Megan Fischer

Young Ozzies in a
DIGIWORLD

Standing in front of a lecture room with 400 first-year students, I ask each of them to go to the unit Facebook page and respond to the following status update: 'Globalisation is...'

'You have five minutes', I say, 'and feel free to discuss all this with the people around you.'

By James Arvanitakis

young and
MEDIATED

The response is somewhat overwhelming: in seconds, the chimes that indicate a Facebook 'status update' begin. Within the five-minute deadline, there are over 150 responses. Working with my teaching assistants, I quickly transfer the information into software that produces a 'word-cloud' that presents me the entry point for the lecture to begin interrogating the subject matter.[2] **Dominant words include 'connections', 'opportunities' and various forms of media: 'internet', 'Facebook', 'movies' and so on. It is clear from the responses that for this cohort, communications media is synonymous with globalisation.**

Other words that surprisingly emerge are 'fear' and 'injustice'. As I ask students to explain why these words were put forward, recent events are raised: from the factory fires in Bangladesh that resulted in the violent deaths of hundreds of people which have been linked with western consumption patterns,[3] to the decline of Australia's manufacturing industry.[4] These events are top of mind, and present intellectual as well as emotional challenges for students. The responses are also accompanied by all sorts of personal 'updates', from commentary on the fortunes of a favoured football team, to opinions about my fashion sense, and requests for top marks.

When discussing the issue of young people, media and identity within the Australian context, this example provides us with some important insights for this paper. It highlights what we already know – that communications and entertainment media is quickly embraced and used by these young people. Yet we have also learnt something of how forms of communication media are seen to be integral to globalisation. Simultaneously, there are concerns being raised about

who exactly holds the opportunities that globalisation offers; what happens to those left behind; what responsibilities do we have; and a quest to understand the risks involved. So while many young people have established a symbiotic relationship with contemporary forms of media in terms of their identity – often accompanied by both confidence and bravado – they simultaneously raise concerns about the associated vulnerabilities.

This paper presents some early results from a broader research project on young people and understanding their changing experiences of citizenship in an increasingly globalised and complex world.[5] The project interrogates whether these experiences promote agency and engagement, and therefore place their citizenship in 'surplus', or whether the predominant result is disengagement and disconnection, in which case their citizenship can be considered in 'deficit'.

As part of this research, media and media interactions are fundamental to understanding the way young people engage with civic processes that can develop or undermine their sense of agency – or both, as circumstances and personalities provide. Furthermore, media interactions are fundamental in youth identity-formation around these essentially *political* processes of civic engagement or disengagement.

Before turning to these issues in greater detail, I would like to briefly present the theoretical framework of the project, which has been discussed in detail elsewhere (see Arvanitakis 2008; Arvanitakis and Hodge 2012).

Theoretical framework
Citizenship has long been a site of contestation. From below, it offers a range of rights and privileges that have developed over generations, particularly of solidarity actions. From above, citizenship represents a mechanism of control and discipline. As different groups of actors approach citizenship from different perspectives, a fundamental issue that crosses both time and space is the radically different experiences of citizenship that individuals confront.

Citizenship offers a range of rights and privileges; and is encased in a series of obligations (Turner 2009). To enjoy the full potential of social, cultural, political and economic privileges offered, the citizen must negotiate a range of institutions, from the educational to the authoritarian. Here, the 'active' citizen is one that experiences both a sense of empowerment and is also engaged. That is to say, those citizens who are active and able to negotiate powerful institutions, experience a sense of *agency* that means they are, as individuals, more likely to enjoy the benefits of citizenship – and appreciate the obligations. Those who are unable to deal with the power and authority of civil society, or grasp potential opportunities, are more likely to withdraw from the *civus*, and remain (or become) disengaged and disempowered.

Elsewhere I have presented this concept as the engaged/empowered typology depicted in Figure 1, (see Arvanitakis 2008). Like all typologies it is limited
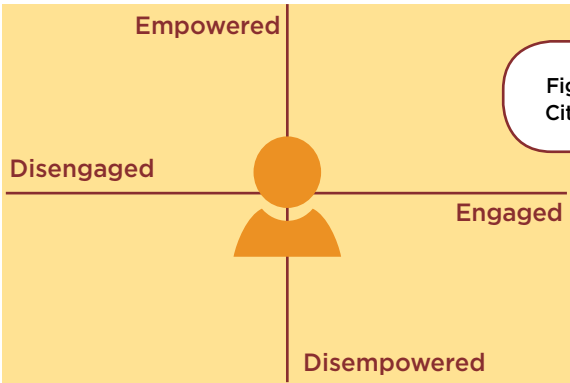

Figure 1:
Citizenship typology

by design. However, it recognises that individuals experience a sense of citizen surplus or citizen deficit in different settings, and at different times. If experiencing surplus, the citizen has the skills and cultural capital to potentially enjoy the benefits of citizenship, while meeting and appreciating the obligations. For those experiencing a citizenship deficit, these opportunities and skills are less likely to be available, or be pursued.

As mentioned, typologies come with limitations, not least being that it is only ever a static snapshot or point-in-time location of an individual's experience. Rather than only focus on any given point, therefore, the research also seeks to identify triggers that can move individuals from deficit to surplus (and potentially the opposite). Here we are examining the *relational* nature of citizenship. That is to say, citizenship and the associated experiences that locate an individual in one quadrant or another of this typology should not be understood in isolation. Rather, our placement at any one time or place is a function of the experiences of those around us, relationships with the relevant institutions, and interactions with community, including via the media in all its dimensions.
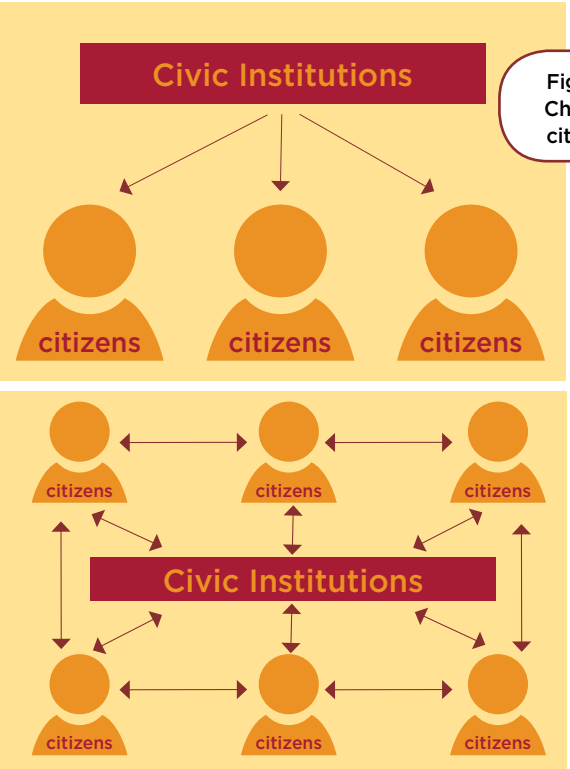

Figure 2:
Changing nature of citizenship

Figure 2 represents the changing nature of citizenship to what I have described as 'relational' from its traditional 'vertical' structure. There are two important insights here: in the contemporary world, the relationship that any individual citizen has with civil society is best understood as a function of the relationships around that person. Someone with strong solidarity networks is likely to be able to draw on them to assist in negotiating the complex processes and opportunities of citizenship. In contrast, those with weak networks are more likely to experience a deficit.

New media – social and presentational – accentuates these experiences. This is highlighted in Figure 3 below, which shows that the relational nature of citizenship is mediated by new governance structures. All contemporary societies are challenged by, and responding to, developments of the digital age, including, but certainly not limited to, governments of all colours and political movements (religious, environmental, Indigenous peoples), media, transnational corporations, non-government organisations, and international institutions (financial, military, health and humanitarian).

Figure 3:
Mediated nature
of contemporary
citizenship
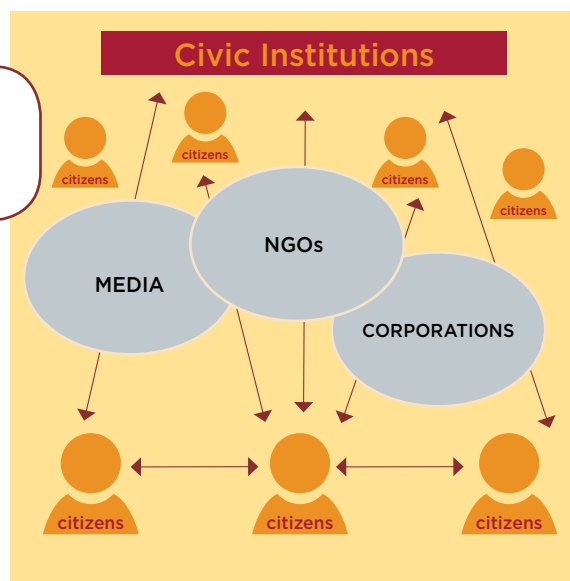
Civic identity and media

Media in its many forms play a number of important roles in civic engagement and identity. I will briefly discuss some of these before moving on to outline preliminary findings of the research project.

The first is accessibility across a variety of platforms. Civic organisations are increasingly coming to rely on a cross-section of media platforms to communicate with the citizenry. This has the potential to empower and to alienate. In Australia, 'Government 2.0' (Gov2.0) works to establish various activities 'including engaging with the public and releasing government data online'. The aim of the Gov2.0 Taskforce is to use technology to realise a 'more open, transparent and consultative form of government'.[6]

Despite being one of the world's most advanced economies, the Australian Bureau of Statistics measured just over 50 percent of young people with regular access to the internet in its most recent census (2011).[7] While

this is relatively high by international standards, it reminds us that almost one in two young Australians do not have internet access, and consequently are more likely to experience a growing sense of deficit.

Access is important, and so is the second issue: internet literacy. Mission Australia's *Youth Survey* 2012 examined young people's attitudes to the internet and found that it has become their most important source of information. Almost 80 percent of those surveyed listed it as their first preference. Furthermore, 37 percent stated that the web is where they turn for advice. The authors, however, raised concerns about the need to improve internet literacy. Young people need to be "better equipped to not only identify sites with reliable information but evaluate online information" (ibid: 8).

In research with The Whitlam Institute, a public policy think tank based at the University of Western Sydney (see Arvanitakis and Marren 2009), we found what can best be described as a lack of transferability. In a series of focus groups, one young IT entrepreneur emphasised that accessing Facebook does not equate to internet literacy. In his work, he found that internet literacy is "thin" and many young people with whom he was dealing lacked the skills, knowledge and networks to be able to take advantage of projects such as Gov2.0.

A fourth dimension is the fraught relationship that young people have with media – particularly traditional delivery mechanisms. Specifically, I am talking about the way that young people are portrayed in the media. As Alexander (2008) notes, the media can and often does create and promote fears about young people.[8] These range from accusing young people of political apathy, to perpetrating crime, lacking values (such as being labelled the 'me generation') and generally disconnected from their community (Poynting and Morgan 2007). This type of moral hazard is often levelled at young people by the traditional, mainstream media and can aggravate disconnection from civic life. For many young people, it confirms to them that they are not considered part of the civic landscape.

Finally, the media in its many guises can act as a way to promote and encourage an engaged citizenship. There are multiple examples of young people taking advantage of new media to establish themselves as 'active citizens' or 'activists'. They may upload self-made videos to YouTube highlighting Australia's treatment of refugees and Indigenous people,[9] join Facebook campaigns around Fair Trade and myriad other causes and campaigns,[10] or volunteer with online-based active citizenship organisations such as GetUp![11] Oxfam's International Youth Partnerships program (an organisation that I have intimately been involved with) runs a network of 900 young community leaders across the world, interacts virtually, and is organised and managed by young people.[12]

Despite media interactions playing an important role in young people's civic engagement and identity formation, these activities have been described as "slactivism" in the mainstream media (Christensen 2011).[13] That is, this is a type of political engagement that is envisaged as easy and possibly lazy, and not

recognised as a genuine form of political engagement (Greere 2013).[14]

As our research project has identified, the starting point when it comes to young people's civic engagement is one of deficit – treating young people as "citizens-in-waiting" (Collin 2008). The deficit model presumes that young people have nothing to add to civic life until they meet certain markers of adulthood such as employment and property ownership, or financial asset accumulation. While elsewhere I have criticised those organisations that are built exclusively around online engagement (Arvanitakis 2011),[15] there is no reason for youth digital engagement to be simply dismissed.

Here we see a contradictory relationship between various media and young people: on the one hand, there is finding empowerment through engagement; while on the other, experiencing the opposite, in the form of dismissal or negative labelling and stereotyping of the type of engagement in which young people choose to participate. It is such insights that have emerged in this research project, and it is here I turn to next.

'If we designed parliament today, it would nothing like this'

Between 2008-09 a Whitlam Institute research project investigated the relationship between young people and democracy, including focus groups. The findings have been released in a series of publications (see Arvanitakis and Marren 2009; Collin 2008; Horsely and Costley 2008).[16]

While the focus of the discussions was much broader than the role of media in civic life and identity, a number of key observations were raised that expanded, confirmed and added to the points outlined above. I will outline three of the most pertinent of these.

The first was that established civic institutions must make greater effort to consult with young people using new media. It became clear from the focus group discussions that much consultation commissioned by civic bodies to seek the views of young people had been negative because they were either consulted very late in the process, such that suggestions could not be implemented, or so early that any input was lost, or seen as unrealistic.

It became clear here that for many young people who are internet literate, media empowers civic engagement and responsibility. The focus group participants were assertive in ways that surprised the research team. Many claimed that it was not only the end product that they should be consulted about, but also the processes of consultation themselves. The internet was clearly identified as 'their' domain. For civic institutions to assume that the institutions themselves were best placed to set the terms of engagement, particularly digital and multi-media engagement – without consulting young people on method and form – was a costly, and alienating, mistake.

At the same time, we heard warnings on the old 'if you build it they will come' maxim. Just because you 'build' something in the virtual world, we were told, does not mean it will be used. Here it was made clear that when civic institutions did enter this arena, there was a need to understand the private/public divide. As with the physical world, the world of new media had clear private spaces that should not be entered. As one participant said: "I do not want my local member [of Parliament] liking me on Facebook."

The third and final point I want to raise here is that new media was seen as having the potential to create revolutionary structural change that was not generally understood by civic institutions. One highly thoughtful participant observed: "If we designed parliament today, it would be nothing like this."

As we unpacked this statement, the participant explained that the structure and even layout of contemporary parliamentary processes in Australia were designed at a time when geographical boundaries

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and identity were fundamental in representative democracy. Today, however, this had dramatically changed and was now out dated – to the point where our respondent could not even relate to the structures. The majority of time spent at a 'central' location such as Parliament House was wasteful; and disconnected parliamentarians from community. Furthermore, traditional party politics created false alliances: today's technologies should redefine the way parties are formed and allow these relationships to be re-negotiated regularly. For example, is the Australian political divide between representatives of labour (the Australian Labour Party) and business and capital (the Liberal Party) relevant when these issues are no longer how young people identify themselves?

In a recent survey, the Lowy Institute, a public policy think tank, found that the majority of young people did not think that democracy was always the best form of government.[17] Media and political commentators across the spectrum argued that this confirmed young people were either disconnected from political processes, or had become so comfortable in the privileges of democracy[18] that they no longer appreciated them. An alternative way to understand such research was not that young people did not support democracy, but that they felt disheartened by the version of democracy they are witnessing.

Conclusion

As argued throughout this paper, contemporary media is fundamental to the civic identity formation of young people in a variety of complex ways. The media, in its many forms, empowers and disempowers, engages and disengages, inspires and frustrates young people. To move beyond the deficit model, media organisations (and those who teach media at different education levels) must promote internet literacy while simultaneously recognising that these young people are active citizens who are engaged in ways that are not often recognised or appreciated. Without a better understanding of these practices, the available energy will not be harnessed and our democracies will suffer for it.

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Endnotes

1. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Ingrid Matthews and her insights in preparing this article. I would also like to thank the Australian Research Council for awarding the funding for the ARC Discovery project DP120104607 discussed in this article.
2. Word clouds are open source software that explicitly disclaim having the text analysis capacity of more complex programs of the CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) family of software. Word clouds are 'toys' (see www.manyeyes.com.au) and as such are ideal for engaging with first year students. They do however show dominant terms: the more frequently a word appears in the uploaded text, the larger the font in which it is printed in the word cloud. On the usefulness and capacities of both word clouds and text mining software, see Hodge and Matthews (2011).
3. http://www.actionaid.org/australia/2013/05/bangladesh-factory-collapse-no-accident
4. http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-23/ford-to-close-geelong-and-broadmeadows-plants/4707960
5. See http://www.uws.edu.au/ics/research/projects/young_peoples_citizenship for the project background. Furthermore, this project has built on earlier work undertaken with the public policy think tank, the Whitlam Institute looking at young people and democracy: http://www.whitlam.org/the_program/young_people_imagining_a_new_democracy
6. http://webguide.gov.au/web-2-0/gov-2-0-primer/
7. http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features50Jun+2011
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