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Reshaping Slacktivist Rhetoric: Social Networking for Social Change

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This article investigates the parameters of civic engagement through digital writing. Specifically, it examines the differences between slacktivism and activism against changing citizenship styles and definitions of civic action. With the goal of rethinking the relationship between civics, digital technology, and slacktivism, it outlines a digital writing project that uses social networking technologies to enact social change by increasing students' awareness in terms of what counts as civic action in digital spaces. In particular, it draws upon student reflections from a digital writing class to illustrate how engaging Stuart Selber's three components of computer literacy—the functional, critical, and rhetorical—can afford young citizens an aware and ultimately agentive role in terms of their online civic participation, as well as an opportunity to increase their social capital as digital citizens.

YOU.

HAVE BEEN WORKING
WITH CONSERVATION
INTERNATIONAL FOR 10
YEARS.

Everything we do, you do.

*Fig. 1. Portman-Daley, Joannah.
Starbucks Cup, Starbucks, Newport RI.
Personal photograph by author.*





Congratulations, you,” ends the above Starbucks Shared Planet message decorating the company’s hot beverage cups. The campaign attempts to offer the Starbucks¹ consumer an activist role in the multilayered Conservation International supported cause at hand—environmental stewardship, ethical sourcing, and human rights are all affected by your coffee purchase. As the cup assures you, everything Starbucks does, you do, too.

But do you really?

Well, in a way you do. Despite the clearly marketing-centric motivations for such an advertisement (which is, of course, what the above example is), this type of consumer-oriented engagement presents a non-traditional type of citizenship—in this case, economic citizenship. As termed by Saskia Sassen, economic citizenship defines “political agency around the roles each of us plays in the cycle of global production and consumption” and states that “[m]any political acts we perform each day, in terms of our economic citizenship, occur not in the voting booths or even the statehouse but in the stores, the workplace, and in our homes” (Mathieu 112). In other words, an everyday citizenship centered on the critical awareness of production and consumption is foregrounded rather than one centered on the more traditional focus of nationality. Specifically, Paula Mathieu draws upon James Berlin’s work on cultural narratives that argues that “economic citizens act by critically examining and questioning the dominant narratives that are circulated in and about the economic system” (112). Such action allows us to combat scotosis, a condition Mathieu describes as “rationalized acts of selective blindness that occur by allowing certain information to be discounted or unexamined” (115). Indeed, rather than being merely interpellated into the dominant narrative, consuming citizens are given the chance to critically investigate the story behind the story, so to speak. They are offered an opportunity to challenge the inclination, as Berlin puts it, to simplify patterns and conditions though self-interest by employing rhetoric to critique basic narrative operations (*Rhetorics* 56).



In doing so, one could argue that Starbucks Shared Planet offers them an occasion to enact change in this way—to look beyond the cup of coffee and toward the environment, the workers, the material conditions, etc.—to pay attention to the fact that buying Starbucks coffee over another seller’s brand puts their dollar towards a greater cause. In other words, it offers consumers a potential opportunity to civically engage, regardless of Starbucks’ actual motivations.

I begin by mentioning economic citizenship to first introduce its non-traditional nature, but also to illustrate how in this particular Starbucks example, two things potentially eclipse the power of the civic act: the wording on the cup itself and the awareness of the consumer. Specifically, the wording on these cups doesn’t necessarily encourage activism; rather, it can be thought to encourage slacktivism, which many fear inhibits citizens from “real” activism (see Tapscott, Morozov, among others). The term slacktivism intertwines the idea of slacking (doing nothing of real consequence, often alone) and activism (acting on behalf of a cause, often communally).

In essence, “YOU” do not need to do anything but buy a cup of coffee—the cup of coffee you were going to buy anyway—in order to pat yourself on the back for helping to save the planet. It is even likely that you never even noticed the cup’s message and remain unaware of the civic potential of your purchase. In fact, the civic act is complete regardless of your awareness; you may remain in scotosis and Conservation International (as well as Starbucks, of course) still benefits. Or maybe you do notice, which makes you feel good about yourself. Surely that’s what Starbucks is hoping, for then you might come back for more. Regardless still, “YOU” are actually unnecessary, beyond your simple purchase.

For many, this campaign likely incites irritation precisely because this seemingly non-active, accidental activism is just the type of action (or lack thereof) that contributes to a growing slacktivist culture—or, rather, to the general public’s perception of a growing slacktivist culture. And



while these frustrations may be warranted, few people could disagree that choosing consciously how and where you spend your money is one of the most powerful forms of civic engagement. Furthermore, what if “YOU” are aware of the effects of your purchase and the cup prods you to “find out what else you can do” by visiting the Shared Planet website, whose URL is in small font at the very bottom of the cup. In such a case you would be taking an agentive role rather than an unintentional one through the critical investigation that both Berlin and Mathieu advocate, thus motivating the very same, simple action away from slacktivism and towards activism. So when slacktivism contains the seeds of real activism, which it often does, what really distinguishes the two?

Slacktivism and Activism

While the word has been around for over a decade, slacktivism has become increasingly popular as digital technology has become a mainstay in citizens’ everyday lives. Evgeny Morozov defines slacktivism strictly in relation to technology, claiming it “is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in ‘slacktivist’ campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group” (Foreign Policy). It is this technology-centered notion of slacktivism, and specifically the rhetoric against it, that eclipses yet another potentially powerful and ultimately non-traditional type of citizenship: digital citizenship. For example, as with the Starbucks example, wherein the cup’s slacktivist message allows a consumer to feel as if she is doing something even though she may be doing very little (or even nothing at all based on the truth of the cup’s statements), when one clicks to join a Facebook group that promises to “Save Darfur,” s/he may also be doing nothing but simply making him/herself feel good and/or striving to appear to others as a be a “good person” who has a “moral compass”—the latest trend, or so the anti-slacktivist rhetoric goes (see Ma). In this regard, slacktivism seems the perfect fit for a digital generation who is already termed “lazy” or “selfish”—two adjectives



often used when discussing the “net generation” or “digital natives” (see Tapscott and Prensky²).

To be sure, there have been several slacktivist accusations heaped upon members of the current generation with regard to their civic participation and overall desire to engage in activities outside of their personal interests (Bauerlien, 2008; boyd, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). Because many of these young citizens choose not to participate in traditional models of democracy, wherein they “listen to speeches, debates, and television ads, give money and vote—but when it comes to having input into policy and real decisions, they are relegated to the sidelines” (Tapscott 244), they are deemed civically apathetic. Furthermore, the social media³ based engagement of Web 2.0⁴ that many of them do participate in is often too easily discounted and labeled as slacktivist simply because it does not fit into standard examples of what it means to be civically or politically engaged. In actuality, however, social media can often prove more advantageous than standard methods of civic participation simply due to the fact that “[it] raises awareness like never before because it’s more accessible to larger audiences,” (Jye quoted in Ma). Consequently, a problem arises when the tools and methods for civic engagement and participation change, but the means of measurement don’t.

Indeed, in such cases where the slacktivist action has a real world effect and can successfully inspire citizens to act and engage further, that which starts as slacktivism can often end up as “real” activism. Thus, while many online slacktivist activities can be clearly quite meaningless and ineffectual, the line between slacktivism and activism is actually very thin, and can be easily bridged by raising citizens’ awareness of what it means to participate in meaningful digital activism. Getting citizens to cross this line is similar to getting a Starbucks drinker to recognize the meaning of his or her purchase (as opposed to just buying what they would buy anyway) and make different purchasing decisions because of it. Indeed, according to Jye Smith, “[w]hat drives change is awareness ... and people are never going to care unless they know” (Ma). In this



regard, one can argue that, in part due to a lack of awareness about what *can* count as civic action, digital citizenship, perhaps similar to economic citizenship, fails to reap the credence it may very well deserve. It's not honored because it's not completely understood or recognized. Citizens are unaware of its power and potential. Indeed, as the use of "YOU" in the Starbucks' campaign points to the changing role of consumers and citizens, it also seems to reflect the influence of Web 2.0 and participatory technology. Web 2.0 relies on "YOU" or it fails. In other words, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, etc. are only as good as "YOU" make them. For both economic and digital citizenship to hold real merit, "YOU" need to be integral rather than accidental.

To begin to understand and recognize digital citizenship, then, I return to the aforementioned definition of economic citizenship for inspiration. In doing so, a digital citizen may be defined as one who acts by critically examining and questioning the dominant narratives that are circulated in and about the relationship between digital technology and civic action; s/he resists interpellation into anti-slacktivist rhetoric by not only analyzing but also combating the condition of scotosis in terms of what it means to be an active and engaged citizen. In short, this critical investigation would attend to the fact that there is a lack of awareness in terms of what counts as civic action in the digital age, a lack of awareness that has led to narrow parameters of credence for digital activism. Given our investment in both the potential of digital technology and the cultivation of good citizenry for our writing students, this lack of awareness and these narrow parameters need our attention. After all, "the rules of citizenship are changing" (Mathieu 114).

In what follows, I first highlight changing citizenship styles and definitions of civic action. Then, with the goal of rethinking the relationship between civics, digital technology, and slacktivism, I outline a digital writing project that uses social networking technologies to enact social change by increasing students' awareness in terms of what counts as civic action in digital spaces. Specifically, I draw upon student reflections



from my digital writing class to illustrate how engaging Stuart Selber's three components of computer literacy—the functional, critical, and rhetorical—can afford young citizens an aware and ultimately agentic role in terms of their online civic participation, as well as an opportunity to increase their social capital as digital citizens.

Changing Notions of Civics and Citizenship

Rhetoric and Composition scholarship has paid significant attention to the cultivation of students as active and engaged citizens, primarily through Cultural Studies and Service Learning approaches (see Berlin and Ervin, among others). While each of these methods has its own set of valuable implications, each also has its own share of problems. Generally speaking, Cultural Studies often focuses too heavily on analysis, keeping the student in a critical yet solitary and passive position. And while Service Learning has moved the student into a more communal and active role, studies indicate that the institutionally driven nature of such projects have a low level of transference into the personal lives of students. Indeed, as Elizabeth Ervin shows, students often divorce their educational self from their personal self, especially when it comes to civics. A potential explanation for this divorce may be that, ultimately, these approaches subscribe to traditional notions of civics, wherein engagement and participation are measured by quantifiable, large-scale issues and efforts, such as donations, letters to government officials, public volunteering, and protests, to name a few examples. Indeed, a problem seems to arise when these traditional means of civics and communication are insisted of the current generation of learners, further emphasizing Ervin's insistence that we "cannot neglect those behaviors that embody an engaged participation in civic life in favor of diluted forms of participation and of public that have little resemblance to the unruly world outside the classroom" (398). After all, due to the affordances of digital technology, and social media of Web 2.0 in particular, many members of this generation locate themselves in peer-to-peer, rather than top-down, knowledge sharing communities and seem



to define their role as citizens largely in regard to “staying informed” and “sharing information,” as several of my students insist⁵.

Indeed, based on a 2010 study on Social Media and Young Adult communication by the PEW American Life and Internet Project one can easily argue that the informal learning that happens publicly on social media sites cannot be overlooked: 91% of the 18-31 year old members of this generation use the Internet, 75% of them get their news online, and 70% of them use social network sites as a primary means of communication (Lenhart). Surprisingly, however, and to varying degrees of course, many of my students did overlook this informal learning in terms of it being real, worthwhile activity—precisely because they bought into the anti-slacktivist rhetoric that surrounded it. Even though they believed “staying informed” and “informing others” to be among a citizens’ most important duties, their online learning and information sharing didn’t seem to count for them as civic action. Despite how active and engaged their digital activity proved to be, these students seem rooted in normative notions of what counts as civic action, with many of them tracing those roots back to classroom projects and/or institutional mandates. Furthermore, the concept of digital citizenship had never occurred to many of them; or, if it had, it held little merit, which was particularly surprising considering their overwhelming online activity: they reported daily usage times ranging from 3-9 hours.

From the way several students initially discussed their attitudes toward civic engagement—most of which were inspired by classes that required service learning projects, either in high school or during their freshman year in college—the main thing they seem to have taken away from their experiences was the fact that civic engagement is hard work—hard work that demands a sense of obligation, a top down organization, and no benefit to the server. Of course, with such perspectives, it’s no surprise that these students didn’t view their digital contributions as meaningful; after all, they considered social media activities to be fun, engaging, and easy. In this regard, most of the students would more likely consider



themselves as slacktivist rather than activist, placing them directly into what Lance Bennett calls the “Dutiful Citizen” category, a name he reserves not for 18-22-year-old tech savvy learners who spend several hours a day online sharing important information with peers, but rather for members of older generations, especially those who are not well versed in the affordances of digital technology and look instead to traditional media sources and top-down authorization for their information.

Specifically, In *Rebooting America*, Lance Bennett argues that changes in styles of citizenship are elucidated when we contrast what he terms the new century “Self-Actualizing Citizens” and “Dutiful Citizens.” According to Bennett, the differences between these groups of citizens surround ideas of personal expression and a sense of obligation, respectively, as well as revised conceptions of society and social communication. For example, self-actualizing citizens tend to have a higher sense individual purpose, one that is a product of a diminished sense of government obligation. These citizens tend to prefer more personally defined acts of consumerism, volunteering, and activism over the traditional ones such as voting; they harbor a mistrust of mass media and tend to get their information elsewhere, preferring loose networks of community action created by peer-to-peer networks via interactive information technologies (Bennett 227). Even though many of my students fall directly into Lance Bennett’s engaged youth paradigm, which “implicitly emphasizes generational changes in social identity that have resulted in the growing importance of peer networks and online communities,” their attachment to deeply normative conceptual views of civic engagement keep them from seeing their activity as meaningful or influential, thus aligning their ideas of civics with the dutiful side and illustrating the difficulty for many young citizens in deciding whether recent trends in engagement are good or bad—or important or meaningless without an overhaul on the defining elements of the terms as a whole (“Changing Notions” 2).

As an educator invested in digital writing technologies as means for shaping young citizens identities and ideals, I was particularly



discouraged by this disconnect. However, if we take into account John Dewey's notion that young people are relatively "plastic," that their minds are instruments for realization and that their ideas are adaptable, we are given the hope of reshaping some of the slacktivist rhetoric responsible for these binary relationships (see *Democracy and Education*). This is not an easy process, of course, especially in relation to civic matters. Indeed, as John Levine argues, "adolescents develop habits and attitudes relevant to civic life when they first encounter the world of news, issues, and events. During that initial period, their ideas are flexible and subject to influence. However, once they develop a political identity, it cannot be changed without much effort and discomfort" (125).

For many of my students, it was precisely a steadfast allegiance to traditional attitudes of civic life that seemed to contribute to the lack of feeling like they did or could make a difference.

However, if we focus on the part of civic engagement that centers on the act of being informed and informing others in ways that make a positive difference, thus cementing as a fundamental action of citizenship the passing of knowledge for the betterment of oneself and one's community, these students' digital engagement levels are remarkable, despite what they may think. In fact, their actions actually fall in step with Thomas Elrich's definition of a civic engagement and an engaged citizen from *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*: "Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes" (vi). Moreover, "[a] morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate." Upon analyzing their social media activity,



most students began to see that they were not only moral and responsible civic individuals and part of a larger social fabric that they felt the responsibility to contribute to and make significant changes in, but also deeply invested in the medium of digital technology for the development of their knowledge, skills, values, and motivation. They began to see themselves as digital citizens.

Thus, what I've gathered is that by immersing themselves in the ultimate "conversation of mankind" (Bruffee, 1984)—the participatory culture of Web 2.0, which harnesses collective intelligence through user-generated content in peer-to-peer knowledge sharing communities like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, StumbleUpon, Blogs and Reddit—many young citizens of this digital generation are actually engaging in active and productive, yet traditionally unrecognizable—even to themselves in some instances—civic behavior through much of their social media activity. The digital writing environments in which these communities and conversations are constructed provide natural opportunities for the type of social knowledge making and remaking that Berlin's transactional rhetorics are based upon and which Kenneth Bruffee sought to foster via collaborative learning. Furthermore, since the success of Web 2.0 lies in its ability to embrace the power of the web to harness collective intelligence, it is dependant upon user-generated content and user participation in the co-creation of knowledge through a public pedagogy. Indeed, it would seem that these students' social media activity would work to promote social capital and a healthy sense of civic identity as digital citizens—but they would first have to acknowledge it as worthwhile and meaningful. Just as Web 2.0 is dependant on "YOU" for its success, digitally civic action hinges on "YOU" realizing, and acting on, its potential. As educators, igniting this realization means "rethinking the purposes of the writing we assign and the kinds of resources, including textbooks, that we use" (Ervin 395). Especially for a digital generation, and in terms of civic education, this "rethinking" insists upon the incorporation of digital technology into the classroom in ways that can help elucidate its civic potential outside of the classroom.



In an attempt, then, to redefine for students what civic engagement can be, the following section describes a digital writing project that aims to encourage students to challenge anti-slacktivist rhetoric by first critically investigating their consumer-oriented technology use to gain an awareness of the possibilities social networking sites hold for civic action. They are then asked to use that knowledge to move into a production-oriented role wherein they might gain awareness for not only what they could be doing to enact social change via digital technology, and social networking sites in particular, but also what they might already be doing without even knowing it.

Social Networking for Social Change: The Project

At the turn of the century, Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn forecasted the changing citizenship styles that Lance Bennett describes above. Specifically, they stated, “digital democracy will be decentralized, unevenly dispersed, even profoundly contradictory. Moreover, the effects some have ascribed to networked computing’s democratic impulses are likely to appear first not in electoral politics, but in cultural forms: in a changed sense of community, for example, or in a citizenry less dependent on official voices of expertise and authority” (2). As you will see, it is these cultural forms of citizenship—a changed sense of community and a citizenry that focuses primarily on peer-to-peer knowledge exchanges—that my digital writing project aims to highlight as meaningful, relevant, and generative of social capital. But first, a little background about the course itself.

Our Writing and Rhetoric program offers WRT 235: Writing in Electronic Environments as a required course for writing majors and as an elective for non-majors. WRT 235 asks students to:

- identify rhetorical situations calling for a wide range of responses;
- evaluate the appropriateness of rhetorical choices;



- demonstrate respectful negotiating behaviors in collaboration;
- arrange texts appropriate to the rhetorical situation;
- choose effective process, forum, and technology for situation;
- design visually effective texts using appropriate technology;
- identify and evaluate options for text production and circulation;
and
- use current technologies to produce and deliver written texts.

The overall design of this class takes into account Stuart Selber's work on multiliteracies. Specifically, Selber argues that students should focus on the functional, critical, and rhetorical ways in which technology and its counterparts (material conditions, software, hardware, etc.) have been set up as means of persuasion. Indeed, as the above list illustrates, our focus with this digital writing class is not so much functional literacy as it is critical and rhetorical literacy. In fact, the functional requirements are minimal at the onset of the class and are expected to be learned, for the most part, on students' own time via trial and error, online tutorials posted by the instructor and/or the occasional "lab day" set aside for trouble shooting. Consequently, the class does not require any high level of programming or software knowledge. Students use free online software for each of the four main projects (blogger, wikitravel, Google Sites, and Ning), and therefore a basic familiarity with Web 2.0 tools is the highest level of functional literacy required. Such low technological requirements allows students the ability to focus on the critical and rhetorical parts of the assignments rather than get bogged down in the "how to" aspects.

Inspired by my students' conflicted attitudes towards on and offline civics, I decided to take advantage of Dewey's idea of plasticity and see if I could reshape their ideas of what actually counts as civic engagement in the digital age. To do so, I replaced one of the courses' original assignments, whose aim was to focus solely on technological infrastructure (see Dyehouse, Pennell, and Shamoon), with an assignment that would take up the specific focus of digital civics. Due to their vast popularity, social



networking sites seemed the best choice; after all, social networking sites have become a global phenomenon, with over 70 percent of the current generation of learners using them as their primary means of communication (Tapscott, 2009; PEW, 2010). In addition, many scholars have recognized the vast pedagogical potential of these sites and adopted them into classroom curriculums (see Maranto and Barton; Vie; Fife, among others). According to Stephanie Vie, for example, the writing that occurs in social networking sites provides an abundance of untapped potential for writing instruction and rhetorical learning. Indeed, she argues the problems with incorporating technology in the classroom have moved away from the access-oriented dilemmas of the digital divide and more towards the goal of incorporating technologies in ways that can help students to see them as critical, rhetorical, and educationally useful, rather than solely for entertainment or extracurricular purposes (236).

This kind of critical and rhetorical enlightening seems particularly necessary since my data suggests that, usage hours aside, most students don't actually think critically about their activity on these sites. Rather, their attention remains at the practical level, focusing on whatever their immediate task—a wall post, a picture comment, a posted link—rather than the causes and effects produced for and by these tasks. Moreover, despite over two decades of the work Rhetoric and Composition has dedicated to revising what it means to write in the digital age (see Selfe, Manovich, Moran, Yancey, etc. for examples), a recent PEW Internet and American Life study shows that many students still fail to consider the writing they do on these sites as real writing (Lehnart 2008). Much of this lack of awareness can indeed contribute to similarly tethered notions to the idea of writing as hard work. After all, what students do on social networking sites is fun and enjoyable. For my purposes, then, a critical and rhetorical investigation of these sites was the first step towards an illustration of their civic potential. However, as mere analysis can be a passive act, stepping into a production-oriented role was necessary in order to highlight the action or activism I was seeking.



Specifically, I asked students to explore the infrastructure of social networking sites for their potential to raise awareness, inspire action, and enact social change. To do so, each of them was to imagine that they were among a group of passionate activists who want to create a social networking site to draw attention to their cause at the local level. Unlike Facebook, which thrives primarily on personal connections, the social network that they were to create would allow individuals to connect based on shared views and/or interests. This particular requirement spoke to criticisms that social networking sites lacking the potential to inspire political action because of the echo-chamber effect that can ensue from a network comprised merely of friends (boyd 2008). Indeed, while Facebook users may search for groups that support causes they want to subscribe to, often times a friend's allegiance to a particular group will show up in a newsfeed and inspire users to join simply because that friend has joined. This joining of groups is one of the main social network inspired types of slacktivism. As the thinking goes, even when a group's cause has legitimacy, its impact is minimal, especially if the click to joining isn't followed up by anything else. Specifically, danah boyd argues that for technology to support the democratic process and encourage political action, diverse people must connect rather than like-minded ones. She contends that online personal connections are largely homophilous: people flock to others who are like them ("Sociable Technology" 200). The network my students were asked to create were to encourage the kind of diversity that boyd calls for by cultivating an online community shaped around a specific issue that allowed people to share, learn, discuss, make plans, and take action rather than a loose network of like minded people who speak the same language, have similar backgrounds and tastes.

The project components were numerous. Students had to first agree, as a group of four, on a cause to support. This required a certain amount of negotiation between identities and opportunities in order to choose a cause that would receive collaboratively inspired support. Next, each group member had to individually research the cause, gathering



information from at least 4 credible sources to collaboratively create an annotated bibliography consisting of 16 entries. This information was to inform the creation of the site both in terms of content and aesthetics. As well, they had to research local events that related to the cause so they could post them to their site's events calendar, keeping in mind that this was to be a live, up-to-date site that would be useful to others searching for real information on the cause. After the research was complete, the groups were asked to perform a rhetorical and design analysis of the site they envisioned would best support their cause. Coming off of a project in website redesign, they understood basic design components and had to negotiate those ideas with rhetorical considerations. For example: who was the audience they were trying to reach?; what was the specific purpose of the site?; what stance and tone would be most effective for attracting potential members? Based on the answers to those questions, the students had to determine what their site should like and how should function.

Students were then asked to create and design a complete and functional social networking site using Ning.com⁶, allowing the answers to their rhetorical questions guide the design of the site, both in terms of its overall aesthetic and functionality. The site was to include at least the following: a mission statement, a welcome note, an events calendar, a blog, a discussion forum, photo, video, and music sharing, and a public profile for each individual user. And, finally, students were required to create a corresponding cause on Facebook Causes, filling out all the required information and choosing a beneficiary if appropriate, then interlinking the two sites. For example, one group created a site dedicated to raising awareness for college students in terms of how to "live green". According to this group, they chose their cause because it was personal to each of them and they wanted to do something about "how much gets wasted on college campuses and by its students." As their mission statement says, they are "here to give small tips that will make a big difference in your local environment." Accordingly, the site is complete with blog posts on Dorm Room Recycling, Commuting via



Bus, and easy tips on how to “Save Energy and Your Wallet”. In the discussion forum, members engage in conversations on the meaning of sustainability, recycling statistics, and why one should conserve resources. And when one logs onto the site, Jack Johnson’s song “3Rs” (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) immediately begins to play, an appropriate choice for the group’s cause in terms of content, inspirational tone, and their direction to an audience of college students (see fig. 1).

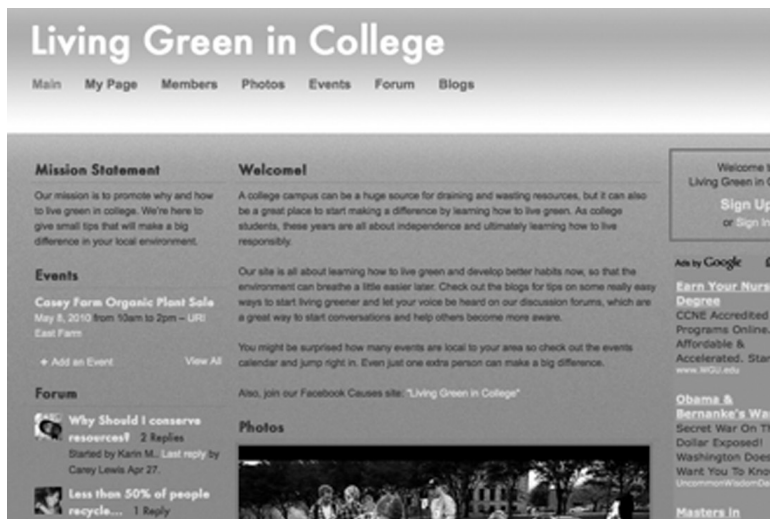


Fig. 2 *Living Green in College*

Social Networking for Social Change: The Implications

Increasing Awareness

Creating a social network from scratch encouraged many of these students to rethink their activity on other social networking sites, Facebook in particular. It gave them an increased awareness of the value of their actions, or lack thereof. In doing so, this critical awareness began



to challenge the anti-slacktivist rhetoric attached to the site that some students had bought into, many without even realizing it. Indeed, “[r]hetorical analysis can interrogate the inducement of scotosis, which then sets the stage for critique, responses, and action” (Mathieu 115). Thus, the students began not only to analyze but also to combat their scotosis by determining the parameters that anti-slacktivist rhetoric had set for digital civics and figuring out how to change those parameters. Specifically, many students began to see how joining a Facebook group, for example, could potentially be the start to something positive and far reaching. As well, the assignment introduced, or reintroduced, many of them to Facebook Causes.

Launched in May 2008, Causes quickly became one of Facebook’s most popular applications. It aims to increase the idea of socially aware Facebook groups by adding a level of legitimacy to them. For example, when users create Causes, they have the option to link them to actual non-profits, which allows users the ability to donate money. Interestingly, over half the class had installed the Causes application at some point by clicking to support a cause, but only a few of them were actually aware that they had done so, thereby cementing the validity of slacktivist accusations surrounding the site. As Christine commented, “This project has changed my idea of civic engagement because it has made me realize that there are so many ways to get engaged and involved, and so many things that you can get involved with. I had never heard of Ning before this, but I think it’s a great way to start getting the word out about a certain cause. I engage civically in ways that didn’t before because in the past I was never one to start sites like these, or even join them, but I’ve realized what a good thing it is and I think I may continue to use it in the future. For example, 3 years ago I met a man who has AIDS and listening to him speak about it has made me very interested in AIDS awareness, and so I may actually begin a site or Facebook Cause about it after doing this project.”



Understanding Impression Management

This new level of awareness moved many students' social networking activity away from mere reflexivity into a reflective space through their understandings of impression management—the ways in which they represent themselves to others. Indeed, as danah boyd argues:

“What we put forward is our best effort at what we want to say about who we are. Yet while we intend to convey one impression, our performance is not always interpreted as we might expect. Through learning to make sense of others' responses to our behavior, we can assess how well we have conveyed what we intended. We can then alter our performance accordingly. This process of performance, interpretation, and adjustment is what Erving Goffman calls *impression management*” (Why Youth Heart 12).

Students not only had to create and customize their site, but they also had to create and customize a personal Ning-based profile page, a My Page, which acts much like a Facebook profile page. This required them to think about the ways in which they present and represent themselves online. It forced them to ask how all of their choices—which images they upload, what kinds of writing they engage in, which groups they join, how many and what type of friends they have, etc.—contribute to other people's responses to who they are. As Dan Perkel argues, “the creation of an online social networking profile is in actuality a complicated exercise in self-representation that requires a great deal of skill in composition, selection, manipulation, and appropriation” (5). By employing mainstream media and popular culture to represent themselves, these students had to engage in textual poaching, “the appropriation of textual icons or images in the service of self-expression” (Alexander 113). Thus, a critical understanding of the intertextuality of borrowed “texts” became a crucial consideration for the rhetorical process of meaning-making. As digital citizens, they were being asked to critically examine and question the dominant narratives that circulated about the texts they



were selecting, both in terms of their own self-representation and the representation of their civic cause. They were asked to investigate the story behind the story. Indeed, as boyd posits, a first step in developing a necessary critical eye is resensitizing oneself to the everyday “texts” to which s/he has grown so accustomed, and the interactive nature of social networking sites, with their ever-present audience, can encourage and expedite this process: “Learning how to manage impressions is a critical social skill that is honed through experience. Over time, we learn how to make meaning out of a situation, others’ reactions, and what we are projecting of ourselves.... Diverse social environments help people develop these skills because they force individuals to reevaluate the signals they take for granted” (“Why Youth Heart” 129).

To be sure, several students were aghast at the idea that others might think certain things about them based on their Facebook activity, which again showed a lack of critical and rhetorical attention to their previous activity. One student was so concerned about the lack of “control” she had to date exercised over her online identity that after working for two weeks on her My Page she returned to her personal Facebook profile page and drastically revised it based on her newfound understandings of audience consideration and impression management. Not only did she alter basic personal information and image choices, but she also cut her friend list from over 1,000 to fewer than 400, keeping only those to whom she spoke to or saw with some regularity. Such “repositioning,” Diane Penrod argues, “is an important unlearning process that helps students to move toward critically thinking about the rhetoric and the content of the materials they examine” (13).

Increasing Social Capital

In terms of civic engagement, these newfound understandings of impression management also worked to increase each student’s social capital as a digital citizen, a key component in any organizing effort. For Robert Putman, social capital refers to “connections among individuals



– social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (19). Indeed, this points to a measure of worth created by relationships and social networks, one that hinges on interpersonal trust and mutual correspondence. This kind of worth is critical when coordinating communal involvement: potential participants must trust you if they are going to commit their time and energy to your cause.

Specifically, each student had to manage others impressions of them with this goal of trustworthiness in mind through the creation of their My Page. Their objective was to be seen to potential site joiners as a credible and motivating source of information and inspiration. Each user’s profile picture, self-description through both basic and detailed information, as well as multimedia choices and all external links were to be chosen as contributing factors toward this impression. After all, if prospective site members don’t trust the site creator(s), they won’t want to join forces. According to Karin, one of the abovementioned Living Green in College creators, her My Page aimed to give the impression that she “was also a fellow college student like most of our intended audience, but that I also cared about what was going on in the world. I used it as a place for the people to get to know me a little, but without going crazy with information overload.” Brittany, another Living Green in College creator, added “Our group was trying to give the impression that living green while in college was easier than most college kids would expect. I think I tried to get this across in my My Page as well. It wasn’t full of details but was pretty much to the point and even just the colors and the song agreed with the topic that was at hand.”

While Putnam measures social capital by memberships and activities, his measures do not translate well to the digital age; thus, he would likely argue that my students’ digital activity, along with the trends associated with their generation of self-actualizing citizens—a residual decrease in voting numbers and in then joining community organizations or political parties, coupled with an increase in media consumption—are large contributors to what he sees as a crisis in our nations’ social capital—a



“civic malaise” as he terms it. However, as Allison H. Fine argues, Putnam’s dismal view should be seen not as “a decline but an adjustment as a society shifted from the Information Age to the Connected Age” (40). As she puts it, the yearning for connectedness still thrives, but it just “look[s] and feel[s] different” (40). After all, for the current generation of learners, digital mediums of communication—for political, civic, and social interaction—have become second nature. Accordingly, they can be seen as this generation’s primary means for building social capital, rather than merely a media-based distraction that contributes to its decline—like television, Putnam would argue (Leiphon). Furthermore, the interaction, collaboration, and conversations generated by the kinds of connections social networking sites enable are precisely the elements necessary to increasing digital citizens’ social capital, both in terms of civic and personal purposes. Indeed, educators and students alike need to recognize and embrace this new “look” and “feeling” of connectedness. And it is exactly this recognition—or awareness—that my Social Networking for Social Change project strives to achieve.

Potential Obstacles

Of course, as Illya Lichentien notes, “[t]echnology alone cannot create or destroy social capital. It can play a marginal role in encouraging or discouraging social and civic engagement, but, as in any truly democratic society, it is up to the people to maintain a certain level of civic engagement....” Certainly, this is true. We can’t just show people how to be civically engaged and then expect them to do it. Motivation and inspiration are integral component toward action. Indeed, danah boyd argues that social networking sites, though they possess the infrastructure to do so, more often than not fail to inspire such action precisely because the sites cater to unmotivated users, those who she claims are “status-obsessed and narcissistic” and who only wish to use the technology to “hang out” with their friends. As she puts it, “[w]hile the Internet makes it much easier for activated people to seek out information and networks of like-minded others, what gains traction online is the least common



denominator. Embarrassing videos and body fluid jokes fare much better than serious critiques of power. Gossip about Hollywood celebrities is alluring; the war in Iraq is depressing” (115). While this may be true, the majority of my students and research participants, many of whom could have easily fallen into boyd’s unflattering classification, were simply unaware of the possibilities inherent in the sites. Indeed, part of what keep their social networking activity relegated to boyd’s description was that no one had shown them that the sites could be otherwise—or rather, that the use of the sites for civic and/or political purposes held any real merit. As Keith posits, “I view civic engagement more seriously as a whole because of this project. Most people, which used to include myself, don’t think they have the power to make a difference or spread awareness to the point where change will occur. I think it’s great the sites like Ning exist, and I think if people became more aware of the media available to them to spread awareness of causes, then people would have a more optimistic view of civic engagement. I don’t really act in different ways as a result, I am just more aware of the options I have in order to contribute in a useful way.”

Of course, another part of the problem is that, in terms of civic action, many of them hold the view that it is hard work, and they simply don’t want to have to work that hard. For those young citizens, becoming aware of the potential power of simply clicking to join a group, for example, shows them an easy way to participate, one that will hopefully head to more. Andrew was one of these students and at the project’s end, he stated that he now thinks “civic engagement can be as small as just creating a site about a topic. Before I thought I had to reach a big audience and actively hold self sponsored events, but now I think that just by making people aware of something that is going on is just as good if not better. Giving people the tools to make a difference and let them decide how they chose to use them, I think that is a better way for civic engagement to be active.”



But isn't such easy participation slacktivist, you might wonder? Certainly, some would argue yes. Others, however, would argue that Andrew is now doing something positive for society that he wasn't doing before, regardless of its size. Furthermore, that small action is better than no action. Plus, it could lead to more. After all, if he wasn't doing anything civic before, he can't do less than that, right? One can't be sure. In an ideal circumstance, slacktivist action inspires a user to engage more, be it digitally or in face-to-face campaigns. Of course, a valid concern may be that those who may have taken the face-to-face path, upon realizing a digital alternative will choose that instead (see Morozov). *But this project doesn't set out to teach students that clicking to join a group is enough. Rather, it argues that clicking to join can be the beginning to something bigger—the seed to real activism.* As Kelly insists, the various components inherent in the project actually illustrate just how much more than simply joining a group is necessary to enact real change: "Previous to the project I viewed people who considered joining a 'Facebook cause' as civic engagement with derision. I still hold that view now, because it's clear that civic engagement requires much more time and effort than just joining a group. The project showed me that there is more than a fair amount of effort required into getting a 'cause' rolling."

Final Thoughts

So is there a difference between the Starbucks consumer who buys the cup of coffee knowing that he or she contributed to Conversation International and the one who does not? Surely, if said purchase is the only action involved, both outcomes are exactly the same. However, the potential for more is the difference. The aware customer might drive the extra half a mile to continue to buy at Starbucks, or tell a friend about the campaign, or try to better understand what conversation actually is, or even question the validity of Starbucks' socially responsible claims. The unaware person, on the other hand, will do nothing.



Therefore, in order for our students as young citizens to fully recognize and utilize the capacity and potential of social media for civic purposes, and to deconstruct the seeming binary relationship that exists in their minds between online and offline engagement, we as educators must tap into their informal leaning spaces by focusing on things like “identifying the individual preferences for personal expression and peer-to-peer discovery of issues within relatively open digital media spaces” (Bennett 228). We must also value this activity, because it seems that regardless of how active our students are and invested in peer-to-peer activity, they are still looking for top down approval. Indeed, my data seems to suggest that while the institutionally driven nature of civic based school projects do have a low level of transference into the personal lives of students and that they may even promote the negative feelings of obligation and duty, what they also do is dictate how these students define civic engagement, leaving them attaching to normative definitions that may result in an ignorance about the impact of their digital writing, a potential misunderstandings of their civic identity, and a general devaluing of their social capital.

Ultimately, then, I believe the cultivation of good citizenry—economic, digital, or otherwise—begins with awareness. If we can encourage students to begin to understand the power inherent in their choices and opportunities, which first comes from being aware that these choices and opportunities even exist, they can then choose how best to exercise that power. Indeed, we must remember Dewey’s notion of plasticity: our students are in formative years in terms of their identity creation and understanding. If we tell them their actions are meaningless, they just might believe us and prove us right. But if we give them the knowledge to take action, they might just astound us.



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Endnotes

- 1 See Dickinson and Mathieu for further rhetorical work on Starbucks.
- 2 "Net Generation" and "Digital Natives" are terms used to describe those born between 1977-1997, many of whom have grown up with digital technology as a central part of their communicative life. This group comprises 27% of the U.S. population (Grown Up 16).
- 3 By social media, I am referring to Internet tools that depend on user participation and user-generated content and that allow groups of people to connect with one another for various reasons.
- 4 Often used as a synonym for social media, Web 2.0 "is an umbrella term that is used to refer to a new era of Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites" (Lenhart, 2010).



- 5 The data collected for this article comes both from a classroom-based project as well as a larger research study that employs interviews, time-use diaries, and screen captures to gauge students' civic action on social media sites, as well as their feelings and attitudes about said action (or lack thereof).
- 6 Ning.com moved to a subscription model in July 2010. However, there are several other free sites that can be used for this project.