News Translators: Latino Immigrant Youth, Social Media, and Citizenship Training

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Abstract

This article discusses how low-income Latino immigrant youth use the Internet for newsgathering. Contrary to previous assumptions about the digital divide, the youth almost universally owned cell phones and got most of their news online, although poverty affected the quality of their connectivity. However, a generational digital divide was evident, in which Internet-savvy youth had access to timelier and more diverse news than their parents. In a reversal of typical parent–child roles, the youth were "news translators" for their parents, explaining U.S. news stories and their implications. Moreover, in seeking, critiquing, creating, and posting content online, the youth gained participatory and deliberative skills useful for civic engagement in a democracy.

Keywords

Latino immigrant youth, digital divide, news, social media

Given the historic and growing socio-economic inequality in the United States (e.g., DeSilver, 2013; Saez & Zucman, 2014; Someiller & Price, 2015), particularly between "White" populations and racially minoritized populations (i.e., African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans), the "digital divide" or unequal access to new communication technologies has been a concern regarding the future of democratic participation (e.g., Mossberger, Tolbert, & Hamilton, 2012; Norris, 2001; U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications & Information Administration, 1995).

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At the same time, there have been concerns that new generations of young people are "tuned out" when it comes to news and politics (e.g., Jones, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). What might this mean for news consumption and political deliberation among low-income racial minorities in the United States? By interviewing 30 Latino[1] young people aged 15 to 20 living in Boston's largest Latino neighborhood—one of the city's lowest income communities—this qualitative study learned what types of access Latino immigrant youth had to the Internet, what types of information they sought online, and how they learned about current events and shared information of interest to them.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to contribute to understandings of digital newsgathering behaviors and political knowledge among low-income Latino immigrant youth in the United States. Youth between the ages of 15 and 20 are the focus of this study because the younger age spectrum of "youth" is relatively understudied in the research on youth and news media. Major studies of "youth and news" have focused predominantly on news habits of people in the age range of 18 to 34 (e.g., Associated Press, 2008; Brown, 2005; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004; Patterson, 2007; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004, Pew Research Journalism Project, 2013; Purcell et al., 2010). Although it is known that news consumption habits formed during adolescence shape adult news habits (e.g., Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991; Collins & Armstrong, 2008; Grusin & Stone, 1993; Robinson & Levy, 1996), relatively few studies of news consumption have focused exclusively on youth under age 21, and even fewer of these have expressly studied low-income Latino immigrant youth. Minority youth now represent a majority of students in U.S. public schools, with Latinos the largest group (Hussar & Bailey, 2014). Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States and one of the country's fastest growing populations, with low-income, immigrant youth under age 21 comprising nearly half of the entire U.S. Latino population (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). Forty percent of the U.S. Hispanic population is below the age of 21, most of whom come from low-income and immigrant families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Yet, there has been little research on this group's digital media practices as related to news and political knowledge. Given projections that the United States will be a majority minority country by the year 2044, with Latinos the largest population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) and that this will occur within the overall U.S. youth population by 2020 (Colby & Ortman, 2015), this study helps fill a gap in scholarship on the news habits of one of the country's most significant groups of future citizens.

Literature Review

Contrary to earlier concerns about the digital divide, nationwide research has found that cell phones have helped narrow the digital divide between Latinos and Whites (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Patten, 2013) and that regular access to the Internet

exists among large majorities of U.S. youth across racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Cohen, Kahne, Bower, Middaugh, & Rodowski, 2012; Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Although youth of all races tend to be more proficient users of mobile media than their parents (e.g., Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), a generational digital divide between youth and adults is especially acute in Latino communities (Livingston, 2011; Rouse, Kawashima-Ginsberg, & Thrutchley, 2015). The Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project found that Latino youth are significantly more likely to have smartphones than their parents (Livingston & Lopez, 2010; Lopez et al., 2013), particularly when parents are foreign born and/or lack a high school degree (the case of most of the youth interviewed for this study).

Although contemporary youth do not consume news the way earlier generations did (e.g., Jones, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Purcell et al., 2010), they are getting news in new ways, via cell phone texts, social networking sites, blogs, and entertainment media (e.g., Bennett, 2008; Malik, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013; Marchi, 2012; Singer, Clark, & Monserrate, 2009; Turner, 2005). Digital media have become the medium of choice for youth seeking news on political or current events (e.g., Cohen et al., 2012; Frola, 2011; Kohut, Parker, Keeter, Doherty, & Dimock, 2007; Lenhart, Purcell, et al., 2010) and young people are becoming civically engaged online in a variety of ways, including circulating online petitions, sharing political videos on YouTube, and organizing protests (e.g., Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Bennett, 2008; Ito, 2009; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Marin, 2013, 2012; Papacharissi, 2013; Soep, 2014). Given the massive "migration" of young people to digital media over the past 20 years (Watkins, 2010), numerous studies have detailed the ways that youth use new media for identity construction, building friendships and communities, enjoying leisure time and hobbies, expressing themselves creatively, and seeking information of all kinds (e.g., boyd, 2014; Fisherkeller, 2011; Gardner & Davis, 2013; Ito, 2009; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Watkins, 2009; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

However, there has been significantly less research on digital media use among low-income minority youth. The relatively few studies focused on this population show minority youth to be extremely engaged with mobile devices and social media, with Hispanic, Black, and Asian youth spending significantly *more* time on mobile devices than White youth, and Hispanic youth among the *most* avid users of social networks (Lenhart, 2015; Wartella & Lauricella, 2011). Young Latinos use social networking sites at higher rates (80%) than non-Latino Whites (70%) and African Americans (75%), and low-income Latino youth are more likely than their higher income Latino counterparts to use social media (Rouse et al., 2015). This can be explained, in part, because immigrant youth, and especially minoritized female youth from immigrant families, rely heavily on social media to facilitate their integration "outwardly" with the new host country and "inwardly" with the family's country of origin (Elias, 2013), and as a way to connect with and maintain their hybrid identities (Rivera & Valdivia, 2013). In particular, working-class transnational Latina teens are heavy users of social media to bridge the transnational cultures comprising their world,

create spaces of belonging, and deal with the loss and disjunctions that accompany translocation (Vargas, 2008).

Correlations exist between race/ethnicity and the use of cell phones to connect to the Internet: with 35% of Hispanic teens and 44% of Black teens using their cell phones to go online, as compared with just 21% of White teens (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). White youth are far more likely to have at least one computer at home than are Latino or African American youth, and are also more likely to have Internet access at home (Greenberg & Mastro, 2011). A large national study of media and political participation among people aged 15 to 25 found that youth across racial and ethnic groups used new media to engage in participatory politics in roughly equal proportions (Cohen et al., 2012). Two smaller studies of low-income Black and Latino teens noted that these youth relied on Facebook to learn about local gang violence in their neighborhoods (that was not reported in mainstream news) to keep themselves safe (Cortesi, Haduong, Gasser, & Beaton, 2013; Marchi, 2012).

Teenagers of all races are drawn to mobile media for reasons of portability, as well as for the sense of privacy and emancipation from parents that these media offer (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Ling, 2007; Ling & Yttri, 2002). Having a cell phone has become an indispensible element of young people's social lives (e.g., boyd, 2007; Clark, 2005; J. Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007) and for low-income immigrant youth, whose families are more likely than non-immigrant youth to live in cramped quarters, cell phones provide a crucial private space to access information and have peer group interactions away from parents (de Block & Buckingham, 2007). Yet, as media professor Gerard Goggin (2013) notes in his overview of the field of mobile media, comparatively little research has studied mobile media use among racial minority youth. This is even truer regarding low-income immigrant minority youth and newsgathering. Most studies about immigrant youth and media have focused on the role of media in education, acculturation, and identity formation (e.g., Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2012; Masten, Liebkind, & Hernandez, 2012; Orellana, 2009; Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2004). It is known that Latino youth and their parents inhabit different "information ecologies," affecting family cohesion and parental authority (McDevitt & Butler, 2011; Wong & Tseng, 2008). But, there has been little discussion of the ways that low-income Latino immigrant youth use mobile media for news information gathering or the implications of this for their level of civic engagement.

Method

Thirty individual, tape-recorded interviews of 45 to 60 minutes each were conducted from October 23 to November 5, 2013, with Latino youth living in East Boston, the largest Latino neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. According to the 2013 *American Community Survey* (ACS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, East Boston is Boston's largest Latino neighborhood, a community of 40,000 where 53% of residents identify as Latino. The actual number of Latinos in this community is higher, as many are undocumented. One of the last Boston neighborhoods that is not

yet widely gentrified, East Boston houses the city's highest number of new immigrants from Latin America (ACS, 2013). Of Latino families in Boston, more than 50% live at or below the federal poverty line (ACS, 2013). All youth interviewed for this study came from immigrant families[2] who faced concerns such as economic, housing and educational instability, legal documentation issues within the family, and other disruptive phenomena commonly affecting low-income immigrant families. Thirteen youth were born in Latin America (migrating to the United States when very young) and 17 were born in the United States, with 24 enrolled in high school, two enrolled in General Education Diploma (GED) programs, two enrolled in college, and two high school graduates working part-time.

Subjects were recruited from a well-known non-profit youth organization located in East Boston. This center provides afterschool and summer programs directed toward "at risk" youth who, because of their socio-economic status, are considered in danger of dropping out of school or becoming involved with drugs or gangs. According to the center's annual reports, youth participants range from successful college-bound students to those who are failing classes and/or are in trouble with the law. The common denominator is that they are from families struggling with challenges such as single parenting, poverty, domestic violence, inadequate health care, substandard housing, or homelessness. Latinos comprise a majority of this youth center's participants, which is why it was selected as a research site. However, the fact that subjects were youth center participants and self-selected to participate in this study means they may have been more outgoing and expressive than randomly selected youth subjects. Moreover, their location in a liberal, heavily Democratic city, rather than an isolated rural or conservative area of the United States, may also have affected their views.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, creating conditions in which the youth could speak freely about their media use and demonstrate their favorite websites and apps. Among the interview questions posed, participants were asked about their favorite websites, platforms, and apps and were asked which ones they felt were most popular with their peers and why. They were asked how they got information about current events (i.e., whether via TV, newspapers, websites, social media, or other formats) and how they shared stories they felt were interesting. They were also asked to discuss news stories that they had talked about recently with friends and whether there were any political news stories or issues that were important to them.

With institutional review board approval, subjects were recruited by distributing bilingual flyers about this study to the youth center's staff, its program participants, and their parents. Flyers were posted around the center and the principal investigator (PI) visited several of the weekly programs (the song writing program, youth radio station, youth chorus, and homework club) to discuss the study and ask for volunteers. All interviews were conducted in the center's conference room, directly before or after subjects' regularly scheduled programming. Written consent was acquired from all participants, along with parental consent for those below the age of 18. Half of the subjects were male and half female, with ancestry from Brazil (3), Colombia (6), the Dominican Republic (2), Ecuador (2), El Salvador (4), Guatemala (3), Honduras (1), Mexico (6), and Peru (3). All lived in homes where Spanish or, in three cases,

Portuguese was the dominant language spoken by their parents, but all youth were fluent in English. This was evident in conversations with the PI and in her observations of the ease with which the youth navigated, posted, and read English language social media as they showed her their favorite websites. Some youth were completely bilingual whereas others understood the language of their parents but did not speak it well. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant confidentiality.

Findings

Without disregarding the serious impacts of economic disparity on the daily lives of low-income youth, this study's findings substantiate those of national research finding that more than 95% of Latino youth connect to the Internet on a daily basis (Cohen et al., 2012). Cell phone ownership was nearly ubiquitous among the youth interviewed. Only one student did not own a cell phone, whereas two said they were temporarily phoneless (one owned a cell but her service was cut when her family could not pay the bill, whereas the other had his phone stolen at gunpoint days before the interview).[3] However, though 29 of the 30 participants owned cell phones, indicating that their socio-economic status did not prevent them for acquiring mobile devices, individuals reported that the cost of monthly cell phone providers was a significant expense for their families which, in the case of at least one student, meant her cell phone access was cut off when her family could not pay the bill. The youth also noted that Internet service was less reliable with low-cost providers (used mainly by low-income people). Jose, 17, said,

> If you have an iPhone and you are covered by a large franchise like AT&T or Verizon, then you won't lose connection to the Internet. But, if you're covered by a cheaper company, like Metro-PCS, it can sometimes become difficult to stay connected.

So, while the digital divide did not play out in terms of levels of cell phone ownership or familiarity with social media platforms, the economic instability and physical insecurity faced disproportionately by low-income minorities illustrate the fragile nature of digital access for these populations.

This study confirmed that traditional definitions of civic engagement do not properly capture contemporary ways that young people learn about and respond to issues of political import (Bennett 2008; Zukin et al., 2006). Cell phones were the preferred medium through which subjects became informed about the world around them, and social networks, rather than traditional news gatekeepers, determined the types of news they received most immediately. Within their networked communities, youth chose to share stories and images that emotionally moved them, whether because they were considered humorous, cute, sad, angering or urgent. From this study came six findings: (a) Youth got most of their news from social media rather than traditional news sources; (b) they followed issues of personal interest, rather than deliberately following "the News"; (c) entertainment media was a major source of news, including political news; (d) youth became what I call "news translators" for their non-English

speaking parents; (e) youth understood the need to evaluate the trustworthiness of information; (f) digital media activities served as a kind of informal citizenship training.

Finding News via Social Media

Most of the youth did not regularly read newspapers or go out of their way to watch TV news, although they saw TV news when their parents watched news in Spanish or Portuguese. TV news was described as "background noise" in the home, to which family members might or might not pay attention while doing other activities such as cooking, cleaning, sleeping, homework, or talking on the phone. Most youth got their news online, rather than from TV or newspapers. Cell phones were preferred over personal computers for their privacy and portability (many of the youth did not have home computers). Those with access to computers at school or home noted that the machines were usually located in common rooms that lacked privacy. Similar to many of her peers, Selma, 19, liked that she could "access the world" via her cell phone, away from the eyes of adults "when I have downtime, in my bedroom, or outside." Because her family did not have a car, she took buses and subways daily and checked her phone for updates en route. Amanda, 15, appreciated the privacy and immediacy of her phone: "Sometimes they're all [friends] laughing at a joke and I don't get it. I don't want to let them know I don't get it, so I look it up on my phone." Alicia, 18, said, "My cell phone gives me constant access to the Internet. I get automatic updates from my Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter accounts. I prefer to receive information via my phone rather than computer or TV because it's more convenient."

The most popular websites accessed were Facebook (*every* person interviewed had a Facebook account), Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, Google, and YouTube. Youth used these sites primarily to share photos; share what they were doing; see what friends were up to; and view music videos, movies, or TV shows. They also used online sites to learn about celebrities, sports, and other entertainment-related news. Risa, 18, explained, "If something crazy happens in pop culture, I don't even Google it, I just go to YouTube." They also used online sites and apps for practical information. Salisbel, 18, who noted that Facebook, Gmail, Tumblr, and weather.com were "always up" on her smart phone browser, said, "I have a weather app called Sprocket about fashion and weather. . . . They tell you how to dress for the weather. I always check that once a day."

Although the young people's digital media use was primarily focused on friends, hobbies, and interests, it also provided information about news of a political nature. When asked if they could name a story that had been in the news recently, 28 out of 30 were able to name more than one. Nearly everyone mentioned the October 2013 Government Shutdown and many noted the mayoral race happening in Boston at the time. Another topic frequently mentioned was a local ballot initiative in the November 2013 Boston elections, regarding whether a casino should be built in a section of the city that directly bordered the area where most of the youth lived. This contentious issue had been covered for months in citywide news and was also debated on Facebook,

with feverish campaigns for and against it. About half the interviewees also mentioned the murder of a local math teacher by her student (which occurred the first week of the interviews), and nearly a third mentioned protests happening in Syria, Brazil, Venezuela, Russia, or China, although they did not always know the reasons for the protests. The initial source of most of this news was social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter. While exposing them to international, national, and regional news, Facebook was also an important source for hyperlocal news that was not covered by mainstream outlets. The night before she was interviewed, Ana, 16, got a Facebook notification on her phone about a shooting in her neighborhood:

> There was all kinds of comments. Some people had apps of police scanners, so you could hear stuff straight from the police. Then, before bed last night, I checked the TV news and there was NOTHING! So, I went back on Facebook and there were more updates about it.

Other youth mentioned getting Facebook updates about neighborhood gang violence, house fires, and nocturnal sexual assaults on women walking home from the local subway station.

Youth reported that having a cell phone meant they did not need to consciously seek news because it would find them anywhere. Lissa 16, explained, "Twitter is almost like the news. I have it on my phone and if I'm holding my phone, it's like an instinct. I just go to it. If something's going on, everyone's talking about it on Twitter." For Paula, 20, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr were "the four sites I cruise most. I pretty much have them on all the time in the background, so I check them all the time." Santos, 18, described himself as "a very passive kind of person," who didn't go out of his way to look for news: "Whenever I happen upon information, it's just because I *happened* upon it, something on Tumblr or Facebook." Like nearly all the youth interviewed, Jenny 20, felt that if a story were important, it would find her: "I feel like I don't really need to read the news too much because [my friends] are always posting stuff I can see to keep me informed." Such responses illustrate an emerging phenomenon among youth, in which "news" is not uniquely defined and transmitted by professional news organizations, but by the interests and needs of particular social networks.

Following "Issues" Rather Than "The News"

Becoming aware of a news story on social media often inspired youth to search for more details on legacy and other news websites and to follow a story over time. Concerning the government shutdown, Remmi (20) said that news of it "first arrived to me on Facebook but it wasn't clear to me what that meant and I didn't know if it was true or not. I didn't understand it. It said nothing about how we would be affected . . . so I Googled it." Hermes, 20, also first heard of the government shutdown on social media:

> I saw posts on Twitter and Facebook saying it might happen and then *more* posts saying that it *did* happen. I went on Reddit to find out more . . . there was like thousands of people talking about it and I clicked on different links to learn more.

He later found himself explaining to his Salvadoran parents the implications of what a government shutdown could mean.

Rather than habitually following "the News," these youth followed *issues* that were important to them. Kim, 17, had "a lot of friends who are involved with the immigration movement. I get information from them and from Facebook. I pay attention to news about immigration, because it affects my family." Nelson, 18, called immigration "the most important political issue," whereas Kassie, 19, noted, "Immigration news is important to me because my family and lots of my friends are immigrants. I support the Dream Act." Other issues the youth followed included police brutality against unarmed minorities, reproductive rights, global warming, and news about their families' countries of origin. For example, Santos, 18, the son of Brazilian immigrants, who defined himself as "not very political," got political information via social media:

> On Facebook, I've been hearing about all these demonstrations and protests all over the world, like there's tension in Brazil about the Olympics and all this money being invested to build buildings and brand new stadiums for this 2-week event, when so many people in Brazil are living in very serious, sub-par conditions. . . . Also, there have been protests in Russia over gay rights. And of course there's the government shutdown here.

He also followed immigration rights and women's rights. "It *really* breaks my heart to hear of any injustices and human rights violations that are going around still, even in places as liberal as America." For his main sources of news, he turned to Facebook, Tumblr, and the websites Boston.com and CNN.com, which he usually accessed via his phone. But, as his phone had recently been stolen, he felt "out of touch with what's going on," noting it would take a long time for him to afford a new phone. Like many of his peers, Santos translated and explained U.S. news and political issues, such as gay marriage, for his older, Portuguese-speaking family members.

Entertainment and Hobbies as Sources of Political News

Many subjects who said, "I don't follow news much" nonetheless had up-to-the-minute information related to entertainment, celebrities or sports, which they regularly accessed via their phones. In further discussions about the stories they followed, it became evident that some were connected to larger political themes, illustrating that young people's gravitation toward popular culture is not mutually exclusive with developing political knowledge. Certain youth spoke passionately about sexism or racism in popular movies or songs, whereas others expressed their views on the ethics of athletes taking steroids. A 16-year-old avid video gamer discussed a story he learned about on Facebook: "There's this person from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) wanting to sue Nintendo because of supposed animal cruelty on Nintendo video games, even though none of the animals are *real* on the games! It's so stupid! A friend showed it to me" (Manny, 16). Manny's interest in discussing video games on Facebook with a network of other gamers led him to become aware of PETA

and the animal rights movement. It also provoked him to develop his own political position regarding what he felt counted or not as harmful behavior toward animals.

Nearly half of the students had heard about the winner of the September 2013 Miss America pageant, Nina Davuluri, on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or YouTube. Many mentioned the racist responses Davuluri received online as the first Miss America of Indian ancestry. Nico, 16, said,

> I learned about the Miss America pageant on Tumblr. I remember someone reposting a few pictures and a story about how people were being outrageously racist about it. People made a lot of comments on Twitter and Steven Colbert also had a little skit about it. I mean, just because she's not white or blond or whatever, she's an American citizen and has a right to be Miss America.

Julia, 18, who heard about the pageant on Facebook, Twitter, and *The Colbert Show*, echoed Nico's disapproval:

> I thought it was terrible how racist people were and what people were tweeting about her. I was really upset by it. But, one of the good things about Facebook or social media is that I didn't necessarily look it upon my own, but scrolling through my news feed or scrolling through Tumblr, I saw more info about it. . . . I saw a quote from her that said something like, "The girl next door is evolving in the US" or something like that. I thought that was a great quote.

Neither of these teens had seen the actual pageant on TV but, like others interviewed, learned about it via social media, where they were exposed to online debates regarding race in contemporary U.S. society and were able to view, critique, post or repost opinions on the topic in the public domain.

The youth discussed numerous other examples of Facebook and Twitter posts that motivated them to reflect on civic issues related to collective identity, national belonging, and the common good. For example, David, 20, the son of Colombian immigrants, was inspired via social media to consider the subject of economic inequality. When a friend posted a video link of actor and comedian, Russell Brand, on Facebook, David "liked" it, explaining, "He was talking about a revolution of the poor against the rich." The YouTube clip was an October 23, 2013, interview on BBC's *Newsnight*, conducted by British journalist Jeremy Paxman. The 10-min video clip showed Brand arguing that a revolution of the disenfranchised against the 1% was needed to achieve true democracy. The interview, which most youth would not have seen otherwise, went viral, receiving 8,888,725 hits and myriad comments on YouTube (as of the interview date November 4, 2013), due to its circulation on Facebook.

Further illustrating how engagement with entertainment news via social media can introduce youth to political themes, Rafa, 17, gave the following response when asked whether he cared about a political issue:

> Yes, the SOPA bill! There was a petition on the Internet against SOPA. The SOPA bill's, like, I watch a lot of video games on YouTube. . .but a lot of people do commentary over it and have their own experience with it. . . . And the SOPA bill would put a limit on that.

> Like movie companies could take a video down if they have a specific thing in it from
> that movie. The *SOPA* bill would, like, limit what you can poach from the Internet, and
> that's against free speech, against how people can express themselves. So, I signed the
> petition to make sure that doesn't happen.

A movie buff and avid video gamer, Rafa first learned of the Stop Online Piracy Act
(SOPA) from watching one of his favorite online shows—a comedic movie guide
called *The Nostalgia Critic*. Unfamiliar with the term *SOPA*, he later Googled it to
learn more and began following the issue on Facebook and Twitter, sharing online
posts with his friends.

Many of the youth mentioned shows not associated with "news" as sources of
information about current events, with nearly a quarter mentioning *South Park*, a pop-
ular cartoon show available on Comedy Central. The show was watched on TV, com-
puters and hand-held devices, with old episodes available via YouTube. Links to
popular episodes were shared widely among friends via social media. When asked to
provide an example of a political issue they learned about from the show, various
youth enthusiastically recounted episodes, locating online clips to show the PI:

> They had a funny episode recently about Apple and iTunes and all that. You know how
> when you update things on your computer, it gives you pages and pages and pages of
> conditions or whatever, and you don't read it, you just click "agree." And, one day on
> South Park, one of the characters disappears and Apple takes him and turns him into a
> terrible science experiment because it was stated in the fine print. (Lucia, 20)

Through this satirical cartoon, Lucia considered for the first time the importance of
reading website privacy policies—a topic of growing political importance. Meanwhile,
Hermes gained an understanding of civil rights violations occurring within U.S. gov-
ernment spying operations from watching *South Park*:

> South Park was making fun of the NSA spying on us, and the whistle-blowers. There was
> an episode where Cartman . . . wanted to form a Meetup to fight the NSA spying on
> people, but then he says, "The NSA found out about our meeting. They're reading my
> tweets." The NSA knows everything he's doing. Then, he goes to work for the NSA. And
> it shows all these people in suits spying on everyone, observing the dumbest details, like
> what TV show they watch, and they're torturing Santa Claus. What I thought was really
> funny was how they showed the NSA is reading people's Twitter posts and emails. And,
> when Cartman tries to expose it, nobody cares. His own mother just says, "Yes, I know
> the government tortures people, honey, but they're keeping us safe." It was hilarious and
> also a depressing situation. (Hermes, 20)

Alex, 16, first learned about Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law from *South Park*: In
a recent episode, "they were making fun of Zimmerman and the 'Stand Your Ground'
rule. So, I looked up 'Stand Your Ground' to know what it meant." He felt shows like
South Park were useful in informing people about current events "because when peo-
ple joke about things, I trust the source more. They're joking about bad things, things

that are wrong." Entertainment media not only exposed the young people to current events, but also motivated them to seek additional information on unfamiliar topics (such as "NSA" or "SOPA"). Cell phones made it fast and easy to do so.

Youth as "News Translators"

Numerous interviewees noted that their parents had not finished high school and had limited English skills (some parents also had limited literacy in their native language because they lacked sufficient opportunities to attend school in their native countries). Most of the young people described their parents as having meager digital skills. In a reversal of the traditional generational roles typical in non-immigrant families, the youth, who predominantly used mainstream English language websites, rather than ethnic news media, found themselves explaining U.S. news to their parents, rather than the other way around. Danny, 20, who had recently won a scholarship to college, felt his educational attainment and technological savvy put him in a more advantaged position than his parents: "I like to think that the young generation is pretty smart. Smarter than the older generation, sometimes. Some of our parents never even graduated high school." He used the term *smart* to refer to higher levels of formal education and technological skill, but distinguished between "smarts" and "wisdom." Like most of the youth, he respected his parents' life experiences while recognizing that he was more up-to-date regarding U.S. news. He continued, "We have that education and we think we're smarter, even though, you know, it's different because the older generation might be *wiser*."

Similar sentiments were repeated by other youth. Kim, 17, a high school senior who lived in a single-parent household, discussed the generation gap between her and her Peruvian mother, who spoke little English:

> I feel like my mother is less informed than me. She's working. She's busy. When she comes home she's tired and puts on the Spanish news, but she doesn't pay attention that much because she's cooking or doing other things. . . . She reads the Spanish newspaper, but . . . unless you are very tech savvy, and my Mom is very old fashioned, then you don't get up to date on what's going on. You don't have the chance to see lots of different opinions and debates . . . I think because of the energy that I put to find out information and the technology that is offered to me, that I'm better informed.

Kim noted two instances when she needed to explain current events to her mother. The first was news of a "lock down" (a term her mother had never heard of) in relation to a nearby school shooting. The second was the Boston Marathon bombing:

> With the Boston Marathon bombing, I had to inform her. I think my mom jumps to conclusions because she is so old fashioned. . . . So, I often have to inform her of other sides of a story or more details than she normally gets.

Jaime, 18, also felt he was more informed about contemporary U.S. events than his parents: "They came through a lot, they've lived through things I wasn't around for. . . .

But, I'm more technology-wise and, in the online political world, I'm more informed."
Hermes 20, whose Salvadoran mother cleaned offices, felt similarly:

> I feel my mom is less informed, probably because we're definitely from different
> generations and she's not Internet savvy. She works, she comes home and cooks, she
> watches a little bit of TV, but . . . she doesn't really care that much about it. I'm online,
> I'm more connected all day than she is, so I tend to hear about things before she does and
> have more information which I can explain to her.

Tito, 16, summarized the type of exchanges that immigrant youth often have with their
parents: "They're updated about what's going on in Colombia and I know more about
what's going on in the English-speaking world. I tell them what's happening here and
they tell me what's happening over there."

Some parents did not own cell phones and those who did tended to use them differently from their children, reserving them for talking rather than Internet surfing. Erik,
19, described this difference: "My Mom has a flip phone. I have an iPhone, so I have
apps—CNN, Boston.com, news updates from the *Boston Herald*. I click on daily to
see what's going on." Susie, 18, one of the few teens whose mother had a Facebook
account (which Susie set up for her), noted the difference between how she and her
mother used Facebook: "I'm constantly bombarded by opinions and facts about all
kinds of things because of Facebook." She used it to search, receive, and post information, whereas her mother went on Facebook infrequently, just to see photos from family in the Dominican Republic:

> I don't think my Mom knows how to use Facebook like I do. Like, when the Boston
> bombing happened, when things like that happen, I want to be on top of things. I'm
> Googling everything and getting as much as possible. My Mom doesn't do that. On the
> Internet, you are able to get updates and very strong opinions and it's more global.

Evaluating Information

Adept at online searches, many of the youth understood the need to evaluate the trustworthiness of information, but those aged 18 to 20 were most explicit about ways to
do this. As all the youth were proficient in English and had grown up attending U.S.
schools from at least elementary school, age, rather than immigrant status, correlated
with their ability to evaluate online sources. They tried to ascertain the veracity of
online information in a variety of ways, including scrutinizing a website's "look," following links to determine a story's original source, and going to legacy news websites.
Websites with poor aesthetics were associated with lower credibility, and youth compared stories across multiple sites as a way to assess veracity. Jaime, 18, tried to

> make sure it's a primary source, not too far removed from the direct source. Also, usually
> if a web address says .gov or .com. or .edu, you can tell if it's coming from a university
> or government source or a commercial source.

Susie, 18, also checked web addresses: "I usually look at the source, like if it's promoted by the government or by a business or some sort of legitimate source. I ask myself, 'Could I cite this source?'" Tito, 16 noted, "I go to ABC, NBC, those types of news sites, or CNN. Then, you can compare a story on each of them." When a story was "all over the Internet," the youth tended to believe it was true. Amanda, 16, exemplified this feeling:

> If it's online and *everyone's* talking about it, it's probably true. You have to ask yourself, is this believable? Did someone make this up? But, there are some *real* things that are unbelievable! So, if I heard about it at first, I might think it's a joke. But, then I would check on a real, official thing like the *Boston Globe*.

Yet, while recognizing the need to verify "the truth," most youth had difficulty defining terms such as *bias* or *reliable*. This underscores the need for critical media literacy courses in high school, something youth themselves recognize (Cohen et al., 2012). For low-income immigrant Latino youth, as media studies scholar Lucila Vargas notes, this is especially important, as in many cases "working-class transnational parents are ill equipped to guide their children's use of media" (Vargas, 2009, p. 104).

Informal Citizenship Training

This study also found that digital media use among low-income Latino immigrant youth served as an informal training ground for participatory citizenship, given that they learned how to search for information; gained exposure to conflicting political opinions; could develop a sense of solidarity with like-minded individuals regarding issues important to them; and, could express their own political viewpoints by "liking" and sharing Facebook posts, re-tweeting information, forwarding YouTube links, or signing online petitions. The portability and privacy of mobile devices connected the youth to social and political worlds beyond their immediate environment, helped socialize them regarding the norms of deliberative democracy (which differed substantially from the norms in many of their parents' countries), and allowed them to make themselves and their families more informed members of U.S. society. Although their online activities were predominantly oriented toward hobby and entertainment interests rather than "hard" political news, the youth were nonetheless exposed to important current events and political debates that helped them feel part of a larger public in which they could begin to form their own opinions on issues of public concern (i.e., immigration, race relations, animals rights, copyright law, spying). As Stefan, 16, explained about Facebook comments, "There are disagreements all the time. Everybody's out there trying to give their opinion. And, I look at it and say, "Ok, *you're* dumb, *you're* ok."

Contrary to assertions that social media create "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" of similar opinions (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2007), the youth stated that Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms exposed them to divergent debates. They appreciated the chance to see differing viewpoints and contribute their own opinions:

> Well, among my *friends*, there isn't much arguing. But, on larger issues, it becomes global. There are stronger opinions. Like the "No Casino" webpage. I liked that page. You can like a page or not. You can go on a page without liking it and see all kinds of strong opinions. Once you like a page you're bombarded with things. (Remmi, 20)

Erik, 19, said that Facebook was "a mix of people and opinions . . . I love hearing all sides of an issue." Nico, 16, explained,

> Usually, if someone agrees with it, they just like the photo. Rather than say, "I agree with this." It's easier. But, if someone disagrees, they have to say, "I don't like this." And, then people go back and forth and there might be an argument.

Alex, a 16-year-old Red Sox fan, explained how political issues caused contention among his Facebook friends:

> If I post something about the Sox, I'm not gonna get much disagreement. But, if someone posts something about politics, like my friend posted something about Obama, there was a war of comments, especially a lot of Republicans who got very feisty.

The young people's comments corroborate the findings of recent large-scale studies of youth and social media that have found no evidence of an echo chamber, concluding, instead, that social media exposes users to a variety of political perspectives (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Kahne & Middaugh, 2011).

Discussion

This study found that cell phones were the *primary* way Latino youth connected to the Internet. This supports conclusions of prior studies finding that high numbers of low-income U.S. youth access the Internet via their cell phones (Lenhart, Ling, et al., 2010) and that cell phone use is helpful in "closing the digital divide" between Latinos and Whites (Lopez et al., 2013). But, while most of the youth owned cell phones and were highly proficient in a variety of online platforms, the economic instability and physical insecurity faced disproportionately by low-income minorities affects their Internet connectivity. In many ways, the digital habits of these Latino immigrant youth, including the platforms, websites, games, and videos they interacted with online, were similar to the online activities of other youth populations discussed in the existing literature on youth and digital media. Youth learned of breaking news stories via Twitter, Facebook, or other social media and, if a particular story were of interest, they sought additional information online. Similar to youth in other studies, this group learned about political issues and engaged in participatory culture via non-traditional pathways such as entertainment media (e.g., Baym, 2005, 2010; Marchi, 2012; Turner, 2005) or online networks related to hobbies and leisure (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Kligler-Vilenchik, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, & Tokuhama, 2012). However, this study also found that the online activities of youth from low-income

immigrant communities have additional impacts. Just as immigrant children become translators for their parents in social service, medical, and legal situations (e.g., de Block & Buckingham, 2007; V. Katz, 2010; V. S. Katz, Ang, & Suro, 2012), their facility with digital media gives them access to more detailed, diverse, and up-to-the-minute news than their parents get by watching TV or reading newspapers. Although several youth felt foreign language news was more informative than English language news, particularly regarding international issues, most reported that their parents were less apt to be *as* updated as they were about U.S. news, particularly breaking stories. This may be due to a combination of the parents' lack of digital skills and their limited time for consuming news, but may also be due to the quality of news coverage available to them. Comprehensive research on Spanish language (SL) news and politics in the United States has found shortcomings in political coverage, noting, "Across all media, patterns of limited coverage are evident, especially with respect to key electoral campaign issues" (Subervi-Vélez, 2008, p. 12). Of more than 500 SL newspapers aimed at U.S. Latino populations, the research found that there were no primarily political daily publications. A dearth of political coverage was especially true of TV and radio news, the two formats most relied upon by Spanish-speaking adults. Many SL newspapers, radio, and TV news outlets were found to be "primarily profit-seeking businesses with heavy emphasis on advertising and little or no emphasis on the political mobilization of the Latino community" (Subervi-Vélez, 2008, p. 25).[4] This may contribute to limited levels of political awareness among older Spanish-dominant Latino immigrants. If SL news media were to offer more prominent, comprehensive, and reliable political news coverage, perhaps both Latino youth and their parents might connect more with them.

In a reversal of the usual parent–child relationship found within non-immigrant families, the youth reported apprising their parents of U.S. news developments (i.e., The Dream Act, the government shutdown, high school policies, or hyperlocal news on Facebook), providing them with more frequent updates and more detailed explanations than are provided by TV news. Their proficiency with the Internet, near constant physical connection with mobile media, and English fluency underscored a generational digital divide that has technological, educational, and linguistic dimensions.

Social context is important here. Although non-immigrant youth also have parents who are less digitally skilled than they, greater gaps exist between Latino immigrant youth and their parents regarding formal educational attainment, English skills, and digital know-how (Rouse et al., 2015). Whereas most young people from middle-class, non-immigrant families have parents who have completed high school and often hold college degrees, this was not the case with the youth in this study. Because of precarious economic situations faced both in their native countries and in the United States, most of the youth's parents lacked high levels of formal education and worked long hours at low-wage jobs where they were unlikely to develop digital skills or have time to continue formal education.

Like nearly half of all foreign-born Latinos in the United States who lack legal authorization to live and work in the country (Birnback, Chavez, Friedman, & Rowlett, 2009), some of the young people's parents were undocumented or "illegal" residents, further complicating any prospects of continuing their formal education in the United

States. Moreover, many worked more than one job, which meant they had even less time than more affluent parents might have to keep up with events in the U.S. news. Because the youth were fluent in English, had sophisticated online skills and, in some cases, possessed higher levels of formal education than their parents, they felt more informed or "smarter" when it came to U.S. current events and felt a responsibility to update their parents on the latest news.

This exemplifies the differing information ecologies discussed by McDevitt and Butler (2011), in which traditional parent–child civic socialization patterns are inverted in immigrant families. Whereas that study was concerned with the erosion of family cohesion and the undermining of parental authority, the present study finds useful aspects of the differing information ecologies between immigrant youth and their parents. Given that low-income immigrant youth are more likely to live in cramped quarters with extended family members and to have less personal space than most middle-class, non-immigrant youth, the privacy of cell phones allows them to independently explore potentially taboo topics (i.e., reproductive health, sexual orientation, drugs, political protests) that might otherwise be off-limits to them if the only media they could access were desktop computers and/or family television sets located under watchful adult eyes. Digital media, and particularly mobile media, facilitated the ability of these youth to access information and develop their own views regarding political issues such as gay marriage, the legalization of marijuana, PETA, SOPA, or Stand Your Ground, and also allowed them to expose their parents to news and perspectives they might not otherwise have considered, helping them become more informed about U.S. culture and politics.

Moreover, the cultivation of search skills and exposure to divergent opinions online can have an added layer of importance for low-income immigrant Latino youth. Given widely known histories of political violence, repression, and/or undemocratic governance in most of the countries of origin of these youths' parents (particularly Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic), where political debate has been stifled and political expression has led to imprisonment or death, many low-income Latino immigrant parents may be unaccustomed or uncomfortable with exercising certain taken-for-granted behaviors of citizens in a democracy, such as investigatory information seeking and the public expression of political views. For example, one interviewee, whose father's friend had been disappeared by the Guatemalan military, said his father urged him never to post his photo or express any of his opinions online. Such discomfort was noted in a national study that found a "hesitancy among some Latino groups to engage with or challenge officials in positions of authority," attributing this phenomenon to a combination of the effects of widespread racism, an inherited distrust of government, a lack of knowledge about the U.S. political system, and a fear of exposing undocumented family or friends (Birnback et al., 2009, p. 9).

Whereas non-immigrant youth typically have parents and extended family members who can reinforce normative ideas regarding democratic rights, freedoms, and participatory processes, low-income Latino immigrant youth are less likely to have these ideals demonstrated or reinforced at home (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2010) and are the least likely of all U.S. youth populations to discuss

politics with their parents (Lopez, 2003). For these youth, daily habits of seeking information online, assessing its reliability, and having a private and portable space in which to read, share, discuss, and critique opinions on a variety of topics can serve as a kind of unofficial citizenship training. Recent research has found that millennial participation, including among Latinos, in social media is strongly related to levels of political engagement (Harvard University Public Opinion Youth Poll, 2014). In addition, studies by the Latino Civic Health Index (Rouse et al., 2015) and the Center for Advances in Public Engagement (Birnback et al., 2009) note that among U.S. Latinos, age and English fluency correlate with levels of digital media use and civic engagement.

Conclusion

This study found that Latino youth from low-income immigrant families were highly plugged into the digital world, with cell phones serving as the main medium for accessing the Internet, but were also vulnerable to service disconnection given the economic challenges their families faced. Future research is needed to understand how immigrant families negotiate the financial sacrifices necessary to maintain mobile media service and how they respond when that access is discontinued. Such data would be important in creating policies to help better maintain connectivity for economically vulnerable populations. As the Internet is where young people both seek news and deliberate on contemporary political issues, finding ways to make connectivity affordable for *all* is crucial.

This study also found that, like other youth populations discussed in the existing literature, low-income Latino immigrant youth used digital media for a combination of leisure, self-expression, information seeking, friendship, and community building. Typically, they first learned about issues via their social networks, and subsequently engaged with topics of interest by (a) reading, posting, and re-posting stories received via social media; and (b) searching various websites, including legacy and alternative news sites. As they networked with online communities of interest, they learned about current events, including political news, through postings of articles, photos, tweets, blogs, music, or TV clips, that exposed them to debates and offered opportunities to reflect and opine on current issues. This illustrates an emerging phenomenon whereby news first arrives to young people via their social networks, rather than through traditional journalistic gatekeepers. Social media is the "hook" that inspires youth to seek additional news information via a variety of sources, including legacy news. However, the diminished role of journalistic gatekeepers points to a crucial need for media literacy courses in high schools and colleges to help young people assess the reliability of the various types of online news they encounter.

This study found a "digital divide" between low-income Latino youth and their immigrant parents, most of whom had low levels of formal education and limited digital skills. This divide positioned youth as "news translators," providing more up-to-the-minute news, diverse perspectives, and detailed commentary to their parents than the parents might otherwise receive. The youth felt "smarter" than their parents in the

sense of being more technologically savvy and informed about U.S. current events. According to the 2015 Latino Civic Health Index, young Latinos who are more educated and digitally connected than their parents and grandparents are positioned to be leaders in strengthening the Latino voice and increasing Latino civic engagement (Rouse et al., 2015).

This study identified an additional benefit of online news seeking activities for low-income Latino youth from immigrant families: informal citizenship training. In contrast to their parents, many of whom grew up in countries with authoritarian rule where many people, particularly those from lower socio-economic strata, are unaccustomed or unprepared to model patterns of democratic citizenship for their children, these youth were able to learn through the Internet how to search for diverse information, view and assess divergent opinions, and express their own views in the public domain as part of the quotidian roles and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. This study uses the widespread sociological definition of "Latino," used by all major U.S. dictionaries, referring to anyone born in or having ancestry from Spanish-speaking or Portuguese-speaking Latin America.
2. In this article, the term *immigrant families* refers to youth with parents who migrated to the United States from Latin America, including youth born in Latin America and in the United States.
3. The armed robbery took place while the student was riding the Boston subway. It was mentioned by him during the interview and was also mentioned to the principal investigator (PI) later by the Center's director, who was very concerned for the student's safety.
4. Ratings at some of the largest Spanish language (SL) newspapers in the United States are falling, along with SL network news and radio news ratings (Pew Research Center for Journalism and Media, 2015).

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