

Young Citizens And Political Participation In A Digital Society: Addressing The Democratic Disconnect

Collin, P. (2015). *Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect*. Palgrave Macmillan.

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Collin's book *Young citizens and political participation in a digital society* presents a rigorous discussion of the current issues in theorising political participation in the context of an increasingly pervasive digital media ecology, with a focus on young people as a target group for policy-making. This is a strategic choice: the crisis of political disengagement is most commonly associated with a disillusioned and apathetic youth, however (in) accurate that portrayal may be, and digital media has been both celebrated as a democratic force redefining politics and at the same time, condemned as a constant distraction from 'serious' politics. Collin follows the former agenda in a critical fashion, arguing that new forms of mediated political participation are to be theorised instead of seeing them as socialisation mechanisms in fulfilment of, successfully or otherwise, classical, institutionalised political participation modes. This is a research direction that has gained much momentum in the literature of Internet studies, and in this sense Collin's work is timely and much needed: the book features a nice collection of case studies from Australia and the UK, two established democracies whose Internet penetration rates almost reach the point of saturation, and is exactly what is missing from the literature: qualitative, comparative and critical reflections on political participation as changing cultural norms rather than deteriorating citizen political practice.

The book is organised in six neat chapters, with case studies presented and referenced throughout chapters 2 to 6, effectively assisting with the author's theoretical discussions. The theme of 'good citizenship' runs throughout the book, which is a solid theoretical framework to employ, although more recent concepts such as monitorial citizenship could have benefited the discussion a great deal. Case studies from the two countries in focus are presented in both depth and breadth, exploring and at the same time constructing the interplay of emerging mediated political participation forms deemed more relevant to young people and the roles of civic organisations, as well as government policy decisions that are at odds with a new political ecology where youth demands autonomy rather than being co-opted as part of the legitimisation of top-down politics. Interview materials from the author's first-hand contact with politically engaged young people during her extensive experience with the issue in affiliation with different organisations are used to good effect, although academic readers would probably appreciate some methodological clarity by means of explanation, or ethnographic reflection.

All in all, the book is rich in qualitative analysis, and is sharp in pointing out the shortcomings of the ‘deficit’ model of theorising young people as ‘human becomings’ rather than ‘human beings’, whose political engagement is often rendered meaningless unless fitting or evolving into a repertoire of institutionalised political participation forms ‘approved’ and institutionalised by adults. One of the most important arguments of the book is centred on the idea that disengagement is in itself political, and that young people increasingly see political bureaucracy as inadequate and wasteful. For this reason, Collin argues, investing in policies that aim at pulling young people into established political engagement mechanisms are unproductive, and go against an emerging culture of mediated political participation that is entwined with almost all other aspects of life, including entertainment, networking, education, and so on. Prioritising on giving young people more autonomy, crafting policies that respond to their concerns instead of trying to mould them into an old-fashioned concept of the good citizen, and seeing them as a stakeholder to work with should be the solution, as the reasoning logically goes. This is a powerful key message, and is also where the book makes an important contribution to both the Internet studies and political science disciplines by making a critical connection between the two. However, this is also where the book falls short on its ambition: due to its qualitative nature, the book is unable to make any specific policy recommendations that would have been a logical conclusion to the author’s policy analysis approach. The book should therefore be read as a scoping exercise in theorising young people’s participation in highly developed democratic contexts.

There is a pronounced pro-youth accent spoken throughout the book, and at times readers might wonder how representative the author’s account of an engaged, mindful, critical, and misunderstood democratic youth is. Considering that the book is published as part of Palgrave Macmillan’s *Studies in Childhood and Youth* series, perhaps this conceptual choice is a result of an interdisciplinary plurality rather than a shortcoming in and of itself. The exclusion of Bruce Bimber’s line of work is quite a pity, since a lot of Bimber’s research findings using quantitative methods could greatly complement this book. For example, one of Bimber’s most widely referenced works *Information and American Democracy* pointed out how, when controlled for political interest, the relationship between demographic variables such as age or education and political participation becomes insignificant. While the current book is not in a position to tackle that task as such, nor does it attempt to, it would have been rewarding to see it address this argument, since the argument is critical to the book’s very premise.

Nevertheless, Collin’s book is to be celebrated, as it marks one of the first exciting steps in theorising political participation in the digital age. Readers who want to understand the contexts of policy making in Australia and UK will find a well of useful information in this book, presented in an informative and analytical manner, and some case studies can even be adapted to other settings with a bit of creativity. As a bold pioneer in connecting important concepts together under a critical light, *Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect* deserves to be widely read and referenced as an important contribution to the three disciplines in which it pertains to be situated: Internet studies, Political science, and Childhood and Youth Studies.