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Young People, Journalism, and Politics

"Come to a community meeting tonight to talk about locations for 10 new Hubway bike stations in East Boston!" read fifteen-year-old Alma's Facebook post. Alma hadn't started out interested in politics, journalism, or biking, for that matter. But as she experienced increased hope for change in her community, she got interested in all three. Part of that interest may have been sparked by stories she heard about positive changes in her neighborhood that were reported in the posts of her Facebook friend Mike, who lived in her neighborhood and frequently posted about changes taking place in the community where they both lived.

Two years earlier, sixteen-year-old Mike, along with other young people who were part of East Boston's Environmental Youth Crew, had been hired by a local non-profit community development corporation to identify and address environmental issues in their community. They had conducted a study that documented high nighttime airplane noise levels in the neighborhoods near Logan International Airport, where they lived, and highlighted problems related to those levels, including hearing loss, asthma, and increased interruptions in residents' sleep. Mike frequently shot and then posted on Facebook videos of airport-related traffic jams on his local streets as well his comments about noise, traffic, and air pollution from car fumes. He and other Environmental Youth Crew members shared their research with officials from the Federal Aviation Administration. In response, the officials agreed to alter nocturnal flight takeoff/landing patterns in ways that were less disruptive to sleeping residents, and the story was covered in the local community newspaper.[1]

East Boston is the fifth most environmentally burdened community in Massachusetts and borders the Chelsea Creek, the second-most polluted

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waterway in the state.[2] This working-class neighborhood, comprised largely of older Italian and younger Latino and Middle Eastern immigrants, has some of the city's lowest-income census tracts and has long struggled with pollution from industry, jet fumes, highways, three automobile tunnels, and vehicle traffic generated by Logan Airport. Alma's family, like Mike's, was directly affected by airport noise, traffic, and air pollution. So when the Environmental Youth Crew's organizing projects started to experience some success, Alma got involved. She joined the Environmental Youth Crew and became very active in research and social media efforts, sharing videos and photos about local environmental issues that were of concern to her neighbors and her peers. This led her to getting active in local efforts to expand public green space in her neighborhood that ultimately increased opportunities for residents to bike and do other forms of exercise. Eventually, both she and Mike were awarded citations of recognition from the Boston City Council for their organizing efforts, and Alma was invited to speak at the 2016 graduation of a local school to inspire other young people to get involved in their community.

Only a small number of youth have been actively involved in East Boston's environmental work, and few were involved in writing investigative stories for the local youth-run community radio station that covered the airport's environmental impacts on nearby neighborhoods. Still, Alma came to see herself as part of a larger collective that shared her concerns and that was involved in confronting the environmental injustices that afflicted her community after stories reached her through a hybrid media environment of professional, community, and citizen journalism and through her interpersonal contacts in social media. Eventually, both Mike and Alma engaged in journalistic practices, using social media to communicate their concerns to one another and their peers, and to mobilize other community members. In doing so, they created a story that later became important in the narrative about who they saw themselves to be *as* a community and as a public.

In this chapter, we explore the roles that storytelling and the emergent connectivity of social media are playing in changing the landscape of politics, political action, information sharing, and youth citizenship. In particular, we want to foreground the *relational* aspects of social media – or how social media afford different ways of interacting in relation with other people – so that we can better understand the ways in which the norms and practices of social media shape how information is experienced in young people's daily lives. Looking at journalism as a specific kind of communication, we want to highlight the ways in which news

and information are shared through communication that takes place through differing interpersonal relations in socially mediated spaces.[3] We believe that looking at the actual practices of young people can be helpful in understanding not only journalism but its evolving relationship with politics, citizenship, and civic action as these are experienced in everyday life and as they inform the experience of youth and citizenship in the United States and around the world.

This chapter spells out the link between communication and politics, the particulars of youth in this equation, how social media can augment engagement, and how social media may be complicating engagement by undermining journalism. Chapter 2 then turns to the key theoretical approaches that inform this book, introducing the practices of *connective journalism* – a concept that draws upon current discussions about the role of information sharing in a democracy and fleshes out contemporary ways of understanding the relationships between youth, citizenship, media, and politics. Ultimately, we hope that these chapters make clear why we chose to foreground experiences of interpersonal relationships as mediated through social media in our efforts to better understand emergent user practices of journalism and politics, for we believe that it is by looking at young people's experiences within interpersonal relationships that we are able to better understand how some youth participate in the constitution of political talk and political action, as they move along a ladder of engagement toward greater participation in civic life, civil society, and in citizenship. We begin with a discussion of the relationship between communication and politics.

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION

What does it mean to view communication as a set of relational processes and practices that are foundational to the constitution of society? To think of communication in this way, we have to begin by acknowledging with communication scholar James Carey that we have inherited contradictory notions about the processes and practices of communication.[4] On the one hand, the term communication brings to mind technological advances such as the printing press, television, computers, and mobile networks. But on the other, the term recalls ancient ideas about speaking and being heard.[5] In a book like this one that foregrounds practices of social media, one might expect that we would highlight the various ways that new media technologies are used to transmit journalistic messages to accomplish certain political goals, with *messages*

thought of in terms of truth and accuracy and *goals* thought of in rela-
tion to an informed citizenry. Many of us are used to thinking about
communication in this way, foregrounding how representations and
stories shape our understanding of the world. But we must also rec-
ognize that communication, in its less technological and more ancient
associations, brings to mind ideas such as sharing, participation, com-
monality, and the building of community. In this case, we might think
about how those representations and stories are *products* of the social,
economic, and political forces of our world and of the worldviews that
we might share. This view of communication is, as James Carey wrote,
"directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the
maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information
but the representation of shared beliefs."[6] This view of communication
directs our attention to collective experiences, such as those related to
the formation of publics, the practices of politics, and the exercise of
power among all members of a group.

In the US tradition of democratic thought, we have often conflated
the relational and technological approaches to communication, placing
a great deal of hope in the possibility that technologies could help us to
overcome distance and difference so as to strengthen the economic, polit-
ical, and cultural unity of the nation. But we have feared that technology
might undermine our goals of unity.[7] Indeed, while John Dewey long ago
invested great hope in the possibilities that communication might bring
about a "great community," he also worried that technological advances
were responsible for the development of the more impersonal and distant
relationships that he believed threatened to undermine democracy. Thus
he wanted to see those in the United States steer technologies to align
with the relational goals of society.[8]

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey argued that being part of a
public meant being part of a group of people who share common experi-
ences, and he argued that they – or we – need communication to better
understand those common experiences and to consider various alterna-
tives.[9] As the United States was rapidly transforming itself from a rural
to an urban society in the wake of industrialization, Dewey argued for
the importance of communication to the formation and maintenance of
a community that could sustain a democratic public. In 1922, he wrote:

We have physical tools of communication as never before. The thoughts and
aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence not com-
mon. Without such communication, the public will remain shadowy and form-
less, seeking spasmodically for itself…*Communication alone can create a great*

community. Our Babel is not one of tongues, but of signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible.

(emphasis added)[10]

For Dewey, the key to life in the great community is an awareness of common concerns, and communication is the necessary ingredient for the emergence of this consciousness. As he argued, it is only through communication that "…a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests."[11] Community and acts of citizenship come into being through communicative practices, then, as it is through communication that people come to recognize themselves as being part of a community. Communication enables people to tell stories of who they are and to envision the consequences of actions, and so it allows people to consider how the future should be shaped.

Dewey argued that it is only when members of a community are faced with direct opposition to their interests that they become a public.[12] Once a community becomes aware of their collective power as a public, they can actively participate in democracy, he argued. Writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, Dewey also believed that mass media – in his day, newspapers – were key in helping people gain an understanding of the problems that faced the public and that "without such communication the public will remain shadowy and formless."[13]

Still, community is a word that tends to evoke ideas of a fixed group of people who are united either in a common geographic location or through a commitment to common values. And community, as communication scholar Raymond Williams noted, is a term that never seems to be used unfavorably, as we tend to have a great deal of nostalgia and sentiment that come to the fore in relation to the idea of community.[14] Yet, it's always worth remembering that even as community is a term that feels warm and inclusive, communities also exclude and prohibit as a means of maintaining their boundaries. In the current political landscape, numerous scholars have commented on the erosion of community and the need for a reconceptualization of the notion of community and its relationship to concepts of the democratic public.[15]

Approaching communication as a key to the building of community is the starting point for what is termed the Montreal School of communication.[16] This school of thought argues that communication is constitutive of organization and of organizations, in that it is not that people "use" communication as a vehicle for expressing ideas, but rather, communication is "the means by which organizations are established, composed,

designed, and sustained."[17] In this sense, communication is always related to the political problem of democracy, as Dewey argued.[18]

The technological and the relational aspects of communication are not so much competing as complementary views of communication. But the relational aspects are more frequently overlooked when we focus on questions of technology or the transmission of information rather than on the role communication plays in holding societies together or enabling them to envision how they might be different. As we will see in this and in the following chapter, many scholars are challenging the simplistic technological or "transmission" view of communication that has tended to dominate the ways that some have approached news, information, and politics in the past. Instead, in this book we view communication as constitutive of reality. This is our starting point as we consider what "news" is as a form of story-based communication, and how both the relational and technological aspects of communication are implicated in the news and politics of a digital age. Technological and relational aspects of communication both play a role in how stories are told, how worldviews are shaped, and how societies therefore stay together or don't.

In order to consider how people interact with one another in a democracy, it is important to recognize that theories of democracy have long been concerned with two competing approaches to the concept of citizenship that suggest different paradigms of communication and interaction. The older, civic republican tradition of citizenship views citizenship as an active process in which people participate in addressing their frustrations and uniting in matters of common concern. This is the tradition that Dewey spoke of in his discussions of communication and the public. But the liberal individualist sense of citizenship, which arose in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, tends to view citizenship primarily as a legal marker. In this view, citizens are largely passive politically, with rights granted to them by the state and obligations placed on them to obey laws, pay taxes, and, if necessary, defend the nation during times of war.[19] Here, citizens might be understood as passive recipients of information from official sources rather than as participants in an active process. Both these traditions shape how we collectively experience the tensions of contemporary citizenship and our understandings of the role of news in relation to citizenship.

It's important to note that even within the liberal individualist approach in which participation may be deemphasized, concerns arise about how people should interact with one another in a democracy, which in turn raises questions about duties and rights. And questions of duties and

rights are further complicated when we consider the questions related to age and generation. Thus, we need to discuss differing approaches to youth and citizenship that are prevalent today, exploring how these relate to assumptions about technological and relational communication. This will enable us to consider the role news has been imagined to play in relation to youth citizenship in the past, and how we might envision an emerging role for news in the digital era.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACHES TO YOUTH CITIZENSHIP

We argue that ideas of youth and citizenship in the United States have been shaped by three different concerns particular to youth. First, US adults, and in particular parents, worry that young people can be harmed in public spaces. Concerns about predatory adults result in warnings of "stranger danger" and mediated stories of abductions heighten these concerns to a level that is out of proportion to the actual dangers young people face in public.[20] Nevertheless, fears about potential dangers inform a cautious approach to how youth should be introduced to experiences in public spaces.[21] A second and somewhat contradictory worry is that young people gathered together in public spaces can *cause* danger, particularly for others.[22] Thus, youth – and black and brown youth in particular – are often perceived as threatening in public spaces. This concern, for some, informs a cautious approach toward youth in public, and a need for others, particularly parents of black and brown youth, to instill caution in their children regarding how others perceive them in public spaces. A third worry is more abstract: that "youth" is a social category linked with promotional culture. Young people are viewed as highly susceptible to the messages of advertising, and at the same time, youth is celebrated and fictionalized as products and services are made appealing for those who wish they were young.[23] "Youth" is therefore something that is imagined and articulated in public life in ways that do not fully represent the actual lived experiences of young people.

These three frameworks – youth as in need of protection, adults as in need of protection from youth (even when those youth are not dangerous), and youth as deeply embedded in consumer culture – inform our approaches to youth and citizenship. Youth are either positioned as not ready for citizenship, as potentially destabilizing and problematic to adult citizens, or included in the activities of citizenship primarily in a symbolic or token manner. As a result, even as representations of youth

seem to be ubiquitous in public spaces, youth are rarely invited into the decision-making processes of public life.

These various concerns inform what might be termed as a developmental approach to citizenship. Within this perspective, adults need to provide young people with avenues that help them prepare for a gradual extension of rights and identification with the nation-state. Developmental approaches to citizenship presume that young people need to become informed about news, current events, and civic arrangements so that someday, as adults, they will be equipped to hold government accountable through voting and working in political campaigns.[24]

Many scholars and youth advocates have pointed out that it is not sufficient to define youth civic development strictly in relation to the need to become informed so as to participate in voting activities *at some point* in the future.[25] Such deficit-oriented views of the relationships between youth, citizenship, and political action do not adequately reflect and actually invalidate the many different ways in which young people are already coming to understand and act upon political issues throughout their years of childhood. As Maira and Soep have noted:

There is often an assumption in traditional work on youth and citizenship…that young citizens – to the extent that they have rights, which are often limited – must be socialized into adult norms of political involvement rather than being thinking agents who may express important critiques of citizenship and nationhood.[26]

Young people often feel that they are seen as trivial players in the decisions and movements toward globalization, even as they are experiencing the shifts of national and global forces in their lives in significant ways. They respond to the social conditions of their lives through new forms of political expression, yet their efforts are often dismissed, feared, or ignored altogether. They move across a variety of public and communal spaces, and yet they are infrequently asked to comment on their own experiences with globalization or on their own role in constructing knowledge about it.

Moreover, the developmental perspective on citizenship assumes that young people grow up in a context where their basic rights are assured and where they can look forward to a future in which their rights and responsibilities will expand.[27] Unfortunately, this does not pertain to many young people who have experienced marginalization due to disability, race, sexual orientation, lack of access to resources, or their parents' citizenship status.[28] For many young people around the world today, prospects for the future have never seemed dimmer.[29] Perhaps this

is why Hava Gordon and Jessica Taft found that while "apathy" is a word that comes up among white teens, Black and Latino youth use the words "cynicism" and "hopelessness" to describe why their peers aren't involved in civic life.[30] From a critical perspective, then, hope for change becomes a key dimension of how youth citizenship must be reconceptualized. When young people cannot count on basic rights and are skeptical about whether or not they or others they know have ever had those rights, it is difficult to imagine why they would want to participate in the civic or collective life of a society.[31]

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO YOUTH CITIZENSHIP

Critical approaches to citizenship, in contrast, begin from the perspective that people of all ages should have access to the basic human rights of global citizenship, such as the right to clean water, education, health care, and a decent place to live.[32] This access to basic rights is what lays the groundwork for how young people learn about the greater responsibilities that are afforded to them at the age of eighteen or twenty-one. The need for change is certainly something that is central to the lived experiences of many of today's young people. And yet, in spite of the overwhelming evidence that many youth are in need of hope and support, it is often young people themselves who seem to be viewed as a problem to be contained. Black young Americans are particularly at risk, as a study by the *Washington Post* found that they were 2.5 times more likely than white Americans to be shot and killed by a police officer.[33] Rates of youth incarceration are higher than ever, with "tried as an adult" policies meaning that sentences are often longer than youth sentences and are accompanied by fewer opportunities for programs that seek to curb recidivism.[34] And even the most privileged of young people across various racial/ethnic backgrounds feel disempowered in that they are everywhere encouraged to emphasize individualism rather than the collective, and academic achievement over artistic expression, in order to compete in the increasingly cutthroat race to achievement that's believed to be the only route to their future economic security.[35]

In spite of all the problems young people face in the contexts where they find themselves, there are many who are not disengaged from citizenship and public life. Youth from around the world seek ways to share their experiences through music, dance, or creative works and strive to make a contribution to their communities. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi were in their late twenties and early thirties when they

first started discussing the idea of Black Lives Matter and utilizing the
#BlackLivesMatter hashtag in the wake of Treyvon Martin's death.[36]
Thousands of students have called themselves DREAMers, signifying
their solidarity with the many undocumented young people who are
denied the opportunity to pursue a university education or a professional
career, a discrimination based solely on the unlucky fact that they hap-
pened to have been born in a different country. Hundreds of thousands
of youth have joined their parents and peers in movements protesting
economic austerity measures impacting education, transportation, and
social services in their cities, demonstrating their belief that things could
be different, and their hope, if slim, that their own actions might be part
of something larger that could actually bring about change.

It's important to point out that the developmental perspective on
citizenship has also shaped ideas about youth and news. From at least
the early nineteenth century on, most adults in the United States have
believed that one of their primary tasks involves protecting children
from harm, and many adults have expressed concern that viewing news
from legacy media sources can be distressing for youth, especially for
young children.[37] At the same time, a great deal of research has shown
that news consumption enhances political knowledge, understandings of
policy issues, and participation in national political campaigns.[38] How
and when adults should allow youth to have access into the worlds of
adults has long been in question and has been forever changed in rela-
tion to an always-on media environment in which young people have
more access to information than ever before.[39] Thus, if broadcasting
was the model for political socialization in the past, and if that model
fit with the top-down orientation of the developmental model of citi-
zenship, then what might the critical model of citizenship, along with
information's role in political socialization, look like in the relational
context of social media? Such an approach raises new questions, such
as: how do youth socialize one another into political awareness and
citizenship, and what is the role of social media in these processes? As
social media platforms open up new spaces in which youth, rather than
adults, may take the lead in public actions of citizenship, how and when
do the legacy news come to play a role, if they do? And in this digital
context, how might adults and news sources offer the legitimacy and
resources that youth might need in their own efforts towards embrac-
ing critical citizenship? To address these questions, we need to consider
how social media has been understood in relation to critical acts of
citizenship.