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Programme Title:	Media & Creative Industries
Dissertation Title:	YOUTH LEADERS IN CIVIC MEDIA: The role of leading and creating civic media organisations in the youth civic engagement
Word Count	10056
Academic Supervisor:	Professor Thomas Tufte
Standard research ☒	Project ☐ Internship ☐

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YOUTH LEADERS IN CIVIC MEDIA:

The role of leading and creating civic media organisations in youth civic engagement

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Word count: 10056

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role of creating and leading civic media organisations in the civic engagement of young people. Aiming to explore a relatively untapped area of research that focuses on young people as leaders within media production for civic engagement, this research delves into the literature on civic engagement, youth media production, and civic media before turning to Thematic Analysis to analyse data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with creatives within three youth-led civic media organisations in London.

The results of the study are promising, and indicate that creating and leading civic media organisations helps young people to recognize and take critical positions regarding broad socio-political issues, deliberately design civic media organisations as solutions to these issues and experience the rewards of serving different communities through their content and organisation.

As initial results indicate unique and interesting data, more in-depth study across different populations and demographics could further elucidate this phenomenon.

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INTRODUCTION

"I would say The Grapevine is a panel-based show that deals with the issues of today from the perspective of a millennial. Millennials, I think, are a group that everybody talks about, everybody is trying to target in terms of products – in terms of selling content to – but I don't know if people are interested in hearing our voices. So, The Grapevine is a place where you can come and no matter what side of the political spectrum you stand on, you can see yourself represented at that table"

- (Ashley Akunna in an interview with Tosin, 2017)

Ashley Akunna is a 30 year old Nigerian-American woman who grew up in Newark, New Jersey. When she was 23, she graduated from film school into an economy battered by recession and had no job prospects. Upon moving back home with her parents and being immersed into their news watching habits, she noticed that the mainstream voices discussing major contemporary issues were exclusively older than 35, despite the fact that her peer groups were constantly sharing and commenting on these same issues and having insightful discussions. She believed that if she created an online talk show, filled it with millennials discussing matters of importance to them it would become a strong, commercially viable platform for their voices and provide millennials with access to media that reflects them. Five years later the Grapevine is an award winning YouTube show with over 153 thousand subscribers and almost 14 million views that has engaged millennials across three continents, in countries such as the USA, Great Britain and South Africa.

Ashley's story is just one poignant example of young people's efforts to leverage the connective power of media and technology to create participatory spaces for their communities, all around the world. As a type of independent media addressing issues of voice and representation and exerting influence on issues of importance, these organisations are often the focus of civic media research, connected civics (Ito et.al., 2015) and participatory culture (Jenkins 2006, cited in Jenkins et.al., 2016, p.296). These fields exist within a larger discussion about the role of media in civic engagement, which is hardly a settled matter. Furthermore, the internet's effect on the development of media technologies and the declining rates of

traditional civic engagement activities such as voting, among the GEN Y and Z populations (those born after 1980) have only complicated the issue, dividing researchers. These major concerns have oriented much of the research into youth civic engagement through media along the lines of youth media, media literacy, and media for development where the focus is often on civic outcomes such as what young people learn about democracy or whether or not they are more likely to vote. However, more and more researchers contend that exploring unique, novel, new and emerging patterns of civic engagement among young people contribute to a broader understanding of how civic life is being experienced and shaped by young people now (Mirra & Garcia, 2017, p.148), how it is changing (Mirra & Garcia, 2017, p.154), and its role in the future of democracy.

Therefore, instead of weighing all the numerous, useful angles scholars have approached the question of the role of the media in youth civic engagement from such as youth media (Buckingham & Harvey 2001) and media literacy (Soep 2012), this study intends to build on a significant body of research into the civic engagement of youth through the production of media (Cohen & Kahne 2012). Motivated by my own experience as a media producer from the age of 20, at Talk Up Radio, a youth-led radio show broadcast nationally in Jamaica, and how that experience has propelled me into international advocacy and civic action, this study focuses on young people who are leading civic media organisations where media is a resource being leveraged to address identified needs of specific communities. What role does leading civic media organisations play in the civic engagement of young people? There is a lack of awareness around the role of spaces that are designed to connect young people based on shared interests as opposed to explicit political expression, in their civic engagement (Literat, Kligler-Vilenchik, 2018, p.404). This thesis is an attempt to explore this question relying on a broad framework of civic engagement concepts such as connected civics (Ito et.al, 2015) to contextualize this information. Despite the fact many of these concepts are slanted towards “educators and designers” helping young people to become civically engaged (Ito et.al, 2015 p.16), the concepts still reflect on the unique civic situation of young people in the digital age

including who they are, what they care about, and it highlights means through which they can take advantage of resources they may have at their disposal, to get involved.

Firstly the relevant literature on the recent history of the term civic engagement, that investigates the impact of digital media on youth civic engagement, explores the connection between youth media production and civic engagement of young people and reviews the concept of civic media will be outlined. Throughout reviewing this literature, important concepts and ideas within civic engagement will be highlighted and thereafter, called upon to contextualize the findings. Following that, the research methods employed in this study will be outlined, followed by a segment presenting and discussing the findings of this research through thematic analysis, ending with the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Despite the established importance of civic engagement to democracy (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, Akkerman, 2016, p.286; Flanagan & Levine, 2010, p.160; Levine 2008), and benefits that run the gamut from improved education, government efficiency, crime reduction and accelerated economic progress (Putnam, 1995, p.1) to maintaining the balance between "economic growth" and "progress" and avoiding "elite polarisation and "minority exclusion" (O'Neill, 1997), there is little to no consensus within the field on the practicalities of what civic engagement is or how it can be achieved.

Traditionally, theorists have taken a utilitarian approach (Levine & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2010) to this question, so for them civic engagement consists of specific, defined actions directly aimed at political outcomes (Dumitrica, 2016), including voting, volunteering, being a member in civic organisations, religious groups, labour unions and even attending PTA meetings (Putnam, 1995). This also includes less overt actions such as trust in other citizens, political and public interest, consuming news media, understanding political processes and even "a sense of identity, pride or obligation with [American] citizenship" (Delli Carpini, 2000).

In light of the centrality of civic engagement to democratic societies, the general downturn in the core traditional indicator of civic engagement – voting (Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015) across several countries, among youth especially, has sparked intense debate regarding whether not these traditional indicators of civic engagement adequately match the complex realities of modern citizenship (Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015 p,117) and the similarly contested role of media technologies within civic engagement particularly as it concerns young people (Dahlgren, 2011, p.11, Zuckerman, 2014, p.154). In light of this disagreement,

several scholars have sought to define civic engagement in more general terms, such as the various means through which citizens get involved in community affairs in the pursuit of solutions to issues or to direct the development of the community (Adler & Goggin 2005).

Definitions such as these create space for traditional indicators and other emerging patterns of engagement, and provide a useful backdrop for analysing how scholars have attempted to expand, understand and re-imagine civic engagement. Non-exhaustively, these concepts include Dahlgren's (2011) tenets of civic culture (knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and skills and identities), which are useful in understanding, how civic engagement can be developed through fulfilling people's civic needs. The concept of a "civic identity" or a sense of "social agency, responsibility for society, and political-moral awareness" Youniss and Yates (1996 & 1997) as cited in Youniss, McLellan and Yates (1997) adds to the concept of civic engagement by focusing on a more developmental angle that explores how one becomes invested in or feels a duty towards the community. Following the more traditional indicators of civic engagement, Atkins & Hart (2003, p.157) suggest a civic identity is developed through engagement at the community level such as through community service, learning about the community and aligning oneself with democratic principles. However, Mirra & Garcia (2017 p.142) and Nasir & Kirshner (2003) taking a cultural approach, argue that this approach to the development of civic identities idealizes the highly complex nature of citizenship and thus fail to appreciate how the "systematic inequalities" experienced by groups such as "young citizens of colour" for example racism, might influence why they become civically engaged or disengaged.

Similar sentiments can be observed in the work of Banks (2015) who argues that civic engagement is negatively affected when dimensions of a person's identity are marginalized, as they dissociate with the state resulting in failed citizenship. Ekman & Amna, (2012 p.287) highlight the importance of "latent" civic engagement that may not be overt in terms of being aimed at shaping government action, but actually primes citizens for later engagement or has political impact such as awareness of international issues or donating to causes. Similarly, Jenkins et.al (2016) introduce the concept of "civic imagination" or the

"capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political or economic conditions" (p.300). Both of these concepts are useful in the world described by the previous three, where citizenship is complex and some voices are marginalized as they recognize that civic engagement can exist without the ability to influence the political sphere through more traditional actions such as voting. Take for example the unique situation of second-class citizens who may be strategically denied the right to vote, or to join formal groups. These concepts recognize that these people could still have interest in the political sphere. In light of this, Bennett (2008) also highlights the benefits of diversifying what constitutes active civic engagement – expanding and adding to the traditional indicators more unique and personal activities that are also useful to democracy. For example he considers shifting patterns of engagement over time and between generations and recognizes the difference between the "actualizing citizen" for whom civic engagement is more personal than state-defined and thus they may be less inclined to vote as opposed to the "dutiful citizen" who feels a sense of duty to the state and a need to get involved in organized civic engagement. Regarding media Levine (2008), asserts that heterogeneous cultural products shaped by people grouping together based on their shared interests, are actually evidence of true engagement, as it shows that the people are able to express their identities and co-exist, and have more choice in what cultural products they consume, even as the various identities clash but also come together. This is a more democratic system than a mass culture reflective of the ideas and needs of only a few people, which he argues is the real cause for concern.

CIVIC MEDIA

One field of enquiry into the relationship between media and civic engagement that is open to different patterns of engagement across the philosophies, and media forms, and also supports an intentional approach to the ways media technologies can be designed and used to fulfill civic needs is civic media. Gordon and Mihailidis (2016) define civic media as "any mediated practice that enables a community to imagine themselves as being connected, not through achieving, but through striving for common good." (p.2) This definition makes three critical insertions into this conversation on media and civic engagement

that are important to consider. By inserting the element of imagining connectedness within a community, Gordon and Mihailidis create room for narrower forms of civic engagement, less pre-occupied with national and global scale, and different civic values and needs for different groups of people. Gordon and Mihailidis also make the distinction of engagement as practice (therefore longer-term as opposed to immediate, one off results) and ideology, (therefore internal, as opposed to finite, observable, measurable actions such as voting or joining groups). Finally, they also re-orient the media and civic engagement conversation away from the means of single forms of media such as social media or television, towards using any form of media or creating new forms of media to achieve the ends of civic engagement. Thus civic media builds on significant contributions to the discussion of media and civic engagement including community media and the alternative press, but provides a new paradigm for understanding civic engagement through media, outside of community media's focus on tangible outcomes for localities (Manyozo 2005; Mayer & Krohling Peruzzo, 2015) and alternative media's focus on opposition (Kenix, 2011).

YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In the last fifty years media and communications have undergone massive changes largely under the influence of the internet. Communications systems have become globally networked – interactive and flexible and this hyper connection has had massive impact on all aspects of modern life (Castells, 2014). Today's young people, those under the age of 35, commonly referred to as Generation Y or millennials and Generation Z, have grown up largely (Gen Y) and entirely (Gen Z) in this digital age and thus much of the research on digital media and civic engagement focuses on their patterns of media use and engagement practices (Herring, 2008. They have been described as 'tech savvy', 'digital natives' Prensky (2001), and are considered to be a driving force in the development of media and communications technologies (Koulopoulos & Kelsden, 2016).

Some researchers believe this digital revolution has fundamentally changed the ways we understand communities and connectedness and therefore, civic engagement (Gordon & Mihailidis, 2016), has created the potential for, and/or resulted in unprecedented and novel methods of civic engagement and has also reinvigorated civic engagement especially amongst young people. They recognize that young people are organizing multinational social movements (Tufte, 2017, p.128), and while they connect with others who share their values and identity-markers, they are also probing their connections to others who don't (Literat & Brough, 2019). They are also receptive to mainstream politicians such as Barack Obama (Cohen & Kahne, p.2), or the UK's Labour Party (Hart & Henn, 2017) when they use social media to engage with them and they get involved in political conversations online and add their voices (Banaji, Mejias, De La Pava Velez, 2018). Furthermore young people may divest from traditional politics, or feel excluded from it and mistrustful of politicians (Sloam, 2007) but that does not necessarily mean they aren't interested in the global politics and the fate of other people, which even if it doesn't result in voting or other traditional indicators of civic engagement, are still useful to citizenship and democracy (Loader et. al, 2014).

Yet, despite all this access to information and connectivity, there are numerous counter-arguments that characterize young people as apathetic and disengaged from public life. Common critiques regard much of the engagement young people do online as "shallow" (Christensen, 2011) or "slacktivism" (Morozov, 2011) Furthermore, as briefly mentioned before, they seem to be resistant to attempts being made to amplify their civic engagement (Banaji & Buckingham, p.14). Others have expressed concern that especially in the case of social movements, declaring them the result of social media is overzealous and technologically deterministic about the capabilities of these tools, and underestimates the complex nature and history of social movements (Anderson, 2011; Zuckerman 2014). There is also a school of thought that recognizes inequalities of access to media technologies that have an impact on how young people use these technologies and for what purposes (Hargittai, 2009; Helsper & Enyon 2009 p.14). Furthermore, there is a recognition of the fact that the mainstream digital platforms are not neutrally enabling civic engagement with no negative effects on society. They are created and controlled by major corporations who encourage

activity in order collect massive amounts of personal data of users. At first glance this seems to have little correlation to civic engagement specifically but the Russian social media interference in the US 2016 elections and the Cambridge Analytica scandal regarding both that election and the UK Brexit vote (Persily, 2017; Risso, 2018), highlight the need for paying attention to the critical political economy angle of this issue. Finally it is important to note that not all online civic engagement of young people is positive. Take for example incel groups that encourage the sharing of deeply misogynistic content and veneration of young men who commit acts of domestic terrorism in the United States (Baele et.al, 2019). These young people engage through the same mechanisms as others, however their social and cultural outlook warps this engagement. Therefore the need for criticality in evaluating youth civic engagement is important.

YOUTH MEDIA PRODUCTION

Youth media production is often explored through the lens of education where the focus is on young people's ability to become proficient in media production or media literacy (Hobbs & Moore, 2014) through their engagement in youth media. Or through the mostly Kantian "development" lens of youth media projects in the non-profit world aimed at empowering young people and inspiring them to become civically active in their communities, through engaging them in making media about the issues affecting them (Hauge 2014, Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009). These projects can use media production to bolster young people's sense of self and community and their civic agency, within a space that is responsive and reflective of their individual and cultural needs as in the case of Youth Voice, a youth radio programme in the United States (Green, 2013). According to Green, Youth Voice prioritizes the voices of young people of colour against the political and cultural backdrop of the United States in which these voices are marginalized thus they create a safe space for youth to become civically engaged.

These studies often focus on educators and mentors and the relationship between them which is a very important consideration when the core aim is to empower young people through media literacy. On the

other hand organisations operating through this model do not always effectively engage young people as they are often designed by "adults" in ways that may reflect adult priorities, based on unyielding ideas about how to civically engage young people (Bennett, Wells, Freelon, 2011 as cited in Mainsah et.al 2016; Valdivia 2017; Blum-Ross 2017) and thus information and its presentation is not interesting to young people. Furthermore this is reflective of larger normative splits in civic engagement that Banaji & Cammaerts (2015 p.119) identify, where entertainment is sometimes seen as having little to no civic value, which does not hold true for young people specifically. Mouffe (2000 p.95) also challenges the focus on rational dialogue and consensus within the Habermasian and Rawlsian schools of thought democracy to highlight the fact that conflict and irrational or "emotional" dialogue has a role to play in democracy.

Secondly a number of scholars also critically assess the connections between young people being involved in media production as "capacity" building and how that translates into civic outcomes. Hauge (p.472) points out that it is often taken for granted that involving [young] people in media production inherently constitutes civic engagement through "agency, empowerment or voice" a view situated within the broader discourse being furthered by scholars like Manyozo (2016 p. 57), Tacchi (2016 p.118) examining the invocation of "voice" within development contexts and what it really means to have voice. Couldry (2010), imagines voice as a process by which people are able to "give an account" of themselves and the issues affecting them, and further voice is also imagined as a value that suggests that mechanisms for voice as a process are inherently valuable. Voice can also be expanded to the community level, helping communities to conceptualize their priorities for their own advancement.

What do these considerations mean for media production in which young people as media creators are in control of the production process from top to bottom, which Banaji & Cammaerts (2015) highlight as a method through which some young people gain civic agency? With the proliferation of smart phones with high-tech cameras, widespread internet access and social media which allows anyone to create content, young people have unprecedented access to the means of media production to make their own media, thus the role of young people as creators and the role that plays in their civic engagement requires further

thought and research (Ostman, 2012, p.1017). Soep (2016) points out media production, as opposed to media use, can have positive effects on civic engagement. Mainsah et al (2016, p.36) also make the claim that bespoke approaches to media design, that reflects "identities and cultures" and the unique civic contexts particularly of youth, is more possible when young people who are more connected to the needs of young people are the designers. Jenkins et al (2016) highlight several examples of young people taking things they enjoy like superheroes and using the imagery and symbolism of that genre to create content that aids in "civic imagination" or to help their peers come to identify with causes, explore how life could be better, and become politically and civically engaged.

Soep (2016) in exploring methods for participatory politics outlines five ways youth media production can incorporate patterns of civic engagement. Firstly information intended to spur civic engagement can be introduced within identity groups. For example, the Harry Potter Alliance is a group that has mobilized fans of the book and film series to donate books, register to vote and promote marriage equality (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012). Secondly, collecting, disaggregating and contextualizing data helps to make information usually reserved for the think tanks and the mainstream journalists to interpret, more accessible to the wider public. Thirdly, programming creates avenues for young people to take online youth media production one step further and actively design the platforms via which they tell their stories. Fourthly, the digital space offers both opportunities for visibility and invisibility, voice and silence, which can both be leveraged for more targeted and subversive civic activities. Fifthly, engagement can be motivated by creative and innovative media production, which in and of itself is a "meaningful tool for civic and political activity" (p.399).

The concept of connected civics as civic education pedagogy and a form of participatory politics (Cohen & Kahne, 2012) further describes the emerging patterns of civic engagement among youth, taking into consideration how they "leverage digital media" and sometimes work with "adult allies" to make their voices heard on issues of importance to them (Ito et.al, 2015, p.10). Connected civics highlights the sphere of possibilities that emerges when young people have agency such as through the ability to create digital

media, issues and interests of importance to them and civic opportunity (Ito et.al, 2015, p.25). By taking advantage of these opportunities to create media on issues of importance to them young people are aided in their civic engagement along the following axes:

Narrative Connections

Narrative connections describes the unique abilities of young people create engaging "content worlds" that bridge their shared interests to more general civic issues, for example through fandom as explored by Jenkins (2012). Drawing on popular culture, young people are able to make the civic world accessible.

Shared Practice

Shared practice explains the how young people learn to participate, gain awareness of themselves and their actions in relation to others and become intentional about how they navigate these spaces. Groups have rules and norms of engagement, which structure the interactions. Ito et.al highlight how these norms can be civic through the example of the Harry Potter Alliance in which members are sometimes engaged in creating media together such as contributing blogs or videos on a topic. Shared practice can connect identity with civic engagement for example through the DREAM activists who make content about being undocumented youth and host events that centre the voices of such young people. Furthermore the DREAM activists also train other undocumented youth in media production, empowering them to add their voices to the conversations about them.

Cross-Cutting Infrastructure

Cross-cutting infrastructure describes the relative ease with which young people can use and create more affordable and larger digital organisations in the digital era. Building on Bennet & Segerberg's (2012) connective action framework they highlight the importance of connecting personal interests together to form longer term, more "durable" connections. This could include using open platforms such as YouTube or building own infrastructure or even partnering with adults such as teachers and professional media producers. The digital era has allowed various opportunities to solidify one's "youth affinity network" (Ito

et.al, 2015 p.23), however Ito et.al also point out that “institutionalisation” and infrastructure can negatively impact the organic connections on the basis of shared interest that connected the group in the first place through issues like funding concerns.

When these three conditions come together, Ito et.al posit that young people are able to use the groups they form on the basis of interest, for civic aims, create opportunities for other young people to become civically engaged by lowering hurdles in their path to civic engagement and achieve sustainability that transforms ephemeral weak bonds into effective perpetual connections. This approach is youth driven, civic oriented, and encompasses “everyday social, creative and community engagements” (p.14).

METHODOLOGY

Through thematic analysis this study aims to qualitatively explore the research question; what role does creating and leading civic media organisations play in the civic engagement of young people? Primary data was collected through three semi-structured interviews - two with young people who lead civic media organisations and a third with an older adult leading a civic media organisation made up of young creatives. Several organisations were identified from an initial google search for "youth media in London" and three were ultimately selected for semi-structured interviews from three different media forms – radio, multimedia print and digital in order to include different platforms and possibly different experiences. Youth media was the selected search term instead of civic media, given the fact that civic media is a relatively esoteric collective term for all media use intended to help communities imagine themselves as connected through striving for common good (Gordon and Mihailidis, 2016). Therefore, whether or not the organisations overtly classified themselves as civic (very rare), organisations were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

1. The organisation operates in London
2. The organisation has significant engagement with the particular community, evidenced by listenership, viewership or readership numbers.
3. The organisation identified a particular community they wanted to serve through their content
4. The organisation identified how the content created was intended to positively impact the community being served
5. The organisation was created and run by young people under the age of 30 or had young people under the age of 30 in core leadership roles with editorial control over the content produced

Criteria 1 through 4 were intended to narrow the field of possible organisations to interview. Criteria 1 was selected for ease of access, criterion 2 narrowed the field to organisations with significant enough

interaction with the selected community to generate “thick description”. Criteria 3 and 4 narrowed these organisations to ones that would count as civic media. Civic media has two central premises, firstly that the media content serves a community (geographic or imagined) and secondly that the content is intended to help to connect the community through striving for some idea “good”. To limit the influence of my own personal leftist, feminist political leanings, the actual content of the particular organisation was not included in the study. Criterion 5 was selected based on the fact that the study intends to focus on young people as leaders specifically, which is a gap in the general research on civic engagement of youth through media production.

Two of the interviews were conducted with young people at the head of such organisations, one with the co-founders (27 years old each) and another with the Head of Editorial (25 years old). The third interview was conducted with the Station Manager, an older adult who manages a team of young creatives, however given the fact that the young creatives in this organisation do in fact have editorial control in their work, the older adult functioned as a guide and mentor, which is an important part of youth media production processes (Blum-Ross, 2015; Hobbs & Moore 2014).

The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, they were audio recorded and lasted between just under half an hour to just under an hour. The questions were designed to focus on their production values, why they decided to create civic media, their relationship with the community they create media content for and how they believe their work impacts them, however the conversation was allowed to flow.

Thematic Analysis

As a method, thematic analysis allows for the connection and synthesis of themes from multiple participants or sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). In this study, thematic analysis supports the pulling together of insights across the data collected from semi-structured interviews to identify common

understanding across the data. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility as a method that allowed for both "reflecting and clarifying the reality" (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). My research question required a flexible approach that was open to novel and unique experiences shared across the data, and a variety of scholarship on civic engagement given the lack of standard theories or clear indicators regarding the concept that could be reliably identified semantically. Thematic analysis allows for rigorous, sound analysis of qualitative data and supports the connecting of these insights to larger concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.58) therefore it was selected as the most appropriate data analysis method.

Although this study relies on the breadth of scholarship on civic engagement, the coding process was conducted inductively to preventing the imposition of these concepts onto the data and allow the interviewees "subjective meanings and social reality" (Vaismoradi et.al, 2016 p.101) to be apparent. Therefore the codes and themes strongly reflected the actual content of the data. Thereafter, themes were connected and compared to civic engagement concepts to interpret their importance within the greater body of work. This method of analysis was carefully selected to purposefully narrow this study from civic engagement broadly to the elements most closely tied to the civic engagement of young people in the modern digital era. This allowed for a meaningful data set of latent and overt civic engagement practices and orientations to be identified

Ethics & Limitations

All participants in this research were fully informed of all aspects of the study including its purpose, their right to withdraw participation at any time prior to submission of the final dissertation, the efforts made to keep their identities anonymous and to protect the data collected. They were also required to sign an informed consent sheet attesting to this.

Furthermore, in recognition of the competitive nature of the media industry, I made the decision to declare my own position as a young person who also leads a civic media organisation, to ensure that interviewees were comfortable divulging inside information about their operations. In light of this, I was also deliberate about maintaining a healthy distance from the data being collected in order to reduce the likelihood of bias.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In exploring the data, three major themes regarding how the role of creating and leading civic media organisations in the civic engagement of young people were identified. Firstly, creating and leading civic media organisations often signals young people's ability to critically examine complex relationships among societal institutions such as the media, government and capitalist structures to recognize and form positions on major societal issues such as unequal systems of power and injustice. Secondly, creating and leading civic media organisations provides young people with a customised avenue through which they can engage with and develop solutions to these issues that reflects their own needs, interests and positionality in relation to these systems of power. Thirdly, creating and leading civic media organisations enables young people to have limited but personally significant influence on these issues.

"The Clammy Hand": Critical Awareness of and Concern for Societal Issues

Each interviewee spent a significant portion of their interviews discussing major social issues local to the United Kingdom but also globally relevant social issues. Throughout the analysis, "The Clammy Hand" became a figure of persistent social issues and resistance to change among power brokers in society, in the sense of holding on to tradition, being unaware of or blind to new and unique occurrences and therefore becoming an uncomfortable force to those desiring change. Many of these persistent issues were framed as "gaps" or shortcomings, entrepreneurial pain points even, which inspired the creation of these civic media organisations.

> We decided to launch because we were aware that there was a problem in terms of diversity in the media landscape. We're aware that, that is where there's a problem, when it comes on to lack of representation. The stat that we always return to, was pulled out by City University in 2016. I think that is that the media or the media landscape in the UK is 94%, white and 55% Male. That's clearly a problem. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

The ability to recognize, form complex positions on and become invested in social issues is a central tenet across civic engagement scholarship including Youniss & Yates's (1996) notion of "civic identity", awareness of political and moral issues and agency within society. Not only were participants aware of the issues, their awareness formed a central part of why they chose to take further action. Creating and leading civic media organisations represented for them, a means of confronting these issues. Furthermore, participants demonstrated a complex understanding across issues, highlighting how the issues were connected in general, and also connected to them specifically along different axes. For example, they identified struggles they faced in creating or leading their organisations, highlighting a disconnect between their needs as creatives and the larger systems within which they operate.

> Like they need to see the formula. They need to see the theory of change model, they need to see a young person baselining themselves and then self-appraising every step of the way. And it got to a point where they all needed a report, every quarter, they all needed this, they all need that. And it got to a point and we felt like we just had this very firm, clammy hand on our shoulder, pulling us to do things. And it just umm… it kind of tied us up. (Interviewee 3. 2019, personal communication, 18 July)

In this regard the organisation itself also became an avenue for developing a greater understanding of these major issues for example, issues in finding and maintaining funding were connected to the more general issue of a lack of funding for youth activities and how that affected young people across society.

> You have youth clubs to take kids to that age, then you have this gap, where there's nothing that transitions from youth to young adult. So the transition for youth to young adult, particularly if you're not going down an academic route, is really hard. But uh… in the current state of the nation with the lack of youth facilities… It's mad, [BIG BRAND] have taken over from the government. Part of me just thinks like the funding figures and governments hang their head in shame, man. (Interviewee 3. 2019, personal communication, 18 July)

Respondents were often critical of the government and other major stakeholders in youth civic engagement. Their "clamminess" came from not understanding the issues affecting young people in particular and being resistant to learning about these issues and changing the way they address these issues to better reflect youth priorities. For example, interviewees were also aware of and engaging with issues regarding youth civic engagement and were especially opposed to "clammy hand" narratives that painted them as disengaged.

> When we started it, there was loads of talk about how young people are the lowest percentage of voting and all this kind of thing… the way that mainstream media and government and all these people who are meant to be the people we listen to, the way they communicate the news, and the way they communicate politics and the way that they communicate social issues. It puts young… it put me off when I was younger. And whilst I was interested in in the issues and the conversation, I wasn't interested in how they were telling me it was going on. Goes back to media as well that point because a real social issue is probably what they're telling us it is… so like, Notre Dame being on fire… to them. If I didn't care about it that's a real social issue. Exactly, but I might care about something which is affecting way more people than a fire that didn't kill anyone you know, and care about fire that did kill people. And so which one's more real life? (Interviewees 1. 2019, personal communication, 26 July)

Not only were they opposed to narratives that suggested young people were out of touch with civic life, they were judgmental of the "real life" idea, particularly because it doesn't represent them or their ideas, identities, unique needs or wants. Furthermore the invocation of "real social issue" points to a larger concern for the devaluing of the things they care about and their sense of uncomfortableness with being told by the "clammy hand" what they should and should not care about. Beyond being uncomfortable, they were critical of whether or not "real life" really represented a better system, ethically, morally, politically, questioning whether or not these dominant ideas about what issues are important and which ones are not were actually useful and pushing back against some of these institutional norms.

> That's why it really riles me when I meet journalists who worked for publications, where their ethics do not match the type of content that they produce. Because then I'm just like well your ethics are shit then aren't they? Because you're still, you're still not taking responsibility for who you're influencing with, with your words. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

These articulations of issues go beyond awareness to demonstrate a critical engagement with issues, indicative of what Ekman & Amna (2012) suggest are a sort of latent engagement, a first step towards more overt engagement. Interviewees expressed a sense of responsibility to understand these issues and to approach them with nuance. They also demonstrated that young people are inclined to engage with issues that relate to them and relate major issues to how it affects them, thus when their unique experiences are ignored or subtracted from the dominant societal discussions, an opportunity to connect with young people from those groups may be missed, prompting young people to design ways to fill those needs on their own. Furthermore, these issues centred around a fundamental shift in thinking, interests and preferred actions between the traditional elements of society and the young, that is reminiscent of the very rift within civic

engagement itself, suggesting that those who notice a change in the ways young people are choosing to engage are not simply theorising within a vacuum, but may be instead in touch with the lived experiences of young people on the ground, experiencing that reality.

"There's always a method to the laughter": Deliberate design and development of solutions to issues

Throughout the interviews, interviewees often made mention of their values, processes, rules and structures that guided the ways they chose to use their media organisations to confront major issues and make a difference. In recognition of the clammy hand's reluctance to let go and allow change to happen, they were strategic and deliberate about designing organisations that avoided the perceived issues in society while doing something to solve them, working around or directly challenging the clammy hand of institutional and traditional power structures. These strategies took on two dimensions. On the one hand interviewees built on their deep and nuanced understanding of the social issues to orient their organisations towards clear understanding of how their organisation functioned as a possible solution or mitigating factor.

> A lot of people know us for the dancing series. But beyond that, the dancing for the sake of dancing is it's a way of connecting with people and connecting with people's understanding of interpreting different cultures. And, you know, there's always there's always a method to the laughter. And I think, currently the people who do know about [CHANNEL C], they gauge that they understand that. So I think in essence, it plays an active and positive role. (Interviewees 1. 2019, personal communication, 26 July)

Similar to Jenkins et.al (2016) focus on imagery and symbolism of pop culture as a resource through which young people could develop a "civic imagination", identifying with causes and imagining better futures, interviewees highlighted their own cultural and creative tools for helping their communities engage with bigger issues and larger concepts.

As outlined in "The Clammy Hand", the lack of recognition of the unique issues affecting young people is a recurring problem. Lack of diversity plays a central role within this issue, except it is not referenced as a

sort of “buzzword” or “virtue signal” as is often the critique of young people’s use of the term, rather, it forms a central part of what young creatives see as the solution to many of the issues they identify.

> (We’re) putting weight behind causes that mean something. So for instance, today, we, are one of the co-hosts of the Anti-Boris Johnson protests. We specifically seek out the most marginalized voices in our community. We try and platform them. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

Platforming, or “giving a voice” (Couldry, 2010) to the experiences and issues affecting their communities was another common imperative that the interviewees deliberately designed for. In line with Couldry’s explanation of voice as a means of connecting communities in the shared vision for solving issues and self-determination, platforming and giving voice were invoked within discussions about moving the conversation offline, out of the small circle of the organisation, into the real world in order to include the community within the work and ensure it directly reflects community priorities in meaningful ways.

On the other hand interviewees also highlighted rules that dictated how the organisation managed itself. These rules, like production values, recognized issues that could arise if the organisation was not deliberate in its operations and mitigated against potential issues by making the expectations, limitations and affordances of the space clear. Interviewees clearly identified the rules which they set for themselves to ensure that they were making a positive difference.

> Our ethics are, I'd say, pretty vastly different from some of the more traditional mainstream outlets. So in terms of like, you know, making sure the content is well edited, and so on, that is all the same like but then in terms of like the voices that we choose to platform are what is quite different. So like, whereas say, [X MAG] just put Nigel Farage on the front of their print issue, we’re very clear on who we do and do not give a voice to, and the reasons why. Yeah, we’re sort of unashamedly political and I hope that we stay that way. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

Interviewees expressed differing levels of political zeal but all demonstrated dedication and bold commitment to the practices, rules and norms they had developed. Although “platforming” was mostly invoked to indicate a commitment to making the issues of the particular community visible, de-platforming was also used to prevent harmful influences from impacting the community and the organisation. This

highlighted the subtle interplay between visibility and invisibility, voice and silence which Soep (2016) pointed out was often a feature of young people's use of digital media constituting civic engagement. Similarly, the concept of "shared practice" within connected civics (Ito, et.al, 2015) also highlighted the ways how the rules and norms of youth-led connective spaces encourage intentionality in action and is inspired by an awareness of self and others and the different needs. One significant need was the resistance of becoming the "clammy hand". Interviewees expressed intentionality about being open and willing to adapt, listen to each other and respect boundaries.

> We have this attitude of… um… it's very much enjoy yourself. Like if you don't like doing something, stop it. If I'm wrong about something, everyone, from the volunteer who's doing our on demand listening, to the Assistant Manager, everyone's allowed to tell me to fuck off. Like literally fuck off. If I'm doing something wrong, they know that they can tell me, and they know that I'll listen to them. Everyone has the same rights to challenge and to change things. And they do. All the changes that have taken place, the majority of them have been youth-led. It's young people saying to me, we need to change this is not banging anymore. The Presenters can do what they want. (Interviewee 3. 2019, personal communication, 18 July)

By subverting dominant power structures and building ones that made more unique interactions possible, interviewees expressed a flexibility in the methods of engagement. Whereas fun and entertainment are usually not correlated with civic or political conversations, fun and entertainment were considered methods through which engagement could be strengthened. "If you don't like doing something, stop it" is an unassumingly radical position, particularly within the context of how mainstream media is often run like a dictatorship, with company heads that have overwhelming control over the entire organisation. These organisations modelled democracy, allowing young people involved to enjoy the experience without a "clammy hand". However, the commitment to making a positive difference also correlated to some stricter rules and imperatives within the content creation.

> I don't have to illustrate the importance of retaining your listenership. They know that. But that doesn't mean don't experiment. So they will experiment with content on their show. And, you know, three quarters of the time it will flop. But then when they find that one feature that really kind of hits home, their show will suddenly get really strong. And you know, that feature will run for sometimes a couple years. Because the audiences really enjoys it. If your programming's all angles, then your audience is just gonna drift off. And if you've got no audience, you've got no one to tell these social stories to. So you know, there's a constant balance going on. But you just kind of have to know how to how to get the depth of a social issue across in a way that doesn't make your

> audience go “For fuck’s sake” and turn off. Because those little presets on a car stereo are fast. (Interviewee 3. 2019, personal communication, 18 July)

Youth-led media are often critiqued for being idealistic and unconcerned with the real pressures facing media organisations, however, interviewees demonstrated a deep understanding of these issues generally and accounted for them in how they designed their organisations as solutions to various issues. In that regard, the very design of the media organisation reflected the priorities of service to the community. Interestingly, their account of their intentionality was never connected to the choice of platform, traditional or otherwise. What mattered was the content, how it was created and for whom. Where it was hosted seemed not to matter very much, reflecting the civic media (Gordon and Mihailidis, 2016), that decentres type and form of media and therefore outcomes such as likes and views, and rather focuses on the practice of engagement through media, centering community and values.

“Our community is powerful”: Perceived influence on the community

In addition to providing space for understanding major societal issues and a medium for designing solutions to these issues, through taking action and implementing these solutions in the leadership and creation of civic media organisations, interviewees positively reported the influence they perceived they were having on the communities they were engaging and how that made them feel. The idea of being able to make positive change was dominant across the interviews. These also took two angles.

Internal

Internally, interviewees highlighted benefits for themselves and other young people working with them or within the organisations. These benefits included financial and career rewards and more intangible feelings of pride or recognition.

> When I'm at work it’s hilarious. They know that I've got their back. And they know that umm… I'll do everything I can to push them forward. (Interviewee 3. 2019, personal communication, 18 July)

Youth in these organisations expressed significant feelings of camaraderie and connection to each other. As an internal community they were attentive to each other's' needs, supporting each other in holistic ways both in and outside the role of mentor. They affirmed their own interests in the content created, and understood this dedication to fulfilling their own needs as a means of becoming more adept at identifying and serving the needs of other individuals who form the audience for their content. They also displayed a uniquely clear understanding of their own position and that of other young people within the community and organisation, using their perceived position as a means of having positive impact on others.

> So it's like, knowing that like when I'm gone, I will have pulled up as many people who do and do not share my privileges alongside me. It's a complex issue but it's important. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

Rather than the transitory, ephemeral, fickle bonds that are usually associated with youth media, young leaders within these civic media organisations expressed long-term commitment to the community, to the work and to each other and a strong belief in the positive impact they could, and were having on the community.

> And then it's also because we believe that we have something of value to add to the world. It's not, it's not a vanity project it's like we like, we believe and we know that we can add value. We can entertain people, we can grip people, we can have people laughing and crying in equal measure. We know that and we really believe that. (Interviewees 1. 2019, personal communication, 26 July)

There was a unique philosophical element to the responses as well, that further illustrated the depth of consideration given to the issues and the deliberate choices being made in relation to them and the community. Interviewees seemed empowered by the possibility of being able to have positive impact. Furthermore, they seemed used to having to justify their existence and their impact and therefore, the interviews were also dominated by significant discourse of external impact.

External

Interviewees also highlighted benefits to the communities they serve through the content and benefits to broader society as well. Beyond their own positive associations with the content and the organisations and how they reflected their own positions on social issues, they also had positive associations with how the community had positive feedback and interactions with the content and the organisations. It fulfilled their needs for designing a better system, exercising civic agency in how they created and had perceived and reported positive impact, mirroring the case study presented by (Green, 2013) in which youth media production helped young people to develop strong ties to their communities and to understand their own power within that structure.

> I think that we generally get good feedback on what we do. It's rare for us to get negative feedback. We're always working hard to try and do more. There was a nice stat that we pulled out. Like, last year, which was like, we'd managed to through our events and stuff, we managed to, like, pay x, many hundreds of like women of colour over the four years we've been going… And I know, in terms of editorial, like, over the past three months that we've been able to pay producers, we have published at least, I think almost like 300 articles, which is like amazing. So yeah, but there's always more to be done. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

Rather than "being in it for the money" interviewees spoke about money and career success through the lens of social justice. Paying people or helping them to access opportunities was not viewed through capitalistic lenses but rather as a responsibility towards the community and a way of giving back, showing gratitude for the support they give through viewership, listenership and readership loyalty.

> Like people who've commented on a lot of our videos, even if they're in a really dark, deep, dark place in their own personal life, just because of the fact that they're able to laugh, and get lost in a different world for minutes to hours, is… can be life changing. And therefore, you have, you have legitimacy to kind of say to people that it works, because it does work and our content is out there has been seen in across the world. And so I feel like someone can't tell me it doesn't work, because I can tell you it does. And it's not just my own belief. It's the belief of the millions of people who watch our stuff every month. (Interviewees 1. 2019, personal communication, 26 July)

Furthermore, they also felt rewarded for giving of their time and energy, serving even the smallest needs of the community for a listening ear, inspiration or laughter as opposed to traditional civic needs of influencing policy and legislation, indicating a grounding of their experience of civic engagement within a more human frame.

> Seeing yourself reflected back in the smallest of ways, helps inspire you, motivates you. It gives you access. Because you might feel that you can reach out and talk to that person about your goals and dreams or your ambitions, whereas someone who doesn't represent you, you might not feel that way. And it's not just about colours as well. Obviously it's about more than that. It's about class. It's even, just about what part of the country you're from. When I first joined [MAG B] I was the opinion editor, and I very much saw a direct correlation between people writing for us and then, you know, a few weeks later, people being like 'Thank you so much'. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

By personalizing their interactions with the community, they add to their own investment in the community, beyond their immediate needs for entertainment or content and into a human connection. Furthermore, as the community connects with the young creatives and provides feedback, the young creatives are themselves, positively impacted by this connection. As they inspire and motivate others, so they are inspired and motivated themselves. On the larger civic scale, they did highlight possible, major societal impacts, particularly as it regards diversity and representation in media.

> And we've seen the past four years we've been around how these bigger organisations have changed and have started publishing things much more in line with what we were doing way back then. And it's interesting to me… this is a bit off-topic, I don't want to like overstate [MAG B]'s influence but like it's interesting to me just like, you know, seeing the BBC talking about colourism or like Afro-hair, or they had something on like racial adoption the other day, and these topics which I just swear to God, they were not covering in the same way like four years ago, in the way they are now. (Interviewee 2. 2019, personal communication, 24 July)

Identity issues have been a constant issue within civic engagement discourse. From failed citizenship (Banks, 2015) to (Mirra & Garcia, 2017) and (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003) the differences in engagement for different people with different needs has been the centre of theorisation within the field. Mainstream media has had to deal with these issues and similarly, youth-led civic media organisations have found themselves having to confront these issues head on, and they do.

> …through the lens of media perception of young people. And that's not just launched in a public facing media, but the media industry. Because we haven't fucked up, like the amount of people working in the industry, that have maybe had a slightly different perception of young black creatives. (Interviewee 3. 2019, personal communication, 18 July)

They also highlighted the impact they've been able to have on broader issues of diversity beyond the media landscape, some of which have more traditional civic resonance such as sparking the creation of petitions.

> So from like a kind of civic engagement, I guess, if you were then some of our content has done that in the past already. From like creating a video about the teaching of black history in schools in the UK, which led to a petition to be to be made to change that. (Interviewees 1. 2019, personal communication, 26 July)

Confronting issues of identity, culture, power imbalances and marginalization and leveraging their skills, knowledge and empathy, they create civic media organisations that play unique role in their own civic engagement. Through this recursive process of building awareness of social issues, building capacity to design solutions to these issues and having positive perceived impact on these issues and the communities affected by them, young people create pathways to engage with issues of civic importance in customized and unique ways.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the role of leading and creating civic media organisations in the civic engagement of young people, considering literature covering a myriad of concepts related to civic engagement, youth civic engagement, youth media production and civic media and relying on the flexibility of thematic analysis. It is a contribution to efforts made by other researchers to fill the gap within youth media production and civic media that centres on young people as leaders within these spaces.

While civic engagement continues to be an important concept particularly within the democratic nations of the world, what it actually is and how it can be achieved continue to inspire debate. Regarding young people the discussions about civic engagement tend to be quite negative and rooted in their perceived disengagement from civic life, due to their apparent falling interest in more traditional forms of civic engagement such as voting. However researchers continue to identify new and novel ways young people are choosing to engage, among these, media production plays a central role, given the so-called digital revolution. This study is an attempt to understand how the specific context of creating civic media, or media specifically intended to serve the needs of a community, can create opportunities for civic engagement and what those opportunities would look like.

The results of this very small and nascent inquiry into this phenomenon indicates great potential for robust civic engagement among youth. Young content creators are connecting with broad societal issues, forming complex opinions and positions on them. From issues of identity to politics to finance, they articulate an understanding of these issues and the impact they have on themselves and their peers and communities. They express negative feelings towards power brokers within society that refuse to deal with these issues in the ways they have and they use their talents and skills to intentionally design organisations through which these systematic issues can be better understood by the communities affected by them, but also confronted

and challenged. These civic media spaces also go beyond the individual young people engaged in the creation and organisation of the media into having impact on the community, further boosting the impetus for the young creators to continue to engage with the issues in this way. Through this process young people are able to convert civic awareness into civic imagination and intentionally design civic media that results in civic engagement.

Regardless of platform, the practice of engaging young people in solving issues that resonate with them appears to have positive impact on their interest in civic matters. They highlight positive feelings of connection and camaraderie amongst their peers and a positive outlook regarding their ability to have small but significant impact. These findings contradict much of the dominant discourse on youth civic engagement that paints young people as apathetic, thrill seekers who only care about excitement and entertainment. Young people can find civic issues exciting and entertaining and when they are in control of the process, fun and civic engagement go hand in hand.

The promising results of this study lead me to consider further engagement with this particular phenomenon of youth leadership within civic media through a longer term ethnographic study that involves a more representative mapping of the field of youth civic media. I believe this would yield even clearer, fuller explanations of the dynamics within these organisations, among founders and employees. Across the board there might be differences of engagement levels or perhaps not. The communities that this media serves could also be very interesting to explore through research. I would also explore this phenomenon in other settings such as developing countries. Furthermore, studies not limited by the size and resources that this one was limited by, could also investigate impact more clearly, exploring how these activities and this civic engagement impacts the young people and the communities they serve through their content. Overall, youth leadership within these spaces, seems to not just be a difference of age or outlook. They influence the entire orientation of the activity and further study is likely to reveal even more interesting differences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chevening Scholarships, the UK government's global scholarship programme, funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and partner organisations

Talk Up Radio & Talk Up Yout, Jamaica

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