

“Youth-Led Research, the Internet, and Civic Engagement”

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Some University of Maryland colleagues and I are studying the geographical causes of obesity.¹ An emerging body of scientific research suggests that your health depends on your weight; and how much you weigh depends on precisely where you live. If there are stores nearby that provide healthy produce, you will eat better. If there is a safe and convenient park in your neighborhood, you may exercise. If between you and a shopping district there are streets with sidewalks, safe crosswalks, and low crime, you are likely to walk every day. But if you live in a suburban cul-de-sac with no sidewalks at all, if you are afraid of muggers in the park, or if there is a fast-food restaurant much closer to your house than the nearest greengrocer, then you are more likely to become obese.²

We are working in a community where the majority of the population is African American or Latino, the median income is modest, and the landscape is very diverse, ranging from suburban ranch-house lanes to traditional urban grids to clusters of large apartment blocks. In general, minority people, adolescents, and those with lower socio-economic status (SES) are disproportionately at-risk for obesity and related diseases such as diabetes and hypertension; they are also relatively unlikely to lead active lifestyles.³ However, many of the studies that have demonstrated these correlations have investigated inner-city populations. It has thus been difficult to disentangle economic and cultural factors from geographical factors such as population density.⁴ We hope to get beyond the general correlation between SES and active lifestyles by identifying specific variables in the physical environment that more directly predict active living behaviors.

So far, I've described a fairly standard social science project with policy implications. However, my own interest is not in nutrition or urban planning. Rather, my colleagues and I are constantly looking for ways to involve disadvantaged adolescents in creating sophisticated and valuable research that they can give away to the public. In our current project, college faculty and students will not conduct research alone. High school students—mostly not college-bound; all African Americans or new immigrants—will do most of the work. They will frame the research questions, collect the data in the field (using Palm Pilots to enter information), and make analytical maps for a public website.

This project is the latest in a series of informal experiments that have the goal of *engaging youth in research of public value, using new information technology*. Most recently, we worked with students at the same high school to create a deliberative website about the desegregation of their own schools. In that work, oral history rather than geography was the relevant academic discipline. Before that, we helped students to interview local residents and create public maps of community assets. Once we have completed the current mapping project, we will move on to new fields.

At this point, I cannot report that engaging youth in public-interest research generates powerful effects. Our own project has barely begun; besides, it is not well designed to measure effects on the students. (The class is small and self-selected; there is no control group.) In many other places, adolescents are engaged in original, sophisticated, community-based research. However, there are no aggregate poll data that would help us to estimate the effects of research on adolescent researchers. Nor can I find any effort to assess these projects in a serious, controlled way.⁵ The best available assessment presents mixed findings.⁶

This, then, is a *theoretical* paper. For reasons described below, I believe that we should expect to see important benefits from engaging adolescents in the “scholarly communications commons.” We should expect the participants to obtain civic skills and values as a result of creating public intellectual goods. They should also gain academic and technical skills and interest in attending college. They should develop an understanding of the digital commons and thereby enlarge the political constituency for policies that protect the commons. Meanwhile, communities should benefit from the materials generated by diverse new groups; and powerful research universities should benefit from new opportunities to collaborate with students in their vicinity. As a result, it should be possible to persuade universities to use some of their research resources for projects that would increase youth civic engagement.

My optimism about involving youth in making online public goods arises from my commitment to five general ideas.

1. The Associational Commons

Our current project on geography and obesity is part of a nascent organization called the Prince George’s Information Commons. (Prince George’s County, MD, is where the University of Maryland is located.) We have a partner in the St. Paul Information Commons, which is connected to the University of Minnesota. Both experiments are rooted in local work that has been ongoing for decades, but they were shaped by national conversations among experts and stakeholders that occurred in 2001. The Ford Foundation funded these conversations and the Democracy Collaborative organized them, with the goal of planning a new federal program to support public uses of the Internet and related digital media. The original idea was to design a whole new

federal agency or corporation called the Public Telecommunications Service (PTS). However, most participants ultimately favored an alternative approach, which was to create local, nonprofit, democratic associations that could later join together into a loose, “bottom-up” network that might choose to call itself the PTS.⁷ We further decided to begin in communities where there are Land Grant, public universities, because these are institutions with technical resources, expertise, and traditions of public engagement (and there is at least one in every state).⁸ Hence the first “information commons” began around the universities of Maryland and Minnesota.

A “commons” is some kind of public resource, accessible to all members of a community and often constructed by them. I admire commons such as public libraries, the Internet, community gardens, and bodies of scholarly research because they encourage voluntary, diverse, creative activity. However, I have distinguished between a *libertarian commons* and an *associational commons*.⁹ In a libertarian commons, anyone has a right to use (and sometimes also to contribute to) some public resource. This right is *de facto* if no one is able to block access to the good or if no one chooses to do so. The right is *de jure* if it arises from a law or policy that guarantees open access. In contrast, an associational commons exists when some good is owned and controlled by a group. The owner has the right and power to limit access, but it sees itself as the steward of a *public* good. As such, it sets policies that are intended to maintain a commons. For example, an association may admit anyone as a member, on the sole condition that he or she protects the common resource in some specified way. (Libraries tend to function like this.) Or a group may only admit those who have special qualifications, but impose obligations on its members in order to enhance the public good. (Scientific and professional associations

often use this model.) Religious congregations, universities, scientific organizations, and civic groups differ in their rules and structures, but they often have this function of protecting or enhancing a quasi-public good.

I recognize that there is a powerful limitation to associational commons: they are only as good as the associations that manage them. Just because a group is a nonprofit does not guarantee that it is fair, responsible, transparent, or honorable. Nevertheless, there is a great tradition of banding together into voluntary groups to protect a public good. This is what Alexis de Tocqueville found exemplary in the New World. He is often seen as a theorist of free association, but what he really admired were groups that generated public goods: “The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to diffuse books, to build inns, to construct churches, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools.”¹⁰ I believe that such associational commons are the heart of “civil society” and explain a considerable part of its appeal.¹¹

Furthermore, I have argued that associational commons, while hardly infallible, have several advantages over libertarian commons:

1. An association can defend itself; it can litigate and lobby to protect the public good of which it is the steward. In time-honored fashion, associations give their members “selective incentives” (such as free access to the good that they control) in return for support.¹² Thus, for example, a religious congregation may own a beautiful building that creates “positive externalities” for the broader community: nice views, free concerts, tourist revenues. The congregation may allow anyone who commits to its creed and pays tithes to join. Members then gain special access to the building (for instance, reserved

pews and invitations to social events). In return, the congregation gains a bank balance with which it can hire masons if the building is damaged, and lawyers if there is a legal threat. In contrast, a libertarian commons such as the ocean suffers from a classic free-rider problem. Some people and groups benefit from degrading the commons, either by taking too much of it for themselves, fencing parts off as private property, or polluting it. Many people like the commons and wish to see it defended. But no one has a sufficient incentive to pay to defend a good that benefits everyone else as well.

The Internet was born as a libertarian commons, but today it badly needs organized defenders. The free distribution of ideas online is threatened by political constraints, such as censorship and the overprotection of intellectual property; by private pollution in the form of spam, viruses, and “flaming” (abusive text); and by corporate “enclosure.” For an example of enclosure, consider that if you visit a major corporate site, the source code will be hidden by technological means, and patents or copyrights may make imitation illegal. If you try to borrow Amazon’s “one-click” method of purchasing goods, you could be sued for stealing the company’s intellectual property, even though such “business methods” have never been patented in the past.¹³ In contrast, the early Web had the feel of a commons—in part—because one could always see how a site had been constructed and freely imitate its technical features. Meanwhile, cable companies and other providers of high-speed Internet access are eager to drive people to particular commercial websites with which they have financial arrangements. Users who want to be able to find sites of their choice and to create and share material are engaged in a constant struggle with large corporations that want to control search engines or to discourage individuals from creating their own content.¹⁴ It is not clear that corporations

are currently winning, but the threat requires permanent vigilance and an organized response.

2. An association is potentially democratic. It can offer its members opportunities to deliberate about policy and to make collective decisions with fair procedures. In contrast, a libertarian commons is difficult to regulate even if the vast majority of participants feel (and feel rightly) that particular rules should be imposed. For example, we might wish that the Internet combined free speech with privacy and avoided nuisances like “spam.” But to the extent that the Internet is truly a libertarian commons, such regulations cannot be imposed even if they are popular and legitimate. Only a subset of associations are democratic—and not all of them should be. But a commons is often most efficient and durable when “most of the individuals affected by a resource regime can participate in making and modifying [its] rules.”¹⁵

3. An association can publicly articulate a comprehensive set of values. A libertarian commons is free, but liberty may be the *only* moral norm that it embodies. In contrast, a university, a religious congregation, or a professional association can declare itself the defender of a basket of values, including freedom, public access, truth, reliability, and/or decency. In some cases, a government may monitor the association to ensure that it serves its mission.

4. An association can proselytize, in the best sense of the term. Any commons relies on a demanding set of norms and commitments, such as trust, reciprocity, long time-horizons, optimism about the possibilities of voluntary collective action, and personal commitment. In this paper, I will describe people as having a “civic identity” if

they have internalized these norms in relation to a particular public good. People are “civic” if they see themselves as responsible for the good, and if they act accordingly.

A civic identity is unlikely to develop automatically. We have to be taught to be civic; we aren’t born that way. Each generation must transmit to the next a moral concern for common goods as well as “the operational principles on which self-organized governance is based.”¹⁶ Knowing this, successful associations recruit members with an eye to the future, looking (for example) for young people who can replace their current membership and leadership in decades to come. Associations educate their recruits—and also the general public—about their core values. If they have narrow constituencies, they may try to broaden their appeal. If they have broad but shallow support, they may try to develop a zealous core.

Indeed, I can think of no successful historical example of a commons that arose under conditions of total individual freedom—or as a gift of nature. Even oceans only work as common fisheries if fishing communities are highly organized and self-regulated. Commons are made possible by demanding moral norms and/or enforceable agreements, hammered out in groups, and then reinforced by hard, collaborative work.¹⁷

In Prince George’s County, we are trying to build an independent, democratic association whose purpose is to create public goods using the new digital media. In the process, we hope to cultivate relevant skills and commitments among young people of color who are not on course to attend competitive colleges. This is a constituency that usually does not benefit from the Internet commons or have a voice in its future. We never try to persuade these young people to adopt any particular view of the Internet or the major corporate and governmental policies that shape it. We do not tell them, for

example, that the Internet is at its best when the architecture is “open end-to-end,” or that intellectual property is over-protected in the interests of Microsoft and other companies.¹⁸ We have not even exposed them to open-source software (although that might be a good thing to do). Instead, we help kids to address local problems that they care about, using the most readily available technology. Ultimately, we hope that their direct experiences with creativity will make them skilled and independent judges of the policies that govern the new media.

So far, the Prince George’s Information Commons is not an independent, democratic association. It is a series of projects organized by a few University of Maryland colleagues, with the heavy participation of youthful volunteers. Since foundations fund these projects, the principal investigators are responsible and make many basic decisions. We decided not to start by creating a new association, because we believed that it would have been impossible to attract community members until we had created some tangible and valuable products for a public website. However, we have tried to honor associational norms by making our young participants feel that they are important members of a group, and by asking them to make as many decisions as possible. Moreover, we see ourselves as building the foundations of a robust, independent community organization.

2. Youth Civic Development

An information commons could involve people of any age. We focus on youth because of converging evidence that people develop durable civic identities in adolescence. They either come to see themselves as efficacious, obligated, critical members of a community, or they do not. Their identity, once formed in adolescence, is

hard to shake. This theory derives from Karl Mannheim, but it has considerable recent empirical support. In the 1920s, Mannheim argued that we are forced to develop a stance toward the public world of news, issues, and governments when we first encounter these things, usually around age 17. Our stance can be one of contempt or neglect, or it can be some kind of engagement, whether critical or conservative. Most of us never have a compelling reason to reassess this stance, so it remains in place throughout adulthood. That is why generations have enduring political and social characters, formed in their early years.¹⁹

Young Americans are less likely to develop civic identities today than in the past. Many ingredients of a civic identity are difficult to measure or have not been followed consistently over long spans of time. However, the percentage of young people who say they follow public affairs dropped from 24 percent in 1966 to just five percent in 2000.²⁰ Although young Americans are just as likely to say they believe in God as their predecessors were in 1976, regular attendance at religious services is down from 41 percent to 33 percent.²¹ There are substantial declines in the percentage of high school seniors who have joined or led extracurricular groups—in school or outside.²² And only half as many young people say they are likely to trust their fellow human beings.²³

Wendy Rahn and John Transue explain the erosion of young people's social trust as a result of "rapid rise of materialistic value orientations that occurred among American youth in the 1970s and 1980s."²⁴ This trend is not their fault. I blame the failure of mediating institutions such as unions, political parties, and churches to recruit young people to help sustain public goods. Eric Uslaner explains trust as a function of optimism. People who believe that the world will get better (that there will be more public goods for

all) are willing to trust others and cooperate. People who believe that the pie is shrinking adopt a zero-sum, “me-first” approach.²⁵ Whatever the cause, a decline in trust spells danger for all forms of commons.

Fortunately, we know how to develop civic identities. Adolescents are more likely to become civic if they feel that they are assets, rather than potential problems; if they feel that they *matter* to a group.²⁶ It also helps to give them direct experience with civic or public work.²⁷ The value of experiential learning for citizenship has been shown in numerous studies. Partly as a result of this research, there has been a massive increase in “service-learning”—i.e., combinations of community service with academic work—at all levels of education from kindergarten to PhD programs.²⁸ At its best, service-learning can be a transformational experience that develops enduring civic values and habits.

However, in the context of real public schools, service-learning often degenerates into tutoring younger children or cleaning a park—and then talking about the experience. This happens for two reasons. First, developing more ambitious service projects is difficult and time-consuming. And second, public schools court controversy whenever their students engage in political advocacy and/or “faith-based” community action. Yet forbidding politics and religion drastically narrows the range of discussion and action; as a result, service-learning often becomes trivial.

Many of the best programs are found in Catholic high schools, where service experiences are connected to a challenging normative and spiritual worldview: post-Vatican II Catholic social thought. There is no evidence that these programs cause their graduates to agree with the main doctrines of Catholic theology; but students do develop

lasting engagement with their community.²⁹ However, this model cannot be replicated in public schools, which must be more normatively neutral and respectful of pluralism.

As an alternative, it seems promising to involve young people in *public-interest research using the new digital media*. Conducting research is consistent with the express purposes of public schools, so it is less controversial than political action. Yet research on public issues can be deeply motivating; it can influence identities and attitudes, not just knowledge. By asking students to study their own communities, we can help them to experience and prize the values of public service, empirical rigor, and critical inquiry.

Using research for civic education has always been possible, but the Internet helps in two ways. First, it cuts the costs of conducting research and then disseminating results. For example, ten years ago, it would have required tremendous investments of skilled time and equipment to help adolescents to create reliable and original maps of their community. If they did create excellent maps—say, of pollution levels—disseminating their work to the community would have been expensive and difficult. Today, GIS software can assist a class in making professional maps, which they can place on a website at almost no cost.

Besides, the Internet has an appeal to adolescents. Many people born after 1970 view computers as exciting and accessible; they are more likely to address civic issues by creating a website than by joining a labor union or a fraternal organization. We have often been able to recruit youth with the promise of working with computers. The Pew Internet & American Life Project has identified a group of “Power Creators” who each create online material in an average of two different ways: for instance, maintaining a

personal site and also posting on other sites. This group has a median age of 25 (and the youngest people surveyed were 18, so the real median is certainly lower).³⁰

On the other hand, adolescents are not automatically facile with computers just because they were born after the release of Windows 1.0. Many students with whom we have worked have spent little time in front of computers; they have only been taught “keyboarding” in school (this is typing, but with a word processor); and they have fairly low confidence in their own abilities.

In fact, young adults are not the most active age group online; people in their thirties and forties are more likely to create or contribute to websites. Content creators also tend to be well educated: just 6 percent are adults without high school diplomas, and almost half hold college degrees.³¹

Subtle forms of inequality arise even when students have equal access to computers. Analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) by Jianxia Du and James Anderson reveals that consistent use of computers in schools is correlated with higher test scores for White and Asian students and for those who take advanced courses. Presumably, they are using computers to enrich their studies and to do creative, challenging work. But there is no positive correlation for young people in other racial and ethnic groups or for those of any background who take less challenging courses. In fact, students who take computer courses perform *worse* on standardized tests than other students, *ceteris paribus*. “Disadvantaged children tend to utilize computers for routine learning activities rather than for intellectually demanding applications.”³²

Mark Warschauer has compared two schools in Hawaii that intelligently integrate computers into their science courses. In both schools, teams of students use computers to

conduct scientific research, guided by teachers from several disciplines. But one school serves an affluent and selected student body, 97% of whom go straight to four-year colleges, while the other serves a neighborhood with a per capita income under \$10,000. At the selective private school, teachers have experience in graduate-level scientific research. They teach students to collect field data using handheld devices, download the data to computers, and then intensively analyze them (with help from the calculus teacher). Meanwhile, the students at the Title One public school take boats to outdoor locations, learn to grow seaweed, and then use computers to publish a newsletter.

Both activities are worthwhile; both teach skills and knowledge and engage students in creative teamwork. But there is a fundamental difference in the kinds of skills taught and the overall purpose of the exercise. As Warschauer notes, “One school was producing scholars and the other school was producing workers. And the introduction of computers did absolutely nothing to change the dynamic; in fact, it reinforced it.”³³ Teachers at the public school are very conscious that they need to give their students the skills demanded by employers today—collaboration, responsibility, and teamwork—whereas the private school tries to place its graduates in demanding college programs where they will be expected to show independence, originality, and sheer intellectual excellence.

It is not easy for teachers to overcome this gap, even if they possess sophisticated research skills themselves. Many of the students in our project write English at an elementary school level (although they may be bi- or even trilingual) and they have limited skills for searching the Web or reading text. It is hard to move them a long distance in a single course, and hard to set high expectations when their academic self-

confidence seems fragile and they are far from achieving pre-college work. There is a reason to settle for merely teaching responsibility and teamwork: these attributes help high school graduates in the workplace. No wonder African American and Hispanic students are most likely to use computers in school for games, for drill and practice, or at best to create simple Websites with text and pictures; whereas White and Asian students are most likely to use them for “simulations and applications.”³⁴ To give poor students and those from racial minorities a shot at entering professional occupations, we are going to need much better curricula and pedagogical methods for youth-led research.

3. The Engaged University

Many people are rightly concerned about how well higher education serves its core purposes, which are to educate college students and to produce public goods in the form of knowledge, debate, and cultural artifacts.³⁵ But I think that universities should also use their faculty and student expertise and technical resources to benefit nearby communities. This is partly a matter of fairness; universities should be responsible citizens, sharing their enormous advantages. Engagement is also way to address a sense of alienation that many professors feel. They enter the profession with idealistic motivations, but find that they only contribute incrementally to the knowledge of fellow specialists, with whom they interact sporadically at conferences or by email. Engaging with their local communities can be profoundly rejuvenating for some faculty.

The most common way to “engage the public” is to provide technical assistance: in other words, to advise people how to address a public problem. This kind of work can be valuable. However, it does not tap the knowledge and energy of people outside the academy. Nor does it increase their capacity to address their own problems. The

application of expertise can even *reduce* public capacity if people become overly reliant on, or deferential to, experts.

Furthermore, technical assistance cannot settle normative conflicts, since no one is an expert on matters of value. Yet sometimes expert opinion can *suppress* normative debates. For example, economists may appear to resolve a debate when they claim that one policy is most efficient, and lawyers may claim to settle a controversy when they assert that one side has more support in the law. But neither discipline exhausts the range of considerations that citizens should consider.³⁶

Technical assistance is either expensive (in which case it is out of the reach of poor communities) or else it is a *gift* from experts. A gift does nothing to challenge the basic power imbalance. If anything, it may make residents feel indebted to the university.

Finally, technical assistance tends not to be highly challenging for professors. For many scholars, public service research is “normal science,” a routine application of their methods to some local problem. For junior faculty, this is a diversion on the road to tenure (and inadvisable). For senior faculty, it is *pro bono*; something that they do out of generosity but without a close link to their core work. If public engagement is not challenging and ground-breaking, then it will always seem marginal when a university considers how to allocate scarce resources. At best, there will be two tiers of faculty: the most prominent scholars who do advanced research, and their lower-status colleagues who provide “public service,” perhaps to improve the university’s relations with its neighbors.

I am much more interested in research that contributes important new methods and knowledge to a discipline *as a result of* close engagement with communities. For

example, I doubt that Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues at the University of Indiana could have made crucial contributions to the theory of collective action if they had not worked closely with people who manage “common-pool resources” (forests, fisheries, irrigation systems, and grazing lands) on several continents. They have drawn advice and inspiration from these people even as they have provided technical assistance and derived generalizable lessons.³⁷ Likewise, Jane Mansbridge’s discovery of regular norms in consensus-based democratic organizations arose from her close and collaborative work with such groups.³⁸ Such engaged research projects are not only interesting (and useful for the populations studied); they also create models within the academy. Professors and graduate students can see that community engagement is not extracurricular or optional; rather, it is the *only* way to make progress on certain important questions.

Community-based research should go beyond description and include tough-minded analysis. I have attended many meetings and events at which young people or poor people “document” an asset, problem, or activity in their environment. But academics and other professional researchers “document” things only as a first stage in research (if they do it at all). Their real interests are comparing, assessing, and explaining phenomena, not merely listing or portraying them. I understand why disadvantaged people often make do with description; it requires fewer skills and resources. But much more power comes with assessment and explanation. Too often, the rich do research while the poor get documentation. The solution is to try to involve young people, poor people, and other disadvantaged people in real research, whenever possible.

Our work in Prince George’s County is hardly a model. We are unlikely to break new ground in geography or urban planning, since I am the principal investigator and I

am no expert in these fields. However, we are committed to working in the vicinity of our university, and we see this local engagement as a strength. For faculty, local work connects their professional research to their citizenship; it allows them to contribute to their *own* communities while doing serious professional work. It is thus an antidote to a certain kind of alienation that is common in the age of jet-set academia. At the same time, focusing on a defined geographical community is a good way to create a commons—for reasons described in the next section.

4. Local Roots

An association can be local and face-to-face or else dispersed, even global. This is particularly true on the Internet, which lowers the costs of identifying fellow-travelers in faraway places and communicating with them. Often the results are beneficial. For instance, people with shared stigmas are able to find one another at long distance and thereby escape the oppression of their hostile local communities.

Nevertheless, I believe it is especially important to build associational commons with roots in geographical communities. There are four major reasons for this conclusion.

First, many people care deeply about their own localities, so a local or regional focus will encourage them to participate in the commons. As a general rule, people are more likely to contribute to voluntary associations that work locally, because it is expensive to move, and therefore a household's welfare is tied to the common welfare of the place.³⁹

Besides, there is a shortage of valuable online projects that have local or regional orientations. This means that there is a market niche for Websites (and related activities) that take localities seriously. Moreover, this niche will probably *not* be filled by for-profit

enterprises. People want the chance to do collaborative public work, to represent and experience their distinctive local cultures, and to engage in sustained dialogue—but no one has found ways to make money from hosting such activities. Commercial sites that are intended for geographical communities are full of advertising and generic news and entertainment, but they have few public contributions.

Second, geographical communities (especially whole counties and metropolitan areas) are economically, culturally, and ethnically *diverse*. Some observers argue that the Internet encourages narrow discussions and segmentation into small, like-minded groups. We can too easily escape from people unlike ourselves by going online.⁴⁰ However, a geographically defined commons will encourage us to interact with people who are different.

Third, local governments make important decisions, so we need a healthy democracy at the local level. Democracy requires not only good institutions, but also active publics that can deliberate, organize, and act. Public work with the Internet can help to form such geographically defined publics. In Prince George's County, for example, most people are confused by the overlapping layers of governmental authority exercised by towns, school boards, regional planning bodies, the three branches of county government, and the state. They are also largely indifferent to this structure, which means that they do not vote in local elections, deliberate about local policies, or lobby local politicians. Power thus falls into the hands of organized special interests that have the resources to master local politics: especially developers, police unions, and chambers of commerce. But even teenagers with very ordinary academic skills who participate in the Prince George's Information Commons quickly encounter political issues that have to be

addressed through local law. And so they develop both knowledge and interest in local government.

Finally, much research suggests that online interactions are most meaningful and satisfying when they are accompanied (at least occasionally) by face-to-face contact. This is partly because being known and seen discourages outrageous and offensive behavior, which is common in anonymous online settings.⁴¹ However, it is very expensive to add face-to-face contact to an Internet group—unless all the participants live nearby.

Thus there are important benefits from local associations. But they are not thriving online, as evidenced by the shortage of compelling Websites produced *by* voluntary groups *for* specific localities. Neighborhood associations, voluntary organizations, religious congregations, and other groups that do public work within geographical communities have benefited from establishing Web pages. But most of the actual sites that these groups have created amount to simple online brochures, no more valuable to their visitors than printed posters would be. Furthermore, a 2001 survey by the Pew Internet & American Life project found that, of those Americans who communicated online with other members of a group, just 15 percent contacted people in their “own local communities”—compared to 43 percent who contacted others “all over the country.” Asked whether “the Internet [is] more useful for becoming involved in things going on in your local community, or things going on outside of your local community,” just nine percent chose the first option. And only a fifth of those who had used the Internet to communicate with fellow members of a group had ever met those people face-to-face.⁴² It is great to be able to participate at low cost in national or international associations and to communicate with people whom one will never be able

to meet in person. But if local associations have an important civic and social role, then we need to take deliberate action to support them online.

5. Public Work

By now it should be obvious that there is a political agenda behind our projects in Prince George's County; but the nature of this agenda could easily be misunderstood. My own political orientation derives from Harry Boyte's concept of "public work."⁴³ Boyte and his colleagues argue that ordinary citizens have enormous capacity to make things of public value by working together outside of a market. For example, citizens can create public goods by recycling, starting associations, revitalizing their culture, or fighting crime. By creating new institutions and projects, people also gain political power that they can use to claim rights and benefits.

Our response to obesity illustrates Boyte's ideas. In March 2004, the Centers for Disease Control announced that excessive body weight will soon be the leading cause of death in the US.⁴⁴ The next day, the House of Representatives passed the "Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act" (H.R. 339) to block "civil liability actions ... against food manufacturers, marketers, distributors, advertisers, sellers, and trade associations for claims of injury relating to a person's weight gain, obesity, or any health condition associated with weight gain or obesity." The press dubbed this legislation the "Cheeseburger Bill" and gave it considerable coverage.

There are legal academics and lawyers who advocate "an onslaught on the fast-food industry as a whole, in which it would be made to pay its share of responsibility for type-two diabetes, sclerotic arteries, heart attacks and strokes."⁴⁵ Those in favor of the "Cheeseburger Bill" reply that we should be personally responsible for our behavior and

should not sue McDonald's because we're fat. "Look in the mirror, because you're the one to blame," said F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-WI).⁴⁶ I disagree in part: a rapid increase in the obesity rate is a social problem with political solutions. However, I agree that lawsuits aren't the right response. There are much more constructive, positive, participatory responses to obesity. For example, a community can work to make its streets safe and walkable, to identify and publicize existing assets, and to provide new food and exercise options.

As a matter of fact, just two days before the CDC released its report on obesity as the leading killer in America, 45 high school students had spent the day with us discussing the local causes of obesity and planning their mapping project. They talked about harmful advertising and their own lack of will-power. But we also encouraged them to ask whether there are local causes of the problem that may be more tractable. For example, in the areas around Hyattsville, MD, there are no full basketball courts. This is a political issue (the authorities don't want young Black men hanging around, so they don't build courts); and it may affect adolescents' body weight. It shows the limits of conservative arguments. You can't exercise if there are no sidewalks, no basketball courts, and no grassy spaces. If the only place that lets you hang out at 10 pm is McDonalds, then you're going to eat a lot of fries. Still, that doesn't mean that lawyers will ever solve the problem by suing McDonalds on behalf of the American people. Communities have the power to take their fate into their own hands.

Every community, no matter how poor and embattled, has assets that its residents can use for their common benefit.⁴⁷ Whereas Leftists might say that the only solution to the afflictions of an inner-city neighborhood is government aid, proponents of public

work stress people's capacity to improve their *own* communities by acting together. Poor people do need outside resources—both capital and government assistance—but they are unlikely to get such help unless they have first organized themselves as a powerful political force. The best way to organize is to address tangible local problems, even before powerful outsiders offer aid. And if residents are used to working together, are confident and experienced, and have created their own institutions, then they can handle an influx of cash without being overwhelmed by corruption or manipulative outsiders.

At bottom, both the Left and the Right believe that all things of value are created either by companies and entrepreneurs or else by governments. They assume that markets and states produce a pool of goods which citizens fight over. This struggle is what we conventionally call “politics.” It is a zero-sum game, hence largely unpleasant. In contrast, the public work approach suggests that citizens can make new goods—expand the pie—by cooperating.

Unfortunately, opportunities for ordinary citizens to do public work have shrunk over the last century. This is partly because professionals and experts have taken over many traditional duties of citizens, from managing towns to setting educational policy to lobbying. And it is partly because many civic functions have been privatized. For example, Americans often pay companies to provide neighborhood security or to watch their small children. All that is left for citizens to do is to complain, vote, and volunteer. Volunteering can be valuable, but it is usually squeezed between work and family time. Moreover, conventional volunteering tends to mean direct, face-to-face service that does not change policies or institutions or grant much power to those who participate. A national survey of Americans conducted in 2002 found that many volunteered, at least

occasionally, but only 20 percent of the volunteers (and 10 percent of young volunteers) described their participation as a way to address a “social or political problem.”⁴⁸ In a qualitative study of Minnesota citizens completed in 2000, respondents said that volunteering often consigned them “to positions of mediocrity with the assumption that they lack[ed] the capacity to work on big issues that impact the community.”⁴⁹ At its best, public service is demanding, creative, responsible, serious business.

In modern America, we prize expertise as perhaps never before in human history. And nowhere is the admiration for specialized intelligence greater than in fields connected to computers, where nerds rule. It is good news that young people without high social status or formal education can rise quickly in this world. However, most people remain unable to perform important tasks or to make significant decisions, because only technical experts are competent. Thus, for anyone who is attracted to the general idea of public work, it is crucial to find projects that are genuinely valuable, that involve the new information technologies, and that can be accomplished by ordinary people. Analytical mapping using GIS is a good example.

Conclusion

The Internet was born as a commons, as a particular kind of public resource. A commons can be beneficial for civil society and democracy, mainly because it permits people to be creative as citizens—to contribute things of value to the commonwealth. It is an antidote to consumerism and to passive forms of citizenship.

The most valuable forms of “free speech” on the Internet are not text (e.g., chatrooms, personal Webpages, discussion groups, emails), but fairly expensive and elaborate products such as moderated deliberations, maps linked to databases, streaming

videos, online newspapers with original reporting, historical archives, and photo-essays (to name just a few).

Young people can contribute such products, thus exercising their creativity in the public interest. This is especially important since many young people are otherwise alienated from public and civic life.

The Internet commons is threatened by state regulation, but more seriously by corporate control. Corporations can increase their profits by restricting access to the commons and by treating Internet users as consumers, not co-producers. Since the Internet commons is threatened, and since the most valuable public products are expensive and elaborate, worthwhile uses of the Internet require *organizations* and constituencies.

College faculty, students, and staff have a special opportunity to help communities use the Internet for public purposes, thereby developing a political constituency for the commons and also creating models and templates that can be used elsewhere in civil society. Such work is not only beneficial to the public; it can also make scholarly work more satisfying and multi-dimensional.

These premises have encouraged us to create an experimental “commons” attached to the University of Maryland. We would welcome collaborations with anyone involved in similar efforts.

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¹ We are working under the aegis of the Engaged University Initiative of the Democracy Collaborative. Our current funding comes from the National Geographic Education Foundation. There are eight colleagues and graduate students involved in the project, but I would especially like to acknowledge Margaret-Morgan Hubbard, Associate Director of the Democracy Collaborative, and Carrie Donovan, Youth Director of CIRCLE. They have done as much as I to create the Prince George's Information Commons; nevertheless, the views expressed in this essay are mine alone. I would also like to thank the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at the University of Indiana for the invitation to write this paper and for feedback on an earlier draft.

² Frank LD, Engelke, "How land use and transportation systems impact public health: a literature review of the relationship between physical activity and built form." ACES Working Paper #1; French, S.A., Story, M., Jeffery, R.W. "Environmental Influences on Eating and Physical Activity," *Annual Review of Public Health*, 2001, 22, 309-325. (Review Article); Giles-Corti, B., Donovan, R.J. "The Relative Influence of Individual, Social and Physical Environmental Determinants of Physical Activity," *Soc Sci Med* 54(12):1793-1812.

³ Gordon-Larsen, P., McMurray, R.G., & Popkin, B.M. (2000) "Determinants of adolescent physical activity and inactivity patterns" *Pediatrics*, 105.

⁴ Sallis JF, Bauman A, Pratt M. "Environmental and Policy Interventions to Promote Physical Activity," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 1998; 15(4):379-397. (Review Article)

⁵ The following report notes the lack of such studies: Education Development Center, Inc., "Self-Evaluation in Youth Media and Technology Programs: A Report to the AOL Time Warner Foundation" (Sept. 2003).

⁶ Earthforce is an excellent program that involves students in environmental research and political action. It was evaluated by Alan Melchior and Lawrence Neil Bailis in 2001-2, using pre/post student questionnaires, teacher questionnaires, and focus groups (but no comparison groups or test-like assessments). See "2001-2002 Earth Force Evaluation: Program Implementation and Impacts," available from www.earthforce.org/resources.cfm. There were many positive changes in self-reported skills, knowledge, and attitudes over the course of the program, and teachers were favorable. However, the participants became *less* likely over the course of the program to say, "I believe I can personally make a difference in my school or community," "I believe that people working together can solve community problems," "It is important to listen to people on all sides of a community issue if we want to find a solution that will work," "I think it is more important to look for ways to help the environment for a long time than to do something that will just make a difference for a few days" and "I pay attention to local environmental issues when I hear about them." These are civic attitudes, supportive of commons. The evaluators conclude: "One possible explanation is that the decline reflects an increased understanding on the part of participants of how slow and difficult change can be, and that participants are both more realistic and in some cases discouraged by the challenges they face in addressing issues in their communities."

⁷ Peter Levine, "Building the Electronic Commons" (April, 2002), at www.democracycollaborative.org/publications/reports/.

⁸ Harry Boyte and Paul Resnick, with Peter Levine, Robert Wachbroit, and Lew Friedland, "White Paper: Civic Extension for the Information Age" (Draft of July 23, 2001) at www.si.umich.edu/~presnick/papers/civicextension/.

⁹ Peter Levine, "A Movement for the Commons?" *The Responsive Community*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 28-39; "Building the E-Commons," *The Good Society*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2003), pp. 1-9.

¹⁰ See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve and others (Vintage Books, 1954), Vol. II, Book II, chapter v, p. 114.

¹¹ I connect "civil society" talk to the idea of a commons in "Civic Renewal and the Commons of Cyberspace," *The National Civic Review*, vol. 90, no. 3 (Fall 2001), pp. 205-211.

¹² Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

¹³ David Bollier, *Public Assets, Private Profits: Reclaiming the American Commons in an Age of Market Enclosure* (New America Foundation, 2001), p. 58.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Chester, "The Death Of The Internet : How Industry Intends To Kill The 'Net As We Know It," TomPaine.com, October 24, 2002.

¹⁵ Elinor Ostrom, "Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Summer 2000), p. 150.

¹⁶ Ostrom, "Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms), p. 151.

¹⁷ Ostrom, "Type of Good and Collective Action" (unpublished paper delivered at the University of Maryland, 2002): "Groups of individuals are considered to share communal property rights when they have *formed an organization* that exercises at least the collective-choice rights of management and exclusion to some defined resource system and the resource units produced by that system. In other words, all communal groups have established some means of governing themselves in relationship to a resource" (italics added).

¹⁸ Points made persuasively in Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (New York: Random House, 2001),

¹⁹ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations" (1928), available in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, edited by Paul Kecskemeti (London, 1952), pp. 276-322, especially p. 300. Mannheim says (p. 298): "even if the rest of one's life consisted in one long process of negation and destruction of the natural world view acquired in youth, the determining influence of these early impressions would still be predominant." For a good summary of recent literature, see Constance Flanagan and Lonnie R. Sherrod, "Youth Political Development: An Introduction," *Journal of Social Issues* (Fall, 1998). The period between age 14 and 25 is identified as crucial in R.G. Niemi and M.A. Hepburn, "The Rebirth of Political Socialization," *Perspectives on Political Science*, vol. 24 (1995), pp. 7-16.

²⁰ 24.6 percent of Americans age 17-24 said they paid attention to public affairs in 1966; but just 5.1 percent in 2000 (National Election Study).

²¹ Monitoring the Future data analyzed by Child Trends

(<http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/family/school/32ReligiousServices.htm>)

²² M. Kent Jennings and Lara Stocker, "Generations and Civic Engagement: A Longitudinal Multiple-Generational Analysis" (unpublished paper, 2001).

²³ In 1976, 31.6% said that most people could be trusted; the figure was 17.3 percent in 1995: Monitoring the Future data as analyzed in Wendy M. Rahn and John E. Transue, "Social Trust and Value Change: The Decline of Social Capital in American Youth, 1976-1995," *Political Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1998, p. 548.

²⁴ Rahn and Transue, pp. 545-565.

²⁵ Eric M. Uslaner, "Trust as a Moral Value" (forthcoming in Dario Castiglione, ed., *Social Capital*), www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner/uslanerexeter.pdf

²⁶ Constance Flanagan, "Developmental Roots of Political Engagement," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (April, 2003).

²⁷ See, e.g., the literature review in Miranda Yates and James Youniss, "Community Service and Political Identity Development in Adolescence," *Journal of Social Issues* (Fall 1998).

²⁸ Almost half of US high schools offer service-learning programs. See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Service Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools" (Sept. 1999), table 1. Since the term was coined ca. 1990, it is difficult to measure the increase since the 1980s, but it appears to be very dramatic.

²⁹ Yates and Youniss; David E. Campbell, "Making Democratic Education Work: Schools, Social Capital, and Civic Education" (2000).

³⁰ Amanda Lenhart, John Horrigan, and Deborah Fallows, "Content Creation Online" Pew Internet & American Life Project, February 29, 2004.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jianxia Du and James D. Anderson, "Technology and Quality of Education: Does Technology Help Low-Income and Minority Students in their Academic Achievements?" *Illinois Journal of Law, Technology, & Policy*, spring 2003, pp. 1-34 (quote from p. 7).

³³ Mark Warschauer, "Technology and School Reform: A View from Both Sides of the Track(ing)," revised version of Warschauer, "Technology and School Reform: A View from Both Sides of the Track," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (2000), vol. 8, no. 4.

³⁴ National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Mathematics Assessment, 1996, analyzed by Harold Wenglinsky, "Does it Compute? The Relationship Between Educational Technology and Student Achievement in Mathematics" (Educational Testing Service, 1998), pp. 22-24. At the eighth grade, students who use computers primarily for drill and practice are half a grade level behind their peers with similar demographic characteristics, while students who use computers for "simulations and applications" are nearly half a grade ahead of the mean (p. 30).

³⁵ See, e.g., Eyal Press and Jennifer Washburn, "The Kept University," *The Atlantic Monthly* March 2000, vol. 285, no. 3, pp. 39-54.

³⁶ Levine, "Public Intellectuals and the Influence of Economics," *The Higher Education Exchange*, 2001; "The Idea of an Engaged University," an interview of me by David Brown, *Higher Education Exchange*, 2003

³⁷ I am referring to the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis and The Center for the Study of Institutions, Population, and Environmental Change (CIPEC) and to such products as a database of 127 common-pool irrigation systems in Nepal (see Ostrom and Roy Gardner, "Coping with Asymmetries in the Commons: Self-Governing Irrigation Systems Can Work," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 7, no. 4 [Fall 1993], p. 101).

³⁸ Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and subsequent work.

³⁹ Ostrom claims, on the basis of studies from around the world, that communal ownership arrangements generally work best when "participants plan to live and work in the same area for a long time (and in some cases, expect their offspring to live there as well) and, thus, do not heavily discount the future. "Type of Good," p. 27.

⁴⁰ In *Republic.com* (Princeton University Press, 2001), Cass Sunstein claims that the Internet allows people to choose news and opinion that already interests them, while filtering out any views and facts that they find uncomfortable. As a result, the population splits into small communities of like-minded people who reinforce their shared views. Another predicted result is a widening gap between those who have a lot of interest in public issues and those who are not interested. Motivated citizens benefit from all the news and opinion online. Unmotivated ones can ignore the broader world in a way that was more difficult back when they relied on TV for entertainment and the newspaper for want ads and crossword puzzles. Whether they liked it or not, they saw news on television and on the front page of the newspaper.

Sunstein's book was mostly based on his theory of democracy and some experimental evidence about deliberation in narrow groups. His empirical evidence about the Internet was relatively weak. Thus many reviewers criticized him and offered anecdotes about the Web as a place for diverse public deliberations. Even Sunstein seemed to back off his own claims in the face of these criticisms. Yet I never thought he was proved wrong.

If Sunstein were right, then those who started off uninterested in politics would be less informed, and therefore less likely to participate, once they gained Internet access. Recently, Markus Prior has demonstrated that Internet access correlates with a lower probability of voting among people who start with a low interest in the news. (In other words, these people are more likely to vote if they do *not* have net access.) The article is entitled "Liberated Viewers, Polarized Voters: The Implications of Increased Media Choice for Democratic Politics" (*Good Society*, 2003).

I still think the best theoretical account of "cyberbalkanization" is Marshall van Alstyne and Erik Brynjolfsson, "Electronic Communities: Global Village or Cyberbalkans? (1997; see web.mit.edu/marshall/www/papers/CyberBalkans.pdf). They predict that the Internet will help people who are so inclined to increase the range and diversity of their information and contacts. They also predict that the Internet will allow people to "filter" out unwelcome ideas or contacts and to form narrow, exclusive groups. So the technology will not determine the outcome; people's motives will. And clearly, people have various motives. Some prefer diverse ideas and serendipitous encounters; others want to shun people who are different and simply confirm their own prejudices.

I am fairly pessimistic about the cyberbalkanization problem, not because of the technology, but because of cultural trends in the US. Niche marketing has become highly sophisticated and has divided us into small groups. There's more money to be made through niche programs than by creating diverse forums for discussion. Meanwhile, people have developed consumerist attitudes towards news, looking for "news products" that are tailored to their private needs. And broad-based organizations have mostly shrunk since the 1950s. In this context, the Internet looks like a means to more balkanization. In a different context, such as contemporary Saudi Arabia, it may have a much more positive impact.

⁴¹ See, e.g., A. Joinson, "Causes and Implications of Disinhibited Behavior on the Internet." In J. Gackenbach, (ed.) *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Transpersonal Implications* (San Diego, Academic Press, 1998), pp. 43-57.

⁴² Pew Internet and American Life Project, Online Communities Survey (2001), available from www.pewinternet.org.

⁴³ Boyte is a former field secretary in the Civil Rights Movement, a University of Minnesota professor, and co-director of the University's Center for Democracy and Citizenship. See, e.g., Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Rob Stein, "Obesity Passing Smoking as Top Avoidable Cause of Death," *Washington Post*, March 10, 2004, p. A01; citing Ali H. Mokdad, James S. Marks, Donna F. Stroup, and Julie L. Gerberding, "Actual Causes of Death in the United States, 2000," *Journal of the American Medical Association* (2004), vol. 291, no. 10, 1238-1245

⁴⁵ Andrew Gumbel, "The Man Who Is Taking FAT TO COURT," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 14, 2002 (Sunday Life, p. 16); cf. Kate Zernike, "Lawyers Shift Focus From Big Tobacco to Big Food," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2004, p. A15.

⁴⁶ Maureen Dowd, "The Politics Of Self-Pity," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2004, sec. 4; p. 13.

⁴⁷ See the work of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) at Northwestern University and articles by ABCD faculty John Kretzmann and John L. McKnight.

⁴⁸ Molly Andolina, Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, and Krista Jenkins, "Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait," available from CIRCLE at www.civicyouth.org.

⁴⁹ Dean Mohs, "Celebrating and Encouraging Community Involvement of Older Minnesotans: A Snapshot of Current Minnesota Baby Boomers and Older Adults," Minnesota Board of Aging, April 2000, p. 6, quoted in Boyte, "Information Age Populism," May 28, 2002, p. 11.