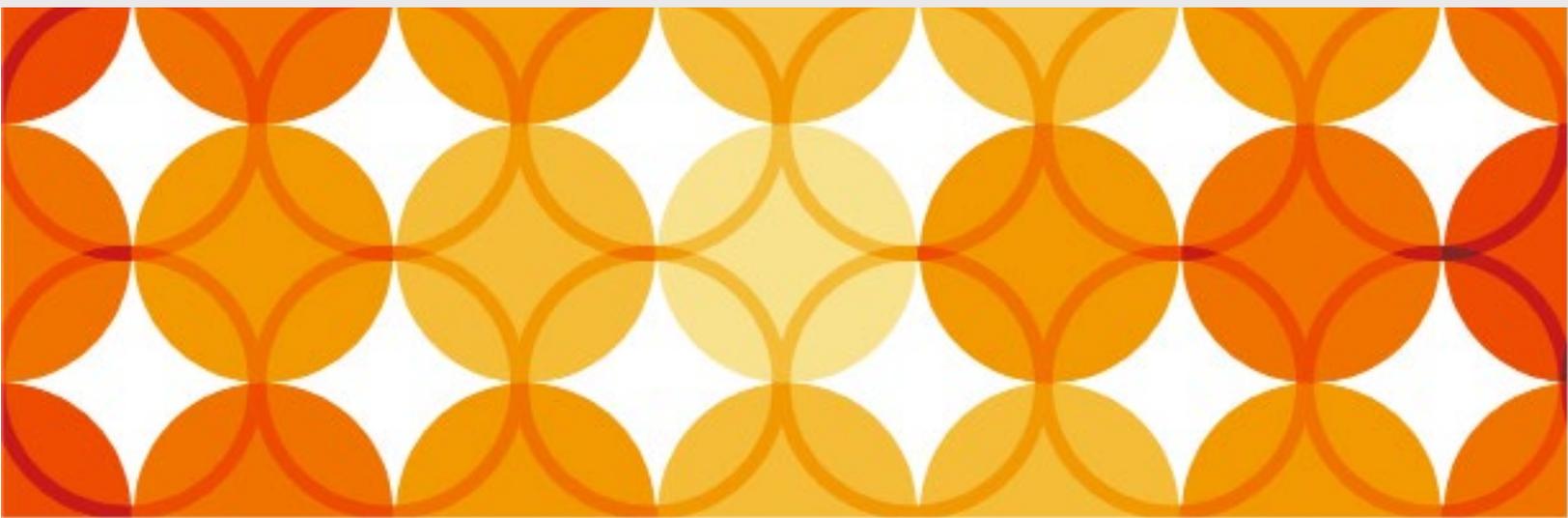# A NOVEL CIVIC IDEA

Building the capacity of youth to critique
and create media in digital culture

Written by

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CIVIC
IDEA

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INTRODUCTION

There are growing concerns about the rise of fringe activist groups intent on spreading false information, politicians' accusations of fake news to advance agendas, and bots that are increasingly present in our digital feeds. In their report *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis explore how internet subcultures "leverage both the techniques of participatory culture and the affordances of social media to spread their various beliefs."[1] Continue Mawick and Lewis:

Taking advantage of the opportunity the internet presents for collaboration, communication, and peer production, these groups target vulnerabilities in the news media ecosystem to increase the visibility of and audience for their messages. While such subcultures are diverse, they generally package themselves as anti-establishment in their reaction against multiculturalism and globalism, while promoting racist, anti-feminist, and anti-Semitic ideologies.[2]

The rise of internet subcultures to advance ideological and partisan stances has impacted the credibility and trust of civic institutions. In the United States, fringe groups using Reddit and 4Chan were able to successfully seed and scale false information campaigns about mainstream political candidates that spread fast and had major impacts on national political elections. At the same time, governments around the world are asserting increasing control over digital media and connective networks to advance their agendas, or to monitor, control and manipulate the online communication and expression of their citizenries. In the wake of an attempted coup in Turkey, the government cracked down on citizens through social media monitoring, leading to the detainment of thousands. In Syria, government monitoring of mobile phones led to the specific targeting of civic activists and opposition parties. Online networks increased the presence of nationalist parties in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Sweden, and put into question the trust of major media and civic institutions. The 2017 nationalist rally in Poland, which gathered over 60,000 people, was initiated by alternative media and social networks beyond what any mainstream media outlets could achieve.

Marwick and Lewis outline a digital infrastructure that allows for groups to propagate and manipulate information, and to allow that information to scale at prolific rates. Subcultures employ techniques that range from the development of bots and the appropriation of memes to leverage the capacity of vibrant participatory networks that are able to amplify messages without relying on mainstream media. Marwick and Lewis, through exploring various vulnerabilities in mainstream society that allow alternative groups to have such power online, highlight a lack of trust in media, the decline of local news, and the complicity of mainstream media outlets who have to compete in an attention economy, where techniques that prioritize engagement and "eyeballs." are prioritized. Aa a

result, write Marwick and Lewis, "New and old media alike employ software that provides detailed data that shows exactly which articles get the most clicks, shares, likes, and comments. This allows newspapers and blogs to tailor future content to drive their metrics up, incentivizing low-quality but high-performing posts over high-quality journalism."[3]

The role of mainstream media in the rise of false and manipulative information has ramifications for the overall trust that people place in media. In a report for the Tow Center, Craig Silverman finds that amidst the "onslaught of hoaxes, misinformation, and other forms of inaccurate content that flow constantly over digital platforms,"[4] news and media organizations spend inordinate amounts of time and energy engaging in the verification and debunking of information that emerges online from internet subcultures. As a result, Silverman writes, "rather than acting as a source of accurate information, online media frequently promote misinformation in an attempt to drive traffic and social engagement."[5] A landscape of distrust, manipulation and proliferating of Internet subcultures is supported by technological infrastructures that prioritize the growth of like-minded, homophilous networks[6] and that promote a level of peer support and validation for information credibility, that questioning the sources is not found to be as important as the justification of information through peer support.[7] This landscape is further entrenched by technology companies that are larger and more powerful than ever before,[8] and that regulatory bodies have little control over. As a result, their algorithms dictate how and where information travels, often prioritizing attention over depth, extracting data over providing diversity, and favoring the sensational over the subtle.[9]

In the wake of these emerging trends of digital culture, many in government, non-governmental and policy positions have called for media literacy pedagogies and practices to respond to current media and socio-political realities of present day.[10] Foundations are devoting significant resources to explore the role of technologies and news in society, and exploring how civic media can impact more vibrant and active communities.[11] These initiatives focus largely on the ways that citizens, and primarily young people, can be better equipped with the skills and competencies to navigate and meaningfully participate in daily civic life in a ubiquitous, complex and increasingly influential digital culture.

MEDIA LITERACIES
AND THE CAPACITY TO ACT

Media literacies have long been positioned as a set of skills and competencies centered on critical media deconstruction, analysis, comprehension, creation and engagement. Media literacy pedagogies and practices generally focus on increasing the ability for people

> **"While positioning media literacy as a solution to problems that emerge alongside rapid technological advancements makes sense in theory, in practice organizations working with youth in formal and informal learning environments often struggle to keep pace with fast evolving technologies, tools, and social networks that elicit unique skills and competencies in users."**

to critically evaluation and analysis media texts, produce content, understand media system and structures, reflection on media representations in society, and use media to effectively participate in daily civic life.[12] More recently media literacy pedagogies have incorporated specific disciplines, or sub-literacies, such as data, news, health, critical making, and DIY that respond to the pervasive and increasingly central role that media and mediated platforms play in society.[13]

While positioning media literacy as a solution to problems that emerge alongside rapid technological advancements makes sense in theory, in practice organizations working with youth in formal and informal learning environments often struggle to keep pace with fast evolving technologies, tools, and social networks that elicit unique skills and competencies in users.[14] Organizations often lack resources to devote to training in new technologies, and lack access to the technological skills and experiences needed to create savvy technological responses. In the 2016 report titled *Digital Crossroads: Civic Media and Migration*,[15] Paul Mihailidis, Liat Racin & Eric Gordon examined how civil society organizations (CSOs) working with refugee or migrant populations in host countries were building media capacities of youth (16-25 yo). The report found that organizations struggled to build effective media literacy practices with young people. Organizations lacked both the tools and approaches for implementing media literacy skill sets and dispositions focused on creating pathways for youth to safely and effectively participate in civic or political discourse. Non-profit and youth-oriented organizations struggled to find effective communication initiatives in an increasingly fragmented

and polarized media landscape, and lacked the capacity and infrastructure to devote proper resources to respond. As a result, many organizations were starved for media and digital literacy training that would help them leverage information and communication technologies to both better engage with communities and help community stakeholders meaningfully participate in daily civic life.

> **"Civic IDEA emerges from these findings to offer a media literacy intervention to help organizations build the capacity of youth to be more engaged citizens through the creation and distribution of media. Civic IDEA incorporates accessible technologies and a focus on connecting critical inquiry with active engagement in daily life."**

Civic IDEA emerges from these findings to offer a media literacy intervention to help organizations build the capacity of youth to be more engaged citizens through the creation and distribution of media.[16] Civic IDEA incorporates accessible technologies and a focus on connecting critical inquiry with active engagement in daily life.[17] Youth who engage with the IDEA framework will learn to identify and investigate issues, deliberate around their values, express alternative narratives to current messages, and advocate for communities and issues that matter.

Civic IDEA builds from research that explores the effectiveness of using data for teaching and learning in community contexts,[18] on the potential for online deliberation to improve civil dialog and public engagement,[19] on remix as enhancing critical inquiry and expression,[20] and on advocacy as a means of bringing voice and agency more directly into the daily lives of young people.[21] Collectively, Civic IDEA prioritizes knowledge that is explicitly transformed into civic action taking, and that supports voice, agency and participation as the cornerstones for effective and safe engagement in daily life.

Each module in the IDEA framework-**I**nvestigate, **D**eliberate, **E**xpress, and **A**dvocate-is designed to create a pathway for the learner to move from the point of investigating information online, to deliberating about the information with peers, to forming personal expression, to transforming that expression into digital advocacy. Modules are anchored by interactive digital learning tools and series of activity guides that facilitate fun and creative inquiries. For the investigate module, *Databasic*[22] is a simple online tool that allows users to quickly analyze data sets, look for correlations, and create visualizations and connections. For deliberation, *@Stake*[23] is a mobile role playing game that enables small groups to deliberate about civic issues they define themselves. For expression, *MediaBreaker*[24] allows youth to input and remix visual content to express themselves in relation to mainstream media narratives. And for expression, *Emerging Citizens*[25] encourages civic advocacy through popular social media modalities, such as Twitter, Wikipedia and memes. Collectively, these tools and guides are positioned to move learners from the point of critical inquiry to practicing media literacy that prioritizes active engagement and participation in daily civic life.[26]

Recent research has found that media literacy interventions in formal schooling can increas-

ing learners knowledge about politics, news, and general civic information.[27] Research has also found that increased critical analysis and deconstruction skills can lead to increased cynicism and disengagement from media.[28] Civic IDEA is positioned to build on the potential of media literacy to increasing meaningful engagement and active participation in daily life. The focus of this toolkit is to harness the availability of tools and technologies that can be incorporated in media literacy pedagogies for explicit civic adoption. Civic IDEA prioritizes how media literacy pedagogies and practices can incorporate civic action taking into their learning experiences.

A CIVIC MEDIA
APPROACH TO LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

C ivic IDEA prioritizes the civic outcomes of media literacy pedagogy. Civic outcomes refer to the direct connections between learning to critique and create media, and applying that newfound knowledge to processes that involve of investigation, deliberation, expression and advocacy. To facilitate this goal, the IDEA framework builds upon recent work around civic media, defined by Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis as "the technologies, designs, and practices that produce and reproduce the sense of being in the world with others toward common good...civic media, then, is any mediated practice that enables a community to imagine themselves as being connected, not through achieving, but through striving for common good."[29] In their 2018 report on *Civic Media Practice*, Eric Gordon and Gabe Mugar build on this definition by articulating that, "There are two important aspects of this definition: 1) "striving for" suggests process over product, and 2) "common good" suggests a shared set of negotiated values driving the work. Before every finished product, before every celebrated new initiative, values, interests, and power dynamics must be navigated and negotiated."[30]

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Media literacy interventions embrace civic media practice through a focus on public impact and fostering a common good. This orientation helps media literacy move from beyond distanced critique, interpretation without application, and a focus on tools and technologies over the processes and applications that define them. Write Gordon and Mugar:

All uses of technology are not equivalent: underlying every new tool or technology is a series of decisions and negotiations that lead to its invention or adoption. Optimized efficiency is not always desirable when the higher priority is assuring that a community's voice is heard, that a process is fair, or that the most vulnerable are able to safely express themselves. Attentiveness to the values underlying technology is necessary to understand the contemporary civic transformation.[31]

In focusing on the process and potential of media literacies, the civic IDEA framework supports research at the intersection of technology and civic engagement that demonstrates the need for approaches to civic engagement systems with deep user immersion, defined as both experiential and challenge-based, where the user can easily make the connection between knowledge acquired and possible actions to take.[32] This focus is reinforced by scholarship showing that increased civic activity online can promote constructive civic behavior offline: from supporting causes, to raising local awareness about social issues.[33] Civic IDEA is also motivated by a focus on "real-world" engagement, where applications to conditions in daily life can increase content retention and bolster young people's ability to transfer abstract concepts to other domains.[34]

This approach supports a focus not only on skills but also responds to emerging norms of digital culture, where media literacies, according to Paul Mihailidis, are "designed to bring people together in support of solving social problems, reinventing spaces for meaningful engagement, [and] creating positive dialog in communities."[35] While many initiatives focus on the measurement of assessing civic engagement in learning contexts,[36] Civic IDEA builds specifically on work that looks at young people's ability to effectively participate in digital communities.[37] Effective participation in this context means moving beyond skill acquisition and towards a sense of situated agency that moves learners from "articulating concern to a capacity to act.[38]

BEYOND "SKILLS" - FROM RESPONSIBILITY TO ACCOUNTABILITY

For as long as media literacies have been formalized as a pedagogical movement, they have prioritized skills and competencies as core learning mechanisms. Prioritizing evaluation, analysis, comprehension, interpretation, and creation, advocates argue, "empower people to be critical thinkers and makers, effective communicators and active citizens."[39] More recent articulations of media literacy skills incorporate technological fluencies like play, performance, remix, appropriation and negotiation,[40] and a focus on creation, reflection and action taking,[41] that help learners navigate skillfully through digital platforms and ubiquitous information ecosystems.

> **"Civic IDEA, addresses this concern by situating skill sets in tools and technologies that focus on real world problem solving, and the transfer of skills to the modeling of active civic participation."**

Approaches to media literacy that prioritize skills and ability are valuable in helping young people to build critical knowledge sets and competencies for message interpretation. They prepare learners to be critical in their inquiry into media systems and their interpretation of messages. Skills-based approaches to media literacy, at the same time, often necessitate *critical detachment* from messages, where one has to be distant from the message to properly deconstruct it. They prioritize *transactional* approaches to skill building, where once skills are learned, media literacy has been achieved. And perhaps most importantly, contemporary media literacy pedagogies focused on the development of skills and competencies often works from the perspective of **individual responsibility**. In *The Age of Responsibility*, scholar Yascha Mounk argues that a focus on personal responsibility has contributed to the fracturing of civic life in Western democracies, and sowed the seeds of partisanship and polarization:

Nowadays, when politicians promise their followers that they believe in "individual" or "personal" responsibility, they do not mean that each of us has a duty to make life better for others, or even to make sacrifices for our nation. What they mean is that we must strive to be self-sufficient-and that the extent to which we have lived up to this responsibility determines how willing the collectivity should be to help us in an hour of need.[42]

Media literacy pedagogies often adopt a "responsibility as accountability" frame, which asks the individual to learn how to better navigate media, and are often detached from the col-

lective or social elements of such responsibilities.[43] Civic IDEA, addresses this concern by situating skill sets in tools and technologies that focus on real world problem solving, and the transfer of skills to the modeling of active civic participation.

Each of the modules in the IDEA framework, by incorporating tools that model core civic engagement processes and means for acting in daily life, emphasize the placement of skills into the real world. Gordon and Mihailidis refer to this as the "usability of knowledge." "The usability of knowledge," they argue, "[is] the process of creating and sharing knowledge that takes the learner, and the learner's place in the world, into consideration. Usability suggests that knowledge is open-ended, capable of accommodating a range of user experiences, and appropriately cultivated within the social experience of learning."[44] This usability includes applying investigation skills to tell visually compelling and rich stories with public data, applying negotiation skills to effectively deliberate across stakeholder roles in communities, applying analysis skills to remix and share media messages for more diverse interpretations of media messaging, and applying skills of expression and production to public advocacy through popular social communication technologies.

In this way, the components of civic IDEA are focused on how knowledge becomes activated in the real world. The values that inform this transition support how people use media to support a common good.

UNPACKING THE TOOLKIT

What makes the IDEA toolkit unique is the facilitation that connects each module to a learning framework, and that scaffolds the engagement within a process that takes users from inquiry to advocacy. Civic IDEA prioritizes the following learning objectives:

- Participants will be able to assess the accuracy and reliability of data.
- Participants will be able to use data to create compelling visuals and stories.
- Participants will be able to effectively deliberate with peers about issues in the media.
- Participants will be able to challenge dominant media narratives through remixing video.
- Participants will be able to create and disseminate media-based advocacy campaigns through memes and hashtags.
- Participants will be able to monitor the impact of their campaigns by tracking the use of their media creations.

These objectives are met through activity guides that both build learner engagement through hands-on and creative activities with each module of the framework, and the collective experience of navigating activities that promote active participation with information.

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INVESTIGATION

Core Learning Mechanics
- Understand the role of data in daily information and communication practices
- Learn how data impacts media messages through comparison of public data sets
- Build and share meaningful information through creative data storytelling practices

Media literacy prioritizes deep critical inquiry and investigation as a core skill set. This is often activated through the evaluation of media texts, message interpretation, and analysis of the structures and systems that support media message creation, distribution and reception. In the IDEA framework, facilitators and participants work together to explore different ways to interpret texts through data analysis, visualization and storytelling. The Databasic tools allow learners to compare texts of political speeches, news stories, press releases or any other relevant media texts. Learners will compare across texts, looking for similarities, differences, exploring word frequencies, and looking at the ways in which networks impact the spread of content online.

What makes Investigation unique is the that skills of access, analysis, and evaluation are activated through students learning how to use data in visually creative, fun and dynamic ways. The outcomes of data inquiry process can be used to understand how information travels online, how it is positioned, who and what are prioritized, and how we can explore multiple interpretations of media narratives through creative storytelling. Investigation, in this sense, becomes an active learning pursuit, and not simply a process of distanced critical deconstruction.

DELIBERATION

Core Learning Mechanics
• Understand diverse perspectives of an issue of shared concern
• Learn to make clear arguments and respond to others
• Build capacity to creatively explore solutions to complex problems

Deliberation is often left off the radar of media literacy pedagogies. But it is an essential skill for learning how to engage in civil dialog around contemporary issues, and to assess the credibility of media in the process. Through the @Stake role playing game, learners will source issues of present concern in their communities, be assigned stakeholder roles (parent, local government official, activist, journalist, etc.), and engage in dialogue around the issue from their assumed role. Learners will negotiate with others in the game, and through this process, learn the art deliberation.

Deliberation here embraces media literacy skills focused on assessing the credibility of information and understanding how to apply that information to a current community issue. In their role, learners will use information to advocate for a stance, to make a persuasive argument, or to attempt to convince others of the veracity of their perspective. Other players will need to assess the credibility of this position, it's impact on the community, and the tradeoffs involved with civic decision-making. As a result, learners are constantly negotiating the credibility of information with the performance of subject position, and the desire to "win" the game.

EXPRESSION

Core Learning Mechanics

• Understand how media represent issues in public
• Learn about how media techniques to promote social, cultural and political norms

• Build alternative narratives of media texts through remix

Media literacy focuses on the creation of media messages as a core expressive skill. Learners use accessible technologies to learn how to tell stories, frame messages, and create content about issues of concern. Many time production practices are about media topics, or focus on analysis and reflection about these stories. In the IDEA framework, expression takes the form of actively appropriating existing content, and remixing it to shift the narrative.

In the expression process, users learn digital editing techniques through the remix process. They select an issue, find existing video content about that issue, upload into the MediaBreaker platform, and using an easy-to-use editing suite, re-imagine the narrative of the video. Through this process they learn production and editing techniques, and at the same time they learn how to analyze content and understand how messages are framed, what they prioritize, and who they intend to attract. During the remix, learners will engage in these questions as they experiment with voice over, textual remix, art, and graphics that shift the intention of the message. Using real texts, from political speeches to newscasts and advertisements, helps learners think about expression through reframing of messages created and distributed by professionals with intended outcomes.

ADVOCACY

Core Learning Mechanics
• Understand the role of popular social technologies in civic engagement
• Learn how to create memes, hashtags and wikipedia for civic means
• Build advocacy campaigns that are tested against peers for engagement and resonance

Learning to use media to advance a cause, advocate on behalf of issues or positions, and to give voice and exposure to marginalized communities is central to the civic goals of media literacy pedagogy. With an abundance of free and easy to use tools, young people are able to reach greater and more diverse communities, faster, and without the need of extensive resources. Despite the potential of these tools, often times it is challenging to help young people understand how to activate their voice and build media messages that they can use to be agents of social change.

Advocacy in the IDEA framework helps learners develop agency through the application of popular social technologies-memes, hashtags and wikipedia-to civic purposes. Learners will explore the role of these forms of communication on how people can leverage humor, wit, and creative content to advocate in relevant and engaging ways. Through playful mechanics that ask learners to create memes and hashtags, and select which are most engaging, they explore how to make resonant content while reflecting on what makes a hashtag scale, why memes can be powerful tools for civic action taking, and how hyper-connected online content can help people better navigate the web for fluid knowledge acquisition. Through Emerging Citizens, learners strive to become everyday advocates on behalf of community betterment.

CIVIC IDEA:
KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

Civic IDEA aims to build the capacity of young people to be effective participants in their societies. Through a media literacy facilitation, IDEA embraces what Philosopher Peter Levine calls civic renewal, in which "people must change the norms and structures of their own communities through deliberate civic action—something that they are capable of doing quite well." In societies that rely more and more on media to facilitate daily engagement, how people think about changing the norms and structures of communities must necessarily incorporate how they understand media and their ability to actively use media for civic purposes.

> **"Civic IDEA attempts to situate a media literacy process into how communities explore and realize change."**

Media literacies that support civic renewal embrace the types of deliberation, participation, and engagement that reflect a commitment to reforming communities. What this means in a ubiquitous digital culture is different than how we traditionally understand media and its role in democracy. Civic IDEA attempts to situate a media literacy process into how communities explore and realize change. Through the tools and the activity guides that support them, IDEA puts into practice a scaffolded learning experience that moves learners from critical inquirers to active media makers who advocate for stronger, more inclusive and supportive communities.

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