THE CIRCLE

AROUND

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

THE INTERNET'S ROLE IN MAKING ENGAGED CITIZENS

Contrary to popular belief, new research finds that youth who pursue interests on the Internet are more likely to be civically and politically engaged.[1] Drawing on a panel survey of the online practices and the civic and political engagement of youth (ages 16–21), this new study, partially funded by CIRCLE, addresses broad and timely questions about the ways in which the Internet and digital media are impacting democratic and political engagement, particularly among youth.

The study's findings run counter to two commonly held assumptions: first, that the Internet makes exposure to divergent political viewpoints unlikely, the so-called "echo chamber" effect; and second, that the Internet promotes shallow activism among youth, so-called "slacktivism."

YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGING ONLINE, ALSO ENGAGING IN THE REAL-WORLD

This new research suggests that interacting online does not cause young people to drop out of their real-world communities. Young people in the study who became heavily involved in online communities tended to *increase* their offline volunteering, charity, and work with neighbors. According to Joseph Kahne, author of the study, education professor at Mills College and CIRCLE Advisory Board member, "Research demonstrates that many youth are disengaged from traditional forms of civic and political life but are very engaged with new media. Our study findings strongly suggest that there are ways to build on their engagement with digital media to foster engagement in civic life."

> YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE STUDY WHO BECAME HEAVILY INVOLVED IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES TENDED TO *INCREASE* THEIR OFFLINE VOLUNTEERING, CHARITY, AND WORK WITH NEIGHBORS.

NO ECHO CHAMBER

For more than a decade, many authors and observers have worried that people go online to have their own political and ideological views confirmed, causing society to become more polarized. However, the new study finds that young people who see any political opinions online tend to see diverse opinions. (A larger concern is the substantial

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proportion, 34%, who don't see political opinions at all when they are online.)

RESEARCH SUGGESTS MEDIA LITERACY CAN BE TAUGHT

It is difficult to use the Internet and other new media effectively and responsibly, and therefore we need to know whether such skills can be taught. The new study examined how often students were required by schools to use the Internet to get information or different perspectives on political or social issues, how often they were given assignments to create something to put on the web, and also whether they had learned to assess the trustworthiness of online information.

> THE STUDY SUGGESTS THAT STUDYING DIGITAL MEDIA IN THESE WAYS DRAMATICALLY INCREASED THE ODDS THAT STUDENTS WOULD BE EXPOSED TO DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ONLINE AND WOULD ENGAGE ONLINE WITH CIVIC AND POLITICAL ISSUES.

The study suggests that studying digital media in these ways dramatically increased the odds that students would be exposed to diverse perspectives online and would engage online with civic and political issues. The study showed that young people are not all "digital natives," and that digital media literacy education substantially increases their exposure to diverse perspectives and boosts the likelihood of their engaging online with civic and political issues. These results have significant implications for school and after-school programs as well as for parents. Many young people will benefit if they learn how to tap into the full potential of digital media.

The results of this new study are consistent with research previously conducted by CIRCLE. For example, CIRCLE has found that young people who use new forms of electronic media for civic purposes tend to volunteer at higher rates than those who do not.

This is true for youth without college experience as well as youth with college experience. As shown below, non-college youth who use various types of media are 10 percent to almost 40 percent more likely to volunteer than their counterparts who do not use new media.

Graph 1: Percent Increase in Volunteering Associated with Media Use
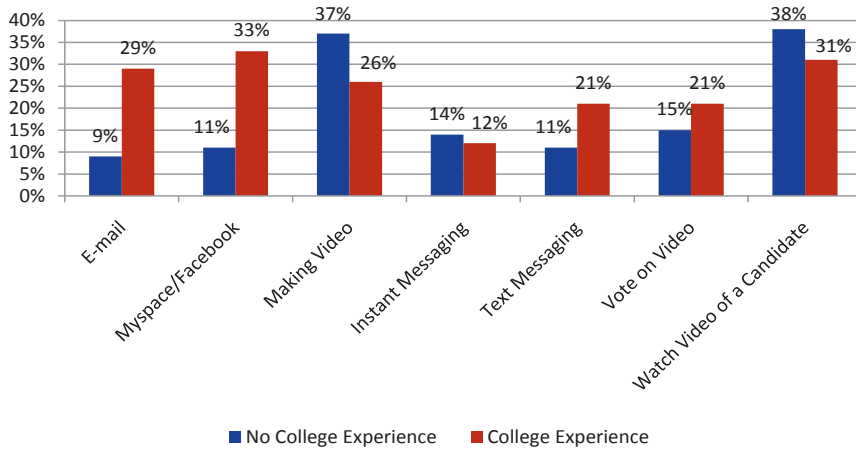
Source: Emily Hoban Kirby, Karlo Barrios Marcelo, and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, "Volunteering and College Experience," CIRCLE Fact Sheet, August 2009, using data from the National Conference on Citizenship's America's Civic Health Index survey, 2008.

To read more go to:

http://www.civicyouth.org/the-internets-role-in-making-engaged-citizens/ ★

ENDNOTES

1   According to the report, "Interest-driven participation items asked how participants a) used the Internet to organize social or recreational events (games, concerts, dances, competitions), b) used the Internet to organize an online group, discussion or Web site, c) went online to participate in a special interest community, such as a fan site or a site where you talk with others about a hobby, sports, or special interest, d) gave someone you don't know feedback for something they wrote or put online, and e) was a leader in an online community" (11).