A Hush Falls Over the Crowd?
Diminished Online Civic Expression Among Young Civic Actors

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An earlier investigation of civically engaged youth's online civic expression, conducted by the authors, revealed that most youth expressed their off-line civic views in their online lives. But do youth change their online civic expression over time? If so, how and why? A follow-up study of the original participants about two years later provides a longitudinal perspective on online civic expression. Survey responses from 41 U.S.-based civic youth reveal that over 40% changed their expression patterns over the two-year period, with most quieting or silencing expression. These changes correspond to a group-level shift: Withholding civic expression on social media is most common at the time of our follow-up study. Key rationales for individual shifts, as stated by participants, are described.

Keywords: civic expression, civic engagement, social media, youth

Consider two societal truths, one long-standing and the other relatively new: Civic discourse is imperative for the healthy functioning of democracy (Habermas, 1994), and American youth spend unprecedented amounts of time—literally hours each day—online (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). The online context holds unique promises for civic discourse. The Internet and social networking sites (SNS) offer expansive opportunities for individuals to connect with political stories and figures, express their views, and engage with diverse others (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Smith, 2013).

Yet the online space also may complicate the already difficult task of political and civic discourse in an environment perceived to be polarized and argumentative (Eliasoph, 1998; Hayes, Scheufele, & Huge, 2006). Features of SNS, such as the uncertainty of the audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011), lead

some youth to creatively explore their civic expression, while other youth restrict public display of their civic views (Thorson, 2014). Furthermore, now well-documented phenomena, "flaming" (Burnett, 2000) and "trolling" (Cambria, Chandra, Sharma, & Hussain, 2010), refer to hostile interactions that often pollute online spaces. Indeed, the past year has seen many websites shut down or restrict comments sections in an effort to avoid "feeding the trolls" (Lebarre, 2013; MacKinnon & Zuckerman, 2012; Soni, 2013; YouTube, 2013). Productive online discourse may be also impeded by the "filter bubble" challenge (Pariser, 2012; Zuckerman, 2013) or by simplification of complex issues into snappy tweets (Soep, 2014).

Between February 2011 and January 2012, our team conducted interviews with 70 U.S.-based civic youth. There was some variation in the extent to which youth shared their civic activities and views on social media platforms, but we found that most youth indeed expressed the civic facets of their identities online (Weinstein, 2014). We defined online civic expression as an individual's representation of his or her off-line civic views, interests, or participation, communicated to others via the Internet. We focused especially on civic expression via social media. For example, youth might express their views about abortion policy by tweeting, sharing links to videos with similar perspectives, or changing their default profile pictures to iconic images.

Yet the context for online expression is ever shifting as platforms, social norms, and legal precedent continue to evolve. This begs the question of whether, how, and why young people with civic interests change their approaches to online civic expression over time. The following sections draw first on empirical research and popular press to highlight the shifting nature of the terrain, including norms, policies, and platforms. Although these changes may impact any kind of expression, we focus particularly on civic expression, which may have particularly high stakes for not only individuals but society. We then describe the results of a longitudinal study designed to explore the online civic expression patterns of civic youth.

Changes in Online Life, Changes in Youths' Experiences

Studying youths' online behavior is in many ways, by nature, chasing a moving target. An early wave of research—against a backdrop of chat rooms and anonymous message boards—underscored opportunities for identity play (Livingstone, 2002; Turkle, 1995, 1999), issues related to online sexual predators (Bremer & Rauch, 1998; Hughes, 1999; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001), and the prevalence and risks of chatting with strangers (Stahl & Fritz, 2002).

Yet, with the rise of social network sites, teens' online lives became increasingly linked to their real names (Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris, & Arsoy, 2010) and more heavily anchored in off-line relationships (Ellison, 2007; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Research underscored friendship-driven motivations for teens' Internet use (boyd, 2007; Davis, 2012; Ito et al., 2009) and the salient challenge of managing "context collapse" as multiple audiences from off-line life started to collide online (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, Lampe, Gray, & Ellison 2012; Vitak, 2012). Concerns about issues like cyberbullying moved into the academic limelight (Li, 2007; Limber, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008. These two waves of research illustrate how changes in the nature of online spaces correspond with changes in salient experiences and challenges for users.

A Rapidly Evolving Landscape: Shifting Norms, Policies, and Platforms

Contemporary youth are actively navigating online life as legal precedent, societal norms, and website policies continue to shift. The conflicting treatment of online speech and changing restrictions underscore the complicated nature of this undertaking. In the following sections we consider a series of events, most occurring in the span of about 12 weeks in 2013, to highlight new challenges for online civic expression.

Legal Precedent and Social Norms. In September 2013, a Virginia federal appeals court overturned an earlier decision by ruling that Facebook "likes" are protected by the First Amendment (Fung, 2013). At issue in the case was an employee who alleged he was fired because he "liked" his boss's political opponent on Facebook. Approximately one month later, a Florida sheriff arrested two adolescent girls on felony charges for cyberbullying 12-year-old Rebecca Sedwick, who committed suicide (Alvarez, 2013). The charges, subsequently dropped (Almasy, 2013), raised questions about off-line, legal consequences of online expression (Bazelon, 2013).

These court rulings might be seen as encouraging developments for civic expression. But not all cases that reached the justice system before or since have had similar outcomes. Whereas charges were dropped in the Rebecca Sedwick case, a North Carolina teen was found guilty of cyberbullying, sentenced to four years of probation, and banned from SNS for one year (Abernathy, 2014). And, although the Virginia appeals court ruled in favor of the employee who lost his job, the court ruled against 24-year-old Ashley Payne, who alleged she was pressured to resign or risk suspension from her teaching position after photographs of her drinking alcohol on a vacation were posted on her personal Facebook page; she sued to recover her job, but was unsuccessful (Downey, 2011).

In October 2013, a *New York Times* article entitled, "Warily, Schools Watch Students on the Internet" (Sengupta, 2013) documented an increasingly common practice among schools: hiring technology companies "to comb through the social network posts of children in the district" (Sengupta, 2013, para. 11). In case it was not yet evident that teens' SNS posts might be under scrutiny, another article 12 days later detailed the rising trend among college admissions officers of checking prospective students' social media pages (Singer, 2013). The article cited a survey conducted by Kaplan (2013), on which 31% of admissions officers reported checking applicants' social media pages, an increase of five percentage points from 2012.

Platform Policies. As legal precedents and social norms complicate the nature of online speech and associated risks and opportunities, platform policies continue to evolve. In the same week as the charges were dropped in the Rebecca Sedwick case, Facebook announced a decision to *relax* the existing privacy policy for 13- to 17-year-old users (Goel, 2013). Previously, teens could only share content with friends and friends of friends; the decision allowed them to begin publicly sharing their status updates, videos, and photographs (Facebook, 2013). During the 12-week period highlighted here, several websites, including *Popular Science,* YouTube, and *The Huffington Post*, announced decisions to modify or eliminate their anonymous comments sections, therein underscoring another type of challenge for online expression

(LeBarre, 2013; Soni, 2013; YouTube, 2013). In an explanation of *The Huffington Post*'s decision, managing editor Jim Soni (2013) referred to the growing issue of "trolls": people who post inflammatory remarks intended to upset another person or community (Cambria et al., 2010).

Soni also stressed *The Huffington Post*'s desire to ensure a "civil environment." Indeed, a study by Anderson and colleagues (2013) found that exposure to uncivil comments online had polarizing effects on readers. Yet removing anonymous comments sections also may constrain opportunities for productive discussion, which benefits civil society by exposing citizens to heterogeneous perspectives (Brundidge, 2010; Kim, 2011) and supporting deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1994). While some use a veil of anonymity for trolling, others may have important reasons for shielding their identities. To take an extreme example, citizens of countries including Russia, China, and Iran risk beatings, imprisonment, or even assassination for expressing dissenting views online (MacKinnon, 2012).

Taken together, the public nature of online speech, the complicated social norms and inconsistent legal treatment surrounding online expression, and the evolving platform policies contribute to a thorny context for online civic expression.

What Does This Mean for Youth?

Youth are responsible for the future of democracy, and their engagement is vital (Levine, 2007). As young people spend unprecedented amounts of time on SNS (Madden et al., 2013; Rideout et al., 2010), the online context represents a potent arena for engagement through civic expression. Civic youth may recognize these opportunities and, consequently, tend toward expression online; indeed, civic youth's proclivities for civic expression on social media are borne out empirically (Weinstein, 2014).

However, trolling and uncivil dialogue (Burnett, 2000; Cambria et al., 2010) contribute to the widespread perception of hostile online environments and a growing discomfort with civic exchanges (Hayes et al., 2006; Thorson, 2014). Middaugh, Kahne, and Bowyer (in press) report that youth engaged in discussion of political topics online were more likely to experience heated exchanges or conflict online than peers who did not similarly engage in political online discussion. Young people who express the civic facet of their identities in digital contexts may therefore be more vulnerable to conflict online. Some youth may welcome this kind of deliberation; for others, however, it may be a deterrent to expression (Thorson, 2014).

Shifting norms regarding accountability and off-line consequences of online expression may also raise the stakes for youth weighing whether to engage in online civic expression. It is possible that perceived risks associated with evolving digital contexts will give civic youth pause and, as a result, that they will either decide to withhold civic speech from online spaces altogether or limit their expression to certain online contexts with more curated settings and audiences. At the same time, interactive Web 2.0 sites are no longer in their infancy (e.g., see O'Reilly, 2005). It is therefore also possible that youth are comfortable in their practices and unaware of or unconcerned with macro-level shifts in policies and norms.

Beyond external forces that may influence online civic expression, the internal changes youth experience as they age also warrant consideration. Developmentally, adolescents are in the throes of transition, exploring and beginning to solidify their identities (Erikson, 1968). SNS offer an accessible way for youth to explore and share different aspects of their identities, including the civic aspects (Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010). Yet the fundamentally social nature of these sites means that expressions will be seen and possibly responded to by others. Social feedback from peers takes on heightened importance during adolescence (Pugh & Hart, 1999). Depending on its nature and interpretation, peers' feedback may either encourage or stifle subsequent civic expression.

In what follows, we report findings from a multiyear investigation of the online civic expression of 41 young civic actors. This work represents an effort to understand whether—and, if so, how and why— civic youth changed their approaches to civic expression on social media.

Context and Research Questions

Between February 2011 and January 2012, our team interviewed 70 U.S.-based, civically engaged youth (27 male), ages 15 to 25.[2] We asked participants to describe their online civic expression, including whether and what they choose to share about their civic engagements and views on their personal social media accounts. Based on participants' descriptions, we identified three patterns that characterize the relationship between off-line civic engagement and online civic expression: blended, bounded, and differentiated (Weinstein, 2014). Youth who adopt blended patterns express their off-line civic beliefs and work across contexts in their online lives. Youth who adopt bounded patterns, on the other hand, refrain from expressing their civic beliefs and work in their online lives. Youth who adopt differentiated approaches vary their civic expression across different platforms or contexts.

We found that most civic youth tended toward civic expression in their online lives. Fully 72% engaged in online civic expression on all (blended) or some (differentiated) of their social media platforms. Blending was the most common approach: 37 (n = 53%) of the civic youth adopted this pattern. Bounding and differentiating were less common approaches, with 13 young civic actors (n = 19%) describing each pattern. Our sample also included 7 low media users, who consequently did not adopt any of the expression patterns.

The initial interviews captured a rich snapshot of youths' expression patterns. Yet we wondered whether documented expression patterns would endure as fixed approaches or if they would change over time. We were particularly curious about the experiences or reasons that might lead youth to change their online expression patterns. We could imagine that youth might move toward more online civic expression as their individual and civic identities became more solidified in early adulthood. On the other hand, we recognized that evolving features of the online context might result in withdrawing or more cautiously curating expression over time. The inclusion criteria for participation in the original study—a considerable commitment to civic issues—also created a unique opportunity to detect and explore any such changes.

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[2] We recruited youth through affiliation with recognized civic organizations, public recognition they received for their work, and referrals from contacts in the youth civic engagement field.

That is, observing any self-silencing in a sample of especially engaged and committed youth would be a particularly noteworthy finding.

Method

The initial data collection took place between February 2011 and January 2012 (Time 1). Data collection for the current study took place approximately two years later, in June 2013 (Time 2). We successfully recontacted 68 of the original 70 participants via e-mail to follow-up about their online civic expression patterns. E-mail addresses for two participants were no longer valid, and we were unable to find them through Internet searches. Forty-one participants responded and participated in the current study (60.3% of those for whom we had viable contact information; 58.6% of our original sample).

We sent each participant a link to an online survey in which we described the three patterns and indicated which pattern we thought most accurately described their Time 1 online civic expression pattern. We asked participants whether they agreed with our Time 1 characterization and, if not, to explain which pattern was more accurate. We also asked participants which pattern most accurately represented their current online civic expression. If their pattern changed from Time 1 to Time 2, we additionally prompted participants to describe reasons for their shift.

We looked at individual-level responses to explore the nature of each participant's expression over time. For participants who reported a change in expression, we specifically looked at the nature of the shift (i.e., their Time 1 and Time 2 patterns). We identified three types of change based on their responses: silencing, quieting (decreasing expression in certain online spaces), and raising online civic voices. We then drew on participants' open-ended descriptions to explore the experiences and considerations that led to these three expression pattern changes. Specifically, we used an emic approach to code responses for key experiences and rationales cited by youth.

Findings

Agreement With Initial Pattern Designation

Of the 41 participants in our follow-up study, 4 were low media users at Time 1 and did not have an assigned pattern based on their initial interview. Fully 86% of participants with a designated pattern at Time 1 (n = 32) indicated that we accurately characterized their Time 1 expression pattern. The following analyses are based on participants' designations of their Time 1 and Time 2 civic expression patterns.

Time 1 and Time 2 Expression Patterns

Among the 41 participants in the current study, blending was the most common pattern at Time 1: 17 participants self-reported blended patterns, 13 differentiated, and 11 bounded. At Time 2, bounding was the most common pattern: 16 participants self-reported bounded patterns, 14 differentiated, and 11 blended.

Twenty-four participants (58.5%) remained stable in their online expression patterns from Time 1 to Time 2, including 8 of the 17 original blenders, 7 of the 13 differentiators, and 9 of the 11 bounders. Although participants from each pattern category remained stable in their expression, bounders were, proportionally, least likely to shift from their original pattern.

Seventeen participants (41.5%) described changes to their online civic expression over the two-year period. These changes fall into three broad categories: silencing online civic expression ($n = 7$), quieting online civic expression in certain online spaces ($n = 6$), and raising online civic voices ($n = 4$).

We further explored the subsample of 17 participants who changed their expression patterns for trends related to age. With such a small number of participants, it is not possible to draw any statistical or generalizable findings. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that a majority of those who changed their civic expression pattern were 19 or younger at Time 1, and most of those youth shifted toward diminished expression (see Table 1).

Table 1. Ages at Time 1 and Time 2, by Change Type,
for Participants Who Changed Expression Pattern.

Age, Time 1 (years)	Pattern, Time 1	Age, Time 2 (years)	Pattern, Time 2	Change Type
16	Blend	18	Bound	Silence
25	Blend	26	Bound	Silence
17	Blend	19	Bound	Silence
17	Differentiate	18	Bound	Silence
16	Differentiate	18	Bound	Silence
22	Differentiate	24	Bound	Silence
17	Differentiate	19	Bound	Silence
21	Blend	22	Differentiate	Quiet
15	Blend	17	Differentiate	Quiet
17	Blend	19	Differentiate	Quiet
17	Blend	19	Differentiate	Quiet
19	Blend	21	Differentiate	Quiet
18	Blend	20	Differentiate	Quiet
18	Bound	20	Differentiate	Raise
19	Bound	21	Blend	Raise
25	Differentiate	27	Blend	Raise
20	Differentiate	22	Blend	Raise

Below we highlight individual cases that illustrate key reasons for each type of change.

Mum's the Word: Silencing Online Civic Expression

Participants who silenced their civic expression online—moving from blended or differentiated expression to bounded patterns—cite a constellation of factors, including concerns or experiences related to backlash; changes in contexts, such as shifting from life as a college student to the professional role of an employee; an increased awareness of online audiences; and declines in overall dedication to civic issues.

Gavin is one participant who describes silencing her online civic expression. Gavin was a 16-year-old high school student when we first interviewed her. She was actively involved in civic and political initiatives both in and out of school, including participating in Model UN, student government, Organizing for America, and various youth democracy initiatives through a nonpartisan civic organization. She also co-hosted a cable TV show covering political issues. In our initial interview, Gavin described a blended online expression pattern: She used social media both to support her civic work and for personal civic expression. She created Facebook events to invite people to participate in campaign-related activities and started online groups to connect with peers about upcoming initiatives. At Time 1, Gavin explained, "Facebook is a huge vehicle for advertising or broadcasting an event." Although Gavin said she was somewhat reserved and private on Facebook, she noted that her online expression clearly demonstrated her identity as a young civic actor:

> If you look at my Facebook page, pretty much all the things that I have on it are derived from sort of political or international figures. So, all the pages—I don't like musicians, I like politicians. I don't quote the new rap song, I quote Nelson Mandela. And if you look at my page, you will realize, "This girl, number one, is a weirdo. Number two, she's pretty into this sort of politics stuff."

Now, two years later, Gavin is starting college. Gavin says that she has transitioned from a blended pattern of expression to a bounded approach, actively withholding civic expression online. For Gavin, the transition was catalyzed by the college application process. She explains:

> As college-related standardized tests started and once I began applying to different universities this past year, I became much more cautious about the information I shared with others online. I am—and probably always will be—extremely political and vocal about my views with friends, but I consciously tried to limit the amount of information about my political views on my Facebook page. The last thing I wanted/want is to be held back or stereotyped for my opinions.

Gavin emphasizes that her concerns about negative repercussions of civic expression are not felt in the off-line context. She explicitly differentiates her online civic expression style from her off-line approach:

> This is not a concern of mine in the classroom and in conversation with friends, but I've learned to think twice before broadcasting my views to my 1300+ Facebook friends,

> *some of whom may agree but others who may not. I guess the main point is that I would rather not risk ever being penalized for what I posted on Facebook as a teenager.*

For Gavin, awareness of the permanence of online expression and the considerable size and potential diversity of her Facebook audience led her to conclude that online civic expression may cause more harm than benefit. Consequently, she no longer showcases her civic work or expresses civic beliefs in her online life.

Jorge, who also described a blended expression pattern during his initial interview, similarly shifted to a deliberately bounded approach. Jorge's decision was based on his observations and concerns about civic dialogue online:

> *I began to realize that discussion in person is both more meaningful and less problematic. People (myself included) have a tendency to be more easily hurt by what someone says online because it's so easy to feel ganged up on while on the Internet. In person, I feel like discussion was more like actual discussion of issues instead of just a back and forth of long-winded comments that get more and more personal rather than a meaningful dialogue. I think more problems are able to be solved in person than online.*

Jorge expresses a preference for face-to-face discussion rather than online, where he views civic discourse as unproductive and potentially upsetting.

Neither Gavin nor Jorge changed their approach to off-line civic expression, but both deliberately curtailed their online expression. Gavin and Jorge's explanations highlight key concerns raised by youth who shifted away from civic expression online. Among these concerns are changes in contextual factors (such as Gavin's decision to apply to college); concerns about unwanted consequences of expression (as Gavin describes); hurtful, uncivil responses from others (as Jorge suggests); and the large and potentially opaque nature of online audiences.

Additionally, several youth explained that their online civic expression declined as a function of comparable declines in their off-line engagement. Sienna, who described herself as "passionate about politics and making change" when we initially interviewed her, was involved in a collection of community initiatives and used online platforms to support her work at Time 1. She used her Facebook page to create groups, announce events, and post links to news stories. She also created her own YouTube videos about candidates. Two years later, Sienna references concerns about potential backlash, similar to those described by Gavin and Jorge. She explains, "I have heard a lot of backlash toward people who believe certain things and express them. For example, saying something about the election during the election then someone says you are annoying or obvious." But Sienna also muses that the dampened state of her current online civic expression is, "Perhaps because there is not one particular issue right now that I have specific views on for me . . . now I am not really behind a specific thing."

Indoor Voices in Here: Quieting Online Civic Expression in Certain Online Spaces

For participants who shifted from blended to differentiated expression patterns, the move represents a transition from broad civic voice across platforms to more carefully curated strategies. These participants cite changes in their experiences on particular platforms, including audience composition and concerns about backlash; they also cite more general changes in their off-line contexts.

Martin had just finished his freshman year of college when we interviewed him in 2011. He was involved in a college Democrats organization and student government, and he was continuing his pre-college campaign work for local candidates. He told us that politics and government are his passions and that they were reflected in his online life: "If you check [on Facebook] who inspires me, it's a lot of very political figures, like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and Supreme Court justices. Online, as well, I do post articles." Martin also described blogging about political issues, participating in the Facebook group for his organizations, and listing himself as a "fan" of pages related to his civic work. At Time 2, Martin reported having adopted a more differentiated approach to expression, which he attributes "mainly [to] the evolution of the social network[s] I was using." He explains:

> On Facebook, it is a more personal connection with others because my name is there, people know who I am, and people don't necessarily care to hear my views. On the other hand, on Twitter, I can voice my views on things without worrying about losing them as friends because the majority of my social interactions happen on Facebook and not on Twitter.

For Martin, different audiences on Twitter and Facebook—and his perceptions that these audiences have distinct expectations about what is appropriate to post on each platform—lead to a more differentiated approach. By adopting this discriminating pattern, Martin can engage in civic expression online and voice his views without concern about negative repercussions from friends.

Willa similarly describes a shift from blended to differentiated online civic expression, but she attributes her shift to a change in context and in the use of particular platform affordances to meet new goals. When we first interviewed Willa, she was a college senior planning to go to law school. She described posting on both her organization's Facebook page and her personal page as a way to raise awareness about her civic work. She spoke openly on Facebook, hoping to provoke engagement and thought from others. For example, when she saw a picture of "Obama, MLK and Malcolm X" online, she decided to comment because, as she says,

> The perception I got was that the only link, based on the history I know, between those three people were that they're all black. . . . So I made a comment about that. And a person was kind of just like, "No one is trying to attack her, why is she always so aggressive?" But I feel like that made it [clear] what I thought and my politics.

When we followed-up with Willa two years later, she had graduated college and decided, rather than going straight to law school, to become a teacher. From Willa's perspective, provoking heated civic discussion

online is neither the most valuable nor appropriate use of social media in her current role. Rather than using her Facebook page for controversial discussion, she finds that a different kind of expression is more valuable:

> *Due to my career change as a new teacher, I found that Facebook was much more useful for promoting events and projects in my classroom. I find that different modes of social media are more applicable for different projects—i.e., Instagram is great for photo updates in the classroom, Twitter I don't use as much but use it to stream for positive quotes and inspiration, and Facebook I use the most because I find it most accessible and functional for my goals (DonorsChoose projects,[3] wish lists, personal reflections, classroom updates, etc.).*

Both Martin's and Willa's online civic expression changed forms over the two-year period. Martin highlights the evolution of his audiences and his awareness of their expectations on different platforms. A differentiated approach allows him to use social networks socially and politically—goals that he suggests may not have been compatible on one platform. Willa, on the other hand, highlights a critical change in her context, becoming a new teacher, which translated to new civic goals (such as raising money for her classroom) and in turn a more differentiated online expression pattern.

Other youth cited similar context or role changes—such as from high school student to college student or college student to employee—as reasons for a shift in expression. Such transitions may limit an individual's ability to be civically engaged due to new priorities—"adjust[ing] to the demands of college life"—or other concerns—the need to "be more careful about making opinions public, particularly when those opinions could reflect on my employer."

A Little Bit Louder Now: Raising Online Voices

Although more participants reported decreases in their online civic expression than increases, four participants reported becoming more vocal about their civic views online. Three of these participants—who moved from bounded or differentiated to blended or from bounded to differentiated—cite increases in their overall civic engagement. College student Sam explained that "the initial interview took place in the lull between major campaigns and so there was less to post about. Now I post year-round with more consistency." Similarly, graduate student Monica stated her civic expression increased because she "became very engaged in a civic issue affecting my hometown." For Tori, the transition to college resulted in her taking on a more active civic role. She described how "being in college and actually partaking in the planning of events that correlate to the issues I believe in contributes to my being more active about posting on social media sites."

Danelle, however, describes a different rationale: the realization that curating online expression is "useless" as her audiences on different platforms increasingly collide. At the time of our first interview,

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[3] Donorschoose.org is a program that allows teachers to crowd-source financial support for specific projects for their classrooms.

Danelle described markedly different approaches to expression on Twitter versus Facebook. She used Twitter "for almost everything" related to any issue in which she was interested. She explained that on Twitter, "there's professional Danelle, and social Danelle, and academic Danelle, all tweeting at the same time." She was quick to tweet about personal and controversial issues within her community, which she did not similarly share over Facebook, where she tended to "remove" herself, carefully limiting the quantity and content of her posts to issues such as environmentalism. Danelle considered her Twitter posts more casual and personal, whereas she reserved Facebook for issues of broader concern—partly, she explained, because she had different audiences on each platform.

Two years later, Danelle has relaxed her efforts to differentiate between civic expression on Facebook and Twitter. Danelle explained, "I believe that over the past two years the ways I express my political opinions and activism activities on Twitter and Facebook have become increasingly more similar." The reason for the shift is twofold. First, the audiences on the platforms are no longer distinct, rendering her ability to use the platforms for different types of expression less meaningful.

> *Part of the reason is that Twitter has become even more mainstream and people who previously only engaged with me on Facebook have now "found" me on Twitter where there is not the same capacity to segregate which content different groups of people can see, rendering censoring myself on Facebook less useful.*

The second reason relates to an increase in her off-line expression about LGBTQ issues and her own identity, and her corresponding decision to speak more openly about these issues online.

> *Additionally, over the past two years I have come out as queer to many more people, which I think decreased the marginal benefit of choosing not to engage with LGBTQ rights issues on Facebook (also trying to keep up with what I could post where and remembering to not express more "radical" or controversial opinions on Facebook just got tiring).*

For Danelle, maintaining distinctions in her expression is neither as personally important nor practical, engendering her shift to blended civic expression.

Discussion

In this study, we explored whether and how civic youth changed their approaches to online civic expression over a two-year period. We wondered whether the expression patterns documented at Time 1 would persist to Time 2 or whether youth would modify their approaches; and, if their expression patterns changed, we wondered what experiences or rationales youth would implicate in their explanations. Of the 41 participants in the current study, 17 (41%) reported changing their expression patterns from Time 1 to Time 2.

Four youth reported an increase in their civic expression from Time 1 to Time 2 (dotted lines in Figure 1). Two participants who had differentiated expression patterns, along with one participant who had

a bounded pattern, at Time 1 moved to blended patterns at Time 2. One individual who reported a bounded expression pattern at Time 1 shifted to a differentiated pattern at Time 2.

However, most of the changes (*n* = 13) involved reducing online civic expression either across all platforms (i.e., becoming bounded) or by adopting more differentiated approaches (and therefore "quieting" expression in at least one of their online environments) (solid lines in Figure 1). Of the participants who had a blended pattern at Time 1, six reported a shift to a differentiated pattern and three shifted to a bounded pattern at Time 2. Four participants who had a differentiated pattern at Time 1 later reported a shift to a bounded pattern.

Notably, whereas blended expression was the most common pattern at Time 1, it is the least common pattern at Time 2. In a corresponding reversal, bounded expression, the least common pattern at Time 1 was the most common pattern at Time 2. Figure 1 illustrates these findings, depicting Time 1 and Time 2 expression patterns by participant.
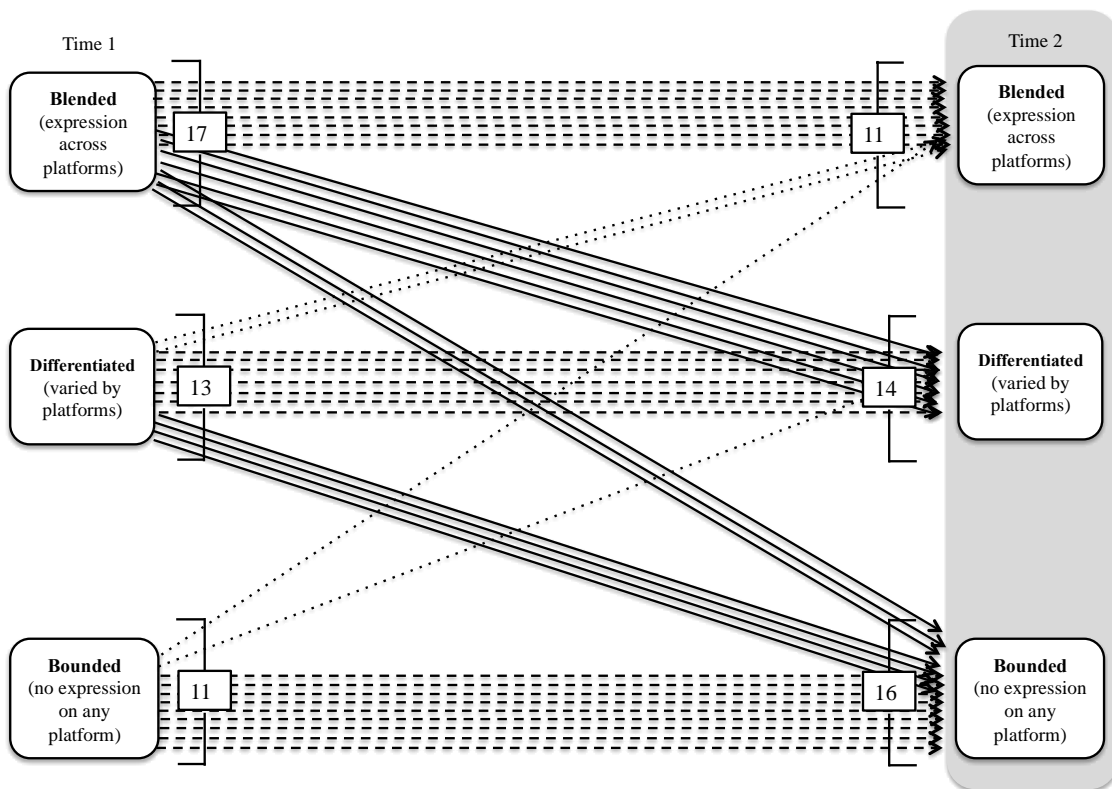

Figure 1. Time 1 and Time 2 expression patterns.

Although many youth (*n* = 24; 58.5%) did not report a change their expression patterns, those who did raise a red flag about a potentially critical civic expression trend. Rationales offered for civic expression pattern shifts included changes in contexts, such as transitioning from college student to employee; an increased attentiveness to online audiences and the appropriateness of civic expression; and changes in overall commitment to civic issues. Most importantly, however, concerns about potential backlash and unintended or unwanted consequences of online speech reverberate through the explanations offered by the 13 youth who described quieting or silencing their online expression.

Given the shifting social norms about surveillance and consequences of and protections for online expression (e.g., Almasy, 2013; Alvarez, 2013; Fung, 2013), their concerns may be unsurprising. Gavin, who cites the college application process as a pivotal moment, indicates awareness of the increasingly common trend of admissions officers checking SNS (Kaplan, 2013). As SNS become more mainstream (Brenner, 2013; Brenner & Smith, 2012) and privacy policies more lax (Facebook, 2013), it may be progressively more difficult to keep online lives separate. Participants who altered their expression patterns also highlight the collapse of audiences from on- and off-line lives and across different platforms. In response, youth may simply reduce their online expression (as Gavin describes) or abandon hope of maintaining distinctions either because it feels impractical or too effortful (as Danelle suggests).

A number of the youth also cited uncivil discourse as a reason to quiet online civic expression. If the online context—a daily destination for youth—is deemed hostile for civic expression, young people may forgo expression and miss a potentially potent opportunity to communicate their values and develop a civic identity (Levine, 2008; Thorson, 2014). Or they may end up in "filter bubbles" and thus miss chances to interact with diverse others and engage in productive disagreement (Middaugh et al., in press; Pariser, 2012; Zuckerman, 2013). The online space is a place where youth go to hang out (boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2009;). It is a loss for youth's individual development as citizens, and for democracy, if productive civic discourse cannot flourish in these communities.

This is not to say that youth should share their civic views online without warranted consideration, nor that blending is the ideal approach. In the case of moving from blended to differentiated expression, the shift could certainly reflect necessary media savvy in a world of increased surveillance and scrutiny. That is, the quieting of civic voice on certain platforms could represent a deliberate and strategic choice. On the other hand, the shift could indicate an absence of skills and supports for managing disagreements on particular platforms, customizing privacy settings to control audiences, or monitoring changing Terms of Service. In these cases, silencing on a given platform may be easier than navigating engagement. Yet, by shifting to differentiated expression, the individual may miss opportunities to develop new skills and to hear different perspectives.

What else might account for these trends of changing and decreasing online civic expression? To be sure, it may simply be that as platforms evolve, so too do users' behaviors. Or the changes could reflect normative developmental transitions and transformations of adolescence. In adolescence, identity and its communication to others are especially significant and shifting in salience (Erikson, 1950). That is, young people may feel that a particular issue is more or less important to them over time, or they may feel a greater or lesser desire to share their civic identities with others. In the online context in particular,

young people's identity expressions are often grounded in, but not fully aligned with, their off-line identities: Digital portrayals are strategically polished and curated (Gardner & Davis, 2013). For adolescents maturing in a digital age, they may simultaneously transition to more enduring interests (Arnett, 2000), but decide not to incorporate all of those interests as they "write themselves into being" online (boyd, 2007, p. 129).

A fundamental puzzle at the heart of the shift we document is whether the transitions to bounding—which transpired in a relatively short period of time—are symptoms of typical adolescent development or are responses to the larger, evolving social context of the digital world. Research on how inclinations to express one's civic views specifically change over the life course is sparse, although civic development studies may suggest relevant insights. Longitudinal studies indicate that youth civic actors are more likely than nonactivists to be active into adulthood, albeit in more conventional ways (Braungart & Braungart, 1990; DeMartini, 1983; Younniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997). Yet some studies suggest civic engagement drops off temporarily as youth enter adulthood with its associated responsibilities (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Jennings & Stoker, 2004). Although transitions to adulthood may account for some of our findings, the reflections adolescents offer suggest they contextualize shifts in expression as part of a burgeoning understanding of opportunities and, especially, challenges of an increasingly connected world. Youth called out specific features of the context responsible for their diminished expression: concerns about hostility and unintended or unwanted consequences. We wonder: Might the changes we observe result from young people "polishing out" the political as they polish their online identities (i.e., Gardner & Davis, 2013)? Are contemporary youth strategically marketing themselves on social media in ways that minimize the risk of appearing controversial?

Adolescence is a potent and sensitive period for civic identity development (Younniss et al., 1997) and connecting individual identity to public interests meaningfully supports this process (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Conversely, expression inhibition may translate to feelings of apathy and alienation (Wyatt, Kim, & Katz, 2000). We must therefore be especially alert to when and how the social context of online expression is shifting.

In addition to illuminating a potentially concerning trend, the current study underscores the importance of continuous study of online experiences. We had barely completed writing up our initial findings when we conducted the follow-up study and realized an important shift had taken place. Like other researchers interested in youth, civic engagement, and digital media, we are endeavoring to map out the terrain as it constantly changes. A robust understanding of individuals' experiences necessitates both thorough and repeated documentation and analysis.

Limitations

The small size of the current sample is well suited for in-depth investigation and initial exploration of the phenomena (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Silverman, 2011). However, the current sample precludes more generalizable conclusions. Similarly, the focus on civic youth—"exemplars" in the domain of civic engagement—enables deeper insights about the leading edge of a trend (Bronk, 2013; Damon & Colby, 2013), yet cannot provide direct insight into less civically engaged youth. Further research could

investigate whether and how these trends are borne out with larger samples of civic youth, as well as with more representative groups of young people with varying degrees of civic interest. Additionally, larger samples would also provide the opportunity to explore cohort or developmental factors. Finally, studies that examine youth's actual posts alongside their narratives would enrich and verify their self-reports.

Conclusion

Concerns about long-term repercussions, changing audience composition, shifting roles and contexts in off-line life, and evolving interests are all legitimate reasons for modifying online expression. Some factors may simply reflect realities of an increasingly connected world. For example, context collapse of audiences from different sectors of young people's lives—such as friends, family, teachers, bosses—into one place online (Marwick & boyd, 2011) may be inevitable as more people of different ages use SNS (Pew Research Internet Project, 2013). Other factors, including shifting roles, contexts, and interests, are undeniably part of human development. Most problematic to us, however, are youths' worries about backlash and repercussions that surfaced in the current investigation. Such fears merit further consideration as they relate to decreasing online civic expression.

In the off-line context, the value of safe, participatory, and responsive climates for supporting youth's social, emotional, and academic achievement is well established (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Put another way, youth thrive in supportive environments in which they feel safe to express their voices. In the particular case of civic expression, SNS will not support civic identity development nor will they offer spaces for youth to practice productive civic discourse if youth fear direct backlash or longer-term repercussions.

We recognize that young people will continue to change their interests, priorities, and concerns as they transition into and move through adulthood. In the foreseeable future, platform features and social norms will also continue to evolve. All these changes will inevitably lead to changes in individual expression. But the current investigation also alerts us to salient concerns about the treatment of online civic speech, which dampen youth's expressions. It is important for social science to document when people alter their behavior significantly, especially when the changes take place in a relatively short period of time. It is also important to explore the reasons why. Given the centrality of civic speech for democratic life, the stakes are high. For societies that fundamentally value the hum of an active and reactive citizenry, beware a hush falling over the younger crowd.

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