on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

digital civics after trump

Sigal Ben-Porath and Gideon Dishon

In this short essay, we focus on the need for developing students' sense of a shared fate in digital contexts, and the role schools could play in this effort. We describe the need for digital civics, and make the case for three specific shifts in the norms for online civic exchanges, focusing on how a sense of shared fate can inform individuals' roles and responsibilities.

1. Introduction

Questions about the opportunities and challenges offered by digital media with respect to developing habits of good citizenship have been around for a while (Papacharissi, 2004). Yet, the events leading up to the 2016 presidential elections in the US, as well as their aftermath, shook the ground beneath scholarly work on civic participation in the digital age. The emergence of peer-based and interactive modes of civic participation was shown not to be inherently democratizing, and to sometimes support anti-democratic aims. This was in contrast to earlier optimistic suggestions that digital media could support participation among the youth, and particularly those from marginalized groups, citing encouraging examples such as the DREAMers movement and Black Lives Matter (e.g., Ito et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2016).

The sense of an increased polarization and a balkanization of the civic sphere, together with concerns about the circulation of inaccurate "news," have led to a reinvigorated interest among educators and researchers in ways to develop the skills needed to manage the never-ending stream of (mis)information, most commonly described in terms of digital literacy or critical thinking (Wineburg et al., 2018). While developing such skills is important, as is the recent push for platform changes, we argue that neither would work without the appropriate civic dispositions, motivations and preferences – in other words, individuals must develop early on, the habits and inclinations to act democratically in the civic digital sphere.[1] In this short essay, we focus on the need for developing students' sense of a shared fate in digital contexts (Ben-Porath, 2012), and the role schools could play in this effort. We describe the need for digital civics, and make the case for three specific shifts in the norms for online civic exchanges, focusing on how a sense of shared fate can inform individuals' roles and responsibilities. We then lay out ways in which schools can take part in this effort.

2. Digital Civics

The civic world is rapidly changing in response to the affordances of the digital age, among them interactive, participant-based media and Internet-enabled mobile devices (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Zuckerman, 2016). Within this domain, new forms of civic participation and action arise, for which future citizens could effectively be prepared by their schools. When considering the role of

schools in preparing students for their morphing modes of civic interaction, we are thinking not so much about civic knowledge or formal practices like voting, which remain relatively constant. Rather, we are interested in less formal actions and interactions by citizens (or members of the community), and in particular, the way citizens can learn to understand the civic/political sphere as one where shared fate can be uncovered, expressed and developed. For the purpose of the current discussion on digital civics, we understand the concept of shared fate to mean a sense of belonging to one's nation, which connects a person primarily to fellow citizens rather than to the country, leadership or land. Shared fate comprises the ties that citizens and other members of the nation share across languages, geography, histories, representative institutions, shared projects etc. (Williams, 2003). Developing a sense of shared fate in digital contexts is a key aspect of digital civics, where participants can seek shared interests, visions, and collaborations – even before they define these in clear political terms (Wolin, 1994). What are the main commitments individuals have when they interact in civic and democratic ways around shared civic goals? We describe three such commitments, and then discuss possible ways to develop them.

2.1 Commitment to Ongoing and Just Dialogue

Civic dialogue in online platforms is an ongoing mix of private and public communication; these exchanges require new norms of civic communication. In formal contexts, this is often achieved through the regulation of speech, and the setting of well-defined norms considering appropriate conversational moves. Such regulation seems not only unrealistic in online contexts, which are often characterized by a new hybrid model of informal written communication, but also undesirable, as it might create discomfort for some and thus limit participation. Accordingly, we suggest that even more than traditional face-to-face communication, shared fate should not center on stylistic or formal standards, but rather on impact. Specifically, *the impact of one's modes of participation on the capacity of others to participate within a context of just relations*.

2.2 Seeking a Diverse Audience With a Shared Goal

Hybrid forms of civic communication in digital contexts enable new modes of homogeneity and diversity to evolve. Beyond the common echo chambers and balkanization of the civic sphere, non-hierarchical and decentralized interaction also allows individuals to collaborate or communicate in more ad-hoc ways than was previously possible. As a result, the material and human costs of organizing and sharing ideas is reduced, allowing individuals to participate in mobilization efforts, even for limited goals. The tolerance required in such contexts is similarly tied only to certain aspects of personal identity, where various other dimensions can be bracketed. *Shared fate in such contexts requires silence as much as it requires personal expression, permitting groups to focus on shared interests, goals or aspects of identity while remaining silent on others*. Speaking or remaining silent stems from whether such silence supports just relations between groups, or ignores aspects that perpetuate unjust relations. Thus, the challenge facing citizens is balancing between the need to work together towards shared just goals, and the dangers that such a focus could come at the expense of the needs and rights of more vulnerable individuals or groups.

2.3 Horizontal Accountability

The diffuse nature of online platforms, especially loosely-moderated ones, creates a need for forms of public accountability that are not based on an appeal to authority. While some of the recent calls for platforms to respond to new challenges are justified,[2] developing a view of oneself as a producer

of content which can be used by and have an effect on many others, in addition to being a critical consumer of information from many peer-based sources, demands not only critical literacy and related capacities but also an understanding of one's *accountability as a relational virtue*. In other words, citizens need to consider what they consume or produce but also to hold others accountable for what they share. Literature on digital civic participation tends to prioritize active citizen engagement that bypasses institutional channels, as this was perceived as a revolutionizing civic opportunity offered by online contexts. Such engagement should include demanding of others the kind of communication practices that contribute to the civility of the public sphere.

3. Teaching Digital Civics

Schools are key among other civic institutions in which citizens are initiated into their roles, both intentionally and collaterally. Educating for civic participation, and teaching and practicing shared fate in digital contexts as a part of this civic training, should take place in schools, as they are equally accessible to all (with some caveats), and as they allow most young people to prepare ahead for their civic roles.[3]

New forms of participation brought forth by the digital age demand preparation and support from adults (James et al., 2016). Despite earlier narratives of children being digital natives, there are many aspects of interaction in online contexts which need be intentionally taught, especially for children who do not receive abundant opportunities for modelling rich online interaction at home (Buchi et al., 2016). There has been a surge of research on patterns of youth participatory politics, as well as on the related core practices that need to be developed through schools (see especially Ito et al., 2015; Kahne et al., 2016; Soep, 2014). Going beyond the common focus on skill development, we briefly consider some of the ways in which an underlying sense of shared fate could be cultivated within everyday school-based learning.[4] Key to our argument is that habits of shared fate should not be taught in civics of government classes, but rather be integrated as a component of learning more broadly (Ben-Porath & Dishon, 2015). In the limited space here, we focus on some key examples.

The use of asynchronous online forums has become a central tool at all levels of education. In such forums, teachers often assign a text and require students to respond through written comments and through consulting, reviewing and responding to their peers' work. While such activities are pursued for academic reasons, they could concurrently serve as opportunities to cultivate habits of shared fate in online interactions. For instance, teachers could emphasize the importance of *commitment to ongoing dialogue*, and offer students practical tools to do so effectively. Students could be mentored in how to respond in ways that afford their interlocutor room for further discussion, using disagreement as the driving force to productive arguments. Such interactions could also highlight (to a limited extent) the importance of *horizontal accountability* and how it manifests in online discussions. The growing body of research on bystander intervention in cases of cyberbullying could support the effort to develop analogous practices in civic contexts. This would include lessons concerning how to identify utterances that demand external intervention, as well as practical tools on how to respond to attacks, recruit other digital bystanders, and determine when and how to flag or report behaviour to an authority effectively (Allison & Bussey, 2016). Horizontal accountability should not be reduced to responding to negative forms of conduct, and should include emphasizing the importance of engaging with those who are less 'vocal' or central to the group interaction, and learning how to promote the inclusion of participants who are likely to be marginalized.

Educators can also use activities in educational digital spaces to promote students' propensity to *pursue shared goals with a diverse audience*. This could be achieved by focusing on activities in which students need to identify shared aspects of their own view and those of others, and engage in projects where they work together towards furthering their common interests, despite other differences. Instead of simply asking students to collaborate on projects in which the goals are defined by the teacher, the starting point for such activities could be bringing together groups of students who have displayed limited points of agreement in their earlier responses. There is a rich body of knowledge on the role of argumentation and collaboration in learning (e.g., Asterhan & Schwarz, 2016), which could be utilized as the basis for structuring learning environments centered on pursuing shared goals. Such process can highlight the possibility of collaboration across difference, but also to expose the challenges of such work, and the delicate balance between identifying when concessions are due, and when collaboration might be at the expense of more fundamental differences which should not be compromised.

Finally, while these approaches could be applied to a single class, a sense of shared fate demands supporting such interactions with more diverse audiences, and in less formal settings. Facilitating consequential connections between the activities students pursue within schools and those which are a central part of their lives outside of it, is key to developing meaningful civic practices (Ito et al., 2015).

In sum, recent developments in the political sphere, following Trump's election, including current trends in political uses of social media platforms for digital civic organizing, communication and action, ought to reinvigorate the efforts towards establishing the vital role civic education should play in a democracy. Since online platforms are generally oblivious to substance and thus permit organizing around hate just as much as they permit organizing around democratic civic goals, the introduction and practice of modes of civic engagement that can support a democratic public sphere take on a new urgency. Moreover, they highlight the need for a deeper and more comprehensive approach to this endeavour, one that goes beyond skills and explores how educators could support the development of democratic habits of shared living among today's youth, in and out of schools.

Though worries about democracy are old as democracy itself, the ways in which democratic citizens rise to address these worries changes along with the historical context and technological tools. A central challenge facing our era is re-establishing contexts that promote shared fate in an increasingly diverse and segregated society, both in reality and online. New platforms highlight the need to intentionally engage in providing opportunities for the next generation to participate in, shape, and develop, habits of shared democratic living.

References

Allison, K. R., & Bussey, K. (2016). Cyber-bystanding in context: A review of the literature on witnesses' responses to cyberbullying. *Children and Youth Services Review, 65*, 183-194.
Asterhan, C. S., & Schwarz, B. B. (2016). Argumentation for learning: Well-trodden paths and unexplored territories. *Educational Psychologist, 51*(2), 164-187.
Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(5), 739-768.
Ben-Porath, S. (2012). Citizenship as shared fate: Education for membership in a diverse democracy. *Educational theory, 62*(4), 381-395.
Ben-Porath, S. R., & Dishon, G. (2015). Taken out of context: Defending civic education from the

situationist critique. *Philosophical Inquiries in Education, 23*(1), 22-37.
Büchi, M., Just, N., & Latzer, M. (2016). Modeling the second-level digital divide: A five-country study of social differences in internet use. *New Media & Society, 18*(11), 2703-2722.
Ito, M., Soep, E., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., & Zimmerman, A. (2015). Learning connected civics: Narratives, practices, infrastructures. *Curriculum Inquiry, 45*(1), 10-29.
James, C., Gruner, D. T., Lee, A., & Mullen, M. (2016). Getting into the fray: Civic youth, online dialogue, and implications for digital literacy education. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy, 4*(1).
Jenkins, H, Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & A. Zimmerman (Eds.), *By any media necessary: The new youth activism* (pp. 1-60). NYU Press.
Kahne, J., Hodgin, E., & Eidman-Aadahl, E. (2016). Redesigning civic education for the digital age: Participatory politics and the pursuit of democratic engagement. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 44*(1), 1-35.
Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media & Society, 6*(2), 259-283.
Soep, E. (2014). *Participatory politics: Next-generation tactics to remake public spheres*. MIT Press.
Williams, Melissa (2003). "Citizenship as identity, citizenship as shared fate, and the functions of multicultural education." In K. McDonough and W. Feinberg (eds.), *Citizenship and education in liberal-democratic societies: Teaching for cosmopolitan values and collective identities* (pp. 208-247). Oxford University Press.
Wineburg, S., Breakstone, J., McGrew, S., & Ortega, T. (2018). *Why Google can't save us. Positive learning in the age of information* (pp. 221-228). Springer VS.
Wolin, S. S. (1994). Fugitive democracy. *Constellations, 1*(1), 11-25.
Zuckerman, E. (2016). Effective civics. In E. Gordon & P. Mihailidis (Eds.), *Civic media: Technology, design, practice* (pp. 49-76). MIT Press.

Recommended Citation

Ben-Porath, S. R., & Dishon, G. (2018). Digital civics after Trump. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate, 1*(1). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2018.1.6

Download PDF version

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting gu target="_blank" rel="noopener noreferrer"idelines.

sigal ben-porath & gideon dishon

Sigal Ben-Porath is Professor of Education, Philosophy and Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. Her most recent book is Free Speech on Campus (Penn Press 2017). Gideon Dishon is a postdoctoral fellow at Tel Aviv University. His research explores the convergences and tensions between the academic and civic or moral functions of education, with a special interest in the emerging role digital technologies play in these endeavors.

1. We denote here a 'civic digital sphere' to differentiate from other activities in which individuals participate online, although the concept is sometimes hard to outline clearly. For example, forms of gender discrimination and harassment in the gaming world have political and civic repercussions, even as gaming may not be inherently civic or political. Clearly, some of the dispositions we discuss are also relevant to the real world of politics, not just to online interactions, but here we focus on the specific challenges and affordances of the digital civic sphere.
2. Such as the call for Twitter to respond more effectively to hate speech and threats, and for Facebook to revise its algorithm, so as to limit exposure to false news stories.
3. Some readers might worry about the dangers of indoctrination in schools. We argue that the initiation into certain modes of shared living is an unavoidable characteristic of schools, where children spend a substantial part of their childhood. To us, the question then is not whether schools exert any influence, but rather what modes of shared living children practice in schools, and whether they amount to indoctrination into a way of life (see: Ben-Porath & Dishon, 2015).
4. This does not come to replace schools' more traditional civic roles.