Does Facebook boost civic engagement among American youths, too?

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In Egypt, youthful revolutionaries spray-painted their thanks to Facebook on urban walls. In Wisconsin, a young demonstrator supporting union workers' rights reportedly held up an iPad to play a scene from "The Empire Strikes Back" as he chanted against Gov. Scott Walker: "The Rebels brought down walkers; so can we."

Digital media are changing the way young people participate socially and politically – and scholars are scrambling to keep up with the implications.

Some recent, first-of-its kind research examines the relationship between the Internet use and civic engagement of young Americans.

Youths involved in online groups based on common interests, even if those interests were not political, were more likely to increase their level of volunteering, charitable giving, and expressing themselves about community issues, compared with similar peers who were not involved in online groups.

Contrary to concerns that the Internet might isolate people in "echo chambers" where their own viewpoints prevail, "when young people spend time in online communities, [they are] more likely to be exposed to diverse perspectives," says Joseph Kahne, an education professor at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., and lead author of the series of studies.

The research comes at a time when concerns have surfaced again about youths' political and civic engagement. After a participation spike in the 2008 presidential election, in which 51 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted, just 23 percent of that age group voted in 2010, according to The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University.

And 34 percent of high school seniors didn't reach even "basic" competency on the civics exam of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2006.

Fifty-seven percent of the youth surveyed in Kahne's studies reported at least some online exposure to those holding diverse perspectives, while only 5 percent said they mainly saw views aligned with their own; the rest had little exposure to views in either category, or were uncertain how to answer.

While being part of online groups tied together by hobbies or interests was linked to increased civic engagement, merely socializing with friends through sites like Facebook was not.

The findings are drawn from a survey of more than 2,500 high-schoolers from a diverse set of California school districts, and a subset of more than 400 that were followed for up to three and a half years. Researchers statistically controlled for factors ranging from parental involvement to political orientation so they could isolate the impact of Internet activity.

Education on digital media literacy in high school or college was found to dramatically boost online politically-driven participation and exposure to diverse views.

"Nobody controls the way young people are going to use the Internet," Kahne says, "but there may be ways that educational institutions, parents, and designers of platforms can think about how could they make it more likely that folks will tap the promise of these digital media and avoid some of the possible pitfalls."

Samuel Reed, an instructional specialist with the Philadelphia public schools, has worked with students on projects examining the relationship of digital media and democracy. One group of middle-schoolers wrote letters to district administrators, either for or against a policy of blocking certain websites in schools. They researched court cases and engaged in debates along the way.

"They were actively engaged in that discourse, which led them to have a lot of discoveries about being responsible citizens online," says Mr. Reed, who also writes a blog for the Philadelphia Public School Notebook.

"As teachers we have to find a way to bridge – to meet the digital literacy with traditional literacies," Reed says. "We need to see that there's a wealth of creativity and opportunities in it, instead of ... demonizing social media."

Understanding young people's use of digital media is challenging, Kahne says, particularly given the pace of change. Twitter didn't even exist when he started surveying youths for his recent study, for example. But scholarship is speeding up, he says. And it will be helped by the newly formed Youth & Participatory Politics (YPP) research network, which Kahne is chairing.

YPP brings together scholars from such disciplines as political science, communications, education, and developmental psychology, to look nationally and internationally at the relationships between digital media and young people's political and civic involvement. The network is supported by the MacArthur Foundation, which launched its Digital Media and Learning Initiative in 2006.

One question they hope to explore is how young people interact online when their views diverge. Do they tend to scream back at opposition, or rethink their own perspective?

http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2011/0224/Does-Facebook-boost-civic-engagement-among-American-youths-too