Social media and connective journalism: The formation of counterpublics and youth civic participation

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Abstract

Based on a study of US high school students from predominantly working-class, immigrant backgrounds, this article illustrates how young people used social media to share personal opinions, experiences and news about environmental problems affecting their neighborhood, ultimately helping to change public policy. It reveals how the interpersonal connectivity facilitated by social media can create opportunities for youth voice and collective identity that inspire connective action. Youthful online practices of sharing personal stories, links, photos, memes, videos and other online artifacts of engagement exemplify 'connective journalism' through which young people create and share narratives about their personal experiences and concerns that, in turn, allow them to see themselves as members of a larger community or counterpublic of people facing similar experiences and grievances. These connective journalism practices have implications for the ways we think about journalism, political activism and youth citizenship.

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Introduction

As Americans' confidence in government and trust in the news have hit all-time lows (Gallup Poll, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2015), many worry that democracy in the United States is in danger. Given their low voter turnout and relatively low rates of engagement with traditional news outlets, young people are frequently seen as the problem rather than part of the solution, dismissed as uninterested in news and apathetic about politics. Yet, if we want to understand the political attitudes and behaviors of today's young citizens, we need to examine the shifting boundaries of what counts as 'news' and 'participation'. Based on interviews and online ethnographic research with high school students in Boston, Massachusetts, this article discusses how the interpersonal connectivity and information-sharing activities taking place among young people via social media are changing the landscape for news consumption, political participation and youth citizenship. The relational aspects of social media are foregrounded here to better understand how online practices shape the ways young people receive news information, voice their concerns, and experience a ladder of political engagement.

Many youth today generate and share online information that they consider to be news. Legacy news sources may be part of this information, but 'news' for young people in the social media age is no longer about which journalist or news outlet produced the story, but rather, who shared it and whether or not it is something worth sharing with peers. Instead of routinely seeking out traditional news outlets such as *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal* or CNN on a daily basis, most contemporary young people first encounter news of an unfolding event on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat or Instagram when it is communicated to them from people or organizations they recognize (Holcomb et al., 2013; Shearer and Gottfried, 2017). The social relationship, level of admiration, and trust that they have in the sender, in turn, gives the story's telling legitimacy (Clark and Marchi, 2017). When we asked youth whether or not they sought news from legacy media sources, they often replied as did this 16-year-old: 'I don't need to. Twitter is almost like the news. If something important is going on, everyone's talking about it on Twitter', or this 15-year-old: 'I think a lot of people my age, instead of reading a newspaper or looking at a magazine will just find out the main thing [happening] on Instagram'. Such responses raise new questions as we consider the future of news and democratic political participation. For instance, when do people consider information encountered on social media to be trustworthy? How does a person come to recognize an event or story as being worthy of sharing with friends? And how do some youth who follow issues via social media become involved in more overtly political actions? These questions foreground the relationship between news, emotion, and identity-construction, and the ways that young people – and all of us – inevitably see the world through a lens shaped by our own unique experiences and needs.

In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey (1927) argued that being part of a public meant being part of a collective of people who shared common experiences, noting that communication was crucial in order for people to understand the shared nature of their experiences. He maintained that only when members of a community were faced with direct opposition to their interests did they become a *public* capable of collectively working on solutions to their problems (Dewey, 1927). On social media, people share not only

stories, but also their *feelings* about those stories, and we will argue that the emotional punch conveyed in that sharing can kindle trust, civic awareness and involvement. This article aims to illustrate how young people, who are often new to the arena of politics or who may not consider themselves to be 'people who count' in politics, are engaging in proto-political (Dahlgren, 2016) acts of sharing online that can help them see themselves as part of a collective capable of making a difference through action. While a growing body of research has studied the evolving relationships between professional journalists and audience members, far fewer studies have considered how journalism fits into young people's everyday lives. This article reveals how the everyday online sharing practices of youth, often dismissed as frivolous, embody important features of what has historically been conceptualized as 'journalism', and how young people's digital participation and even 'non-participation' (in seemingly passive acts such as listening, liking, or lurking), can be early forms of civic engagement.

Literature review

Most young people today do not subscribe to newspapers or regularly tune in to TV and radio newscasts (American Press Institute (API), 2015; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2012). In the early 2000s, some scholars interpreted these trends as an indication that contemporary youth were less interested in news and politics than previous generations (Jones, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007). Other scholars noted that youth were not necessarily less informed than prior generations, but differently informed. For example, Costera-Meijer (2007) and Singer et al. (2009) found that young people did not seek news and information as ends in themselves, but rather as a way to acquire conversational topics, personal inspiration, a sense of belonging, and meaning in their lives – gravitating toward entertaining sources of current events news, such as talk shows or satirical cartoons, rather than formal news outlets. Other research has highlighted how digital media, and social media in particular (including gaming sites, hobby groups, or viral videos of sardonic cartoons and talk shows), serve as avenues through which youth can express their identities, bond with peers, and learn about participatory culture (boyd, 2014; Buckingham, 2008; Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2016a, 2016b; Ling, 2007).

Today, young people get most of their news via social media, with Facebook, YouTube and Snap Chat the most popular sources of news for the 18–29 demographic (API, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015; Shearer and Gottfried, 2017). A study conducted by the API (2015) found that 88 percent of millennials (defined as people reaching young adulthood in the early twenty-first century) aged 18–34 got news from Facebook and more than half of them did so daily. The same study found that millennials were drawn to news they might otherwise ignore when peers recommended and contextualized stories for them via social media networks or more private networks, such as group texts and instant messaging. Research has also found that many young people, especially those from minoritized and low-income communities, express low levels of trust in mainstream news media and rely on social media to help them follow the stories they care about (Clark and Marchi, 2017; Cohen et al., 2012; Madden et al., 2017). Moreover, adolescents' ideas regarding civic identity and the efficacy of civic participation in a democracy vary greatly

based on their race and socioeconomic status, with minoritized and low-income youth among the least likely to feel that their voices are heard (Marchi, 2012; Rubin, 2007; Rubin et al., 2009; Van Steenbergen, 1994).

In the twenty-first century, social media networks have reshaped news as something that is portable, personalized and participatory (Purcell et al., 2010) and news is no longer exclusively understood as a profession that is practiced or an industry that disseminates a product. Rather, news is now defined, produced, and disseminated in relation to specific networks of people, with traditional distinctions between 'active' production and 'passive' consumption increasingly blurred (Bruns, 2005). Although they did not foreground news specifically, Henry Jenkins and his colleagues studied how youth activism developed in relation to topics relevant to young people, such as the DREAM act, racialized police violence, income inequality, or the legalization of marijuana. They found an active 'civic imagination' among young people online, and an interest in imagining what a better world might look like and ways to collectively move toward that world (Jenkins et al., 2016b). Given that digital technology has altered how we communicate with others and engage in politics, there has been a growing interest in online 'participatory politics', a term referring to political action that is peer-based, interactive, non-hierarchical and collective (Jenkins, 2009). To determine the extent to which young people engaged in participatory politics, Cohen et al. (2012) conducted a nationally representative survey of 15- to 25-year-olds. They asked youth how often they had done things such as circulating funny videos or cartoons related to a political issue or candidate; forwarding someone else's political commentary; or posting their own comments about a political news story, candidate or campaign. Using such actions as indications of political engagement, this study concluded that 41 percent of young people surveyed had engaged in at least one act of participatory politics, and that 90 percent of them had engaged with politics in some other way.[1] Kahne et al. (2014) further defined participatory politics as comprising the following five types of activities, many of which were being carried out by the young people we studied:

1. Investigating/analyzing political information about issues of public concern;
2. Dialogue and feedback in which people voice their perspectives on and offline;
3. Circulation of information on and offline;
4. Production of new information introducing different perspectives than those produced by mainstream powers;
5. Recruiting others in and beyond one's network to join in collective actions for political change.

Bennett and Segerberg (2013) have contributed significantly to contemporary discussions concerning the connections between online information sharing and democratic participation by revealing the ways that digital media have expanded possibilities for political organization and action. They discuss the emergence of what they term *connective action* – a form of political action in which networked communication enables individuals to personalize expressions of a movement's goals outside the bounds of traditional social movement organizations. Contrasting *connective* action with the pre-Internet logic

of *collective* action (associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities), they note that the logic of connective action is based on personalized content sharing across media networks that enables people to personalize their connection with issues, choosing what kinds of information to share with people in their networks and how they will share it. This research brings to the fore the ways that online communicative acts constitute relationships among people that, in turn, are vital in organizing for political change.

Zizi Papacharissi's work on affective publics shares some common ground with Bennett and Segerberg's argument that social media have brought about possibilities of connective action, as she asserts that social media provide new locations through which people can express themselves and participate in publics and counterpublics that help them to feel that their views matter. 'Affective publics', as Papacharissi terms them, are 'networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment' (Papacharissi, 2014: 125). She notes a two-part progression: first, individuals *feel* like a part of the developing story by reading about it and following it, and second, they *become* a part of the story as they contribute emotive declarations online through words, photos, and videos on social media. Papacharissi connects current debates about social media's ability to facilitate emotional feelings of belonging with debates about political engagement, helping to explain how people 'feel their way into politics' (Papacharissi, 2014: 25), particularly in instances when they share stories and feelings that are emotionally fraught, such as when bearing witness to or sharing outrage over an injustice. As Nick Couldry (2010) has pointed out, the concepts of publics and counterpublics take 'the political' beyond the realm of traditional institutionalized contexts for political discussion and policymaking.

Influenced by the above research on youth, digital media, identity, participatory cultures, connective action and affective publics, Clark and Marchi (2017) developed the concept of 'connective journalism' to describe the ways that news and information are shared via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other social media formats. They note that in connective journalism, 'news' is not exclusively defined, explained, or spread by the industries or professionals historically associated with journalism, but rather by everyday people linked together online by their relationship to unfolding events or concerns. They illustrate that when youth share information online (such as links, 'likes', tweets, Facebook posts, Instagrams, or YouTube videos) about issues that are important to them, they are engaging in practices historically associated with journalism (i.e. gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information for the purpose of informing others). In doing so, they demonstrate how young people express their personal identities while also attracting others who share similar experiences or views. By liking, following, re-tweeting or otherwise engaging with online pages, posts, memes, remixes or other 'artifacts of engagement' received from peers, the authors note, youth can recognize themselves as being part of a community of people who share similar concerns or grievances, which can motivate them to address those concerns collectively. Recognizing that awareness of a problem is constituted through communication, the authors argue that connective journalism practices are proto-political (Dahlgren, 2009) in that they are precursors to connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Methodology and research site

High school youth were the focus of this study because adolescents have been relatively understudied in the research on news media and political engagement. Given that youth are on the frontlines of our dramatically evolving digital media landscape and that news consumption habits formed during adolescence have been found to shape adult news habits (Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991; Collins and Armstrong, 2008; Grusin and Stone, 1993; Robinson and Levy, 1996), along with the fact that teens under 18 years of age are excluded from formal processes of political participation such as voting, jury duty or formal membership in a political party, we feel it is important to examine how high school students are engaging with news and politics. Moreover, because young people of color comprise the fastest growing segment of the US population and are expected to be the majority of the national population by 2045 (US Census Bureau, 2017), we feel that they need to be studied more pointedly in research on youth and media.

The case discussed here came from ethnographic research conducted from December 2014 to September 2017 among teenagers in Boston, Massachusetts. While observing and interviewing high school students as part of a multi-year project to learn about their social media practices related to news consumption and civic engagement, the first author of this paper encountered a group of youth who were members of an Environmental Youth Crew (EYC) – a group of high school students hired and trained by a local non-profit agency in the neighborhood of East Boston to carry out environmental research and advocacy on behalf of the neighborhood. The work done by these young people included interviewing local residents, community activists, elected officials and transportation planners about environmental issues; conducting online research to learn about environmental laws and regulations; conducting surveys of local residents regarding sleep interruption, asthma, and other environmentally related problems, and attending public meetings to discuss these topics with the larger community.

The researcher followed these young people's public posts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and followed newspaper coverage of their community organizing activities. Spending extended periods of time in the neighborhood where the EYC operated, she attended public community environmental meetings at which the young people spoke and interviewed EYC members as well as other young people who followed them via social media but were not members of the EYC.[2] A total of 14 youth were interviewed, 6 who were active EYC members and 8 who were not but had followed EYC members on social media. Individual interviews of 20–30 minutes in length were conducted at a local public library, a local youth center, and a public park where the EYC youth worked. The young people interviewed were between the ages of 15 and 17 years and were 58 percent Latino, 42 percent White, and 61 percent male. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the individuals discussed.

Research site

A predominantly working-class and low-income neighborhood from the 1930s to the early 2000s, East Boston's 41,000 residents were 53 percent Latino at the time of this

research, making it Boston's largest Latino neighborhood (American Community Survey, US Census Bureau, 2015). While 20 percent of the neighborhood's total number of residents lived at or below the federal poverty rate, 50 percent of its Latino residents lived at or below poverty levels (American Community Survey, US Census Bureau, 2015). This is significant, since nearly 60 percent of the youth interviewed in this study were Latino. Regardless of race, many families in this community were struggling economically and (either personally or through the experiences of friends and neighbors) had close contact with the realities of poverty and related challenges such as substandard housing, inadequate health care, domestic violence, or substance abuse. Nonetheless, residents of this densely packed urban neighborhood felt a strong sense of community pride linked to the geographic territory in which they lived. Both the long-term (predominantly older Italian American) and more recent (predominantly younger, Latino immigrant) populations in the neighborhood organized a variety of annual cultural parades, festivals and other community events and felt strong connections to their local churches, schools, sports leagues, civic organizations and youth programs. While turf identity is common in many Boston communities, the neighborhood identity of this particular community was especially strong, due to nearly 50 years of ongoing battles between local residents and state and corporate entities that, at various points in time, had threatened the neighborhood's quality of life. These threats had included undesirable types of development projects such as proposed garbage dumps, sewer treatment plants and parking lots. They also included the ongoing expansion efforts of nearby Logan International airport, which had taken East Boston land and homes by eminent domain and created serious environmental hazards for abutting residential communities. Since the 1960s, East Boston residents had struggled with high levels of air pollution from airport-related vehicle traffic and plane fumes, and had experienced the dissection of their community due to the construction of a major highway and two automobile tunnels that shuttled regional traffic between the airport, the downtown region, and surrounding suburbs. Home to some of the city's lowest-income census tracts, the neighborhood historically had few financial resources with which to fight environmental injustices, yet was renowned for its strong 'fighting spirit'.

Due to higher than average levels of toxic particles in the local air as a result of airplanes and airport-related vehicle traffic, East Boston has had some of the highest rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses in Massachusetts. A 2014 report by the Massachusetts Department of Health found that, compared to the rest of the state, children living near Logan airport were four times more likely to develop asthma, and adults were nearly twice as likely to develop chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and other lung illnesses (Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), 2014). East Boston is considered the fifth-most environmentally burdened community in Massachusetts (Faber and Krieg, 2005),[3] and because of a constellation of poverty-related conditions frequently facing low-income immigrants, such as living in homes located next to highways or directly under airplane flight paths and having a lack of access to quality healthcare, urban Latino youth are especially susceptible to environment-related health ailments, including asthma and sleep deprivation (Daniel et al., 2012; Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 2014).

Social media and youth civic participation

On 16 December 2014, teenagers Mark and Sammy, both 16, were interviewed on Boston's local cable TV news station regarding a sleep interruption study that they and other EYC teens had conducted to measure noise impacts on residents living next to an international airport. With guidance from their adult EYC program mentor, the youth were engaged in participatory action research (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013), a form of research that encourages community residents to collaboratively reflect on and discuss collective problems and collect data in order to seek solutions. Mark posted a link to the cable news show on Facebook and quickly received an avalanche of 'likes' from peers and neighbors, with comments expressing excitement, such as 'Cool!' and 'You go!' The story of the EYC's sleep study circulated widely online, was covered in the local newspaper, and caught the attention of an administrator at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). A month later, Sammy and Mark were invited to share the findings of their sleep study with officials at the FAA who agreed to alter nocturnal flight takeoff/landing patterns in ways that were less disruptive to the sleeping community below (Lynds, 2015). This exciting news – that teenagers had influenced public policy – was covered by the local newspaper and Mark and Sammy later posted the link to this newspaper article on their Facebook accounts, proudly showing off what they had accomplished. The professional newspaper coverage of their accomplishments gave them, their friends, and the larger community, a sense of pride that the teens' accomplishments had been publicly recognized. The posting and recirculation of 'real' news content on social media played a legitimizing function, validating the young people's efficacy as citizen activists whose voices and accomplishments mattered. Their posts received 'likes' and encouraging comments from their peers and adult neighborhood residents (many of whom, in turn, circulated the story among their online networks).[4] 'It made me feel proud', said Sammy, 'like we could *really* make a difference. I couldn't believe it!'

As EYC members, Sammy and Mark frequently posted updates on Facebook and Twitter about community meetings they attended, links to legacy media news articles related to their neighborhood's environmental problems, videos they shot on their cell phones or found online concerning air pollution and traffic in their community, and their personal observations and comments about all of these things.

'Check out this traffic!' wrote Mark, expressing exasperation in a Facebook post accompanied by a link to a video he had filmed on his cell phone documenting bumper-to-bumper gridlock traffic on a local residential street leading toward an automobile tunnel near his house. His video quickly got dozens of 'likes' and emotional comments from sympathetic local residents who were angry that they could not drive down their own neighborhood streets because of daily tunnel-related gridlock. Another teen, Lulie, who was Facebook friends with Mark, replied to Mark's post that she was afraid for the safety of younger children in the neighborhood: 'My little brothers and lots of kids play on that street!' Such public posts emotionally documented how cars and trucks from surrounding cities and towns (that routinely cut through East Boston's streets to access the tunnels or airport) affected local residents. As a result of the posts, a counterpublic (Couldry, 2010; Warner, 2002) of people upset about the situation began to form. In response to Mark's video, other youth posted angry complaints and emotional responses

such as 'A car almost killed me when I was crossing the street last week!' and 'This should be against the law!'

Besides expressing his personal feelings about the community's environmental problems via comments that conveyed anger, disbelief, irony, humor and hope, Mark's Facebook posts regularly contained information about community meetings to discuss neighborhood residents' higher-than-normal levels of sleep interruption, asthma, hearing loss and other possible airport-related health impacts that he and fellow EYC members were researching. Mark initially attended these meetings because of his work as an EYC member, but ended up becoming more heavily involved than he initially expected:

> Before I started working on this [sleep interruption] study, I didn't really think of airplane noise and how it affects us in so many ways. But I've learned a lot and the noise and traffic is getting so bad, that I wanted to do more.

Thus, he began using his cell phone to film the community meetings he attended, posting them on Facebook so that his friends and neighbors could become more informed. Sammy, whose family was from El Salvador, posted similar updates in Spanish and English on Facebook to share this information with the Latino community. In a tone of outrage, he explained, 'When I heard that Latinos have the *highest rates of asthma in the state*, I couldn't just sit there!'

Through social media, Mark, Sammy and other EYC youth shared the latest environmental news related to their community, including reposting stories from local news outlets and updates from environmental activist groups in the city and state with whom they networked online. They also discussed the community organizing work they did and their personal feelings and experiences about living next to an international airport. José, another EYC member, posted a link on Facebook to a survey he was helping to conduct, noting the personal impact of the issue: 'Almost everyone in my family has asthma. We're working with Neighborworks to deliver the Neighborworks America Survey to residents. This survey helps us understand the environmental impacts in East Boston. Please fill it out'. The EYC also tackled other problems, as when members Gabriela, 16, and Manny, 16, tweeted about garbage on local streets, attracting a flurry of additional tweets and photos from other residents who wanted to help document the worst trash areas in the neighborhood. With support from their adult EYC program coordinator, the youth contacted city officials to organize a meeting about the inadequate number of public garbage cans in the community, resulting in the placement of additional city garbage receptacles on local streets. In related environmental activism, EYC youth also worked to expand park space for their community.

Because they were all directly affected by airport-related traffic, air pollution and other environmental injustices, many young people in the community could relate to the online postings by EYC members. Yet, only a relatively small number of the EYC members' social media peers were involved in the EYC. Most were more passive participants or 'lurkers', who quietly followed the EYC youth on social media, watching their videos, 'liking' their posts, commenting on them, or re-circulating them. Ariana, 15, was one of those quiet followers. She had been Facebook friends with Mark for nearly a year and 'liked' his posts, until eventually deciding to join the EYC when she 'felt encouraged' by

what she saw. She and other youth interviewed for this study illustrated Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of 'situated learning' and 'legitimate peripheral participation', in which onlookers who are newcomers to a community initially participate in simple, low-risk tasks that support community goals, becoming increasingly involved until they become central actors in the community. Once Ariana joined the EYC, she participated in an environmental initiative in which EYC youth were involved: a community campaign to extend a local bike path in their neighborhood.

Youth Greenway Activism

The park known today as the East Boston Greenway was originally a nineteenth-century freight railway corridor that was closed in the 1970s. In the 1980s, community residents worked with the railway's owners, private philanthropic foundations, elected officials, and city and state agencies to convert the abandoned railroad tracks and surrounding land – an eyesore filled with garbage and weeds – into a park and bike path for this densely populated, lower-income neighborhood which, at the time, had the second lowest amount of green space in the city. Since some of the land in question was owned by the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), the state agency that runs Logan airport, residents spent years convincing the agency to relocate airport 'Park and Fly' car lots (located on Massport land next to the railway tracks) to another area so that the Greenway park could be built. The process took more than 20 years, but the Greenway Park finally opened in 2007, replete with community gardens, public art installations, playgrounds, and the neighborhood's first and only bike trail.

However, the mile-long bike trail, which abutted airport property, ended abruptly 'nowhere' at a locked gate on the outskirts of the airport. Local residents wanted to extend the bike path a mile and a half to a nearby beach and argued that extending the path to this popular location would incentivize its use and help ameliorate the neighborhood's high rates of obesity and heart disease, related, in part, to a dearth of outdoor spaces to safely jog, walk or bike. EYC youth began to organize in favor of extending the bike path, circulating an online petition in support of the project and also standing after school and on weekends in front of the community's main supermarket asking people to sign the petition. They were extremely active on social media, posting photos, updates, and opinions. Initially against the idea of extending the bike path, Massport officials claimed that having a path so close to airport property would create security risks (Fox, 2011; Harmon, 2011). Given this firm opposition by the state transportation agency, prospects for the park's extension originally seemed slim.

Yet, conversations about the bike path extension continued on social media, with youth and adult activists sharing ideas and strategies. As part of a participatory action research model, EYC youth conducted research to learn about other public parks in the United States that abutted airports. They gathered data and posted it on both the EYC Facebook page and on their personal social media accounts to counter Massport's assertions that community parks could not be built on land directly abutting airports for security reasons. A video made by a local activist was widely circulated on YouTube and Facebook, illustrating potential routes for the bike path extension and helping the public to envision what an extended bike path might look like, if built. With guidance from

established community groups who had worked on green space issues for decades, EYC members went door-to-door to discuss the bike path extension proposal with residents in English and Spanish. They also met with various city and state officials and spoke at public meetings and hearings, sharing these developments and local news coverage of them on social media. As the bike path was discussed online and at neighborhood meetings (with Mark, Sammy, Gabriela, José and other EYC youth posting about the issue on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube), public momentum for the project grew. The bike path extension that initially seemed impossible became a reality in May of 2016.

Inspired by the power of youth voices online, 15-year-old Ariana, who had 'passively' followed EYC youth members on Facebook for a year prior to joining them, felt inspired to join the EYC. 'I realized that change can happen, even if it seems impossible', she later told a public audience at a community meeting.[5] In contrast to upper middle class youth with access to a variety of in-school and afterschool enrichment programs designed to develop their sense of personal efficacy and voice, Ariana, Sammy, Mark, and José were urban public school students from working-class immigrant families living in a low-performing school district where they had not grown up filled with a sense of themselves as citizen activists able to affect political change. Yet, when they began to recognize themselves as part of an online community of like-minded people with similar concerns, they were gradually emboldened to take action.

After the opening of the Greenway's bike path extension, Ariana and other EYC members posted videos and photos on Facebook to publicize the extended bike path and to organize and promote free youth-run biking events to their peers. With logistical support from adult environmental activists, EYC teens organized and ran the community's first free summer kayaking program in 2016 (which continued in subsequent years) at the beach where the new bike path extension concluded. The Greenway bike path extension dramatically increased opportunities for outdoor physical activities for local residents, attracting the attention of a citywide bike-sharing program that had previously not operated in East Boston. In June of 2016, Ariana's enthusiastic Facebook post let her peers know about this exciting development: 'Come to a community meeting tonight to talk about locations for 10 new Hubway bike stations in East Boston!' Because of strong resident support, the bike share program began operating bike rentals in the neighborhood in the fall of 2016, increasing opportunities for recreational physical activity for local residents. Ariana, who was initially unaware of the EYC and had not previously thought of herself as an environmental activist, came to see herself as someone who shared the same grievances as Mark, Sammy, Gabriela, Manny, José and other youth who had posted about these issues on social media: 'Seeing what they were doing inspired me. It made me feel like I should and *could* do something too'. Once she recognized herself as part of the same community – a counterpublic of youth who cared about clean air, safe streets and green space – she not only followed the social media posts of her peers, but eventually joined them in doing community-organizing work.

Other young people interviewed, who were not EYC members but had followed members on social media, also noted that they gained awareness about community issues such as the bike path and airport-related health hazards from their peer's Facebook posts. Susy, 17, stated, 'I didn't know we had the highest asthma rates in the state. It makes me mad and I'm glad they're trying to do something about it'. Mike, 16, and

Kessie, 15, who were also not members of the EYC but both took part in the new summer kayaking and biking programs, learned about these initiatives through Ariana's Facebook and Instagram posts, explaining, 'We "liked" her posts and wanted to support it. We never did kayaking. It sounded fun'.

Discussion

Facebook and Twitter posts containing updates, observations, photos, videos, news links and expressions of outrage, disbelief, or triumph, are examples of 'artifacts of political engagement' (Clark and Marchi, 2017) that not only expressed who these young people saw themselves to be as individuals, but also enabled the formation of a counterpublic of people facing shared injustices. The EYC members' sharing of news and information on social media inspired other youth in their networks (who trusted, admired and identified with them) to 'like' the information, repost it, share their own personal experiences or opinions, fill out surveys, or attend related public events. As these young people participated in connective journalism practices, they were laying claim to a political subject position: one in which their voices and views had value.

The social media practices of the teenagers discussed in this article illustrate a ladder of political engagement that included the five key aspects of participatory politics (Kahne et al., 2014), namely, investigating an issue of public concern, dialogue and feedback to voice perspectives, circulation of information, production of new information, and recruiting others to join in collective actions for political change. All of these were facilitated via practices of connective journalism that eventually inspired some young people to participate in connective action. Youth who were not members of the EYC nonetheless learned about ongoing environmental issues affecting their community via the social media posts of their peers. Some took advantage of community programming such as biking and kayaking, that they had learned of via their social media network. Others did not, but noted that they had gained awareness from their social media networks about issues such as asthma, air pollution and sleep interruption affecting East Boston residents. We contend that all of these scenarios constitute forms of civic engagement, illustrating how contemporary social media practices can encompass journalistic functions of informing, inspiring and mobilizing.

Connective journalism often starts with something seemingly small, such as quietly following a person or issue on social media, or 'liking' a post. However, over time, people start to see themselves as part of a collective community with shared experiences. As Papacharissi (2014) notes, individuals do not 'join' counterpublics so much as they are hailed into them by finding their own emotions and viewpoints validated by others. Michael Warner makes a similar point that counterpublics exist not out of intentional creation on the part of would-be members, but by virtue of *being addressed* (Warner, 2002). When young people like Ariana and José saw people like themselves addressed by peers in their social media networks such as Mark and Sammy, they became hopeful that public policy goals were achievable and felt motivated to become personally involved in connective action. As Nick Couldry (2010) has pointed out, when people are able to share their experiences and feel that those experiences are heard and *matter* in relation to public policy, they can experience themselves as actors within counterpublics.

EYC members engaged in practices of connective journalism, using social media to communicate their concerns to the larger world, circulate updates, share news stories (including mainstream news coverage about the organizing work they were doing), gate-watch state and city officials, and mobilize residents. In doing so, they created a larger story about who they saw themselves to be both as individuals and as a community, motivating them to take steps toward political action. While only a small minority of the neighborhood's youth was actively involved in the EYC's environmental work, the inter-subjectivity enabled by social media helped youth who were not EYC members to recognize themselves as part of a larger collective that was confronting environmental injustice. In this way, the young people socialized each other into politics.

By examining young peoples' experiences of sharing emotions, stories and information via social media, we are able to better understand the process of how some youth are hailed into communities that engage in political discussions and actions, as they move along a ladder of engagement toward greater participation in civic life. As youth draw upon the connective capacities of social media in efforts to speak and be heard among the communities that matter to them, they also draw upon some of the classic concepts underlying journalism, as defined by the API, such as 'gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information'.[6] Journalism practices are commonly understood as the sharing of news to enable participation in the politics and culture of a society, and this is what the young people in this study did.

Connective journalism is not limited to young people, but the typical news and information sharing practices of youth clearly exemplify this phenomenon and the ways that news and civic participation are happening differently in the age of social media. News consumption and circulation today occur as individuals engage in online communicative acts that express their personal identities and worldviews together with how they feel others *ought to feel* about what is happening in the world. Connective journalism can become connective action when individuals begin to understand the counter-narratives that they generate as a *first* step, rather than a final step, in the communicative process. What differentiates connective journalism from tradition journalism is that the latter usually focuses on storytelling as the final step in a communicative process, whereas the former often presumes a solutions-oriented outcome to news and information sharing.

Conclusion

Illustrating how practices of connective journalism can inspire political engagement, this article has attempted to portray a continuum of communicative action in order to elucidate how individuals actually move from first considering whether or not to express themselves online *at all* (even by seemingly small actions such as 'liking' a post), to the point at which they share personal feelings, experiences and meaningful news with their online networks, and finally to a point in which they are willing to involve themselves in the work of political organizing, protesting or policymaking. Whereas traditional journalism is associated with the practices of building an accurate *story*, connective journalism is associated with the practices of building an individual and collective *identity*, reinforced in the telling of the story by and for a particular network of people.

Because the emphasis is on sharing, there are significant emotional dimensions to the practices of connective journalism, as youth share what feels important to them, often determined, as noted above, through feelings such as outrage, anticipation, joy, or appreciation. An emotion-based approach to news can have serious drawbacks, as illustrated when people share news they know is false simply because it confirms their feelings and worldview (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Silverman, 2016a, 2016b; Tavernise, 2016). Yet, it is also important to note that the emotions underlying connective journalism can motivate individuals to political action, particularly those young people who are marginalized from mainstream news because of their race or social class and excluded from institutional politics because of their age or immigration status. While certainly not all online communicative acts are political, all people feel the need to speak and be heard on matters that affect their lives. Studying the social media practices of young people who have become informed and, in some cases, politically involved in public policy issues helps us understand how journalism operates in young people's everyday lives, exemplifying the concept of connective journalism and its growing relationship to political awareness and youth citizenship in the 21st century.

Funding

Notes

1. These other ways included starting or joining a political group on a social network site (11%), engaging in 'buycotting' (11%), writing an email or blog about a political candidate or issue (7%), and contributing an article, opinion piece, picture, or video about a political candidate or issue to an online news site (6%). These numbers were slightly higher than 'offline' political activities in which young people reported engagement, including participating in a boycott (10%), participating in an event where youth expressed political views, that is, poetry slams, musical events, and so on (7%) or taking part in a protest, demonstration, or sit-in (6%).
2. The PI first met some of the EYC youth at community meetings, where she began speaking with them. Others were contacted through the non-profit organization that hosted the EYC program. Youth who were not EYC members were reached via snowball sampling in which EYC members asked Facebook friends who had commented or posted in response to their posts if they would be interested in being interviewed for this study. Standard IRB protocols were followed and no youth were paid for their participation. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.
3. In January 2015, 10 years after Faber and Krieg (2005) was published, Faber stated that he had not seen significant changes in the environmental situation. See H. Goldstein 'Massachusetts has an Environmental Justice Problem' 20 January 2015 on NPR affiliate WCAI: http://cape andislands.org/post/massachusetts-has-environmental-justice-problem#stream/0 (accessed 25 August 2017).
4. Similar to the March 2018 gun control activism of students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the case discussed here caused adults to sit up and take notice. In both situations, part of the reason adults recirculated young people's social media posts was because they were surprised and impressed by what high school students were doing on behalf of the larger community.

5. Ariana and Mark were later awarded citations from the Boston City Council for their organizing efforts and Ariana was invited to speak at the 2016 graduation of a local school to inspire other young people to get involved in their community. In fall 2018, Mark started college with plans to study environmental transportation planning.
6. American Press Institute website, available at: https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/ (accessed 20 March 2018).

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