



New Media and Youth Political Engagement

Peter John Chen¹  · Milica Stilinovic¹

Received: 26 November 2019 / Revised: 19 April 2020 / Accepted: 22 April 2020 /
Published online: 2 June 2020
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Abstract

This article critically examines the role new media can play in the political engagement of young people in Australia. Moving away from “deficit” descriptions, which assert low levels of political engagement among young people, it argues two major points. First, that there is a well-established model of contemporary political mobilisation that employs both new media and large data analysis that can and have been effectively applied to young people in electoral and non-electoral contexts. Second, that new media, and particularly social media, are not democratic by nature. Their general use and adoption by young and older people do not necessarily cultivate democratic values. This is primarily due to the type of participation afforded in the emerging “surveillance economy”. The article argues that a focus on scale as drivers of influence, the underlying foundation of their affordances based on algorithms, and the centralised editorial control of these platforms make them highly participative, but unequal sites for political socialisation and practice. Thus, recent examples of youth mobilisation, such as seen in recent climate justice movements, should be seen through the lens of cycles of contestation, rather than as technologically determined.

Keywords Australia · Young people · Participation · Democracy · Social media · Determinism

Introduction

At the turn of the century, considerable interest was focused on new internet-based technologies and their potential to stimulate democratic improvements around the world. Attention was particularly given to their role in revitalising the public

✉ Peter John Chen
peter.chen@sydney.edu.au

Milica Stilinovic
milica.stilinovic@sydney.edu.au

¹ Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

sphere, that performative “space” in which individuals have both the right and access to discuss societal problems freely and openly (Rheingold 1993; Grossman 1995). This link was assumed possible through a combination of technological determinism, which assumes that technologies shape sociopolitical environments and cultural values (Winner 1989), along with a strong emphasis on the capacity of individual agency to overcome economic and political challenges (Ferdinand 2000).

This “heroic individualism” was seen in the free market ethos of Silicon Valley (Marwick 2013), promoted a combination of individual sovereignty and disruptive innovation in the development of technologies that support access to information. As such, a decentralised and unregulated internet was assumed a technology that promoted freedom of speech, personal expression and the free exchange of political discourse among open societies.

Illustrating this premise, Benkler (2006) in *The Wealth of Networks* wrote that the internet “allows all citizens to change the relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes”. Equally, similar sentiment was echoed in the deliverance of e-democracy as a means to afford previously passive audience a virtual platform to engage with their elected representatives and the state. By combining both the communicative tenements of structural functionalism (which dictates that well-functioning communication system underpins a well-functioning government) and non-discriminatory individualism, Clift (1997) asserted that “e-democracy” was a contemporary project that should be undertaken by and with liberal democratic governments as a means for citizens to reclaim the power of communication from mass institutions, creating online public spaces for citizens to both express and also develop—through dialogue—collective interests.

Of course, the belief in the internet as a democratising force and a driver of political engagement was not a universal view, then or now. A subset of literature focused on scepticism about the possibility and effectiveness of the “uncritical and non-contingent transfer of ecommerce models” into the public sector and political realm (Collins and Butler 2002). However, it was the dominant view and shaped an ideal of the internet as both a driver of democracy and a means to uphold communication between people and power.

Nonetheless, due to the very nature of internet technologies and their propensity to afford or prohibit certain behaviours, it is unlikely that enhanced meaningful democratic participation is a function of increased use of contemporary dominant internet media forms. As such, this article contests the assumption that internet-based technologies democratise and promote political engagement by focusing on the increased prevalence among Australian youth. Examples, like climate action protests, are cited and problematised. The article employs a “maximalist” and “developmental” view of democracy which emphasises outcomes that facilitate ongoing and meaningful participation when exploring the role of internet-based technologies in political socialisation and mobilisation. This article argues that internet technologies should be more commonly associated with political disengagement and concerns about democratic participation, rather than being touted as a liberating and participatory force.

Democracy, Our Contemporary Crises and Young People

Due to its diverse meanings, and its applications subject to endless contestation (Spicer 2019), democracy is an essentially contested concept. Active definitions for democracy lie across a spectrum of performances and values, from the “minimalist” versions that captures simple measures such as voter registration and turnout, to “maximalist” definitions that include activities like associational membership, active information seeking and civic dialogue (Dahl 1971). The discussion of democracy in this article focuses on a maximalist value of equality over other values, such as maximal individual liberty. Given the recent prevalence of “collective crises” like the climate and pandemic, prioritising maximal individual liberty contrasts the necessary collective nature of contemporary, complex societies (Wildavsky 2017). Prioritising values like maximal individual liberty can be unsustainable and/or create inequalities that structurally undermine participation by others through self-interest (Wildavsky 2017).

In contrast, a maximalist view of democracy equally emphasises the production of democratic culture and institutions that promote just outcomes that sustain democratic practice. This sees generalised civic culture as important in developing practices by citizens that are realised through or by institutions that permit democratic modes of expression and collective action. This is important as recent challenges to individual well-being have collective origins (climate, pandemic, economic inequality). As such, it is complementary to a study of youth participation in the political processes of evolved democracies, such as Australia, and the internet-based technologies that afford them access.

In recent times, youth participation in democratic processes has been subject to controversy. Krinsky (2008) notes that it is unremarkable that young people are often the focus of media and moral panics. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this particular demographic has been implicated as the focal point for three politically focused “crises” within the twenty-first century.

The first panic is that young people are the source of “democratic decline”. This reductionist view is commonly associated with lower formal participation rates, particularly voting, but also membership in key institutions like political parties (Milner 2010). In the compulsory voting context of Australia, Print highlights the focus on young people as a state educational project to become “active and informed citizens” (2015). Which, in the context of today’s technologically driven political environment, would garner access to political discourse, engagement, and the use of advancing technologies to communicate, coordinate and mobilise.

The second and third crises pertain to the increasing levels of structural inequality and the inability of the post-1970s neoliberal economic model—with a focus on egoistic individualism, and the resultant social and political acceptance of enduring and reproducing inequality (Nozick 1975)—to ameliorate the causes of, resultant social conflict over, the environmental crisis.

While these last two are empirical facts, the former is more contestable. To unpack this youth-focused concern, a good example is the often-cited Lowy Institute annual poll (Kassam 2019), which, at times, has shown a 28% gap between Australians aged 18 to 29 years, and those over 30, in response to a question that asks if “Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government”. These types of findings are often reported in the media in rejectionist terms that overreads the data set and does not interrogate its

context. For example, this type of finding has led to sensationalist claims in the media that “Fewer than half of Australian adults under the age of 45 actually believe in democratic government” (Hildebrand 2018). This type of coverage commonly is predicated on a discourse that young people are expected to perform a high degree of nativity about the political world, which, when displayed by older people, is attributed to pragmatism and experience. At the core of this is an implicit message that the status quo must be observed as a normative good.

Thus, young people are at the intersection of multiple fast and slow-moving crises, real or phantasmagorical. Yet, with higher levels of concern for issues of social and climate justice (Sealey and McKenzie 2016), it becomes critical for them to have the capacity to engage in political practices and advance these concerns and question the foundations of political practice that have created or contributed to these social problems. Therefore, contestable claims about current and potential democratic capacity have to be explored, particularly in the context of claims about technologies that afford or impede on youth participation.

Social Media and Youth Participation, What Is Afforded

Emerging information and communication technologies provide new (or remediate) “affordances”, or possibilities for human action. Affordances are important because of the way they encourage, allow, discourage and prevent particular behaviours. These can be deliberately or accidentally designed into a technology, be visible, or concealed (Livingstone and Das 2013). When thinking about the application of this concept to politics, this is frequently captured in the “cost” hypothesis: the internet reduces the costs of political participation and allows some “natural” human desire to be afforded in greater abundance (Negroponte 1995).

The positive aspects of the “cost” hypothesis become evident when considering the affordances made possible through advancing technologies. From the late 1990s onwards, the very nature of the internet—as a tool to communicate, aggregate and coordinate—has been associated with its democratising potential. Therefore, at first instance, it appears logical to assume that contemporary youth, who have grown alongside these evolving technologies, would employ the internet as a communication tool to engage with political discourse, much in the same way that low-cost printing played an important role in youth politics of the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, with the advent of “platform” technologies (technologies that facilitate a range of applications, rather than provide a narrow set of specific functions) and social media channels, it is noted that young people increasingly use social media to engage in political discourse (Yang and DeHart 2016).

Nonetheless, affordances not only have the ability to promote an engagement in political discourse, the design of certain technologies can also hinder participation. In retrospect, claims that assert the democratising potential of the internet have been predicated on loose understandings of the underlying character of the technology under discussion, that is, an exaggeration of its “true” network characteristics. The internet is not a “mesh” where each node has equal power relative to its peers, but a “powerscape” which virtually mirrors the hierarchical nature of power in the physical space where certain agendas, people and even locations are prioritised. Equally, contestable are

claims about the impacts of the technology such as deterritorialisation, or the notion that these technologies may separate the individual from the physical context as a primary definer of their social, economic and cultural needs (Chen 2013). Importantly, the cost claim, once so important to early arguments about the levelling effect of the internet (a view subject to very early empirical criticism; see Small 2008), can now be understood as generating compensatory costs: as data abundance increased, scarcity has shifted from the production of content to its consumption, and considerable time (cost) is now spent sorting, filtering and killfiling the vast amount of content generated and pushed at individuals, particularly through online automation (aka “bots”).

Additionally, free entry to the internet’s public spheres is not cost-free for those marginalised subaltern populations—a term coined by postcolonial theorists to describe a faction of society excluded from hierarchal structures of power—who also experience exclusion at a personal cost. Virtual violence and harassment in online spaces have forcefully attempted to exclude these marginalised groups from the digital public sphere and are well-documented. In this context, youth within established democracies, despite having access to these virtual public spheres, form a part of not only the subaltern identity due to their cultural standing, but also the repression they experience from institutions such as the education system (Spivak 1988). As such, their participation, much like any other faction of subaltern society, is intensely contested (Hartounian 2018; Dhrodia 2017).

In thinking about social media from the perspective of democratic affordances, it is important to consider the political implications of its underlying technological and intuitional characteristics (Howard and Parks 2012). That is, social media is largely only possible because of its reliance on large database systems that afford horizontal visibility within peer groups. Thus, it is unsurprising that social media has been politically useful in the processes of political mobilisation. As evidenced in the work of groups like GetUp! (an Australian-based independent movement for progressive participation in democratic processes), along with others, groups have successfully capitalised off of internet-based technologies to disseminate their message and motivate collective action (Vromen 2017). Equally, Xenos et al. (2014) have argued strongly for a positive relationship between young people’s time spent on social media and political participation. Based on a survey of young people (16–29) in the USA, UK and Australia, and drawn from online panels, they argued that social media was positively related to increase political participation and produce a good regression analysis in support of this claim.

The deterministic interpretation of this research can be contested, however. This analysis also strongly correlated reported levels of participation with respondents’ sense of personal political efficacy. This leaves open the real possibility (as the authors identify) that their observations about technology use and political participation may be an expression of some other unmeasured causal agents, or that tool use is epiphenomenal to the connection between political interest and expression that would occur in any other socio-technical setting. Significantly, reflecting our concern about the dominance of individualism, the same volume includes a longitudinal analysis of internet use that concludes that “...facilities on the internet often described as ‘social’ media offer environments which mainly draw young people’s attention away from common concerns” (Ekstrom et al. 2014). Thus, the actual relationship remains open for investigation, and youth engagement in political participation on the internet is

questionable, opening up the potential to explore how the use of social media and other internet-based technologies could mobilise youths into political engagement.

Mobilisation Politics

Recent attention has particularly been paid to youth mobilisations around climate issues, including the role of young people as leadership figures (i.e. Greta Thunberg) and peer mobilisation using new media (Collin and McCormack 2019). These observations are commonly placed into the now-familiar causal narrative of new media as inherently facilitative of collective action. However, until end-to-end case research is conducted, caution needs to be taken in ascribing causation. That is, participants may take a bus to participate in a demonstration. However, the bus itself has little to do with political action, much in the same way that social media might not necessarily be the driver for collective action. More specifically, to argue that social media was the driver behind climate youth protests remains a mostly correlative explanation when dealing with a population so ensconced in a mediated lifeworld, a reality in which all the immediate experiences of an individual are directly impacted and influenced by evolving media technologies.

Many of these mobilisation case examples are embedded in established social movement industries and, importantly, are not outside the scale of mobilisations seen in pre-internet youth-led movements during the Cold War. In similar “existential” issues of concern for young people (such as anti-conscription in the 1970s or anti-nuclear movements of the 1980s), mobilisation of youth movements was significant, pre-internet. An alternative hypothesis is that we can see this as part of the routine, periodical “cycle of contention” of post-war youth mobilisations in which “good, decent, little people” with an apparent distrust towards establishment rally against the “corrupt and evil forces from above whose policies are responsible for their pain and suffering” (Kazin 1998). Equally, we could argue that established collective action theory might be hierarchically higher than social media-specific theorising in explaining case examples, as it provides a better-substantiated explanation of a greater number of recurrent phenomena. Further, the basic premises of the existence of a “deficit” have been challenged. Collin (2015), for example, argues that claims about youth disengagement are exaggerated. She points to volunteering and social movement participation rates as correctives to reliance on “formal” institutional measures of (dis)engagement. While longitudinal data on social media and volunteering in Australia is scarce and unreliable (Walsh and Black 2015), internationally, there is evidence that increased volunteering rates pre-date widespread internet adoption and may be associated with motivations like experience-gathering to enhance employability or college entry (Jones 2000). Again, membership and volunteering may now be afforded via online channels, but this does not demonstrate a causal connection between the means and social practice. Lastly, flexible definitions of participation serve as a correction of the institutionally oriented “democratic decline” literature by expanding what political participation looks like. They do so by recognising a shift towards informality in terms of participation in the public sphere (“everyday making”; Bang and Sørensen 1999).

This draws us to Bennett’s (2008) analysis of the implications of a social shift towards citizenship as “social movement citizenship” over dutiful/republican models

that privilege participation within or through formal institutions. Bennett's model emphasises a focus on concern for specific issues as a primary driver for the "hit-and-run" participation of everyday making, combined with modes of participation that are more informal and expressive. This not only sits within a post-modern/post-war notion of justice as including recognition as well as other "rightscentric" motivators, but also recognises that the large participation rates in political organisations in the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century might have less to do with their political functions, as much as their provision of social services, recreational opportunities and networking resources.

These benefits are now seen outside of these explicitly political groups with post-war consumer culture, hyperpluralism and social diversification.

While participation in the activities of formal political institutions is essential in liberal democracies, a decline in interest in more conventional models of government presents problems in realising political wins or accepting political compromises, the importance of linking these types of rights and recognition concerns with just structural outcomes (Fraser 2001). Overall, social movement citizenship, or everyday making, presents challenges to an outcome-focused democratic analysis due to a tendency towards adhocery, paradoxical disconnection and rapid demobilisation by political participants following their "hit-and-run" engagement. Each is discussed in turn.

Movement politics tend towards fluid structures which more commonly produce flexible adhocery. While these non-hierarchical power structures are an established advantage of movements, giving them the flexibility, dynamism and resistance to repression, reliance on adhocery may not produce democratic socialisation. In the context of virtual collective spaces afforded by internet technologies, adhocery, through decentralised electronic and online methods of collective action, tends to situate issues and problems in the context of "unique" or unusual issues that may require extra-normal methods to address. These types of organisational forms place politics into states of exception where the framing of the problem as exceptional encourages solutions based on the sovereign's ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the "public good" (Schmitt 1922). Therefore, they are less, not more, likely to consider democratic norms and suffer from low accountability and less-drawing potential. While these forms of governance can ameliorate the crises, the longer-term governance legitimated by invoking sovereign power is problematic under this model (see Wallach's (2015) discussion of advocacy and the global financial crisis). While the lack of lesson-drawing limits the "developmental" value of participation in these forms of governance structure, this critique is emerging in response to state responses to the Covid-19 crisis of 2020.

Second, while rejecting arguments about social media as fundamentally "silencing" its users (the so-called filter bubbles argument), issue-based politics can disconnect participants from other issue groups and meta-narratives seen either as generally necessary for social functioning or as important canvases against which popular debate is framed. Bouvier (2017) equates this to reduced personal ownership of claims made online, due to anonymity, and the collapse of the existence of a shared symbolic order (the "big other"). New media, in undermining the cultural dominance of mass political media, has played an essential part in this process. As a type of networked politics, horizontal visibility can be low. One of the difficulties of the study of younger people's political engagement lies in its comparative "invisibility" within social media that is not

readily observable to wider publics. As Schuster (2013) observed, this invisibility can create a “generational divide” within movements, with older activists unaware of the depth of engagement of younger activists. This reinforces findings that social networks may not create social capital as anticipated (Valenzuela et al. 2009). Indeed, there are concerns that high levels of social media consumption may be alienating (Hunt et al. 2018).

Finally, and related the factors of velocity and transience associated with “internet time”, rapid mobilisation and “flocking” (where attention shifts towards the next exceptional space or incident that garners high visibility, leaving the previous platform or issue empty) can be associated with rapid demobilisation (Jackson and Chen 2015). As Uldam and Vestergaard (2015) argue, there is a need to refocus on civic participation beyond movement-based and protest-focused analysis. Image is not action, and considerable over-attention to visible movement action raises questions about the extent to which the transition from expressive politics to agenda building to policy design, implementation and monitoring occurs. This saw considerable interest from post-war social movement “pracademics” (academics engaged in instrumental and action research), asking questions about “realising wins” and the problem of follow-through post demobilisation (see, for example, the practical work of Moyer et al. 2001, see in the MAP model for social movements).

Social Media, Participation and Panopticism

To understand the relationship between social media and democratic practice, we need to determine what type of practice space social media affords. “Practice space” is used deliberately here over the more popular “public sphere” due to the authors’ view of the tendency to misapply this concept to the new media environment. More specifically, the attraction of online media theorists to Habermasian deliberation may not have been the right choice because this particular democratic model emphasises early parts of the policy process over later aspects of it highlighted above. Thus, rather than see the commercial social media platforms as public spheres (true sandboxes), we can see them as sites with non-trivial visible and invisible geographies of power that not only provide political affordances, but also shape social expectation of social media citizenship.

The monetisation of online spaces, combined with the collapse of the conventional advertising driven internet economy, has increasingly shifted social media into a primary role in what is called “surveillance capitalism”. Surveillance capitalism produces value through the observation, quantification and commodification of individuals’ online behaviours. This data becomes the core product of these services, providing a new market with the potential to capitalise off knowledge about users’ preferences (Zuboff 2018). This has implications for participation in and through these systems due to the role that surveillance plays in creating self-censorship, and the way preference engines generate sameness in the information consumed by individuals. These tendencies—in stark contrast to the view of information in markets as facilitating fair exchange, or the free-speech ethos maintained by the entrepreneurs who run social media enterprises—are problematic for democratic participation. This is due to the reduced capacity for preference formation (attacking performative aspects of speech practice) and preference realisation (via the selective satisfaction of wants at low cost).

From the preference formation perspective, the impact of surveillance is demonstrated in Stoycheff's (2016) study of the effect of social media users' awareness of surveillance. This experiment found that—even in “strong” free-speech jurisdictions—priming users' awareness of the possibility of surveillance produced more conservative online behaviour and speech. This impact should be concerning to developmental democrats. Dahl (1971), for example, emphasis on the processes of preference formation as a critical aspect of developmental citizenship, something that continues life long, but is vital in the transition into civic life in youth. Preference formation is both an individualised practice, in that it is a developmentally acquired skill that individuals exhibit different levels of capacity in, and a collective capacity under conditions of equality. Specifically, discourse within groups develops the capacity of the group to undertake political discourse through observation and the presence of relevant information.

From a preference realisation perspective, the existence of these so-called preference-knowing machines has implications for human agency. This observation is made because surveillance capitalism, unlike traditional top-down political paternalism exhibited in democratic and authoritarian societies, is fully compatible with high levels of perceived individual efficacy.

Where “search” once drove the core economy of the internet and provided efficacy through agency, “sharing” and automagical result systems replace agency with expectation. “Sharing” allows users to expect that aspects of their “wants” are provided automatically as these systems offer solutions to personal wants and adjust the platform in line with anticipated user desires. Thus, efficacy is obtained in these surveillance regimes. Significantly, this is achieved not through the type of agency commonly associated with democratic participation, rather a negative agency, surrendering to the panoptic view in recognition of its capacity to service the individual within very narrow and uncontested spheres. This exchange has a psychic cost. Hoffmann et al. (2016) identified “privacy cynicism” as the tendency for users to engage in “a cognitive coping mechanism, allowing users to rationalise taking advantage of online services despite serious privacy concerns.”

This type of preference servicing/channelling is not something we see in corporate media spaces. Through the continued valorisation of corporate modes of production in the political sphere, these types of negative agency, passive efficacy systems are proliferating within institutions (public, private and non-profit), and in the new interest in behavioural and persuasive “nudge” economics evidenced in the public sector. These projects—wrapped in the discourse of “big data” analytics—seek to understand their stakeholder groups, be they citizens, clients or employees, but only to the extent to which that knowledge fulfils institutional objectives. This is most obvious in the authoritarian internet of China, where the hard power has most recently been combined with “soft” incentivising through the “social credit system” (Ramadan 2018) but can also be seen, to a seemingly less intrusive extent, in developed democracies through the aforementioned corporatised nature of e-governance and behavioural policy units. The naturalisation of the technologies underpinning these management systems, be they in liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes, further erodes the capacity of users to express consent (with legitimacy implications important in democratic regimes) and participate in process design, eroding the capacity for the transference of democratic capacity into other areas of life. Socialisation within these systems of expectations thus

displaces developmental citizenship as citizens are increasingly embedded in these systems of affordance.

Where Forward?

It is essential to learn from the failures of the “electronic democracy” (e-democracy) movement as a development which, at the turn of the century, aimed to streamline bureaucratic processes and motivate higher levels of participative engagement between power elites and their publics. Attempts to create and propagate participative platforms advocated at this time significantly failed through a combination of low utilisation and limited state interest in cultivating and connecting with them. Even where public management has embraced notions of popular legitimacy, such as the focus on connecting administration to public legitimacy through the reclassification of public sector management as the creation of “public value”, this has not led to an embrace of participative media by public managers (Bolívar 2016).

Where participative design is undertaken, understanding the constitutive nature of affordances is essential. As mentioned, design choices activate and allow behaviours. Thorson (2014), for example, has argued that there are important differences in the value of new media associated with how the technologies are employed, with “active” use (i.e. search over sociability) correlated with more challenging modes of citizenship, or seeking divergent opinion exposure. Matei and Britt (2017) provide a useful analysis of Wikipedia as an example of a platform that uses advocacy, creates a social hierarchy in production, but sustains openness to new entrants, accountability, and has sustained itself in the face of attacks on its primary function of knowledge production.

As indicated, however, this cannot be seen as an engineering problem, and the cultivation of interest and practices to employ, discover and create new democratic affordances is necessary. The contemporary problem is that most civics education is undertaken in bad faith. As Bennett (2008) observed, most academic and educational representation of democratic practice bears little resemblance to its actual practice, precisely because this practice in most established democracies falls far short of the underlying idealistic motivations embedded in civics instruction. As “telling people to participate in bad institutions is mere propaganda” (Levine 2006), there has been a tendency to focus on political spaces that are presented as *tabula rasa*, be this technological spaces over the last two decades, or an emphasis on social movement participation because ever-renewing social movements maintain the appearance of both democratic because they are inherently participative, and new because they tend to be continuously renamed.

Coleman (2008) has highlighted the importance of skilling for “autonomous e-citizenship” that capacity building and skilling overcome the problem of bad faith by allowing young people to develop their own aspirational spaces. This has been demonstrated in applied research in schools (see Black 2017).

This model presumes, however, that these skills are produced in a context where their democratic application is explicit, and that these self-actualising young e-citizens would employ these skills in a frictionless environment that provides them with an even playing field. If this illusion was able to be sustained by Coleman in 2008, a decade later it cannot be. The corporate-dominated internet has proven libertarians wrong:

atomised “heroic” individuals cannot find self-actualisation in the face of such overwhelming institutional power. Individual liberalism is impossible in an age of such incredible institutional power. The “hidden affordances” of the sub-systems most internet users spend the majority of their time in online (as opposed to the delusion of the internet as a “sandbox”) may be malleable to a literate few, but this presents the prospect of meritocracy heavily tilted by neoliberal access to education, not a sustainable democracy of equality. Further, social media may provide greater affordances for reactionary and counter-democratic agents (the entrenched, corporations, the state) to limit movement and political agency (Cammaerts 2015; Uldam 2015).

This latter power is contestable. While online activists have attempted to moderate the policies of major internet platform operators, their capacity to act against organisations of this scale and transnational character has been most effective only where similar transnational capacity exists. Thus, while there have been a range of state-level investigations and proposed regulatory interventions in the way platforms operate (in Australia primarily focused on ensuring representative democracy), the most significant developments have been seen at the level of the European Union. This remains a moving target but provides an example of the need to revisit the politics of accessibility but focused on interventions within the walled gardens online.

Conclusion

The internet is no longer a land without a history, and optimistic projections that new affordances have a deterministic correlation with democratisation need to be checked against the visible history of these claims, and the broader background context of societies that are more technologically saturated, and less democratic overall. While new media is undoubtedly at the heart of recent youth mobilisation politics, it is not clear if this is more than correlative or epiphenomenal. Younger people are disproportionately institutionally situated in contexts obsessed by the “human capital” developmental school (Becker 1993) in which citizenship rights are primarily held in abeyance, secondary to instrumental aims associated with participation in the private world’s production and consumption. Thus, recent youth mobilisations can be seen as remarkable contestations in the face of these systems, rather than a result of them. To avoid falling into the twin traps of bad faith promotion of weak systems or magical thinking about new spaces and places for participation, systematic democratisation of spaces and places—both online and off—must be the focus of reform. Participation without democratisation is the possible panacea that can consume the efforts of reformers. As the internet splits into three distinct jurisdictions—the surveillance capitalism space, authoritarian spaces and the regulated internet—new possibilities and natural experiments present themselves for investigation in the online space. To take advantage of these affordances civics education has demonstrated, it can produce positive improvements in rates of participation, but this will need to be met by increased opportunities for democratic agency in our classrooms, workplaces and the public sphere.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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