



## CHAPTER 3

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# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: How Social Media Operates in the Civic Sphere

This book argues that using social media for civic education can have potential benefits, and research has shown that this is true. However, it would be irresponsible and shortsighted to ignore the threats to the civic sphere which are prevalent in social media. Both the very nature of social media—down to its design—and users in social media spaces can limit, distort, and manipulate information and civic participation. Further, there is a perception that because students have come of age in an era of ubiquitous social media use that they know how to use it more adroitly than do the adults in their lives. Both broadly and in the research presented here, this perception of “digital natives” has been shown to be inaccurate (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010). This makes it all the more imperative that teaching with social media includes teaching *about* social media. If young people are to use social media, and to use it for civic participation, they must be fully aware not only of its potential for good, but also of its potential for harm. Understanding the complexity of social media in civic education and for civic participation requires understanding the design of social media; the impact of civic perspective-taking and political polarization; the role of critical media literacy; and the concept of digital citizenship. This chapter weaves these constructs together to provide a nuanced framing of the study to follow.

## POTENTIAL FOR GOOD

The previous chapter made the theoretical case for the potential benefits of using social media for civic participation. From the Arab Spring in 2011 to continued hashtag movements, the sharing of information, and community organizing, it is clear that Twitter functions as a civic space. While the use of social media, and particularly Twitter, for civic education is understudied, there are numerous educational communities which use Twitter for community engagement. One robust example is the use of Twitter by teachers to engage in support and learning (see, among others: Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Greenhalgh, 2021; Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017; Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Rosenberg et al., 2016; Staudt Willet, 2019; Staudt Willet et al., 2017). However, the picture around social media use is not only rosy, and for Twitter to truly be an asset for civic education and civic engagement, we must consider how education addresses its more nefarious aspects.

## THREATS TO CIVIC LIFE

While individual users have found Twitter to be a space for community and civic engagement, no social media platform is a neutral space (Krutka et al., 2020). We know that the very design of social media platforms impacts and can be harmful to civic engagement. After facing criticism in 2020 when users noticed that Twitter's image cropping algorithm was more likely to focus on White faces than on Black faces, the company invited researchers to investigate any potential bias in its algorithm (Hern, 2021). Subsequently, a researcher, Bogdan Kulynych, found that Twitter's algorithm preferenced faces which were lighter in color, younger in appearance, and thinner (Hern, 2021). Tellingly, the researcher who identified the bias noted that this was an intentional design, not a "bug," and Twitter's head of AI ethics candidly said that these biases functioned "the way we think in society" (Hern, 2021). In other words, the intentional privilege on Twitter of younger, whiter, and thinner faces was designed to mimic what was true in larger, offline society. Scholars have also found that social media reproduces marginalization that is found in broader society, particularly around gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Literat, 2021; Selwyn, 2014). These findings echo what scholars of color have identified as systems of oppression within offline citizenship (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Crowley & King, 2018; Johnson, 2019; Rodríguez, 2018; Sabzalian, 2019; Vickery, 2017).

There are further design issues with all social media platforms, including Twitter. Without careful attention and intention on the part of the user, Twitter’s algorithms can create echo chambers, where a user’s feed is populated only with messages from similar points of view (Dutton et al., 2017; Laybats & Tredinnick, 2016). When these are the only messages that one sees, they can both fortify pre-existing beliefs and convince users that what they are seeing is the predominant or only view, value, or knowledge (Dutton et al., 2017; Laybats & Tredinnick, 2016).

In addition to these design flaws, Twitter is a space in which bad civic actors operate to manipulate information and users. In examining Tweets around the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers found that both vaccine proponents and vaccine opponents shared misinformation, though in different ways (Jamison et al., 2020). Those accounts which were opposed to the COVID-19 vaccine actively spread misinformation, while those who were supportive of the same vaccine misrepresented medical information (Jamison et al., 2020). In addition to individuals who spread misinformation or disinformation, intentionally or otherwise, nation-states use Twitter as a battleground. As only one example, researchers are still trying to understand the scope and reach of Russia’s Internet Research Agency, which interfered via Twitter and other platforms, in the U.S. 2016 presidential election (Im et al., 2020). Such state actors also influence education via Twitter: a recent study examined 83 inauthentic, state-sponsored Twitter accounts which engaged with #edchat, a hashtag for educators (Krutka & Greenhalgh, 2021). The prevalence of these fake accounts, which were designed so that educators in the space largely would not recognize their inauthenticity, highlights concerns of anonymity and disinformation (Krutka & Greenhalgh, 2021).

### ADDRESSING CONCERNS ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA: MEDIA LITERACY

These issues are particularly concerning for young people’s use of social media. While the perception that young people are “digital natives”—those who know how to use digital technology because they have grown up with its use all their lives—has been dispelled (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010), young people are not provided with a robust education around how social media works and how to use it. This can lead to concerns about self-esteem (Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Way & Malvini Redden,

2017), privacy (Hodkinson, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2014), and misinformation and disinformation (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Media literacy has attempted to address these concerns, with an uptick in interest particularly in response to concerns about misinformation (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Chang et al., 2020; Roozenbeek & Van Der Linden, 2020; Tully et al., 2020). However, this work is often done in formal contexts, independent of social media (Literat, 2021). Separating media literacy education from the context in which it is practiced often means that what is learned does not transfer to the spaces in which it needs to be applied (Journell, 2019). In other words, students may learn media literacy concepts, but when scrolling through Twitter, they do not employ them. While very little research exists on examining students' media literacy learning via social media, research shows this is a complex picture, too. In a study which launched a media literacy campaign on the social media platform TikTok, researchers found that while young people had enthusiasm for learning about media literacy, others felt that a social media platform offering media literacy education was hypocritical, and attempts to moderate user content was met with distrust (Literat, 2021). Both in terms of content and in terms of pedagogy, different approaches are needed to prepare young people to use social media, and to use it for civic participation.

### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INTO CIVIC EDUCATION

The very design of social media, including Twitter, can thus undercut some of the important aspects of civic education, and teaching media literacy alone may not provide enough support to counter this. However, social media provides an opportunity to engage two aspects of civic education that are important: civic perspective-taking and addressing political polarization. Recent research in civic education has shown the impact of political polarization on learning and civic engagement (Payne & Journell, 2019) as well as the importance of civic perspective-taking (Toledo & Enright, 2021). Social media is both a site of political polarization and a space to engage in civic perspective-taking to understand various perspectives and to come to one's own informed decisions. However, this is rocky terrain: teachers need support both in addressing controversial topics in class (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2011a, 2011b, 2012,

2017; Levy et al., 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) and in using social media (Chapman & Greenhow, 2021).

### CIVIC PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

The importance of civic perspective-taking as an aspect of civic education is not new. Over one hundred years ago, John Dewey argued that schools prepare young people for civic engagement not only by what they teach, but because school is the place where students learn how to be a part of a community (Dewey, 1922, 1963). Dewey further argued that an important part of learning to be in society was the ability to hear and understand multiple perspectives on community issues (Dewey, 1902/1966). The importance of learning to consider multiple perspectives as part of the process of arriving at one's own understanding of an issue has received renewed research interest in recent decades. Building on prior literature, Toledo and Enright (2021) have defined civic perspective-taking as a "process wherein students examine multiple perspectives on public issues and form their own stances on these issues using fact-based reasons with a consideration for the public good," (p. 4-5; Bickmore & Parker, 2014; Hess, 2004; National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013; Selman & Kwok, 2010; Toledo, 2017, 2019, 2020; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). In other words, civic perspective-taking asks students to consider various positions on issues and to use evidence to support the position that they adopt for themselves. Civic perspective-taking also centers around the public good: the emphasis on this process is not merely about a stance on a particular civic issue which resonates with a student, but also asks students to think about how issues impact the community at large.

While this consideration of the public good is only one of seven components of civic perspective-taking, (uses academic vocabulary; supports opinions with reasons; writes in the persuasive genre; differentiates between facts and opinions; differentiates between public and personal issues; engages in civic perspective-taking with peers; considers the common or public good), it is the component which sets civic perspective-taking apart from other forms of perspective-taking (Toledo, 2019; Toledo & Enright, 2021). The emphasis on the public good orients students as members of a larger community and asks them to see the community's welfare as a necessary component of their decision-making process. We

know that students must engage with civics in ways that connect to their lives and their communities; this relevance to students' lived experiences is a critical aspect to cultivating the ability and desire to engage in civic life (Hess, 2004; Watras, 2010). Opportunities to meaningfully engage with civics content in ways that put that content into dialogue with students' lived experience must be curated and supported (Hauver, 2019; Lopez et al., 2006; Toledo & Enright, 2021; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 2001), making civic perspective-taking an important aspect of our shared broader goals for civic education.

Specifically, civic perspective-taking can support critical aspects of civic education: it fosters civic thinking (Hahn, 2010; Mitra & Serriere, 2015; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004), provides students with opportunities to engage with civic content that is meaningful to their own lives (Hess, 2004; Watras, 2010); and deepens students' understanding of the common good (Toledo & Enright, 2021). Researchers examined changes in students' civic perspective-taking, particularly on their understanding of the common good, following iterative lessons around COVID-19 (Toledo & Enright, 2021). They found that students' thinking about ways of understanding the common good which was connected to how they saw their community: local, state, national, global. Students often thought more locally: the community they envisioned when they were thinking about the public good was their local community. Some students understood the common good as more broad-reaching, to the state or national level. Throughout the lessons, researchers found that some students' understanding of the public good shifted over time, fluctuating between seeing the public good as relating to society broadly or to the students' local community only.

Including civic perspective-taking into civic education requires that teachers support students in exploring that there may concurrently exist more than one common good. This is not to say that any perspective should be labeled "the common good," but rather to acknowledge and help students to work through the complexity of societal issues where work which supports the wellbeing of a community may intersect in ways which require deep collective consideration. This speaks both to the importance of including civic perspective-taking as an aspect of civic education and of students' capacity to consider the public good in their civic decision making (Toledo & Enright, 2021). The practice of civic perspective-taking continually asks students to connect their lived experiences with civic content through the lens of the common good. Given that

students' lived experiences expand over time, and that what constitutes the common good can also shift in response to crises or better attention to societal needs, students need to learn the process of learning to consider multiple perspectives as an integral part of civic education.

### CIVIC PERSPECTIVE-TAKING AND STUDENT AGENCY

Another important aspect of civic perspective-taking is that it fosters student civic agency. Civic agency is understood as “the capacity of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively on common problems across their differences of view” (Boyte, 2007), and research on civic education has examined how we develop civic agency in students. Payne (2015) has also argued for a specific approach to civic perspective-taking which begins with being well informed and then leads to action. Specifically, Payne argues that young people need to be able to name the issues and stakeholders who are involved so as to collectively arrive at potential solutions to civic problems.

Another particular aspect of civic education and civic engagement has been found to support the development of students' civic agency: the concept of “audience” (Payne, 2015). Payne defines audience as “an opportunity to be heard” (p. 19), finding that preparing to share their ideas with others fostered students' civic agency. As students considered others' perspectives, they began to see themselves as part of the community as well. In effect, considering others' perspectives allowed young people to see that they, too, were part of society and worthy and capable of having their perspectives considered as well. Students who were tasked with understanding, sharing, and developing potential solutions to civic problems were less likely to rely on adults and to engage in deep thinking around how they might address the issue themselves (Payne, 2015). By thinking through the issue and their audience, and by preparing to speak about the issue, students were able to see themselves as civic actors, and to find their civic voice. Further, taking multiple perspectives and considering their audience allowed students to see issues which did not directly impact them as nonetheless their concern: by being attentive to the ways others could see the world, students saw that civic problems needed to be addressed by the entire community, including themselves (Payne, 2015). Being able to consider issues from another's point of view fostered student civic agency and deepened their sense of self efficacy as civic actors.

## CIVIC PERSPECTIVE-TAKING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Because one hallmark of social media is the creation of user-generated content (Ellison & boyd, 2013), there is often an aspect of perspective-taking in any social media post. However, because of the nature of any social media post (e.g., a user is sharing information), it largely falls to the consumer of social media to determine if what is shared is true. Putting this on us on the users of social media requires both intention and skill. As mentioned above, any social media platform can function as an echo chamber as a result of its design (Dutton et al., 2017; Laybats & Tredinnick, 2016). The posts that we engage with on social media—from the videos that appear next in our queue on YouTube to the tweets from accounts we do not follow which appear in our Twitter feeds—are not solely based on our choices. Further, in curating a social media space based on one's own interests, one can in effect double down on this echo chamber, only seeing what is already appealing and disregarding or ignoring other types of content. While this may seem innocuous when one chooses to watch cute animal videos over sports replays, when considering others' voices, information sharing, and other means of civic engagement, social media can limit one's ability to engage in civic perspective-taking. Consequently, the very design of social media can be harmful to civic life.

Because social media is ubiquitous in our society, it would be foolish to ignore its potential impacts on civic life. At the same time, because it is ubiquitous, including how to use social media as part of civic education becomes even more critical (Chapman & Greenhow, 2021).

## POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Arguably, civic perspective-taking is even more critical in times of intense political polarization, which itself is an important aspect of civic education. Both on and beyond social media, we are living in a time of intense political polarization, one which has been and is likely to continue to grow (Gusterson, 2017; Judis, 2016; Payne & Journell, 2019; Wilson, 2017). Civic education research has found benefits to incorporating the discussion of controversial topics in class (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Hahn, 1999; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1996; McDevitt et al., 2003; Niemi & Junn, 2005; Parker, 2003; Syvertsen et al., 2007; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Torney-Purta & Wilkenfeld, 2009). At the same time, teaching about controversial or political topics can be challenging (Hess,



2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2017; Levy et al., 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), particularly as how teachers incorporate controversial topics into class can be the object of intense scrutiny (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Consequently, even though teaching about debated issues or prescient current events has been shown to be important for civic education, teachers often either avoid discussion of current events or topics which may be considered controversial or address these issues very carefully (Dunn et al., 2018; Journell, 2012, 2016).

Further, while the discussion of controversial topics, perhaps in conjunction with learning about civic perspective-taking, is seen as an important part of civic education, teachers must (and do) recognize who they are teaching in bringing up these topics. Students whose lived experiences intersect with controversial topics or current events, particularly those who are marginalized or vulnerable, may feel threatened during such discussions (Payne & Journell, 2019). The benefit of discussing controversial topics is to engage students in considering multiple perspectives so as to come to their own informed decisions; if students are at the center of these controversies, this approach to civic education becomes personal, rather than an exercise in civic perspective-taking. We know from literature that students who identify with groups who have suffered through historical injustices being taught in class, such as slavery or the Holocaust, experience negative personal feelings such as anger or shame (Epstein, 1998; Goldberg, 2017). One could see how this would also be true of students impacted by contemporary or ongoing political debates around contentious issues, including racism, immigration, and the rights of gender and sexual minorities.

While we know that discussion of political issues in schools can lead to harm for those who are in the ideological minority (Journell, 2012, 2017), this does not mean that we should avoid discussing them in classes and as part of civic education. These controversial topics are present in schools, whether they are formally and openly discussed in classes or present in informal spaces such as the lunchroom and hallways (Journell, 2012). More recent research as argued that teachers need to engage in a “pedagogy of political trauma” which supports students’ holistic wellbeing by processing traumatic historical or political experiences, engaging in robust civic education to cultivate civic engagement, and analyzing systems of oppression to as to foster critical and activist civic dispositions (Payne & Journell, 2019, p. 75; Sondel et al., 2018).

It is clear that contentious topics must be included in formal civic education. Research has shown that this is an effective pedagogy (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Hahn, 1999; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1996; McDevitt et al., 2003; Niemi & Junn, 2005; Parker, 2003; Syvertsen et al., 2007; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Torney-Purta & Wilkenfeld, 2009), and the benefits of engaging in civic perspective-taking as a means of coming to one's own informed decision are also clear (Toledo & Enright, 2021). It is equally clear that the way in which these topics are taught and discussed is critically important, both for the cultivation of civic perspective-taking and, more importantly, for the wellbeing of students. Payne and Journell (2019) argue that this calls for a *relational pedagogy*: an approach to civic education in which students' identities are interwoven into the discussion of these divisive issues so that students can put their personal experience into dialogue with current and historical events. This approach includes, concretizes, and humanizes students' experiences, not only as part of class but as part of civic perspective-taking, which promotes students' agency and voice. Further, the researchers found that this relational pedagogical approach to civic education fostered civic action: by being able to speak about their experiences, students were able to see themselves as part of the community, and to discuss civic events and engage in civic participation as peers (Payne & Journell, 2019; Sondel et al., 2018).

### APPLYING RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY: CRITICAL DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

It is neither possible nor advisable to ignore controversial topics or political polarization in schools. Research has found it important for students' civic development to engage with controversial topics (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Hahn, 1999; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1996; McDevitt et al., 2003; Niemi & Junn, 2005; Parker, 2003; Payne & Journell, 2019; Syvertsen et al., 2007; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Torney-Purta & Wilkenfeld, 2009), and in our current climate it is difficult to imagine students avoiding these altogether. Further, it is important for students to engage with multiple perspectives (Toledo & Enright, 2021). If these topics are to be included in civic education, teachers must be prepared to teach with them in ways which support students' overall wellbeing and civic education. Research has shown that when teachers create space for students to use their own experiences and identities in

discussion of controversial topics, they have an increased sense of being part of the community and an increase in civic agency (Payne & Journell, 2019; Sondel et al., 2018). In other words, when teachers apply a *critical lens* to controversial topics, students feel that they are included and welcomed as civic actors.

Thus, one way in which these topics might be approached is through *critical digital citizenship*. Before we address *critical* digital citizenship, we need a common understanding of *digital citizenship*. Digital citizenship is often reduced to being safe and polite in online spaces, or *netiquette* (Logan et al., 2022). In a sense, it is a misnomer: it is not about citizenship as much as it is about specific online behaviors. When we speak of citizenship in an offline context, the word takes on much more meaning, connotes expectations, rights, and responsibilities, and asks much more of us than merely refraining from harming others. Such an understanding also calls into account the underlying structures at play in online civic engagement. Asking people to be polite and calling it citizenship reinforces dominant power structures: there is no discussion of challenging any part of an oppressive system. In effect, this maintains hegemonic power structures: we do not teach about the underlying systems which impact our lives, and do not invite students to think about how they might change them. This could be compounded by traditional civic education which emphasizes nationalistic patriotism and obedience (Hahn, 2008; Westheimer, 2007).

In this way, *digital citizenship* can be a misleading and unhelpful term, which detracts from our ability to teach about it and from students' ability to use social media for civic participation. Using the term *digital citizenship*, even when what is meant is more than secure passwords and anti-bullying measures, conveys that civic participation which happens in online spaces is different—and perhaps less valid or real—than civic engagement in offline spaces.

And yet, as people interact with each other in online and offline spaces, so too does civic engagement happen online and offline, and sometimes in ways which blend the two. People encourage participation via social media as well as through mail, standing on a corner with signs, or phone calls. Calls for protests or marches start online, then move to in-person gatherings. Politicians interact with people online as a way of sharing the work that they are doing in government, and constituents can both reach politicians and hold them accountable via social media. Understanding digital citizenship as the ways in which people engage in civic life online is a much more helpful definition.

However, scholars have called for more diverse ways of understanding citizenship, including digital citizenship. Some seek to include a wider variety of means of civic participation (Choi, 2016; Kane et al., 2016). Female scholars of color have been even more specific, noting that traditional conceptualizations of citizenship are antithetical to their cultural practices or have actively worked against their liberation, (Sabzalian, 2019; Vickery, 2017). Further, Black women specifically have identified biases in online technologies which negatively impact their civic engagement (Benjamin, 2019; Buolamwini & Gebu, 2018; Kentayya, 2020; Noble, 2018). Although understudied, we also know that young people encounter and use social media differently based on their culture, economic background, and social context (Literat, 2021). For the benefit of all, we must look to new ways of understanding digital citizenship.

*Critical digital citizenship* is one such approach, applying critical pedagogy to this broader understanding of digital citizenship (Freire, 1972, 1974; Logan et al., 2022). Critical pedagogy questions traditional systems of power to break down barriers, promote social justice, and bring about liberation for all (Freire, 1972, 1974; Logan et al., 2022). Critical pedagogy also emphasizes the importance of empowering young people as agents of change (Freire, 1972). Critical digital citizenship asks us to examine the underlying power structures which operate in both online platforms and in society writ large, and to include those examinations in our civic education. Critical digital citizenship uses technology to emphasize the value of each person's lived experience to citizenship, a practice from which historically disenfranchised communities have often been excluded, in order to create systemic change (Garcia & de Roock, 2021; Mirra & Garcia, 2020). This approach to citizenship is inherently relational: by identifying what relationships exist between citizens and societal structures, we can begin to question whether those structures are the ones we want to uphold, and if not, how to dismantle or reorganize them.

As much as critical digital citizenship is centered upon the experiences of the traditionally marginalized to dismantle hegemonic power structures, at the same time it asks us to consider and critique digital technologies—including social media—as one such oppressive system (Chapman & Greenhow, 2021). While we explore the use of Twitter to lift up the voices of young people, we cannot disregard the potential for harm that exists within the very nature of social media. This does not mean that we should disregard social media as a potential tool for civic education and a space for youth civic participation; rather, it demands that we teach students about

social media and how to use it for civic engagement in ways which dismantle, rather than sustain, systems of oppression.

As we move into a discussion of the research around how teachers have incorporated Twitter into their civics teaching, it is imperative to keep these aspects of social media platforms and civic education in mind. Social media, and Twitter in particular, have great potential for civic education; this will be further detailed in the chapters that follow. That potential good is diminished if we neglect to understand and to prepare to teach students about the design of social media, how to use it, and the ways it can be used for civic engagement. Critical digital citizenship may prove one important and effective avenue to address issues of equity and inclusion, and should heighten our need to teach young people about the design and dangers of social media. These points will be further addressed in the chapters which follow.

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