Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

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"Opportunities and risks of Web 2.0: Participation for all?"

Abstract

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Participation in public life, in local democracy and civic affairs, is in a serious decline. From time pressures experienced by individuals & families to a growing cynicism about government and politics, local communities face a fundamental threat to their ability to meet public challenges via democratic processes and participation. A significant 76 percent of citizens of the US say they don't have the time to be involved in their communities as much as they would like. The massive drop in voter turn-out in local elections compared to national elections (falling globally as well) is a sign that something must change.

In most societies, the declining interest among citizens in joining political parties and becoming involved in their local communities has been identified as a potential risk to political systems. As a remedy, various new forms of participatory initiatives have been established. Some of the new forms of participation have been developed by the citizens themselves - trying to get their voices better heard in the political process. Other forms have been initiated by the leaders from above, who seek to improve the legitimacy of the political institutions. The Former thrives, the latter not so much. "Competitive politics" dominates online, which aims to foster partisanship rather than unity. Whether it is online activism generating a large volume of electronic messages to elected officials or often-anonymous inflammatory political comments, online discussions are rarely constructive.

While politicians may raise money online and political interests engage in advocacy, non-partisan, civic-sector initiatives that bring people together from diverse backgrounds and with differing political views are essentially non-existent. Online tools that would facilitate such initiatives can spur effective information-age citizenship, helping people to make their small corner of the world a better place for their family, neighbours and community. Such positive exposure to technology and resources will support individuals, residents, activism, advocates and community-based organizations complete their missions and advocate for their cause.

The rise of information, news, funding, crowd-sourcing tools in the past few years has started the ball rolling, but knowledge of them resides uniquely with the Millennial generation. Very few above 35 individuals have the knowledge to use such tools, most are not even aware that they exist. Although such tools have been used to fund cultural initiatives, assist people with information in times of crisis, and get people to collaborate to solve impending problems, which is what active citizenship is all about.

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Newer tools that are being created are adapting themselves to easier use for the older audiences, and for the changing landscape of technology use from desktops and laptops to smart phones and tablets, which should spur the involvement of those uninvolved demographics. With greater and more effective citizen involvement, comes increased trust in society and our ability to solve problems through our public institutions and processes.