Using Social Media to Teach Social Media

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Today's population of Digital Natives learned how to learn new kinds of software before they started high school. They carry mobile phones, media players, game devices, laptop computers and know how to use them. They know the Internet not as a transformative new technology, but as a fixture in their environment.

These young citizens are both self-guided and in need of guidance. Accordingly, the Social Media Virtual Classroom project, with funding from the HASTAC/MacArthur Foundation Digital Media & Learning Competition,

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is in the process of creating an online social media classroom, detailed syllabi for teaching participatory media theory and practice, a community of practice and a series of instructional videos detailing how and why to use social media to learn about social media.

The Internet provides digital production tools and information distribution networks that have enabled people to mobilize new types of collective action. Community production and sharing of knowledge (Wikipedia), culture (YouTube, Flickr, the blogosphere), tools (free and open source software), markets (eBay and Craigslist), education (Open Educational Resources), journalism (citizen journalism) and political organization (meetups, netroots activism, smart mobs) are early manifestations of social changes that could continue to bloom as more become literate in participatory media — or could fail to take root if those literacies are available only to elites.

These media include (but aren't limited to) blogs, wikis, RSS, tagging and social bookmarking, music-photo-video sharing, mashups, podcasts, digital storytelling, virtual communities, social network services, virtual environments, machinima, and videoblogs. These distinctly different media share three common, interrelated characteristics:

- Many-to-many media make it possible for every person connected to the network to broadcast as well as to receive text, images, audio, video, software, data, discussions, transactions, computations, tags, or links to and from every other person. The asymmetry between broadcaster and audience that was dictated by the structure of pre-digital technologies has changed radically.

- Participatory media are social media whose power emerges from the active participation of many people. Value derives not just from the size of the audience, but also from their power to connect to each other, to form a community as well as a market.

- Social networks, when amplified by information and communication networks, enable broader, faster, and lower cost coordination of activities; participatory media can help coordinate action in the physical world on scales and at paces never before possible.

"Voice," the unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one's communications from those of others, can be called upon to help connect

students' energetic involvement in forming their identity to their potential growth as engaged citizens. Moving from a private to a public voice can help students turn their self-expression into a form of public participation. Public voice is learnable, a matter of consciously engaging with an active public rather than broadcasting to a passive audience. It is an important and beneficial learning outcome, and it is also fundamental to democracy.

The public voice of individuals, aggregated and in dialogue with the voices of others, is the building block of "public opinion." When public opinion has the power and freedom to influence policy, it can be an essential instrument of democratic self-governance. Deliberation is only one important part of public discourse. Investigation, advocacy, criticism, debate, persuasion, and politicking are also important. With citizen journalist communities like Assignment Zero and citizen news critic communities like NewsTrust, YouTube political debates, netroots bloggers and organizational Meetups, the tools for revitalizing democracy are widely available. What is needed at this crucial time is not just basic knowledge of how to use digital tools, but also widespread knowledge of what these tools mean.

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Participatory media literacy is necessarily a hands-on enterprise, requiring active use of digital media by students; for this reason the Social Media Virtual Classroom syllabus will involve student use of multiple online media in their exploration of the syllabus texts, and a video blog will provide instruction and real world

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examples. At the same time, knowledge of the skills needed to use digital tools is uniform but lacks a familiarity with the scientific discourse regarding community, collective action, social networks and the public sphere. Hence, the syllabus will be grounded in traditional texts from sociology, computer science, economics, and political science.

In order to give students a private, easy-to-use, flexible environment for blogging, chatting and aggregating their social bookmarks, we will use a free and open source content management system (CMS). Videos and wikis will document the complete process of leasing an inexpensive server, installing and configuring the CMS, finding and installing modules to make a social media online classroom. The videos and online resources should enable any educator or student to create a social media online classroom and put it to use.

Although a willingness to learn new media through point-and-click exploration might come naturally to today's student cohort, there is nothing innate about knowing how to apply those acquired skills to the processes of civil society, scientific or scholarly innovation, or economic production. A successfully implemented Social Media Virtual Classroom can bridge that disconnect and prepare students to participate in society as engaged and empowered citizens.

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