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Examining the significance of online discursive engagement as a form of civic participation

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Abstract

With the advent of new media technologies, there has been a marked change in the conceptualization of civic engagement as digitally active citizens use discursive practices in online networks to participate in public life and political process. In this paper, we deliberate on the need to broaden the dominant discourse on citizenship and civic engagement and accept online civic participation through discursive practices as a valid form of enacting citizenship. We conducted social media ethnography and explored both the physical and digital realities of 23 women from 15 countries to understand how they articulate the role of discursive practices in producing and maintaining civic identities, i.e. how they use discursive civic engagement to express and experience themselves in the role of citizens. Based on our findings from this study we suggest that in online contexts, discursive civic engagement must be acknowledged as the new citizenship practice that focuses on critical civic engagement and individual participation, at least for a specific sub-set of citizens who actively use online civic spaces regularly. We concede that discursive citizenship practices should be viewed and practiced as complementary to conventional forms of civic engagement to reflect the contemporary mediated lives.

Key words: *discursive engagement, new civic identities, voicing marginal issues, digital civic engagement, participatory practices, new media.*

Introduction

The traditional citizenship and civic engagement discourse emphasized on the collective participation of public in the political process through voting, volunteering, and participating in community services (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004a, 2004b). According to several scholars, civic engagement can cover a broad range of activities ranging from voluntary work to organizational involvement and electoral participation but what is important about these activities is that they are done collectively, in the offline- real world, geographically bound spaces and are devoid of financial gains (Adler & Goggin, 2005). With the advent of new media technologies, however, there has been a marked change in the relationship between the citizens of the digital age and their immediate communities (Papacharissi, 2010). A convergence of technology has created new landscapes for civic engagement transcending national boundaries and into the global milieu (Mihailidis, 2014) wherein the new citizen is not only concerned with structures of governance (Bimber, 2000) but deploys online networks and social platforms to share information, create content, and express ideas related to issues which are of personal importance. This shifting conceptualization of citizenship and civic engagement must take into consideration the development that individuals have more social communication tools at their disposal to express ideas, discuss important political topics, initiate and sustain critical discourse on civic and social issues (Jenkins et al., 2016). Such new practices of citizenship are based on large information repertoires, accelerated and exacerbated by many-to-many connections through personal expressions.

In this paper, we deliberate on the need to examine online discursive engagement in order to broaden the dominant discourse on citizenship and civic engagement where the litmus test of successful civic participation conventionally revolves around the dimensions of action that result

in a visible and material impact in offline spaces. When Slimbach (2005), for example, valorizes action over information he points out that it is good to *know* about the world but what people *do* in the world is more important. Such notions challenge the validity of online civic participation. The question often asked by scholars as well as public-at-large is if online engagement makes any real difference in the world. Keen (2010), Epstein (2011) and Sunstein (2017), for example, have attacked online discussion as low quality and opinionated. They view such discussion as illusionary and leading to fragmentation, extremism, and a pseudo sense of self-satisfaction. Such a critique sees online civic engagement as “slacktivism”- a low-risk, low-engagement version of civic engagement (Vernon, 2008; Auer, 2011; Morozov, 2013). Also, the fact that social media engagement mostly happens in the private mode i.e. as an individual using a personal gadget/device and operating from the privacy of one’s home or workplace, also leads some people to critically examine it’s “civic” connection (Dalhgren, 2003; Papacharissi, 2010). Riger (1993), has pointed out the limitation of “. . . many intervention efforts aimed at empowerment that increase people’s power to act, for example, by enhancing their self-esteem but do little to affect their power over resources or policies” (p 282). Riger’s observation may very well apply to several online interventions. Similarly, despite celebratory claims about the democratic nature of new media (Coleman, 2008; Lenhart, Fallows, & Horrigan, 2004; Bennett, 2008), critics have drawn our attention to digital inequalities, increasing surveillance, and the commercial control of the Internet to raise questions about the new media’s impact on democratic civic participation (Auer 2011; and Morozov, 2013; Tripp, 2010; Vernon 2008).

We acknowledge the validity of such a critique under the contexts of large-scale corporatization and a simplistic solutionist approach to technology combined with an authoritarian backlash by state actors to Internet freedom that the above scholars have examined. In this paper, however, we propose that new media technologies have compelled scholars such as Shirky (2008), Bakardijeva (2009), Bennett (2008), and Jenkins et al. (2016) to go beyond the formal legal definition of civic engagement practices and tap into unconventional spaces and domains in order to explicate citizenship as a lived experience. In this paper, we examine online participatory practices as one of the several possibilities for broadening the citizenship experience where action and information tend to be discursively integrated and validated by peer-to-peer relations that encourage civic participation. Though some studies, mentioned in the next section, extend theoretical explanations to understand how online practices broaden the experience of citizenship and can be liberating, we provide empirical evidence based on the lived experiences of our participants located in different parts of the world when we propose that new media participation facilitates discursive practices that should be considered as important civic engagement strategies in the world that is increasingly being shaped by globalization and digital technologies. Based on the findings of our study, we claim that within certain contexts discursive civic engagement plays an important role in producing and maintaining civic identities, i.e. how individuals see themselves in the role of citizens.

Review of literature: Changing notions of civic engagement

The advent of new media technologies has led to a convergent media environment where horizontal networks of communication have disrupted the hierarchical relations between the government and the citizens. This has facilitated the formation of a non-authoritarian conception of civic actors who identify their “self-organized concern for others” as authentic practices of

enacting citizenship (Beck, 1998). For these new-age civic actors, self-assertion, empathy for others, and connectedness are important dimensions of citizenship. Several scholars acknowledge that new media have created democratic sites, which engender new participatory practices (Beck, 1997; Bennett, 2008; Friedland, 1996; Jenkins et al. 2016; Papacharissi, 2010). This requires that we broaden the expressive and communicative repertoires to redefine citizenship and divest it of the normative standards for “good citizens” that were constructed in different social and technological contexts.

Civic engagement can thus be actualized in and through a “personally expressive politics” (Bennett et al., 2010), through online social networks of communication. This conceptualization of “citizens as everyday makers” (Bangs, 2005) entails recognizing mundane and ordinary act of “speaking out” about them as inherently democratic as it facilitates an authentic expression of the claims, opinions, belief systems, and lived experiences of the citizens. As Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue, citizens “are constituted through complex interactions between their own life experiences, traditions, and available discourses of thinking and acting politically” (p.5). A single normative definition, therefore, may not do justice to the diverse contexts and practices of civic engagement.

Within the same theoretical tradition, Bakardhieva (2009) conceptualized the term “subactivism” to explain how new media platforms give space for “. . . different kinds of politics to unfold at the level of subjective experiences.” Sub-activism has to be recognized as an important dimension of democracy grounded in individual’s paramount reality, the point where they are capable of gearing into the world through talk and interaction. For instance, a study by van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj (2010), provide empirical basis to establish how in the light of the kind of Youtube videos that are uploaded, young citizens articulate their religious and political identities through modes of “self-presentation” and perform their civic personas. As is evident, the articulation of citizenship as connectivity brings into light the new and many ways in which the processes of assertion, resistance, and collaboration are in constant dialogue with one another.

Some scholars are skeptical of the impact of online participatory practices and often dismiss it as mere talks which never translate into real actions. For instance, according to Morozov (2013), online discursive techniques are threatening civic participatory practices and harming the democracy. He argues that a ‘slacktivist’ focus on short term goals accomplished by online tools such as digital petitions steals from meaningful political action in real life. Similarly, other scholars such as Diani (2000) and Polat (2005) have questioned the effectiveness of online discursive engagement in creating a level of trust necessary for sustained collective action. Also, Van de Dhonk et al. (2004) argues that despite the hype over digital participation, what really matters in a democracy is offline engagement and real time activities.

Though we acknowledge the merit in these critiques we concede that civic engagement through online platforms, draws its appeal as it offers its participants with possibilities for self-assertion, dialogic exploration, and individuated forms of resistance. These non-institutionalized forms of engagement such as blogs, Youtube videos, social media timeline, and citizen journalism among others encourage us to think of civic engagement as discursive and recontextualize ordinary voices along the lines of activities of civic participation in a highly mediated lived world.

In the following section we demonstrate how this paper, based on empirically grounded research, explores the civic role of discursive practices of civic engagement in redefining the experience of citizenship.

Methodology: Social media ethnography

A growing literature premised on the study of internet ethnography (Hine, 2008; Kozinets, 2010; Pink, 2012; Postill, 2010) includes a corpus of anthropological studies of social media platforms, practices and sites (Miller, 2011; Wesch, 2009; Juris, 2012). Social media ethnography is one of the most dynamic methodologies which allow researchers to combine participant interviews with relevant online material by following or actively participating in their blogs, social media platforms, and online communities (Postill and Oink, 2014). In order to understand the discursive engagement practices and their role in experiencing citizenship in the age of new media, the paper focuses on a subset of citizens who self-identify as women who are civically active and digitally fluent. The civic communities of our participants constitute of other active citizens who seek to identify and define public issues based on shared interests and collaborate with the group members to address these issues through deliberation and participation in public life (Levine, 2008). Examining their discursive participation in these online communities “involves embracing online ethnography as a textual practice and as a lived craft, and destabilizes the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a bound field site,” which is exclusively online or offline (Hine, 2000:43). Online discursive enactment of citizenship implicates the physical as well as digital realities of individuals (Hine, 2000; Postill, 2010) and so the focus of this study is to bind together the range of web-based discourses on citizenship with associated offline contexts of the participants, described in their interviews. In other words, the researchers wanted to draw links between the online activities of the participants and their understanding of the role of discursive engagement in articulating their civic identities on new media platforms.

Sampling and data collection

The participants were recruited through an online survey posted on selected global civic sites which focused on a range of civic issues and drew participants globally. In all 136 women from 42 countries responded to the survey and 23 women from 15 countries agreed to further participate in the study and be available for in-depth Skype interviews lasting from an hour and a half to two hours and in some cases for multiple sessions. The survey provided the basic demographic information such as age, rural/urban location, profession, and educational background and so on about the participants and an overview of their online civic participation including the types of platforms used, the duration of engagement, and the types of activities and roles performed on these platforms. The subset of women in this research shares certain attributes: they are educated; can afford basic digital technology and have access to it; and their new media use is civic and not only entertainment-related or commercial. It is important to note that during our research the participants had insisted on using their real names and we have their written consent.

The two main methods used to collect qualitative data are in-depth interviews and both participant and non-participant observation of online civic sites based on pre-constructed guidelines. We conducted in-depth interviews with the participants based on a semi-structured interview guide, asking them questions about their online engagements, notions of citizenship

and civic engagement, kinds of online civic practices, motivations and gratifications for articulating their civic identities on and through new media platforms and limitations of discursive enactment of civic identities. Simultaneously, observation guidelines were created in order to understand how our participants articulate and experience citizenship through online discursive engagement (Kwak et al., 2010). These guidelines were used to collect data sets from blogging and other social media sites of our participants such as Facebook, Twitter, Pintrest, and Tumblr as well as global civic communities such as Taking It Global, Global Voices Online, Voices of Youth, YouThink, Harry Potter Alliance and so on.

Data Analysis

We employed an inductive approach for a qualitative content analysis of the interviews and online data sets. An important consideration for choosing an inductive approach was that theoretical categories for the articulation of citizenship as discursive engagement has not been identified before (Bilge, 2009). We read all the data at least three times, often more. Our initial reading of interview transcripts and online data sets helped us understand how participants defined citizenship through online platforms. This helped us explore the socio-political linkages as arising out of patterns of everyday experiences in articulating citizenship as a lived practice. The later readings allowed us to identify online discursive practices of citizenship enactment used by our participants and how these helped them fulfill their role as civic actors in the society. A single sentence was employed as a unit of analysis constituting an argument and such inter-related arguments, spread across the data sets, were clubbed under a single category. During the final reading, we checked for the exhaustiveness and correctness of these categories. All the concepts were mutually exclusive and yet inter-related. We derived four main categories illustrating how our participants conceptualize citizenship and what different practices they associate with enacting citizenship in a new media environment. These categories are delineated in Table 1

Table 1

S r . No	Categories	Subcategories
1	Citizenship as discursive engagement	Engaging in dialogues and conversations Information sharing Telling stories to have an impact on others
2	Citizenship as connectivity	Ethics of care Relationship with fellow humans Showing support and solidarity Building supportive communities
3	Developing new civic identities	Shaping civic self-perception Defining personal civic goals Identifying networks for expressing/experiencing newly developed civic identity

4	Voicing marginalized issues	Pushing marginalized issues on public agenda Advocacy Strengthening civic identities through discursive engagement Encouraging critical narratives to challenge power structures
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For our participants, practicing citizenship in a convergent media environment involves three core dimensions of civic engagement, which make for the themes of this inductive analysis. First, citizenship is experienced through horizontal discursive civic practices in the new online communication space. Second, citizenship practices are often informed by the constant interaction between the lived experiences of the participants and their peer circles and online communities. Third, citizenship constitutes of new social identities which are generated/sustained through personal information spaces, discursive engagements, and online communities. This allows participants to raise marginalized issues and seek help. In the sections that follow we provide a detailed analysis for each category.

Findings and discussion

Citizenship as discursive engagement

In this section we provide insights into how our respondents articulate citizenship and civic engagement as online participation through discursive modes of communication. Most of our participants identify three important ways i.e. engaging in dialogues and conversations, information sharing and telling stories to have an impact on others, in which they enact civic engagement discursively through their social media platforms and online civic communities. These three participatory practices have been delineated as under.

1. Engaging in dialogues and conversations

The potential to dialogue with diverse others is embedded in the capacity of the individuals to connect with people and initiate conversations which either nurture or challenge the participants. Our participants, for instance, often use their social media platforms seriously and try to initiate dialogues on issues which are of significance to their lived realities. Let us take the example of Gwenn who is a sociology graduate from Harare. Gwenn finds in these conversations ripe grounds to broach sensitive but critical societal issues and encourage people to think about normalized structures of violence and power. She mentions one of her recent attempts to start a debate on domestic violence based on a recent case of the beating of a young actress by her boyfriend. Gwenn says, “For me, social media have proven to be very effective because they provide a platform to rope people into discussion, provoke them to share their mind (...).” Such discussions challenge people with diverse ideas to argue their case and convince others only through discursive modes of communication.

Aya, a Moroccan-American graduate student in Middle Eastern Studies, for instance, often publishes provocative posts, videos, and photos on her social media and compels different groups to participate in these discussions. This requires of the participants to draw as much information available as possible to substantiate their arguments with evidences from lived

experiences of people. Although the discussion is not always civil and arguments not always rational, she is happy to have exposed the audience to ideas they haven't encountered yet. Aya admits that this is not always easy and pleasant and the impact is not always visible. She, however, claims, "... many people read and think through social media posts even if they don't immediately accept your argument".

Aya feels that conversations and dialogues reinvigorate the democratic character of a social/political platform as individuals come together in order to ideate new ways to civically engage with a range of issues. According to her, "... having regular conversations, identifying possible solutions and strategies and expressing her stand on certain issues through various discursive modes of participation is an important dimension of civic engagement".

Florence, a feminist and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights activist from Namibia, has stimulating conversations on her Facebook page- *Feminist Poetry*, Twitter and on the website such as Y-Fem and Southern African Young Women's Network (SAYWNET) with young feminists and LGBTQ activists not only in Namibia but also, in the greater African region, and globally. Florence emphatically shares similar observations of online platforms, "...There are dialogues... and there are people who watch other people's opinion, who are open to learning from posts, and there are all these people who comment and they are actually reading from each other and say oh! You know, you are right I never thought about that!"

As illustrated through this instance, online discursive engagement can help people explore the different nuances of a given topic and engage in critical thinking. Though discursive engagement doesn't always materialize into a balanced and informed exchange of information, it does have the potential to open people to different and new ideas and possibilities.

Several of our participants often use the new media platforms to build democratic networks and reach people who really matter; their aim is to have their voice heard and make their opinions count. According to Cristina, for instance, the best way to understand about women's issues and how these issues influence individuals is by having conversations with others, discussing problems and finding solutions together. She considers regular online interactions as an indispensable dimension of her civic practice. She says, "You can read an article but talking to someone from that country, for example Namibia, can tell you much more than reading an article...talking with someone can give you more information about their way of handling things, to understand and to compare and to decide if you can propose solutions."

Engaging in conversations has helped Cristina reach out to women in need and connect with people, influence them by encouraging them to explore new realities and be receptive to other people's experiences. For her and several other participants, online conversations create sense of excitement towards learning more and engaging at length with important issues.

Through our immersion in the online spaces these young women inhabit we observed that discussions, conversations and dialogues helped them transcend their lived experiences and enter new realities relayed in diverse narratives. For these same reasons, Andrea, a young student and blogger from Mexico, has regular conversations with young people active in climate change reporting as well as with other bloggers on Future Challenges, an international blogger network, Mayang, a graduate student of Economics from Indonesia and a volunteer for the Taking IT Global (TIG) organisation, has weekly conversations with other TIG volunteers and mentors,

Olfa, an international youth fellow at the United Nations Population Fund, has conversations with her friends in the global network of young development workers, and Febi who writes for SunFlower Post¹ interacts with the global group of young women.

In the offline spaces, however, this activity of raising awareness and encouraging other people to be critical could have become difficult if participants dealing with sensitive issues were not comfortable sharing their real identities, opinions and ideas. According to our participants, online dialogues and conversations allow them to maintain anonymity or not reveal their true identity when desired and discuss sensitive issues in a discreet way. This encourages them to ask questions, fearlessly present their opinions for which they would have been judged otherwise, learn from other people's experiences, advocate for a cause, seek help, educate others and create awareness about social and political issues. Online conversations and dialogues, therefore, may shield the participants from the world out there that is harsher, more conflict-ridden, antagonistic, and not always fair (Arntfield, 2015).

To summarise the views of our participants regarding online conversations, online conversations and dialogues help the participants learn from others, seek help, share information and raise awareness. In the following section, we discuss how discursive engagement helps participants acquire and share information, one of the many civic engagement practices, which strengthens their civic identity.

2. Information sharing

Our analysis shows that awareness generation through discursive practices on social media platforms include but is not limited to social justice-oriented critical work on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr; blogging on websites devoted to issues such as climate change and gender justice; and writing and translating on platforms like Global Voices Online and Taking IT Global; all of these include practices of information sharing. Through information sharing on their social media platforms, our participants obtain greater insights about issues they are interested in, talk to people who are experts in those areas, and educate those who are unaware of critical issues and are sourcing for more information. Florence, the feminist and LGBTQ rights activist, explains how many young in Namibia don't fully understand the term "feminism" and require guidance for the same. She says, "Even though their actions or values might be in some way feminist, the term is very new to them. I have realized that many young women show quite a lot of interest in learning more about feminism and how they fit into the whole movement of women." Florence shares information with them, writes lucid blog posts and tries to educate them about feminism through her social media platforms. Florence, Gwenn, and Andrea claim that such discursive practices of engagement help first of all, to bring clarity to their own perspectives and then to provide other members with access to available online resources and inform them about the choices at their disposal.

These participants share information in multiple ways. Florence, for instance has recently created a Facebook page for feminist poetry, Helen, a high school student from the Western Cape of South Africa, mostly expresses her concern for animals through sharing images from other animal rights websites such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Greenpeace,

¹SunFlower post is a web-based interactive blog that Febi from Indonesia and Andrea from Mexico started to generate a global dialogue among young women about their lives, feminism, and peace building

and Animal Liberation Foundations on her own social media, and Cristina posts pictures from the protest rallies led by her own organization. Catchy pithy slogans with pictures (photographs or graphics) are a favorite of several participants in expressing their political stances and opinions.

For some of our other participants as well, discursive expressions through blog posts, comments, photo/video sharing and so on are an important civic engagement practice because of their conviction that participation on online platforms creates awareness and the information they share on their blogs help others to come together around common issues like work-life balance in the case of Ginger and Valerie and immigrant rights in case of Yohana and Gulab. Florence explains, “I have always been the type of a person who wants to always, constantly, every single day learn something and if I learn something share it with other women. Sharing and spreading awareness are my ways of contributing towards the society and fulfill my role as a citizen . . . it is the information I have that has made me the person I am.” Similarly, social justice-oriented critical work on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr of two of our participants i.e. Gulab, an Indian-American graduate from the University of Illinois, Chicago, and Sania, a Pakistani-American freelance writer, falls into this category. Sania, for instance, uses her personal blog, saniasufi.me, to share information about issues faced by Pakistani-American immigrants and ethnic minorities. She also frequents some websites such as Myjihad.org and almuslima.org, in order to collect information related to these socio-political issues and to replenish her understanding with new insights. Andrea, a young student and blogger from Mexico who works on climate change and Yohana, a trained journalist from Sao Paulo, who works with Global Voices Online to create gender sensitive content consider information sharing as an important civic engagement practice that is at the foundation of other practices such as signing petitions, joining interest groups, or participating in a campaign. One effective way to spread awareness with empathy is narrating stories of personal experiences and on behalf of others, permeating the politico-social fabric with instances from lived realities and connecting the personal with the larger.

3. Telling stories to have an impact on others

Narrating stories helps people draw links between the personal and the larger societal contexts through and in which citizenship is experienced. Graciela, an internet governance expert from Rio, Brazil explains this as “the power of stories”. “When we create stories to articulate everyday realities, it is possible to connect the personal with the social so that more people can relate to the narrative and the issue being described,” she says. Graciela takes this argument further and explains how narrating personal stories of civic engagement on online platforms can have a larger appeal and influence many people, “Of course, the citizenship starts with local, with your neighborhood, with your everyday actions but it is perfectly possible to make this reach and have impact globally. People build stories that are seen somewhere else and they have impact on lives of people somewhere else. I do believe in the power of stories (...).”

It is evident that even if the participants in online civic communities only talk, the “talk” helps them to share individual stories of struggles and triumphs. According to Ginger, her online writing touches people’s lives and also gradually brings gender and work-life balance issues to the public agenda, helps women come together around a common issue, and also from time-to-time may impact policy in America and elsewhere. Stories helped her reach out to those in need across the world and positively influence lives of some women like her which enables discursive

engagement to qualify as civic engagement for Ginger.

Valerie, the US based mothers' rights advocate and blogger, gives another example, that of a story about a woman professor in the U.S. nursing her sick baby while she was delivering a lecture. Valerie wrote a blog post about this incident. She points out that even when it was a small incident she witnessed and a personal experience, by addressing it from the point-of-view of the larger gender or mother's issue on her blog, she is performing an important civic role that might have a transnational reach. Valerie argues, "I am not trying to say if that mother was right or wrong, but rather, through her story, I am drawing attention to the fact that people have children and also work, and that childcare is inadequate and that it is an issue that most people have." Here, for Valerie, expressing ideas, influencing others, and connecting with them through narration of one's lived reality is of great importance as it helps people connect with the wider issues at a personal level and they feel invested in it.

It is also through such multiple individual stories that a shared pattern of structural oppression becomes visible as noticed in the online communities formed around issues such as immigrant rights, women's/ LGBTQ issues, motherhood, ethnic minorities and so on. This often gives rise to communication enclaves where participants can meet like-minded people and nurture their civic values and beliefs in their supportive company. Thus, narrating stories and initiating dialogues and conversations around these stories bind people in communities fostered with relationships based on care and empathy for others. In the following section we delineate how online discursive participation in such nurturing enclaves is premised on affective and relational dimensions of citizenship and influence our participants' notions of civic engagement.

Citizenship as connection with fellow humans

The discursive choices that our participants make in order to express the way they experience citizenship resonate with Levinas' appeal for the obligation to respond to the others and Derrida's notion of hospitality, and especially with the feminist theory of the "ethics of care" (Held, 2005; Hutchings, 2002). Care, love, respect, tolerance, awareness, understanding, and engagement are the words mentioned the most frequently when these women speak about the qualities of a good citizen. According to Cristina, for example, citizenship is "trying to do good for people who surround [her]... trying to help people, think how not to damage them, to respect their problems, their issues, their opinions... It could be a person from any country." This affective and relational conceptualization of citizenship involves a broader understanding of public support for, and care-giving activities through discursive engagement practices such as being respectful, being available for others, being empathetic, offering advice, sharing intellectual resources, and connecting with people as fellow humans and equals. All such engagements are possible online. Aya, the Moroccan- American graduate student of conflict-resolution, builds on this argument when she says that one cannot be a good citizen if one doesn't go out of the way to have respectful interactions with others who are different from them, who are from different parts of the world, or who have different world-views." There is, therefore, a link between the twin contexts of moral and political community (Falk, 2002). Accordingly, the term "citizen" can refer to the formal linkages established by law, but it can also refer to the psycho-political linkages arising from patterns of aspiration, belief, faith, respect and appreciation (Tarrow, 2005, pp. 35-56). The psycho-political linkages that are equally important to our participants.

This relational notion of citizenship gives rise to online communities in which individuals bond with like-minded people even if they are not in geographic proximity. Women like Gulab, Sania, and Shahla who always felt they were “different” from their peers in their local geographic communities draw sustenance from this affirmative experience as they learnt that they were not alone; there were others like them who encountered the same issues and were looking for support and help.

Additionally, Sania, The Pakistani-American freelance writer and activist from Chicago, emphasizes that “being human” is the sole basis for recognizing a fellow citizen and finding self-recognition when she says, “To me, to have yourself validated as a person in this world, you only have to be breathing... I feel like when we put people into categories it takes away their status of human being.” The roots of such thinking can be traced back to the Graeco-Roman world, particularly in the philosophies of Stoics who valorized allegiance to moral community constituted of humanity for all human beings (Dower, 2003). According to this notion of civic engagement, then, individuals transcend their nationalities, differences in class, race, religion and various other facets of social identity in order to carve their role as a civic actor who is motivated by a passion for humanity. For Febi from Jakarta, for instance, citizenship means “... to fundamentally respect your fellow citizens from any part of the world, their ideas and their way of living... Whenever I interact with them I try my best to make them feel that that I really want to understand them, and you have trust (...).” Thus, defining citizenship as a relationship with fellow human beings, rather than with governments or states, is one of the ways our participants’ practices and beliefs deviate from the conventional perception of citizenship and create communities based on ideas of solidarity and support that are mainly expressed discursively.

This bonding based on international friendship, sharing information, calling for support, identifying with others and seeking self-affirmation also helps some of our participants ask for and extend help to others. Gulab values her online bonding and often extends a lot of help to many others like her through mentoring, sharing stories of fighting depression, being available for them to vent out their frustrations, and acting as their emotional anchor. It has helped many like her fight their problems. Such individuals form communities to share experiences and collectively look for solutions and ways to combat personal as well as professional and civic issues such as immigration, racial justice, and minority issues. Florence, the LGBTQ rights leader from Namibia, explains why this is so: “No one can work in isolation. We need to work with partners across the world- not just to share information but share strategies... to find out the situations that are going on in different countries... how to perform coalitions, link with different civil society groups in other countries.” Similarly, other participants like Mayang (an economics student from Indonesia), Olfa (an international youth fellow from Tunisia), Shahla (a university professor from Pakistan), and Yohana (a digital media professional from Sao Paulo) claim that such discursive acts of engagement in online communities help them reach out and extend words of motivation to people who require emotional support and receive support when they themselves need it.

The critics of such online communities may see the easy-entry-easy-exit in such online communities as a sign of lack of commitment on the part of members. Yohana, a journalist, blogger, and social media consultant from Brazil- however, represents a contradictory view. When she first approached Global Voices Online for volunteering, she was pleasantly surprised

at how easy it was to find entry into that particular community. She was welcomed based on her interest while her lack of experience was not considered a reason for rejection. Besides, through our immersion in such communities we have observed that most stable online communities have a steady and active group of core members supported by a larger peripheral group for whom the ease of joining and experiencing civic agency is a big draw in terms of choosing the online option of civic engagement. As two other civically active participants, Aya (the Moroccan-American student) and Valerie (Advocacy Co-coordinator at the National Association of Mothers' Center in Washington), point out, without this option, these peripheral members would most likely not participate in civic activities at all.

Our observation shows that most successful online communities have core members who take on demanding and complicated actions, like submitting petitions to the appropriate authority, raising resources to keep the site alive, organizing events and campaigns, or acting as spokespersons for the community. Meanwhile, there are numerous members on the periphery that may come and go, but they engage mainly in comparatively less demanding discursive activities like sharing information, signing petitions, endorsing campaigns, etc. These peripheral members, however, fuel the actions of the core members. In the following section we explicate how such participants use the power of their voice online to challenge social myths and dogmas, and to get marginalized issue on public agenda.

Voicing marginal issues

The study participants, due to their socio-economic, ideological, or geo-political locations, have the sensitivity to empathize with issues faced by marginalized groups such as LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, those with bi-racial or bi-national identities, or poor mothers. Dewey (1954) emphasizes two crucial elements in formation of a public: shared problems and conjoint action. However, a problem at the heart of this argument is the impossibility of arriving at a shared vision of public good because of the conflicting and often irreconcilable interests of various groups (Bakardijeva, 2009; Mouffe, 1993; Young, 2000). As Bakardijeva (2009) argues, "The concrete content of public good is therefore an upshot of a hegemonic process in which dominant groups impose their meanings and will over subordinate groups." Public space, however, is also about negotiation between the center and the margins. Castells (2007) has observed that in the digitally networked society power relations are increasingly shaped, decided, and challenged in the communication field. It is the discursive practice, much of it online these days, which helps to push the marginalized issues into public visibility.

Florence, for instance, uses her Facebook pages to draw attention to the LGBTQ rights and women's rights and create awareness about sexual and reproductive rights. Sania, Gulab, and Yohana bring immigrant and minority issues to public attention through personal social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr and also platforms such as Global Voices Online and TakingITGlobal, Olfa reminds various audiences about the struggles of HIV affected population using the space provided by online youth organizations, and Cristina puts the spotlight on women in armed forces through Facebook and blogging. Such participants use discursive platforms to discuss issues which concern them but the potential of such forms of expressions is that their consequences extend ". . . beyond the [two] directly concerned and affect the welfare of

many others” (Dewey, 1954, p. 244). In this the online communities where such marginal issues are discussed and debated acquire a public capacity and challenge the dominant rationality.

These globally circulating online discourse have the potential to influence the public agenda and may lead towards conjoint action as the next step” (Shelat, 2014). For instance, following the recent USA Supreme Court judgment on same-sex marriages, a large number of people changed their Facebook pictures to rainbow colored ones. It is easy to dismiss this as armchair activism until one considers that it is a heroic act of courage for people who reside in homophobic locations. They are asserting their civic identity amidst risks of religious backlash, legal action, or social boycott. When a large number of people globally change their status to support a marginalized group (even when they belong to only a certain strata of society) it provides a barometer to gauge the larger public sentiment surrounding the issue. It gradually moves the issue to the public agenda rather than restricting it to the small community affected directly by it. For the individual engaging in discursive practices, the shared sentiments contribute to strengthening a positive civic identity especially at times when they fail to get such support from those in their geographic proximity. We will discuss this at length in the next section.

Developing New Civic Identities

Most of the study participants claim that discursive engagement matters because it plays an important role in shaping their civic self-perception. Dahlgren (2003) argues that in order to be able to act as a citizen, it is necessary that one can see oneself as a citizen. People, however, do not play their civic role in isolation from their other roles and for most, active civic work is not the main quotidian preoccupation. Besides, voting or electoral participation, which is considered one of the most important activities in a democracy is reserved for adults and happens once in five years or so. Dewey (1954) has rightly argued that democracies are sustained by citizens or civic actors who are “democratic” beings, whose day-to-day behavior and thoughts arise from a core set of democratic values. Movements or occasional voting is not enough to sustain democracies. Even small but regular discursive engagement has a potential to strengthen the civic identities. Gulab, the Indian-American activist explains how discursive engagement has truly transformed and fueled her civic identity. She remembers being depressed, even suicidal, and isolated until she got online, started writing provocative posts that showed her critical stances, and acquired a huge following, mainly of young desi² men and women. She now sees herself as a mentor and a role model: “As I had no role models growing up and there are these other desi girls on Tumblr or Twitter who have no role models and a lot of people do tell me that they look up to me...it really humbles me that I can support other people because I didn’t have a single person who cared about me growing up, not a single person.”

Owing to the wide range of discourse available through new media platforms, there is a scope for diverse individuals to find networks, informational sources, peer circles, and other resources to both develop and nourish their chosen civic identities. All the participants in the study admit that the Internet amplified their civic interest, strengthened their civic identities, and played a

²Desi is the term used for a South Asian in North America, especially the U.S.

significant role in their global orientation. Several scholars have recognized the fluid nature of identities and point out the importance of relations, social interactions, and negotiations with others in the constant shaping and reshaping of them (Buckingham, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Tarrow, 2005). Calhoun (1992) critiques Habermas for treating identities and interests as settled within the private world and refutes that they are brought fully formed into the public sphere. According to Calhoun, participation in the public sphere may contribute to developing a certain identity or clarifying identity positions. Our findings endorse Calhoun's argument and shows that online civic participation does lead to shaping of new identities through information, connection, expression, and action online. Helen, for example, has barely finished high school in a small conservative South African town, but due to her online networking with animal rights groups, she sees herself as an activist. Helen also thinks that online spaces offer a better venue to a young woman like her to express these new identities. It is often difficult to express activist identities in the offline context of school in a small town

Similarly, Andrea from Mexico, started blogging as a high school student and became a climate change activist through blogging. She is active on Vocative, GOV, and Future Challenges. She also maintains a personal blog called One Lucky Life and had established SunflowerPost to bring together young women from different cultures to talk about gender issues facing young women. She has been able to connect with other activists, organizations, and audiences and constantly replenish her civic goals with new ideas she derives from her online interactions. She now identifies as an environmentalist and engages on a regular basis with people to discuss about climate change and devise new plans to create sustainable living solutions. Olfa (an international youth fellow at the United Nation Population Fund), on the other hand, is proud of her identity as a youth health worker and has weekly conversations with young development workers on how to create awareness regarding HIV/AIDS in Tunisia.

As is evident, in the case of most of our participants, online civic participation has helped shape empowering civic identities like that of an advocate, mentor, youth leader, and an award winning blogger, and it has been especially helpful to those women who had marginalized social identities either because of their sexuality, religion, or ethnicity. Our participants believe that articulating their civic identities through a mediated platform where they have the authorial control of the text generated allows them to defy the norms, think outside the box, create new practices that suit their needs and contribute towards the new participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Our empirical research modifies the discourse critiquing online civic engagement as an inferior version of civic engagement. Here we acknowledge that there is some merit in the critical stand. We would reiterate that neither we nor our participants are cyber utopians and we as well they recognize challenges and limitations associated with online participation. Our findings, however, show that quotidian symbolic or discursive engagement plays an important role in the new citizenship practices that focus on critical civic engagement and individual participation, at least for a certain sub-set of citizens who actively use online civic spaces. Defining civic engagement in broader and unconventional ways, therefore, includes recognizing the efficacy of online

actions such as learning and sharing information, raising awareness, mobilizing others, sustaining civic communities for support, pushing marginal agendas in public debates, and articulating new civic identities which resonate with lived experiences. Dahlgren (2006, p.273), citing Stewart (2000) argues for the necessity of “communicative civic competencies” that will enable citizens to make use of the bursts of democratic activity and empower them.” Our study shows that online civic participation shapes these competencies and keeps them honed through the day-to-day, small communicative gestures of a civic nature.

These findings prompt us to argue that much of online citizenship is “invisible citizenship”. The fragmented and non-linear nature of online discourse does not make the trajectories of impact visible, at least immediately. Besides the important or interesting content has to be sieved out of masses of banal content and this is a real challenge. Our findings, however, show that people respond to online content in several different ways. Sometimes the content of the posts is repurposed by bloggers to support their own stance. Other times people may share the post on other platforms, such as another website, Twitter, or Facebook. The networks they develop through online participatory practices help them gain access to information and material resources, learn from others, and contribute toward helping members of their online communities in both tangible and non-tangible ways.

Though the practice of limiting one’s interactions to the online global civic communities may give a false satisfaction of agency and a heightened civic identity that does not reflect the realities, our findings support views of scholars such as Dahlgren (2006), Shirky (2008) and Stewart (2000) that online discursive engagement provides a third option between institutional action and no action.

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