public sphere, or more accurately, for a large and diverse group of local, regional, national, and global public spheres.

Communication and Interaction on the Net

For young adults and youth the “net” has also become a medium used to communicate and interact with one’s friends. The Media Awareness Network held focus groups of Canadian children aged nine to 17 (2004), and conducted a large survey of Canadians in grades 4 to 11 (2005). They found that, “contrary to the earlier stereotype of the isolated and awkward computer nerd, today’s wired kid is a social kid” (2005), and that children access the Internet to converse online with their friends for over an hour, on average, each day. For these children the Internet is a natural, integrated part of their daily interaction with others: “Young people... talked about how they move seamlessly between real and virtual, on-line and off-line” (Media Awareness Network, 2004, p. 8).

Despite young adults’ heavy use of the Internet for news and information some researchers have written them off as politically uninformed and uninvolved, even while acknowledging a high degree of volunteerism (Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Still others note that Internet technologies have increased public discourse of political issues and also hold the possibility of reviving the public sphere and transforming online political discussion into a real political force (*cf* Rushkoff, 2003). My own survey results found that 88% of young adults used online or mobile media for politics; including information gathering, online discussion, and organizing, and 94% of them were involved in groups, organizations, and organized activities (Appendix B). *The Digital Future* study (Cole et al., 2007) and Pasek et al. (2006) also found strong links between online communities and civic activity:

Participation in online communities leads to social activism. Almost two-thirds of online community members who participate in social causes through the Internet (64.9%) say they are involved in causes that were new to them when they began participating on the Internet. And more than 40 percent (43.7%) of online community members participate more in social activism since they started participating in online communities (Cole et al., 2007, p. 2).

Based on my focus group results and responses to the questionnaire, which are analysed later, I believe that one of the reasons why networked young adults do become politically engaged is precisely because they have become accustomed to thinking for themselves through their active participation in public policy discussions online. The fact that young people are now exposed to a wide variety of opinions, well beyond the narrow confines of corporate media reporting, and that many take the opportunity to learn more about issues that interest them, helps compel many young people to take action and use the Internet as a political communications and organizing tool.

Activists Start Online and Move Offline

In 2002, longtime “netizen” and Internet commentator Howard Rheingold published an insightful and popular book *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution—Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access*. In it he describes the rising political power of the new mobile media. (In this paper mobile media includes any sort of medium that is wireless, such as a cell phone, PDA, iPod, MP3 player, portable gaming and video players, videocam, digital camera, book, magazine, newspaper, journal, writing pad, etc.)

An example of political organizing using mobile media that Rheingold describes is the “Battle of Seattle” protests: “On November 30, 1999, autonomous but internetworked squads of demonstrators protesting the meeting of the World Trade Organization used ‘swarming’ tactics, mobile phones, Web sites, laptops, and handheld computers to win the ‘Battle of Seattle’ ” (p. 158). As an information activist myself at the time, I witnessed a great deal of email and web traffic that facilitated the rapid organization of the broad-based and effective coalition against corporate globalization.

In another example from *Smart Mobs*, Rheingold highlights the power of cellular text messaging to quickly rally effective political action:

On January 20, 2001, President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines became the first head of state in history to lose power to a smart mob. More than one million Manila residents, mobilized and coordinated by waves of text messages, assembled... [and] Estrada fell. The legend of “Generation Txt” was born (Rheingold, 2002, p. 157-158).

Most young adults are increasingly seeking their news and discussing politics online. These activities are coincident with a higher degree of political activity than peers who do not go online precisely because they are better informed and more certain of their political opinions. Soft power theorist Joseph Nye, a former assistant secretary of defense for the U.S. government, states that organizations are decentralizing and that virtual communities are developing their own ways of governance on the Internet. He goes so far as to state that these virtual groupings are not only, “being overlaid on traditional geographical communities,” but that the evidence suggests that the nation state, “that has dominated world politics for the past three and a half centuries,” is withering as the strength of these virtual communities grow (Nye, 2004, p. 83).

My own research data confirm these trends identified by Nye towards virtual political communities and the growing public spheres of Internet-facilitated young adults who are both politically aware and engaged. Internet technologies have grown into a set of powerful and diversified tools that facilitate democratic discussion and organizing because: information can be disseminated literally at the speed of light, to multiple personal and organizational networks; group knowledge can be quickly gathered and shared using tools such as wikis, blogs, and websites; and political responses can be formulated, promulgated and constantly evolved through interactive discussions and dissemination tools such as those used in the “Battle of Seattle”.

Virtual Public Spheres Facilitated by Interactive Internet

By “the public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body (Habermas, 1964, p. 49).

Modern theories of the public sphere generally uphold the ideals outlined by Habermas in his major theoretical work, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, written in German in 1962 and translated into English in 1989. At the same time, over the years, many have been critical of the original narrow framing of the propertied, male participants in Habermas’ public sphere; his original assumption that there would be just a single public sphere; the impracticality of his Platonic idealization of a perfectly neutral, dialogic space with the power to transform purely rational discussion into real-world politics; and generally, the poor transferability of an 18th Century model to today’s globalized world which is suffused with corporate mass media and the interactive Internet (Gimmler, 2001; Keane, 2000; Papacharissi, 2002; Polat, 2005).

The consensus that is emerging is that there is not just a single sphere, but many public spheres, operating from the personal to the global level, and that these many unequal spheres have differing levels of influence on public policy and activities (Keane, 2000). This becomes evident if one examines the many online forums for political discussion and action. As is widely acknowledged, the Internet has already undercut the audience and revenues of large television networks and newspapers by providing literally millions of alternatives or channels. In a similar fashion, the many-to-many nature of Internet media, and the low cost of entry, has led to an explosion of sites where political information can be accessed, discussed, and acted upon, thus eliminating the oligopolies of mass media, major political parties, and large organizations, and making accessible a much greater diversity of political opinions and opportunities.

In a 2004 lecture, Jürgen Habermas makes the case anew for the health of the public sphere as a measure of the vibrancy of a democracy:

For complex societies can be normatively held together solely by civic solidarity—the abstract, legally mediated form of solidarity among citizens. And among citizens who can no longer know one another face to face, only the process of public opinion and will formation can function to reproduce a brittle form of collective identity. For this reason, the critical state of a democracy can be measured by taking the pulse of the life of its political public sphere.

Scholars examining the Internet’s potential role as a public sphere differ on whether it can truly function as a democratic medium for public discussion uninfluenced by commercial ownership and government oversight. “The Internet and related technologies have created a new public space for politically oriented conversation; whether this public space transcends to a public sphere is not up to the technology itself” (Papacharissi, 2002). Some early analyses contended that cyberspace could not be effectively used as a true public sphere

because of its corporate ownership (Dahlberg, 1998) and its inaccessibility to members of the public who were prohibited by cost, lack of training, and low bandwidth or non-existent infrastructure, particularly in the developing world. However, as costs decrease, global access expands, and the Internet increasingly is a part of young people's education and lives, this argument weakens.

In 2004, Chen & Wellman estimated global Internet access rates of between 11 and 15 percent, or 700 to 945 million persons worldwide. In the same year, *The Economist* stated that 600 million mobile phones were being sold per year, phones which increasingly have Internet capabilities. Internetworldstats.com (2007), combining data from Nielsen/NetRatings, the International Telecommunications Union, newly industrialized countries, and other reliable sources, estimates there are 1.13 billion Internet users as of June 10, 2007, or 17.2% of the global population. Their estimates of Internet penetration rates range from a low of 3.6% in Africa to 69% in North America.

Internet usage is likely between 15-20% of the global population, and growing, and the net is widely used for political information and discussion, not only by governments and the mass media, but by legions of non-profit organizations, over 70 million individual bloggers (Wikipedia, 2007b), and even more online discussants. Some scholars think that the Internet has the potential to be a more effective public sphere than the public spheres of the past (Polat, 2005; Sassi, 2000), although others caution that other new technologies, such as radio and television were also, in their infancy, widely heralded as ushering in a new era of democratic discussion and effective public policy debate, and yet failed to live up to the initial hype as a democratizing medium (Papacharissi, 2002; Papacharissi, 2004).

In my view the Internet has already shown itself to be a durable and effective public sphere, or more accurately a combination of thousands or millions of public spheres, because it is widely used for public policy discussions and as a tool to organize real political change in the real world (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Even many marginalized individuals are now able to access the Internet as was demonstrated by Machin's 2002 case study of widespread access by poor Trinidadians through Internet cafés, and friends and neighbours who were online, and my own conversation with University of Victoria Sociologist Cecilia M. Benoit, who said in a meeting of the Homeless Needs Survey Research Committee, that the best way to stay in touch with homeless people was by email (C. Benoit, personal communication, 2007; Hämaläinen & Lin, 2006; Machin, 2002). Even persons who are homeless have their own blogs and web sites (e.g. homelessnation.org) contributing a unique marginalized perspective to public discourse.

The Internet is also being used for effective political mobilization such as the 1999 "Battle of Seattle" (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Rheingold, 2002), subsequent anti-corporate global mobilizations, and the rallying of millions of anti-war and peace protesters around the world in 2002 and 2003, in an attempt to stop the US invasion of Iraq (Kahn & Kellner, 2004).

The Internet's wide-reaching political impacts grow year by year and are likely to expand further as the wireless network and Internet capabilities of cell phones and other portable media continue to grow, and as the price of digital technologies and Internet access

continues to drop (Stecklow, 2005).

In the rest of this paper, through a broad analysis of a variety of primary data, I examine how young adults' use of online media, combined with their interest in political issues and level of community involvement, bode well for the increasing use of the Internet as a facilitator of many public spheres that provide access to diverse information and opinions, encourage open and critical policy discussion, and facilitate political organizing locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Diverse Variety of Methods

Following the lead of several ethnographic researchers (Carey, 2005; Hine, 2000; Machin, 2002; Sade-Beck, 2004), this study looks at young adults' Internet media and public media activities using a variety of complementary methods that together provide broad perspective and triangulation of conclusions. I chose these diverse research methods both to look at young people's use of online media from different perspectives and also to learn about the relative usefulness of a variety of research methods.

I was attracted to ethnographic observation to see with fresh eyes exactly how media was being used by young people. I wanted to observe people both in the real world and also in an immersive, online environment, both from a neutral observational viewpoint and also as a participant observer. For these purposes I chose first-hand, passive observation of youth and young adults' use of media in real public spaces and also online participant observation of political meetings, rallies, and conversations in the Second Life virtual world. After observing real life, public media use for over four months, I wanted to test my developing hypothesis that about half of youth and young adults were using media in public spaces and so I subsequently recorded 566 numerical observations of public media use (or lack thereof) by youth and young adults.

I also wanted to learn directly from young adults what they thought of the intersection of online media, mobile media, and politics. So I conducted a university classroom survey of undergraduate communication students followed up with a small focus group selected on the basis of the participants' interest in the subject. Because of the small sample size in the survey I later also posted it on www.SurveyMonkey.com and invited, through email and web postings, politically inclined young adults to complete the questionnaire online, more than doubling the sample size.

Population and Sample

There were several populations surveyed in this study:

- Twenty undergraduate students in a communications class at Royal Roads University (questionnaire and five in the focus group).
- Twenty-three young adults who completed an online questionnaire.
- Dozens of young users of media in public places in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada (ethnographic and numerical observations).
- Dozens of individuals politically involved in the Second Life virtual world (participant observations).

PRESENTATION OF DATA FINDINGS

Public Media Observation Metrics

From March 10 to 31, 2007, I anonymously recorded a total of 566 quick, counted observations of media use in public and semi-public places; simply noting whether young adults and youth were using no media, or one or more media in public. Many of the subjects were observed for less than one minute which probably led to an under-representation of how common media use by this age group is in public spaces. Two media observation summary tables are available at Appendix C and an Excel spreadsheet of all the observations is available on the Appendices DVD.

The use of media by young people in public spaces varied considerably depending on the location. Sixty-five percent of young adults and youth I observed were not using any media; one-third were seen to be using one or more media during the observation period. Media usage by young adults and youth is present in most public spaces, common in some of them, and small media are preferred over larger media in public settings. Cell phones comprised 40% of all public media usage, audio players about the same, and online media use appeared uncommon.

Even in public and while travelling many young people are heavy users of media. As broadband capabilities for portable devices expand in the future, I expect that the variety of media consumed in public spaces, and the uses of that media, will also grow. My numerical observations did not illuminate the issue of media use and political awareness and participation other than to demonstrate that many youth and young adults are in touch with the world beyond their immediate surroundings even while in public spaces.

Ethnographic Observation of Media Use in Public Spaces

Introduction

I unobtrusively and anonymously observed young adults and youth use media in public and semi-public spaces in an effort to better understand this age cohort's interaction with new media such as cell phones, texting, audio and video players, social networking, laptop computers, video games, and digital cameras. Ethnographic observations were recorded from October 25, 2006, through March 28, 2007, in a variety of public and semi-public places primarily in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. (The complete record of 14,000 words of observational sketches can be found at Appendix F.)

A total of 21 public media observations were made, varying a great deal in length and richness. Observations lasted from less than a minute to several hours and were described using from 50 to 4,000 words. I observed media use in a variety of public and semi-public settings: Stain Internet Café, Black Stilt Coffeehouse, BC Transit buses, sidewalks, the Hillside Mall, a moving train, a small hair salon, Greater Victoria Public Library main branch downtown, and at Royal Roads University's Habitat Café and library. While little direct

observation was made of obviously political communications a variety of conclusions can be induced, particularly when linked with the other data collected in this study.

Four common themes from the observations are described in more detail in the sections below:

1. Many people displayed very social behaviour, both with those physically present and also through mediated communication. This social, networking behaviour encourages the rapid sharing of information, political and otherwise.
2. Others tried to isolate themselves in public even while using media to connect themselves with the wider world.
3. Subjects were frequently seen multi-tasking with a variety of media.
4. Boys and young men were frequently seen gaming, illustrating how easy it is for youth to trial alternative, virtual identities and realities through the use of interactive media.

Excepting audio players, the media used in public places tends to be very social in nature, either involving more than one person physically and/or communicating with others not physically present. For youth and young adults, external dialogue, communication, and information retrieval is frequent, even while in public and travelling.

Social Networking Here and There

For young people public media use is often an opportunity to share with friends physically present and also with others through the communication medium. Young people were often physically present with their friends while engaged in public media use, frequently showing them what they saw, or looking over at their friend's screen, and they often talked about what they were doing, laughed, and were emotionally expressive. Compared to older adults watching television, listening to the radio, or reading a newspaper, activities frequently in my experience accompanied by requests for silence, the younger generation's use of the new media is generally a much more social, sharing experience.

A gender difference was notable—females were more likely than males to use social networking applications in public places, such as email, text messaging, online chatting, and sharing daily activities with Facebook. “Facebook is a social utility that connects you with the people around you. Facebook is made up of many networks... You can use Facebook to share information with people you know; see what's going on with your friends; look up people around you” (Facebook, 2007).

In the course of my research, like over one million other Canadians (Roesler, 2007), at the invitation of several friends, I joined the Facebook network. Before long I began receiving political information from my more politically inclined friends and colleagues. When I asked

one party activist why he used Facebook he explained that it organized a large number of people in a way that he could not do with email, and that therefore, it was more effective to use it for some political organizing (M. Stewart, personal Facebook communication, May 26, 2007).

When young adults and youth use mobile media in public places they are usually interacting and communicating with others, rather than receiving a one-way information flow. Even the popular war/violent games frequently played by young men involve constant interactions with other real players mediated by the online gaming software.

Personal and political information can travel more quickly than in the past and reach people wherever they are 24/7 making it possible to organize political events very quickly or react to political circumstances as they unfold such as the minute-by-minute tactical maneuvers and reporting during the “Battle of Seattle” (Rheingold, 2002).

Isolated In Public Through Media

Ironically, a common observation was that online interaction and public isolation occurred simultaneously; with a young person involved in a two-way communications medium such as email, texting, cellular call, or Facebook, but not interacting with those in close physical proximity.

Gone are the days of a shared, communal space; an experience all participate in together—such as the train ride of 20 years ago. Now many of us, particularly youth and young adults, are engaged in our own private electronic journeys even as we travel together in a small train coach or bus. Young people are frequently enveloped in private external worlds of audio, visual, and interactive media in public and when travelling.

Although seeming in contradiction to the more common observation of social usage of media, the isolation described here demonstrates the power and hold of the media even when people are in public spaces. The media commands our attention at any time and any place and can be used to instantly transport us somewhere non-corporeal. Political research and peer dialogue mediated at a distance can continue even when we are surrounded by strangers in busy, public settings.

The potential consequences of this always-on, interactive media and communications for political activity is that, whenever important politics calls, young adults and youth can often be reached: by voice, text, and even image. The isolation that such media can allow even in a public space can be used to connect individuals to the larger world in real time. And, in turn, they can share their new-found information with those around them or connected with them through their various digital networks.

This reality is seen, for example, in the rising phenomenon of citizen journalists and bloggers who intently record their observations live in notebook computers while they attend conferences, political events, and more, and continuously upload their commentary to the

net in order to keep their external audiences connected with important happenings in real time.

Much Multitasking With Media—or Talk the Walk

I was struck by how frequently young adults used a variety of media, often simultaneously or in rapid succession, and how quickly many of the subjects switched between tasks on their computers, audio players, and cell phones. People were often observed listening with earphones while reading, typing, or mousing. Sometimes they would share what they were seeing or doing with a nearby friend or relative. People's tasks and conversations were often interrupted by cell phone calls and text messages. A common observed behaviour was to switch from one media to another, cell phone to MP3 player for example, with very little or no idle time between media.

This ongoing, multitasking behaviour illustrates the ease with which a variety of information and personal connections are available to the youthful media user at any time, any place. Of course, with cell phones, text messaging, email, blogging, and other interactive, online media, communication for young adults is a two-way street, not the one-way mass media diet of many of their parents.

Although I did not observe this exact behaviour it is easy to imagine politically engaged youth taking a cellular call about some fast-breaking political event, broadcasting the news through their text messaging and email networks, and joining a political event-in-progress, all the while keeping informed of the minute-by-minute developments through a live blog or videocast of the action. So while the multi-tasking environment of young people may at times be a distraction to serious political thinking and dialogue it can also support and strengthen the kind of "smart mob" behaviours and political actions described so thoroughly by Howard Rheingold (2002).

Violence and Social Gaming in Public Spaces

In our violence-saturated North American media culture it is hardly surprising that media violence in public spaces is acceptable even in quiet Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The ease into which young men can slip into a violent, interactive fiction, even in a semi-public place, is a testament to how simple and natural it is for youth to try alternative identities and realities through the use of interactive media (Media Awareness Network, 2004). While violent behaviour is not a political ideal, this observation does indicate that new social and political behaviour can be modelled through online media—even in public spaces.

Online media, which allows interactivity with computer software and other participants, can be a highly immersive learning experience, particularly when experienced in the three-dimensional environment of a virtual reality or game. As the Second Life virtual world observations reported in the section below note, and as I have recently seen in various projects being hosted in Second Life by USC Annenberg, such as the Virtual Worlds Project,

Global Kids' Online Leadership Program, Exchanging Cultures Game, and City Building Games (Second Life, 2007), interactive online games can also be used to learn about and model positive social and political goals.

For example, the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy recently received a \$550,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation to study how technology can be used to build bonds between cultures: "One of the key tenets of our mission is to explore how technology can be used to build bridges and understanding between cultures, be they between or within virtual worlds or between countries" (University of Southern California, 2007). The USC program includes development of an Exchanging Cultures Game where, "each player becomes a diplomat who must attempt to understand the cultures of the people that he/she is building relationships with, as well as share elements of his/her own culture," through the exchange of cultural items, "such as dances, art, recipes, clothing, and images," and discussion with other participants about their own cultures (Fernandez, 2006).

Online games using avatars are popular with youth. The use of online simulations, modelling, and interactive social games are emerging phenomena in the public spheres of the Internet which allow people to test various hypotheses and scenarios in virtual reality before transferring the ideas to the real political world. More research should be done on these topics and their ability to expand our knowledge and the functioning of virtual public spheres.

Virtual Ethnography in Second Life

Introduction

In a world where people's experience of community and culture increasingly exist across geographic and temporal boundaries, ethnographers committed to understanding people's everyday experience on an in-depth level may need to abandon their commitment to place and face-to-face encounters (Eichhorn, 2001).

The new, online media have become, at least to youth and young adults, a media space unlike any we have known before. As Carey (2005, p. 15-16) points out: "Many people in the study talked about *watching* TV and *reading* a newspaper but *going to* Web sites. They used a metaphor of place and some, especially teens, talked about *hanging out* at Web sites." To best understand their use of the Internet the researcher must be online with them and observe their behaviours.

I chose to observe the political side of "Second Life", a virtual world that is being created by its users. Unlike many other "massively multiplayer online games" (MMOGs), the Second Life virtual world does not come pre-scripted with a purpose, game play, or theme; but only with the tools for users to create their own virtual reality. It is an ideal test bed for experimentation with political communication and the public sphere, and my observations have confirmed its potential for a new kind of political interaction that can reduce

geography, time, culture, disabilities, personal bias, and other boundaries, while expanding communicative potential.

From February 19 through March 31, 2007, I completed ethnographic participant observations in Second Life, a three-dimensional virtual community of over six million users (Second Life, 2007), whose population its commercial creator, Linden Labs, claimed was growing at approximately 38% per month (BBC News, 2006). During each of my observations about 20,000 to 30,000 individuals were live in the Second Life world. I observed from one to 100 people at any one time, represented as avatars (animated characters, controlled in real time by their owners to interact in the virtual environment).

I attended political meetings of self-described, “progressive grassroots activists,” rallies for Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and general political discussions to make virtual ethnographic observations (Hine, 2000; Machin, 2002). My records included “photos” (screen shots), “videos” (moving screen recordings), and copies of automatic transcripts of the typed conversations. (A representative sample of the transcripts are reprinted at Appendix D and all of the digital records, except for some videos, are contained in the Appendices DVD.)

As well, I participated in several small-group conversations to learn more about virtual politics from those who were organizing in Second Life or interested in talking about online politics. In Second Life virtual spaces I wore a name tag which included the title “Researcher” and my online alias: Alan Innis. I also identified myself as a researcher during participant-observer conversations.

Unlike the other data sources in this long paper, my observations in Second Life were not restricted to young adults and youth; in part because there is no simple or sure way to verify the true identity of avatars. Many of the people I spoke with claimed to be older than 30 years. Nevertheless I include my findings in the paper because I believe that virtual worlds are a youthful medium; that the kind of highly interactive environment available in virtual spaces is a significant addition to the public sphere; and that virtual spaces will become increasingly used by young (and older) adults as this new medium becomes more familiar, easier to use, and as the high-end hardware required becomes more commonplace.

Political Meetings in Second Life Public Spaces

Although the possibilities are, “limited only by one’s imagination,” (and time) to create virtual realities, in practice political meetings and rallies in Second Life mimicked those in real life. Individuals would generally gather in a life-like environment and talk politics. Despite their virtuality, the meetings and rallies had a familiar feeling for anyone who has spent much time at political gatherings in real life.

The photo below gives the flavour of a small meeting in Second Life with its real and unreal elements, such as floating signs, winged participant, and half-invisible couch. I am the avatar in the middle of the blue couch in the foreground.



A political organizing meeting of self-described grassroots activists at RootsCamp, Progressive Island, Second Life (rootscampsl.org).

These RootsCamp meetings, like many political meetings in real life, began with introductions. Participants were invited to introduce themselves, including their real names (aliases are generally used in Second Life), and a quick synopsis of their current real life, political activities. The rest of the meetings were mostly devoted to updates about what was happening politically around Second Life, such as reports from the virtual Presidential campaigns; new virtual, political places and initiatives (e.g. proposed Second Life progressive radio station); incidents of virtual attacks and graffiti (“griefing”); upcoming online events that people were encouraged to participate in, help organize, and communicate to their networks; sharing of technical information and resources, and gifting of virtual resources; and discussions about how to build connections among politically progressive, Second Life residents so that they might become a more potent political force. In short, the meetings provided a public sphere for the sharing of information and coordination of political activities with one notable difference: participants were geographically separated throughout the USA, in Canada, Europe, and the Middle East.

The people at RootsCamp, where I participated in five weekly meetings, were extraordinarily adept Internet communicators, and were able to set up wikis and blogs in just a few minutes even while meeting. They often made arrangements with one another to meet online at another time for collaboration in the creation of more sophisticated political information tools useful in the Second Life virtual world or the larger online community.

I was given information during one of these meetings about a virtual tool that allowed me to later set up RSS feeds in Second Life where my own political web sites' revolving story headlines now appear. Another time when I dropped by late at night, a key organizer, errcheck, was busy installing an automatic language translator so that political activists without a common language might better communicate with one another in Second Life. As you type it renders a crude translation in the chosen foreign language. The language translator highlights one of the key features of Second Life and Internet political discourse in general: the building of informal, world-spanning public spheres devoted to political dialogue and organizing.

I also attended political rallies and events of the unofficial Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton Second Life presidential primary campaigns. No real life candidate endorsed or supported the activities of their grassroots virtual activists until May 13, 2007, when political outsider Mike Gravel officially endorsed his Democratic campaign in Second Life (Gravel, 2007). Speculation was that this was because of official campaigns' perceived inability to control activities in a virtual setting and their fear of the untried and unknown. Another real life concern that the virtual campaign organizers discussed was their inability to raise campaign donations as they could not control who donated because it would be easy for foreigners to make campaign contributions which are forbidden by USA laws (Appendix D), since any Second Life resident can travel ("teleport") to any public, virtual place.

The transboundary, anonymous, and surreal nature of Second Life and other virtual worlds makes them difficult to regulate, which, in turn, increases their strength as independent, virtual public spheres, operating independently of government and corporate interests. Further strengthening the ability of Second Life virtual public spheres to operate independently of central control, Linden Labs released the client-side software into the public domain on January 8, 2007 (Linden Lab, 2007), and a spokesperson for the company announced a few months later at the *Virtual Worlds 07* conference that they would also release the server software into the public domain, thus allowing any computer, anywhere, to host and modify virtual worlds (Wallace, 2007); in other words, decentralizing the location and control of Second Life. The new politics enabled by the globe-spanning, interactive, Internet media, is one that is no longer centered around a single geographical location. As Manuel Castells (2001, p. 697) puts it: "Networks of discontinuous places in interaction with a diverse range of localities are the components of the new sociospatial structure."

I also attended an extremely interesting Barack Obama multimedia virtual rally at *Mainstage at SoHo Island* in Second Life on March 31, 2007. The large public square in Second Life attracted about 100 participants in avatar form (large by Second Life standards and technical capabilities), including some, like myself, located outside the USA. (It was not uncommon to observe multi-lingual conversations in Second Life with people from different countries.)

The organizers brought a live audio feed (soundcast) from origin.barackobama.com/live into the virtual space from a real life, Barack Obama town hall meeting, built a traditional-looking campaign speech stage at the square's centre, and created and controlled a Barack Obama avatar who stood on the stage while the real Obama delivered his speech in Iowa. At the

same time, avatar videographers from SLCN (Second Life Cable Network television, <http://slcn.tv>), were filming and broadcasting the virtual event live from “in-world” (i.e. inside Second Life) to their web site, virtual in-world headquarters, and other screening locations within Second Life . (Other events have also been multicast or soundcast in-world within Second Life to overcome the current technical limitations of the server hardware to host only about 150 avatars simultaneously in any one location at any one time.)



Speakers from rival online presidential campaigns, and other virtual politicians, discuss politics in the Second Life virtual world, at a well-attended forum at which several questions I posed were discussed.

In addition to this rich, sophisticated use of media technology, what I found to be a very democratic aspect of Second Life political rallies and meetings is the ability to communicate by chat with those in the crowd around you and also by instant message privately to individuals or groups, present or elsewhere in the virtual world, even carrying on several conversations simultaneously, discussing what is happening in real time. So while the real Obama was talking to a quiet crowd in Iowa, many participants in the simultaneous, virtual event were also discussing his speech and voicing their own opinions; several times they even brought in data from the outside world to support their arguments, supplying web site addresses and documents for those who wished to pursue them further—a rich engagement in the public sphere in real time.

All typewritten chat discussions can also be archived to your computer creating an accurate, permanent record for you or the group of everything that was discussed publicly. At

RootsCamp, for example, it was standard practice to post the meeting transcript to the group wiki at <http://rootscamp.pbwiki.com/RootsCampSLminutes>.

Second Life political meetings, being virtual, can easily be expanded in real time. If you are in-world, or online accepting email, and do not know about an event in progress, your friends or colleagues can invite you while the event is occurring. Several times I invited Second Life friends to interesting political events I was attending through an instant message (auto-forwarded by email to those not present in Second Life) and later, by teleporting them to the site so they could be virtually present. So, when an expert opinion is required on a matter of community concern, the person needed can be summoned and asked to immediately participate in the virtual, public discourse.

Immediately after the Obama Iowa/SoHo Mainstage town hall the crowd was invited to teleport to a rally held at the in-world D.C. Capitol Hill building, where a panel of virtual political activists spoke (typed) about the reasons why they were supporting the Obama campaign and why they felt that Second Life was an important medium for political activity and communications. A video of the event can be viewed at <http://slcn.tv/barack-obama-citizens-rally>. Rally participants were discouraged from talking, but of course they discussed while the panellists talked. They were also invited to volunteer with the Second Life Obama campaign and be “greeters” (volunteer staff) at the Obama in-world headquarters to show visitors around the various virtual information displays which included:

- Issue notes with official campaign messaging.
- Video clips from mainstream television and the official Barack Obama campaign.
- Links to the official Obama website.
- A phone bank where volunteers could hang out to instant message and email Obama notices to individuals and in-world groups. (All the Presidential campaigns and every imaginable interest have their own virtual groups which anyone can join.)
- Items that avatars could wear or carry to show their allegiance to the Obama campaign and advertise as they travel about in-world: such as t-shirts, ball caps, and banners—just like in real life.
- A meeting space for political discussions and organizing meetings.

A criticism I heard a few times about the virtual Obama campaign, and the other unofficial presidential campaign headquarters, was that they were too real life like; too banal and uninteresting considering the potential for Second Life’s virtuality to be more creative, fun, and interesting. In other words, the virtual campaign sites were too much like other, more traditional media and real life campaign offices, and did not take full advantage of the new opportunities available in a virtual world. At a RootsCamp meeting one participant suggested that political campaigns should incorporate interactive games to help people better

understand the issues, such as, “what happens when you have universal health care,” “your day on welfare,” “a day in the life of a missile,” and “follow the oil money” (Appendix D).

As can be seen there are many advantages to public discourse and political organizing in a virtual space that flow from its non-geographic, multi-media incorporating, and complete record-making opportunities. The public sphere is strengthened through the use of virtual world technologies that bring a wide diversity of people together to discuss and plan public policies in a highly creative, adaptable, and communicative environment. Online and virtual spaces can easily and inexpensively bring together people who are geographically separated for dynamic conversations and debates. They further open the public sphere to previously marginalized sections of the population such as the disabled and disadvantaged (such as those who are homeless), providing an equal-opportunity space for the discussion of all viewpoints. The fact that multiple conversations can and do happen simultaneously builds a depth into the dialogue that simply cannot be replicated in a real life environment. This feature is mirrored by the ability to immediately seek and bring in outside information and individuals as needed and desired to enrich the discussion.

Political Dialogues In A Virtual World

A second form of participant observation made in Second Life was small-group conversations about politics in which I took an active part. I was very fortunate in being able to participate in extended conversations with some of the key Second Life organizers for the presidential campaign sites of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John Edwards. I also discussed politics with ordinary Second Life residents and non-affiliated, issue-oriented political activists, to get their perspectives on how Second Life was being used for politics, how it could and should be used, and how important a medium it was politically.

I had one very enlightening conversation with a 27-year old, US Republican. In her view, the main benefits of the Second Life platform were the “endless” possibilities for education. She felt that the virtual world provided, “a new type of environment for people to interact in a way that they would not otherwise be able to” (Appendix D). She talked about the benefits of speaking with people from many different perspectives, and from many different countries, and how their varied viewpoints had helped inform her better: “I have met some people from all over the world who have shared with me wonderful and educational experiences I would not have had otherwise... Every time I make a round of visits to these campaign places I meet someone interesting.”

Reena, her alias, thought Second Life was a fun environment in which to discuss politics with other people. “You can drink, listen to music, and dance, while watching theatre-sized video.” Reena is a political enthusiast but I also found my conversations with virtually apolitical Lilith (an alias) quite enlightening. Lilith is a virtual world virtuoso; more than any other person I met in Second Life her avatar had a wide repertoire of physical movements and expressions that she effectively used to communicate; taking advantage of graphical and programming possibilities to express herself visually with her animated avatar body beyond the words she typed into the chat box.

Unlike Reena, Lilith mostly hangs out in Second Life for social purposes. However she found herself missing political engagement and started to seek out others in-world who, like herself, were politically involved in real life, so she could also, “talk politics,” while in her Second Life. The virtual world environment encourages informal political conversations between people who would not otherwise meet one another, extending, I believe, people’s perspectives beyond what they are likely to achieve in their real life, and thus contributing to a broadened public sphere of political dialogue.

Lilith was creative with her avatar, wore [talking] wings, and enjoyed the more fantastical possibilities of virtuality. She complained about the Obama headquarters, whose information architecture I had admired greatly. “What they don’t get is that this is Second Life and there is no creativity at all with their headquarters... free hats and shirts big deal.” When asked how they could attract more people to the Obama headquarters she said, “it’s about getting people there... they should make it fun.” Despite all her talk about fun, Lilith described herself as a hard-core progressive who listened to political podcasts, “all day long and came home angry.” Some of the alternative political media she mentioned from her real life were also named as favourites in the classroom and online survey. Reena’s observation that, “people who are politically active here would generally be engaged similarly in real life,” applied to Lilith even though her primary purpose in Second Life was to have fun with her online friends.

Reena’s observation about Second Life political activists is also corroborated by recent studies such as USC Annenberg’s *Surveying the Digital Future* (2007) and Zamaria, Caron & Fletcher’s *Canada Online!* (2005), large survey reports which show that in Canada and the USA people feel more politically aware, engaged, and effective through their use of Internet media.

The Second Life virtual world possesses many characteristics that make it an ideal platform for political communication with young adults and for expanding the public sphere. It is interactive, creative, and fun. It provides an opportunity for meaningful dialogue with many diverse perspectives and offers thousands of places where like-minded individuals may gather. For example, the official French presidential candidate sites of Nicolas Sarkozy, Ségolène Royal, and Jean-Marie Le Pen were busy in March 2007 with political discussion and activity, each hosting 10-20,000 persons daily in the run-up to the presidential election (United Press International, 2007). Even a protest was held by an anonymous group of avatars who virtually attacked the Le Pen site in mid-February 2007 with graffiti and a barrage of digital activity that caused the site to crash. A video of the politically-motivated virtual attack can be watched on YouTube (2007).

Student Focus Group

Introduction

Analysis of the students' questionnaire responses (discussed in the next section) guided the selection of five focus group participants based on their knowledge and engagement with online media, mobile media, and politics. Four young adults attended a 1½-hour focus group on Wednesday, March 7, 2007, from a Royal Roads University undergraduate class in communications, and one older student attended the first half. Using an informal interview style (see guide at Appendix E) the students discussed the influences of online media and mobile media on their own and peers' awareness and engagement with politics. The complete 16,000-word transcript of their conversation is available at Appendix E.

Six predominant themes summarize much of the discussion and are expanded upon in the sections below:

1. Young adults enjoy the interactive dialogue of equality between peers that the Internet facilitates and which provides a foundation for the effectiveness of virtual public spheres.
2. Networking and socializing are common online which encourages a diversity of people to meet and discuss public policy issues and which enables ideas to be widely disseminated through a variety of formal and informal channels and networks.
3. Young adults are very aware of the value of their networked communities and are concerned that more restrictive Internet controls and surveillance from corporations and governments may disrupt their sources of information and dialogue.
4. Their shared sense of youth powerlessness within political parties and governments has contributed to their moving online to research and discuss political issues and organize political activities.
5. They imagine the ideal mobile media device of the future will provide them with an immersive, all-powerful, online communications tool wherever they are 24/7.

Dialogue of Equality

The young adults in the focus group really appreciate the Internet's interactivity. For them the "net" facilitates ordinary people sharing opinions and perspectives on the news stories of the day. The young adults benefit from a multiplicity of opinions before they make up their mind. As one student said about political issues: "Dan Rather won't make sense of it for you. You have to figure it out" (Appendix E). They also feel that power is equalized across the net and enjoy participating in discussions where everyone has a voice and all can be heard equally.

These students have grown up exposed online to a wide range of ideas and perceptions and are used to doing research and discussing issues online with their peers. They do not trust government or corporate interests and believe they can find out what they want from other trusted, online sources. They believe news and opinion from someone, “without an agenda,” is more trustworthy than a large media corporation reporting the news and are more interested in reading a blog from an Iraqi citizen, for example, than their own government’s pronouncements, which they are likely to view with great scepticism.

Their attitudes of scepticism and self-reliance, and their involvement in peer dialogue has implications for governance and obedience in the information age. It seems likely that these young adults, the first generation to grow up with the Internet, are less likely to be politically compliant citizens as they age, and more likely to build a new politics of peer dialogue and citizen action. Such speculations are supported by those of Shah et al. (2005) who, through a statistical analysis of a large US survey, found that the Internet, more so than other media, supports political dialogue and civic engagement, and thus strengthens the public sphere:

What is most intriguing in these findings is the role played by the Internet. Online information seeking and interactive civic messaging—uses of the Web as a resource and a forum—both strongly influence civic engagement, often more so than do traditional print and broadcast media *and face-to-face communication* [emphasis added].

Networking and Socializing

The focus group participants reported using the net as a social space. These young adults like to work together online and are in continuous communication with their friends and colleagues. They use interactive communication tools like Facebook and discussion boards to network with their friends, exchange messages and pictures, even volunteer and organize. As one Facebook user enthused: “If I were to classify it [Facebook], I guess it would be like an online answering machine, that uses images and text, where you can network with your family, your friends, and whoever else. Professionals. Anyone in the world ” (Appendix E).

These young adults are constantly forming and reforming their networks for whatever purpose is at hand, creating a very fluid and personal organizational structure, which is entirely unlike the more stable and rigid hierarchical models of previous generations, who grew up in a more industrial culture and were exposed to a smaller diversity of opinion. Through their many and changing online networks and information sources young adults have the opportunity to interact not only with those in their immediate geographical community, but also those further away, and indeed from around the world. They are exposed to a wider variety of perspectives than previous generations and are more likely to discuss political issues with others of diverse viewpoints. This also became very evident during my observations of Second Life political forums where participants from different countries, sometimes using different languages, were discussing politics.

This broad perspective, combining information and opinion from both “authoritative” and peer sources, friends, and even foreign strangers, leads to a different kind of political

awareness and sensitivity than in the past, where politically inclined individuals were more likely to be consuming the same news sources (e.g. national broadcast news) and generally speaking only to people in their immediate community face-to-face, and not on a daily or more frequent basis.

These observations suggest that the public spheres young adults are constructing are more likely to consider opinions and perceptions from more quarters than in previous generations, and that their deliberations and conclusions are more likely to take a broader perspective. A widely-cited book by B. Anderson (1991) makes the case that newspapers were highly instrumental in creating a widely shared culture that facilitated the establishment and cohesion of nation states. Habermas too argues the critical importance of a shared identity to hold together political entities, such as nations, that are widely distributed geographically (Habermas, 2004). In a similar fashion, the global culture being facilitated by the myriad of Internet media may lead to a wider awareness of global connectedness and the need to solve worldwide problems such as environmental degradation, economic inequity, war, mass migrations, and terrorism through building stronger and more democratic global institutions. As soft power theorist Joseph Nye (2004, p. 82) points out, “the new information technologies have tended to foster network organizations, new types of community, and demands for different roles for government.” That is, Internet-facilitated communities and their concomitant public spheres are often non-geographic, evolving, issue oriented, and globally based.

Young Adults Feel Powerless In Traditional Politics

Politics was largely interpreted to mean governments and political parties by this small focus group of young adults. Their view of politics and politicians was largely negative—people manipulating one another for control. Words like *powerless*, *useless*, *helplessness*, *withdrawal*, and *apathy* were used to describe their view of young adults’ role in government and party politics: “None of those parties are parties I would actually choose if I had a choice. But I have to choose among them” (Appendix E).

They feel alienated because, to them, government and political parties almost universally reflect the views and interests of, “old white men in grey suits, talking with big words.” They do not feel listened to, nor that their opinion has any significant influence on the course of politics, government, or society. One participant said that minorities are also generally excluded from Canadian politics and that immigrants’ children are therefore not inclined to become politically engaged.

These five participants feel that the issues of young adults are ignored in the corridors of power and that there is no meaningful way for youth to participate in politics. They do not feel that politicians even try to connect with their age group or use media that resonate with them. Older people’s opinions, “will often be taken to be more true than ours, even if our opinion is more well researched” (Appendix E).

They want to make a difference in politics, and to make a new politics that matters; a politics that is not just about power, but about solving real problems in the real world. While they are very well networked and dialogue frequently with their peers, these five individuals feel as if their collective voices are not having an impact, even though they want to make one. They are eager to hear from a new breed of politician that listens, speaks their language, uses their media, cares about their concerns, and acts on them.

In short, these five young adults feel a disconnect between their intellectual engagement on the issues, and their perceived inability to make a difference in the real world. For these focus group participants, the public sphere is only partially working: while they have many opportunities to learn and discuss public issues through the Internet, they have not been able to effectively translate their opinions into real world politics.

These five young adults have not yet made connections with activists who are advocating and mobilizing politically using the powerful communication and networking capabilities of the Internet, nor have they themselves taken up the challenge to make their generation's issues heard and acted upon. In contrast to this small sample, the questionnaire which is analysed below, found that 35% of young adults were using the Internet for political "organizing or mobilizing", 48% were involved with a "society or organization", and 29% involved with a "political or party organization". In short, while the Internet has clearly become a new public space for political discussion, and has great potential to become the predominant public sphere for young people, many young adults have not connected their intellectual engagement with political issues with participation to make a political impact in the real world.

Control of the Virtual Public Sphere

The young adults of the focus group have mostly given up on government and party politics, even though they are keenly interested in political issues. They spend a great deal of time dialoguing online about issues with, "real people," like themselves, whom they believe do not have a vested interest in how news and information is reported. These students are acutely aware of the power and freedoms that the Internet accords them and are equally suspicious that government and corporate interests will not tolerate this freedom of discussion to continue much longer.

There was informed discussion of net neutrality, and the possibilities of government and corporate control of the Internet, and the possible shrinking of the virtual public sphere. These five young adults expect increased surveillance and censorship in their lifetime, perhaps soon, and shrinking access to the currently wide diversity of opinion, due to pressures from private interests and governments. This concern is not surprising given the surveillance reaction that has occurred since 9/11, including in the U.S. the Patriot Act, the all-seeing Carnivore and Echelon Internet surveillance systems, and the emerging Total Information Awareness initiative to centralize surveillance information in a single, massive, secret database (Kahn & Kellner, 2004).

What has become clear in the course of my research is that the Internet, in its many diverse forms and channels, has already played an important role in the expansion and deepening of youth public spheres that serve as information portals, discussion facilitators, and political organizing tools. There can be little doubt that powerful political interests must be concerned about the decentralizing potential of a globe-spanning public sphere where ordinary citizens have a chance to share information and opinions and organize. As we saw after 9/11, and as young adults seem to understand, the Internet freedoms we have enjoyed are under attack by those who wish to continue to consolidate public opinion, or in Chomsky's words, to "manufacture consent" (1998), just as commercial corporations have largely managed to centralize and globalize mass media ownership, and decrease the influence of public and alternative broadcasters (Keane, 2000).

However, one participant felt confident that any kind of control a central authority might try to impose on the Internet would be cooperatively disrupted by hackers and thus that global Internet freedoms were guaranteed, an optimism shared by Kahn & Kellner. Freedom from continuing disruption is an optimism I also share given the distributed nature of the Internet whereby if a site is shut down in one country it can be quickly replicated in another or mirrored at various locations around the world. New political sites too, can be created very quickly and inexpensively, and information disseminated rapidly through the decentralized and personal networks of individuals and organizations. The new political culture that the Internet has spawned among young people is a reflection of the nature of the technology itself—decentralized, fluid, redundant, and able to route around any dysfunction in the system, moving at the speed of light. It will be extremely hard if not impossible to defeat by political or even military forces accustomed to centralized control and power using traditional strategies and tactics of force.

Immersive, Online Media Device of the Future

When asked to imagine what they would like the future of technology to bring, the focus group wished for a hyper-connected, small and stylish, powerful communications and computing device that provides an immersive and interactive media and networking experience wherever you go 24/7. They like the idea of extending their online and media experience to the mobile environment and the big, immersive view that glasses or goggles would provide. They imagine all of today's diverse, digital media gadgets rolled into one super, eyes-fitting device that inexpensively provides them with all of the opportunities and services they want—anywhere, anytime.

Student and Young Adult Questionnaires

Introduction

I designed and administered a questionnaire about the roles and influences of online and mobile media on young adults' political awareness and activities that took 15 to 30 minutes to complete. A total of 43 questionnaires were completed by young adults from February 21 to May 25, 2007; 20 by undergraduate and one graduate communication student from Royal Roads University, who combined the demographics of youth and university education that are most predictive of online participation (Pew, 2004), and the remaining 23 on www.SurveyMonkey.com. A link to the online version of the *Young Adults, Media, and Politics Questionnaire* was advertised by web stories and email through PEJ.org (Peace, Earth & Justice News), Newsdaily.ca (Newsdaily Canada), and SunshineCommunications.ca; sites created and maintained by myself, whose readers are presumed biased towards political awareness and activity. The nearly identical surveys can be found at Appendix A and the complete data tables at Appendix B. Survey question numbers quoted in the analysis below refer to the question numbers used in the online version.

Survey Analysis

Ninety-five percent of the young adults reported using online media daily, 64% several or many times daily (Question 6), and 88% thought that online media was very important, or important, to their political awareness and activities (Question 17). These findings are consistent with the very high North American Internet media usage reported for young adults and youth by other researchers (Cole et al., 2007; Lenhart et al., 2005; Zamaria et al., 2005).

Cole et al. and Zamaria et al. show high access rates throughout all age cohorts, with percentage of online usage declining with age. Only the 65 years plus cohort has a minority of the population online, with all other age categories having a large majority online. High rates of Internet usage, with potential access to a wide variety of political information, discussion, and organizing sites, confirm the potential of virtual public spheres to include the vast majority of citizens in North America. I presume that as the population ages that higher access rates will also be seen in the older cohorts.

Of 43 picks for the single, top, online destination for political news and information only six were mentioned by more than one respondent. While 69% of the top five online destinations for news and information were mainstream sites (Question 7), only the CBC was picked 25 or more times (16%) and only eleven sites out of 72 were picked three or more times. Out of 156 picks were a total of 72 different sites, one-third (51) chosen only once, and nine others chosen just twice. Besides the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (16%), only BBC (8%), Google (8%), CNN (5%) and MSN (5%) were chosen by five percent or more of the respondents. These results show that these young adults visit a great diversity of web sites for news and information, with few visible patterns except that the majority of favourite sites are mainstream media. Only one alternative news site (theyee.ca)

scored 3% or more of the picks. Judging by the favourite news media web sites chosen by this sample, I suspect that most respondents were Canadians. This preference of mainstream news media and the popularity of the CBC is confirmed by Zamaria et al. (2005) in their survey of 1,195 online Canadians.

These young adults' news sources include a wide variety of mainstream and alternative sites that they access online daily, and often more frequently. These results coincide with what was reported at the focus group—that while mainstream media was often the first place that a news story was received, that the stories of interest were often followed up with online, individual research to get more facts and perspectives, and often to discuss the story with one's peers. This is good news: for a well-functioning public sphere requires a diversity of news and opinion perspectives and ongoing public dialogue.

Ninety-four percent of these 43 young adults were involved in groups, organizations and organized activities (Question 11) including recreation and leisure (54%), society or association (48%), political or party organization (29%), club or extra-curricular school activity (20%), church (14%), and others (17%). A majority (57%) volunteered for such organizations, 26% were donors, 17% staff or contractor, and fully 94% members or participants (Question 12).

Contrary to the reports of some researchers (Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000), these young adults are engaged in their community and with politics, likely in part because of their active solicitation of online news and information (Cole et al., 2007; Pasek et al., 2006). The three essential elements for a healthy public sphere are met by these young adults through their online activities: a wide diversity of news and information, discussion of public issues, and political participation.

Like the young American adults surveyed in a recent Pew study (The Pew Research Centre For The People & The Press, 2007), these young Canadians are not particularly well informed about party and government politics, which is perhaps not surprising considering that the focus group participants said that young adults do not feel invested in the current political structure. Again, this question's results reflect the frequent dichotomy between young adults' intellectual engagement with the issues online and their frequent eschewment of government and political parties.

Eighty-eight percent thought that online media was very important, or important, to their political awareness and activities (Question 17). Fewer used mobile media for political information and activities with 37% never accessing, 19% less frequently than once a month, 14% at least weekly, and only 26% using it daily (14%) or several or many times every day (12%). Among the survey respondents, as with the focus group, mobile media is not yet generally considered useful for political news and communication.

The young adult respondents draw on a variety of different media, beyond web sites, for their news, but online sources lead by 20%. The web was the top source of political news and information, used by 95% of the respondents (Question 20). Newspapers and magazines

were the next most used at 74%, and friends, family, and colleagues tied with TV at 70%. Radio was used by 63%.

While these young adults use a wide variety of news sources they also trust the web more than twice as much as any other medium. Web, email, and online (56%) was the single most credible and trustworthy source of political news and information (Question 21), with newspapers and magazines (24%), and radio (19%) trailing significantly. They are a sceptical group sifting their own truths from a variety of news and information sources.

Most of these young adults are engaged online in political dialogues. 88% used online or mobile media for politics—73% accessing web sites, 55% blogging or otherwise adding content, 55% on an email list, and 35% for organizing or mobilizing. These results underscore that these young adults are participating in the public sphere online because they find it more accessible, more trustworthy, and more interactive. They are not merely reading and watching about politics; a majority of them are adding their own political ideas to the public sphere, enriching the public debate, and a significant number are organizing online.

Thirty of the survey respondents provided narrative in response to the open-ended Question 19: “Explain how you use mobile and online media for political information and political activities and how important they are for these purposes?” Their answers show significant consistency and triangulate with much of the research outlined elsewhere in this paper. Many stated how important, in some cases exclusively so, the online media are to their obtaining political news and information. They talked about how they use the Internet to seek out political information: “I use online media to research issues relating to what I’ve heard/seen from traditional media.” They explained the value of finding differing opinions on an issue: “I can get information on any political view and get both sides of the argument to make my own conclusion.” In general this question showed how critical the online media had become to their participation in the public sphere.

The 43 questionnaire participants also had many thoughtful responses to the open-ended Question 25: “What are your predictions about the future of online media and mobile media, and politics?” Many of them thought that current trends showing an ever-increasing use of Internet media for political communication, alongside a decline in usage of traditional print and broadcast mass media (Pew, 2005), would continue. Some thought that newspapers, national TV networks, and radio would “fail” or falter while the Internet would “dominate.”

Most felt that online media would force changes in politicians and the political landscape: that news would, “spread more quickly,” and politicians could no longer, “plead ignorance”; that democracy would become, “more participatory,” as “action” and organizations moved online, and that the, “state will become less important as people have more and more say in policy making.” They thought that people would become, “more specialized in their interests with news,” and expressed concerns about information overload. I thought one respondent was particularly insightful:

More of the political information infrastructure will move online and become exclusively available online. Online sources will be referenced more in debate,

conversation, and policy. “Social media” will be adopted more and more by politicians who see its value as a networking/mobilization tool. The transition between online events and real-world events will become more smooth (Appendix B).

Clearly those young adults surveyed thought that the Internet would continue to have a significant impact on the mediascape and politics alike. The Internet was by far the most popular and trusted medium for news and political information, and not just limited to a few sources, but distributed between a wide variety of personal favourites, both mainstream and alternative. The majority of these young adults contribute to the political debate and the vast majority are involved in organizations, including explicitly political organizations. Over one-third of them (35%) already use the Internet for, “organizing or mobilizing.” These young adults predict that the domination of the Internet for political news and discussion will continue and deepen and that the connections between the real world and the online world will, “become more smooth.” The virtual public spheres of these young adults are healthy and active and are likely to have an increasing impact on the political life of our society as they grow older, and as younger, even more Internet aware children, grow into youth and adulthood and also begin to participate in politics.

CONCLUSIONS

Almost all North American young adults and youth are plugged into online media and many are using mobile media (Cole et al., 2007; Lenhart et al., 2005; Zamaria et al., 2005). Young adults are frequently engaged online with political issues because they often feel disengaged from political parties and government policy making; indeed Internet access makes them more likely to be civically involved (Cole, et al., 2007; Pasek et al., 2006). They enjoy diverse perspectives and many of them dialogue online with friends and even with people from around the world. While they communicate profusely amongst their peers many feel as if they are not heard by older adults and that their views do not make a difference politically and are not even noticed by politicians. As a result many young adults are cynical about and uninvolved with party and government politics feeling that they give no meaningful voice to youth and are largely unaware of and unresponsive to youth issues.

Political communicators who want to inform and engage young adults need to do so primarily using the Internet, provide meaningful opportunities for genuine online dialogue, and discuss and act upon issues of importance to this age group.

New opportunities exist for making the virtual public sphere more effective through the powerfully engaging, immersive, and communicative environment of virtual reality worlds such as Second Life. Communication practitioners and researchers are in the early stages of understanding the potential and implications of virtual reality and how this communications technology can most effectively be used for political communications and improving the scope, access, and effectiveness of the virtual public sphere.

As the communication revolution progresses, and today's youth and young adults age and become more politically active, politics and political communication are likely to depend less and less on geopolitical boundaries and one-way media and more upon online, issue-based, dialogic communities. New political alliances, both real and virtual, will emerge, and will continue to present challenges to traditional political entities such as the nation state and mass political party (*cf.* cluetrain.com, 2007; culturekitchen.com, 2007; Nye, 2004; Rushkoff, 2003), such as were witnessed during the "Battle of Seattle" and many subsequent global protests that have largely been organized online (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, Rheingold, 2002).

Governments, civil society, and corporations can ensure the vibrancy of local, regional, national, and emerging global public spheres by ensuring that all citizens have ongoing access to interactive, Internet media, including broadband wherever possible, and that access to all sites are provided on an equal basis, unimpeded by commercial or political interests.

In summary, youth and young adults feel disenfranchised from political parties and governments and believe that the traditional mass media produce biased political reporting. Young adults may follow news in the mass media, but visit a myriad of trusted online sites to seek additional information, research political positions, engage in issues dialogue, and organize political action, all with friends, colleagues, strangers, and people from other nations and cultures. Habermas' traditional public sphere is being augmented by a multitude of virtual public spheres where young adults improvise politics directly online, and bypass

the mediation of politicians, governments, and corporate interests by utilizing the interactive, interpersonal, and mass communication opportunities that the Internet, in all its many forms, offers. Young people are building a new political culture that is more fluid, decentralized, diverse, and global than cultures of the past, which may move society beyond traditional political oligarchies towards greater participatory democracy, flexible coalitions and networks managing political affairs, and communication and information processes that are more influential than in previous generations.

“Thus, in an era when crass perversions of populism, and exaggerated calls for national security, threaten the very premises of representational democracy and free discourse, interactive technologies offer us a ray of hope for a renewed spirit of genuine civic engagement.”

— Douglas Rushkoff, *Open source democracy*, 2003, p. 16

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are three primary areas which I think show great potential for further study to enrich our understanding of modern communications technologies and their impacts on political communication and the public sphere:

1. The research data from this study was unable to ascertain what influence mobile media are having on the public sphere. Howard Rheingold's *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution—Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access* clearly demonstrates that mobile media have the potential to enable Internet-powered mobile crowds to make a significant contribution to public life. Future research questions include how online, mobile media are being used for news and information gathering, public discourse, and political action, and what their impact may be upon the public sphere.
2. As yet there is little scholarly literature about virtual reality in communications research and none that I found focused on the virtual public sphere as manifested in virtual worlds. My participant observations in the Second Life virtual world clearly show that there are many opportunities to build the public sphere in the immersive, media-rich, dialogic environments afforded by three-dimensional virtual technologies such as Second Life. Additional studies and learning communities in virtual worlds are needed to further explore their potential role in local, regional, national, and global public spheres.
3. The use of online, interactive, virtual world simulations and games for research into models of human communication, such as those started in Second Life by the USC Annenberg, have the potential to help researchers and citizens explore more effective methods for cross-cultural, diplomatic, and political communication, and would benefit from further study.

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