

Citizenship Practices among Youth

Exploring the Role of Communication and Media

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In the growing body of research on youth, their uses of media and their communicative practices, increasing attention is being paid to issues of agency and deliberation. Particular consideration is given to the potential for social critique, advocacy, activism and protest through creative uses of the media (for example, Livingstone, 2002; Herschmann, 2009; Olsson & Dahlgren, 2009; Wildermuth, 2008).

The present article reflects upon the role of communication and media in articulating processes of citizenship among youth. Drawing on a broad range of media scholars from Latin America, India, Europe and the United States, two key questions inform the article. First, how is the notion of *citizenship* understood today with regard to the lives of contemporary youth? Second, what role does *communication* play in articulating citizenship among young people?

We will address these questions from two analytical perspectives. First, we will consider the notion of citizenship in the context of *globalization*, looking into communication and the media's role as a resource that enables citizenship practices among youth. Locations of citizenship will be touched upon, including Dutch sociologist Saskia Sassen's references to the urban space of global cities and to electronic networks as strategic sites (Sassen, 2008, 2005) and Mexican social scientist Rossana Reguillo's analysis of the blogosphere as an alternate site for youth's communicative interaction (Reguillo, 2009: 31). Second, we will link our discussion of citizenship to the socio-economic and cultural realities of youth worldwide. Drawing on previous work outlining how youth engage with the world through communication and media (Tufte & Enghel, 2009), we will provide examples of how citizenship practices can manifest themselves through communication and media practices, processes and products. Those examples will also serve as input to the deeper-lying issue of how to define *youth* – as a social, cultural and/or political category.

Citizenship in the context of globalization

Globalization has raised hopes and expectations of improved well-being in many areas. Young people's consciousness of a world of opportunity, consumption, and popular culture affects how they see their local lifeworlds and the meanings and uses they assign to global goods. (Hansen, 2008: 212)

In a large, 5-year research project in Zambia, Brazil and Vietnam focusing on young people's lives, media use, city experience and education, Danish-American anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen (2008) studied the expectations of well-being that globalization has articulated. These raised expectations contrast with the socio-economic and political situation in which many young citizens across the world are caught: situations of unemployment, social and financial marginalization, lack of education, health hazards and the challenges posed by war and climate change.

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in a harsh critique of globalization, argues that 'the state is today unable, and/or unwilling, to promise its subjects existential security ("freedom from fear", as Franklin D. Roosevelt famously phrased it)' (Bauman 2010: 65). When the state acts in this way, the individual citizen is left to his/her own resources, unable to obtain existential security, that is, unable to obtain and retain 'a legitimate and dignified place in human society and avoiding the ménage of exclusion' (ibid.). In practice, this means that young people are left to pursue life based on individual skills and resources and cut off from social support networks, in a situation of 'enormous risks, and suffering the harrowing uncertainty which such tasks inevitably include' (ibid.). Examples include the marginalized youth in the slums of Nairobi, the *favelados* in Brazilian mega-cities or the young immigrants in the suburbs of Paris – what Bauman (2010) calls the '*nowherevilles*'.

Hansen reinforces Bauman's emphasis on macro-economic developments leading to what we might call *nowherelives*, constrained by structurally imposed limitations. She maintains that a series of structural conditions are impacting upon the lives of youth, thus making their lives uncertain. In this context, youth can at best experience processes of empowerment and thus feelings of enhanced citizenship, or they will encounter several obstacles, leading instead to frustration, apathy or violence – a paradoxical divide also noted by Reguillo (2009: 22). Hansen (2008: 209-210) refers to the risk of uncertainties in life by stating:

Many young people's lives are uncertain because of economic changes and shifting household fortunes. Changes in living arrangements, socioeconomic status, schooling and personal relationships complicate many other difficulties that young people may face.

The advent of globalization may produce new opportunities or quite the opposite. In fact, it simultaneously creates *differences*, *inequalities* and forms of exclusion or *disconnections* (García Canclini, 2006)¹ – the social consequences of which seem to affect youth in important ways, according to Reguillo:

On the one hand, globalization, jointly with technological development, has undoubtedly increased the cultural offers. But on the other hand, it is equally true that the possibilities for access are reduced or restricted. In that sense, the thinking and analysis regarding the relationship between youth, communication and social change must be located precisely in the tension produced by this paradox. I.e., more and better means for communication, increasingly powerful technological devices, “availability” of enormous resources for information and knowledge, in coexistence with the increasing impoverishment of large areas of the planet, the aggravated conditions of exclusion, and the so called “digital divide”. (Reguillo, 2009: 22)

Both Hansen and Reguillo reflect upon how globalization may well provide extended resources through access to information and connectivity, thereby raising hopes and expectations of improved well-being. However, they likewise highlight – although to varying degrees – how the lack of resources can be accentuated in times of globalization: increased insecurity and uncertainty, impoverishment and growing divides and inequalities all point towards disempowerment and a weakening sense of citizenship.

In her analysis of how globalization is being produced, Sassen (2005, 2008) proposes an analytical reconstruction of citizenship. She argues that in the context of globalization, the relationships between nation-states and their citizens are being transformed, in a dynamic that produces operational and rhetorical openings for the emergence of new types of subjects and news spatialities for politics.

Sassen notes that what used to be public is being increasingly privatized, in an ongoing process of denationalization of nation-states that reorients their agendas and policy work towards the requirements of economic globalization. The welfare state is shrinking, citizens’ entitlements are being eliminated, and the distance between state and citizens is increasing. In parallel, power becomes “increasingly privatized, globalized, and elusive” (2005: 81). This raises several questions. As the organizational architecture for democratic accountability inside states is altered, which informal political actors, practices and vocabularies emerge? What kind of politics does digital technology, particularly public-access Internet, enable? What claims are being made, both in terms of rights and in terms of aspirations? And to which institutions are these claims directed?

Sassen stresses the importance of paying attention to informal practices and to political subjects not quite fully recognized as such, and proposes that “citizenship is partly produced by the practices of the excluded” (2005: 84). This resonates with Reguillo’s point that the structural and subjective precariousness affecting a majority of youth worldwide, the widening divide between those with and without resources, the withdrawal of the welfare state and the failure of traditional socializing institutions – the school, political parties, the workplace and labour unions – to guarantee inclusion “shape and materialize the dynamics through which young people become political actors and subjects” (Reguillo, 2009: 27).

The role of communication and media in the articulation of citizenship

We are interested in identifying and analysing the role of communication and media in the articulation of new or changed forms of citizenship practices, particularly what Sassen terms “the production of ‘presence’ of those without power” (2005: 90). In this respect, Reguillo argues, and we agree, that

undoubtedly, despite the difficult situation that many young people are experiencing, youth participation is increasing in diverse social processes in which they are speaking up and have seized communication’s tools to put them to work in ways that defy the dominant understanding of “politics”. (Reguillo, 2009: 31)

Viewed through a communication and media lens, three particular characteristics can be outlined as crucial to consider in the context of globalization.

The electronic mediation of everyday life

The heading above refers to Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s theory of rupture, in which the electronic mediation of everyday life plays a key role (1996).² Appadurai explored the relation between globalization and modernity and emphasized two issues characteristic of the transformation of society: mass migration and the electronic mediation of everyday life. He saw these two phenomena as interconnected, and as having an effect on the “work of the imagination” as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity (1996: 3), and argued that the electronic media “offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds”. Juxtaposed with mass migrations – both voluntary and forced – the result was “a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities” (ibid.: 4).

As with other dimensions of their lives, access to the media, and therefore to the possibility to participate in the economic, political and cultural life of the communities they belong to, is not equal for all youth. Data presented at the United Nations Summit on the Millennium Development Goals held in September 2010 noted that

In 2009, an estimated 26 per cent of the world population, that is to say, over 1.7 billion people, was using the Internet. However, in developed countries, the proportion is much higher than in developing countries (64 per cent and 18 per cent of the population, respectively) [...]. In other words, in 2009, over 80 per cent of the population in developing countries was still excluded from the online world and its benefits. (UN, 2010: 90)³

Even in this uneven context, the electronic mediation of everyday life does provide – at least potentially – increased access to symbolic worlds, reinforcing the processes and paradoxes highlighted by Hansen and Reguillo, as discussed above. It has become a resource that informs the everyday life of youth and thus the production and formation of identity.

The articulation of social dynamics through communication

As suggested by Sassen's attention to electronic networks and Reguillo's discussion of the blogosphere, the possibility that social media can open the door to new or changed forms of deliberation is now more widely perceived. However, we still need to better understand the ways and means of deliberation, or of "producing presence" (Sassen, 2005, 2008) and "doing politics", of today's youth. In his latest book, Spanish social scientist Manuel Castells (2009) offers a pathway to explore citizenship practices and articulations of agency by analysing the power of communication within civil society and social movement in connection with the new social media and the network society. In reflecting upon social movements, insurgent politics and the new public space, he states that:

In a world marked by the rise of mass self-communication, social movements and insurgent politics have a chance to enter the public space from multiple sources. By using both horizontal communication networks and mainstream media to convey their images and messages, they increase their chances of enacting social and political change – even if they start from a subordinate position in institutional power, financial resources, or symbolic legitimacy. (Castells, 2009: 302)

This quote points to the bottom-up communication strategy of social movements and to insurgent politics as a way to enact social and political change – something often seen in youth-led movements. In regard to this, Castells identifies a potential pathway for the practice of citizenship and articulation of social change.

The changing character of the public sphere

A third characteristic of communication and media in the context of globalization relates to how the location, space and character of the public sphere are changing. In his book *Media and Morality – the rise of the mediapolis*, Roger Silverstone developed what German sociologist Ulrich Beck has called "a new cosmopolitan critical theory of the emerging global civil society and its contradictions" (Beck on back cover of Silverstone 2007). Silverstone's understanding of the public sphere, with the logics, dynamics and opportunities of the media at the centre, provides a framework for situating and understanding media and communication practices in the context of the globalized world. He defines mediapolis as:

[...] the mediated space of appearance in which the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness, and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us. It is through communications conducted through the mediapolis that we are constructed as human (or not), and it is through the mediapolis that public and political life increasingly comes to emerge at all levels of the body politic (or not). (Silverstone 2007: 31)

Silverstone is concerned with how mediated spaces represent or constitute public life, to what degree they are inclusive or exclusive, and whether they enable

or disable public debate, which relates to our exploration of how citizenship practices can, or cannot, be enhanced by communication and media practices. Silverstone defines the mediated space as a “space of possibility”, in which social and political life can emerge as meaningful if and when the communicative practice grounded in it follows certain ethics or principles. Although embryonic and imperfect, the mediapolis, Silverstone argues, is a necessary starting point for the creation of a more effective global civil space. The mediated space of appearance is, at best, a space of potential and of possibility for citizenship practices to develop (ibid.: 33).

The view of Peruvian media scholar and practitioner Rosa Maria Alfaro ties in well with some of Silverstone’s ideas. Alfaro’s (2001/2008) proposition of alternative communication and alternative public spheres is based on a series of principles: open access to the media; voice and visibility in the media; recognition of mutual differences; and time and space for dialogue and reflection.

Bringing together Appadurai’s remarks on the unstable subjectivities produced by the electronic mediation of everyday life, Silverstone’s vision of the communicative and deliberative possibilities of the mediapolis, and Alfaro’s principles for the emergence of alternative public spheres, we can delineate the contours of communication’s potential for the deployment of young people’s citizenship practices.

Political economist of communication Vincent Mosco argues that it is more productive to think of the public sphere not as a particular location, but rather in process terms, and therefore to consider the state, the global market and social movements (which he regards as a type of structure that manages to distance itself from both the state and the market) as sites of struggle between people’s identities as consumers and citizens – or in other words, as the contested terrains in which the processes of commodification and democracy contend (Mosco, 2009: 153). Because youth is a preferred target of the global market’s efforts to sell and at the same time tends to experience an aggravated condition of exclusion from education and work (Reguillo, 2009), the tension between being – or wanting to be, as noted by Hansen – a consumer who can buy and a citizen who can express his or her demands for justice is especially relevant to our discussion.

How do young people produce citizenship ‘presence’?

How can we explore how young citizens engage in social and political life and claim their rights? What is the role of communication in such engagement? And what is the impact on communicative practices oriented towards citizenship of the socio-economic divides, the paradoxes of global development and the insecurities of everyday life that we have outlined so far?

In our previous collaborative work on youth, communication and social change, we have approached these questions through four analytical perspectives, each reflecting a manner in which youth exercised citizenship through media

and communication: a) memory and identity, whereby youth used the media to communicate for and about their rights; b) the voices of youth: coping, criticizing and calling for change; c) youth as subjects – of content, programmes and regulations; and finally d) youth in processes, primarily gaining a role and some responsibility (in communication for development). These analytical pathways all deliver entry points to answering the questions posed above. Without reiterating here what we have noted elsewhere (Tufté & Enghel, 2009), we would like to insist on the fact that there are multiple and creative ways in which youth are engaging with the world through communicative action and media practices.

The three other contributions in the Research Forum on Communication for Social Change included in this section of the Yearbook all provide examples of how youth engage actively in citizenship practices through their communication and media practices. Turkish media scholar Ece Algan provides an in-depth media ethnographic account of how Turkish youth use radio and mobile telephony as ways and means for young boys and girls to meet, relate and even date each other (Algan, 2011). Beyond the creativity in media use, Algan identifies how these mediated social practices are challenging local community power structures across gender and generations, thereby exemplifying how youth exercise their right to interact with each other. Belarusian media scholar Iryna Vidanava focuses on the right to freedom of expression – providing us with a fascinating account of the challenges faced by a youth-driven underground magazine published and circulated in Belorussia, the last remaining dictatorship in Europe (Vidanava, 2011). Vidanava illustrates how the youth magazine provides social and political critique while tapping into the youth-bound popular culture, from poems and stories to comics and fashion. Finally, Mette Grøndahl Hansen and Lise Grauenkær Jensen⁴ provide an account of how a non-governmental organization in Malawi approaches peer education as a strategy for HIV and AIDS prevention (Hansen & Jensen, 2011). Grøndahl Hansen and Grauenkær Jensen argue that the peer club in which face-to-face communication takes place is a citizen medium – a space for dialogue, reflection and deliberation. In their view, the communicative space allows youth to feel empowered and thus promotes more informed and safer choices with regard to sexual practices.

The diversity suggested by these three contributions grounded in empirical research begs the question of how we understand the category of youth.

Who are the youth we are referring to?

Hansen draws our attention to the obvious – i.e., Western – social construction of the predominant notion of youth. She questions what she calls “the development teleology inherent in the western life-stage model”, or the Western notion of youth as a simple stepping-stone, linear and automatic, on the pathway to adulthood. Her above-mentioned study allowed her to empirically ground her argument that youth trajectories play out in very non-linear ways:

The relationship between youth and home is complex and transitions between youth and adulthood are neither one-way nor one-time events. Far from being static, the meanings of youth shift situationally, depending above all on context. (Hansen, 2008: 210).

Furthermore, while in many cultures there are rituals that signify the passing from childhood to adulthood, in the Western life-stage model, youth has established itself as a particular phase. It is a phase that in many ways is gaining volume, spreading over more years of a lifecycle, becoming bigger business for the commercial sector, and in numerous other ways establishing “youth” or “youthful lives” as increasingly central.

Reguillo adds a very critical perspective on how to define youth. She provides a well-grounded critique of the concept as uniform and draws our attention to three core dimensions that must be considered in any serious attempt to think about youth and their potential leadership in contexts of social change: the processes of precarization/informalization of youth’s biographies, dynamics, circuits and ideals; the retrenchment of the social state, and the strengthening of the punitive state; and the discrediting of modern institutions – the school, political parties, labour unions, businesses – as guarantors of “successful” socializing (Reguillo, 2009: 25).

Articulating citizenship practices in their everyday lives is often a road paved with obstacles for youth, as outlined by Reguillo. However, despite these constraints, they can be agents of change.

The notion of youth as a particular social group experiencing themselves as social actors and agents of change is a rather recent phenomenon, as noted by Colombian scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero. Martín-Barbero (in an interview by Tufte, 2010) argues that, for the first time in contemporary history, youth have constituted themselves as an independent social group, with some of the opportunities to act that this provides, and are experiencing societal change to a degree and of a depth unprecedented in our time:

Youth are not just any youth, since they are experiencing the epochal transformation in their bodies [...]. Those of us who are elder feel doubts and uncertainties that have nothing to do with those of our sons and daughters; they are of a different caliber and type. [...] We had every dogma we wanted and they have nothing even beginning to resemble such dogmas – either in the religious, philosophical or political sense.

Martín-Barbero’s remarks draw our attention to the fact that contemporary youth, immersed in a *glocal* reality (Hemer & Tufte, 2005), are living in a time of radical change, with intensified global transformations, fragmented ideologies and less fixed life cycles and trajectories.

In this context, the role of communication and media in young people’s lives is an extremely dynamic object of study. Deliberation, social critique, advocacy, activism and protest are taking on multiple forms, and our challenge as social scientists is to conceptualize, understand and analyse the deeper meaning of

these social and cultural practices, thereby revealing the polyphony of voices, the multiplicity of strategies and the multitude of arts, genres and languages through which youth, despite the many constraints outlined above, claim their rights and communicate for social change.

Notes

1. The Mexican-Argentinean anthropologist Néstor García Canclini refers to the *different*, the *unequal* and the *disconnected* from a cross-disciplinary, intercultural perspective, and poses the problem of “how to acknowledge the *differences*, right the *inequalities* and *connect* the majorities to the globalized networks” (2006: 14). By *differences* he refers to ethnic, national or gender differences.
2. In 1996, Appadurai referred to media as “a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens and billboards”, emphasizing “television film and cassette forms”. At present, attention is of course given also to the Internet and mobile telephones.
3. For an online version see http://www.un.org/en/mdg/summit2010/pdf/10-43282_MDG_2010%20%28E%29%20WEBv2.pdf
4. Lise Grauenkær Jensen and Mette Grøndahl Hansen, both Danish, work in ADRA Denmark, the Danish sister organization to ADRA Malawi.

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