Spectators or Patriots? Citizens in the Information Age

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Abstract
In theory, a strong democracy rests on robust citizen participation. The practice in most democracies is quite different. This gap presents a challenge, which can be narrowed by augmenting civic education to bring it up to date with the current information environment and thus give citizens the opportunity to participate. Robert Dahl's work on democracy provides a model that looks at this problem structurally. He writes about the ideals and the actual institutions necessary for a democracy and if we situate his model in the modern information environment we get a better idea of how to improve civic education. Successful citizen participation in the U.S. relies on two key factors: the ability to winnow relevant information as well as an opportunity to get reliable information from alternative sources.

Keywords: Democracy, citizenship, Dahl, civic education, Greenwald, Blogger, Information, Alternative Sources, Dewey, news literacy

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Introduction

In theory, a strong democracy rests on robust citizen participation. The practice in most democracies is quite different. This gap presents a challenge, which can be narrowed by reimagining civic education to bring it up to date with the current information environment.

The popular press and academic journals alike lament a crises in democracy. Concurrently, there is considerable literature about the need to improve existing civic education. Mending the existing models of civic education is seen as a way to increase citizen participation to strengthen democracy.

There is, however, a lack of clarity about what is needed to prepare students for civic participation as well as a mismatch in what the curriculum currently offers and what civic participation requires. Much college instruction is still delivered in traditional lectures and is done by factual recall. The emphasis is on content and formal education. Also, changes in the information environment and their relation to changes in higher education, to political institutions or to lifelong learning are not taken into account. Nor is there a close examination of the current political institutions in the U.S. to study how civic education could be situated within them. Most civic educators agree that students need to understand and to care for the public good and that civic education needs to be reimagined but there is little consensus on how to achieve this.

The important question is how to get citizens to participate more in American democracy and not how to incrementally improve the existing model of civic education. The questions of what role the public should play in a democratic society and who is responsible for civic literacy have not clearly been answered by anyone. There is little evidence that civic education as it stands works.

This paper suggests the problem is structural and cannot be solved by higher education alone, though we need to update higher education as well. Two components need to work in tandem. First, government support for alternative and reliable sources of information is necessary for effective participation by citizens. Second, higher education can supplement this by teaching students skills that help them be fluent in the information world. The model of government-supported information gets strong support from the empirical work of Robert Dahl (1998, 2006), who wrote extensively on almost every aspect of democracy in the U.S. His model is viewed in the current information environment of the U.S.

Information is a political resource and informed citizens with support from the state can help counter existing challenges to democracy. It is necessary to have institutions that provide reliable and alternative points of view. The burden of obtaining good information should not rest on citizens alone. The government has a responsibility to support it. The British BBC and Finland's YLE are based on this premise.

Dahl's theory highlights five institutions that are necessary to a democracy and one of them is the necessity of "alternative sources" which is essential for effective participation and enlightened understanding by citizens. Alternative sources ensure that citizens get a point of view that is an alternative to the monopoly view. Dahl situates citizen participation squarely within the theory and practice of democracy. Political equality is the foundation of democracy and Dahl uses the 'principle of intrinsic equality' to justify it. According to this principle, no human being is superior to another and the interests of each person are equally important. Dahl points out that it is more important to think in terms of political equality than 'democracy.' Democracy is the system that rests on our attempts to attain 'political equality.' The demands for increased participation have led to existing political institutions of democracy in the U.S. and rely on active engagement by citizens.

It is useful to study Dahl's writings because they examine the actual institutions of representative democracy in the U.S, and relate them to the ideals we hold dear. His work allows us to

visualize and analyze citizenship and civic education in context of the gap between the ideals and reality of democracy and the challenge this represents. It places citizenship in a three dimensional context, we see it in relation to the history, politics and economics of existing political institutions. We see the problem as one that is far greater than that of school curriculum. It is a structural problem that is related to the evolution of our institutions and is not that of 'higher education' or curriculum alone. What we teach in school should supplement deeper, structural efforts at supporting citizen participation.

Second, a new curriculum of information skills for citizens is needed. Not one that has evolved from current civic literacy programs but one that is designed specifically for the modern information world.

Given the rapidly evolving information climate, skills that emphasize the process of acquiring reliable information need to be emphasized more than teaching specific content. Citizens should learn how to separate digital wheat from chaff in order to deal with the overwhelming amounts of information they are exposed to. This idea is in tune with changes in higher education in which the process of finding relevant information is emphasized rather than knowing specific content. Even experts cannot master all relevant content in their area of expertise. Citizens need to know how to find reliable information and where to look for it. Information skills emphasize a process and so are often overlooked because they don't belong to a specific academic discipline. Such skills serve students in all aspects of life.

The old model of civic education cobbled together an ad hoc combination of civic literacy in the classroom with arbitrary media information. The model suggested in this paper operates in the new information environment. It hinges on government support of alternative sources with schools and colleges supplementing this by teaching the right skills to navigate information successfully. Instead of focusing on specific content the focus would be on the process of evaluating reliable information. This combination will help strengthen democracy more than the existing model.

The excesses of representative democracy and income inequality are two challenges that figure prominently in current complaints about democracy. Citizens feel helpless in the face of these large challenges. The current models of civic education attempt at correcting school curricula alone but this solution seems superficial and inadequate. Dahl's theory enables us to see citizen participation as a fundamental problem, which cannot be solved by curriculum or citizens alone but needs essential help from the government. Such an approach, supplemented by a school curriculum that provides the skills to evaluate the information that surrounds us, is this paper's proposed model to correct the inadequacies of citizen participation today. Such an improvement is sorely needed to guarantee a strong U.S. democracy in the years to come.

Literature Review

Is Democracy in Decline?

Recent articles on the state of democracy and on civic education separately emphasize the need to improve both. John Micklethwait, chief editor of the *The Economist*, points to the great dissatisfaction felt by people, "Of all the predictions to be made about 2015, none seems to be safer than the idea that across the great democracies people will feel deeply let down by those who lead them. " He goes on to list problems such as the failure of democracies to get things done which will impact other features of an open society such as the freedom of the press. According to him a majority of Americans have told Gallup that they are dissatisfied with the way they are governed, "with the numbers of those fed-up several times climbing above 80% (higher than during Watergate)" (Micklethwait, 2014).

He goes on to list two debates, which he thinks should take place. One is about the reform of the state, which is a generation behind the private sector in terms of productivity and technology. The

other debate should be about democracy itself, which is beginning to look increasingly undemocratic, especially with the rise of money politics. Yet in spite of all its deficiencies, democracy "is still more flexible and fair than any alternative."

Tony Blair in an op-ed for the New York Times titled, "Is Democracy dead?" claims that the values of democracy may be right but it is failing to deliver. It is essential to update government systems to modernize them. He suggests, "The answer to this democratic malaise may be partly a change in the relationship between governing and governed…The simple right to vote is not enough. Systems need to deliver results for the people. If we truly believe in democracy, the time has come to improve it" (Blair, 2014).

The twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *The Journal of Democracy (2015),* a journal that explores all aspects of democracy, is dedicated to the topic, "Is Democracy in Decline?" It makes a useful distinction between two aspects of democracy. The first is that which actually takes place in a country, the empirical facts which we can observe. The second is more subjective; it concerns the ideal of democracy, attraction to the rights and freedoms it affords us. It is in the first dimension that the decline is most discussed.

There seems to be a consensus among scholars and politicians that democracy as an ideal is still very attractive but democracy as a practice is in decline. As an ideal, "it is self-rule by citizens possessing equal rights and having equal influence over the choice of leaders and the conduct of public affairs" (Schmitter, 2015, p.32). However, the reality of democracy's political process is in transition and the new form it will take seems unclear.

State institutions have not kept up with popular demands for accountability. Overall "there has been a remarkable worldwide progress in democratization over a period of almost 45 years, raising the number of electoral democracies from about 35 in 1970 to well over 110 in 2014" (Fukuyama, 2015, p.11). Fukuyama calls it a failure of institutionalization that states have not kept up demands for accountability. Democratic accountability is a basic institution of a modern liberal democracy, it "seeks to ensure that government acts in the interests of the whole community, rather than simply in the self-interest" of the representatives (Fukuyama, 2015).

Dissatisfaction with a lack of accountability and transparency by representatives is a common theme. Democracy is an improvement on authoritarian rule because it moves away from the idea of the rulers and the ruled. The idea of a select few who may have the knowledge, skills, expertise or virtue to govern or rule is morally and practically at odds with the values of democracy (Dahl, 1998). This writing runs parallel to a body of writing urging reform of civic education in the U.S.

If democracy is to work it requires a certain level of political competence from its citizens. Citizens need to understand important issues, express their views and discuss political matters. Ideally, they would have a strong voice in the final agenda of the government. Being aware of important issues and seeing past the daily chatter is the first step towards active citizenship

Civics Instruction

In the last few decades a lot of attention has been paid to improving civic education and engagement. Several articles, reports, and efforts discuss the role of higher education in offering a new kind of civic education (Melville, 2013; NYT; Boyte, Elkin, 2014). The prevalent view is that the American educational system needs to solve this problem.

Different solutions are presented but most civic educators frame the problem as one of education (Melville, Dedrick, Gish, 2013). Most educators agree that students need to understand the issues, know how to deliberate and discuss and to care for the public good. Yet there is little consensus or structure on how to do this, for several reasons. For one, civic education does not belong to any one academic discipline, so it is hard to find a place for it in the curriculum. (Melville).

Another is that the key terms of civic education are ambiguous so there is debate about the definition of terms such as 'civic engagement' and 'civil society' (Melville, 2013).

A number of states have mandated classes on civics instruction. The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education recently mandated that civics instruction be a key component for learning at the state's colleges and universities. Florida, Tennessee, California and Illinois have local projects aimed at improving civic education in schools.

The American Democracy Project for Civic Engagement is a national initiative that implements a solution in collaboration with the New York Times. 228 institutions from the American association of State Colleges and Universities are participating in this project to promote civic engagement in the U.S.

Some feel that civics instruction could help reverse low voter turnout (Porter, 2014). There is a strong sense that we must do something to be more functional as a nation and at the community level. A coalition in seven states has launched a movement to have students pass a citizenship test. Others question this method claiming that memorizing to pass a test is not the right solution because citizens need knowledge that will help them be active participants (Porter, 2014).

"What little civics teaching is left only allows students to become better informed spectators – learning names, dates, the three branches of government" writes Senator Bob Graham, (Melville, 2013, p.259). Traditional civic education focuses on an understanding of the traditional structure of the government, such as how the government established by the constitution embodies the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy. Such questions have little to do with the day-to-day lived reality of most citizens. Students need to be familiar with current issues so they can discuss them and engage with public life.

A key concern is the "the excessive dominance of elites. Elites have expertise, so most people are content to allow a certain level of elite domination," (Boyte et al., 2014, p. 210) but this needs to be balanced. People are capable of creating and outlining their ends as well as actively defining the best means of attaining them, a task too often left to a self-selected few

Even in older established democracies, the health of democracy suffers when people do not have a say in deciding the ends to be pursued. If experts and representatives make the final decisions and citizens do not have access to relevant information and feel left out of important decision-making, democracy declines. Reflecting on the importance of political equality in a democracy helps us understand how this decline occurs.

Theory of Democracy

Why Democracy?

Our definition of democracy depends on our values but in general Americans desire democracy because it guarantees certain basic rights and freedoms. It allows an opportunity for autonomy and self-fulfillment.

Political Equality is the Foundation of Democracy

If we make two fairly self-evident assumptions it is hard to refute a case against political equality and democracy (Dahl, 2006):

a) The assumption of intrinsic equality. The moral judgment that no human being is superior to another and the good and interests of each person should be equally considered.

b) If the above assumption is true it raises the question relevant to the government of a state, about who is best qualified to determine what the best interests of a person really are. It leads to the statement that no one is so much better qualified than another that s/he be given complete and final authority over the government of a state.

These two claims offer strong support for the idea that political equality is desirable in governing a state. Democracy is the political system that would best help bring it about because it is the only system that derives its legitimacy and institutions from the foundation of political equality.

This is logically coherent but in the reality of representative democracy, representatives can adopt the role of superior or ruler. The person contracted to represent a citizen's interests can often be the one deciding what those interests are even if they are contrary to the desires or interests of citizens.

Criteria for Political Equality and Democracy

Dahl outlines six criteria to ensure that interests are treated equally: availability of effective participation for all, voting equality, informed understanding, final control of the agenda and finally an accompanying right with each of the criterion above, as it is not enough to say that one should be able to vote without also giving the political right to vote. These are criteria for an ideal democracy and it is possible that no country may be able to achieve them all.

The Practice of Democracy

The criteria above constitute an ideal democracy but the democratic reality in each country is different. Institutions in a country evolve in response to the local history, traditions and culture. So for example, democracy in a city in India would be very different from democracy in a small village in England.

Representative democracy and equality have grown in the last few centuries and have led to modern institutions. In 1900, only forty-eight countries were independent and of these, only eight had the basic institutions of representative democracy, and only in New Zealand could women vote. Those original eight constituted about ten percent of the world's population. A hundred years later the political institutions of democracy, including universal suffrage, exist in about eighty-five countries and include roughly sixty percent of the world's population (Dahl, 2006, p.23).

Institutions Necessary to Every Democracy

Each country has its own political culture yet all representative democracies have certain institutions in common. One can list these by examining the history of countries in which institutions have evolved in response to a demand for participation in political life, as well as by outlining the requisite criteria that could allow a non-democratic country to qualify as a democracy. One can also examine countries that are currently democratic.

Dahl uses these methods to reveal the following five institutions that are common to all democracies: elected representatives, frequent elections, universal eligibility to all citizens to run for office, free expression, availability of independent information and the right to participate in autonomous associations such as political parties.

Mapping Actual Institutions to the Ideals of Democracy

The following figure (Dahl, 2005, p.193) clearly maps the relationship between the criteria for an ideal democracy and the actual institutions necessary for a democracy.

Figure 1.*Why institutions are necessary*

In a unit as large as a country, these political institutions of polyarchal democracy are necessary to satisfy the following democratic criteria.

Institution	**Fulfilled Criteria**
Elected representatives	Effective participation Control of the agenda
Free, fair and frequent elections	Voting equality Control of the agenda
Freedom of expression	Effective participation Enlightened understanding Control of the agenda
Alternative information	Effective participation Enlightened understanding Control of the agenda
Associational autonomy	Effective participation Enlightened understanding Control of the agenda
Inclusive citizenship	Full inclusion

The institutions of 'Free Expression' and 'Alternative Information' enable citizens to be informed and to deliberate in public. Levels of participation can vary widely. One participates when one votes but it is a passive form of participation, in contrast to more active forms of participation such as setting the agenda for large policy decisions. Being informed is the first step towards active participation so it is important that citizens have access to institutions that offer an alternative point of view to the monopoly view, often controlled by the reigning government.

Citizens are entitled to seek out independent sources of information from other citizens and newspapers. Edward Snowden brought the issues of privacy, mass surveillance and the balance between national security and information privacy to the public realm. This was an alternative point of view to that provided by the government. For this, he has been called both a patriot and a traitor and is charged with violating the *Espionage Act* and for theft of government property. However, the publications that reported the leaks, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, received the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. Snowden claims he was motivated by patriotism because he did not want to see his country sliding into oligarchic rule. His motivations and methods are questioned but he provided a public service by stimulating discussion and needed change (Greenwald, 2014).

Being well informed can help citizens articulate themselves, achieve more equality and have stronger institutions.

Challenges to Democracy and Political Equality

There are several barriers to achieving political equality. Difficulty in assessing equality, the unequal distribution of political resources, the size of the nation state, failings in representation and expertise, the dominance of market economies and severe crises in a country, can often all work together to obscure and hinder said equality. Active citizens can mitigate some of the damaging effects in a way that passive subjects cannot.

Difficulty in measurement. When a country slides from 'more' to 'less' democratic, it is hard to quantify and thus track. This lack of quantification means that when a democracy curtails civil

liberties, for instance, an objective link to a decline in that democracy is difficult to universally establish. These gradations are hard to assess or quantify and if one is not able to adequately name or assess them it is hard to analyze underlying problems or suggest solutions.

In times of stress to a nation's security the president can appropriate powers that approximate those of a traditional ruler in a non-democratic state. In such an instance, an external threat can be used to control citizens and erode their basic rights and freedoms. Knowledgeable citizens are more likely to recognize these events and less likely to have their basic liberties eroded.

Representative democracy: A class of experts, specialists and guardians. In a democracy, citizens need final control over the decisions that impact them most, even if they relegate some control to their representatives. This is an important distinction. Our values determine how we act, and in a democracy the values of the citizens should determine the ends and the course of action. The experts may have superior factual, scientific knowledge and subject matter expertise but they are delegates. Empirical evidence and data are important but most decisions are often a choice between competing values.

John Dewey, the philosopher and educator, wrote about educating for a democracy to enable the 'public' to articulate its voice (Dewey, 1954). The debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey reveals the difference between an 'elitist' view and a democratic view. The 'elitist' view has a lineage going back to the theory of 'the guardians' in Plato. This theory claims that people superior in knowledge and ability are the only ones competent to govern. In *The Republic*, Plato wrote that in the best form of government philosophers rule. In the modern context if we substitute experts for philosophers we get the rule of the experts.

For Lippmann, public policy is too complex for the ordinary person to understand. He said that the average American citizen is like a "deaf spectator in the back row" at a sporting event. "He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen," and "he lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct" (Alterman, 2008). Lippmann did not believe in the role of public debate. According to him, even if people could understand policy, they would not want be bothered.

It is also plausible that people want to participate but feel they cannot make sense of the changes around them. For example, Robert Bellah's research indicated that Americans feel that their best efforts to pursue their ideals are senseless. Most people say that they derive joy from doing well at work as well as by serving their community. However, they feel helpless because they have difficulty in piecing together a picture of the whole society and how they relate to it (Bellah, 1985, 1992).

For John Dewey, education is the answer to bridge this gap, it would help socialize people for democracy. He wrote that the foundation of democracy lay in conversation and debate. The public, he felt, was in eclipse, because even though the 'organized public' theoretically helped form the state, in reality, 'experts' spoke, and not the public. He also criticized Lippmann's idea of knowledge-based elites. "A class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge." According to him, "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied" (Dewey, 1954, p. 207).

Dewey believed in the intelligence of the common person and wrote that education could bring about the necessary changes for a strong democracy. There is a tendency to judge the masses by the present conditions and to conclude that average people are incapable of judging and setting political policy. Effective intelligence is not innate, according to Dewey, but depends on debate, social conditioning and education, all of which are more realizable today due to possibilities created by technology—namely, the ease of learning, sharing and publishing ideas.

To govern a state well takes knowledge. But no individual is so qualified to govern that they can be trusted with complete power. The alternative is to increase opportunities for ordinary citizens to gain an issue-based, open and tolerant understanding of public matters. Citizens may make mistakes, but that is why education is important.

The political resources of money and information. A political resource is means a person can use to influence political behavior. Political resources can include money, time, information, knowledge and education. Of these, the one that is distributed most equally is the fundamental right to vote: everyone's vote counts equally. Other resources are distributed unequally. For example, three interrelated resources that are distributed unequally are money, time and information.

Democracies have typically flourished in countries with a market economy, possibly because both encourage decentralized decision-making. This creates a dilemma, though, as market economies have the capacity to create resource inequality of money, time and information. Time and money are more quantifiable but 'information' is harder to appraise. Information is a resource that depends on context, timeliness, trustworthiness and reliability**.** It is not an 'objective resource' that has equal value for all because its value is dependent on use and context. The value of information is highly contextual and people in power have often used it to retain their power. It is not always reliable but that is why one needs to know how to evaluate it.

The ability to evaluate information is distributed unequally as well. The skills to discern good information or to act on it vary considerably. Public policy is complex and skills at winnowing information are uneven though they can be taught in school. In spite of an abundance of news and information, the average citizen knows little about political or public issues, candidates and their veracity.

Economics directly drives inequality of money, but is only indirectly related to the distribution and acquisition of abilities, information, or education. Information and knowledge can be purchased as commodities in a market but they can also be acquired by other means such as education. In fact, good information coupled with the equal right to vote can go a long way towards countering the imbalance caused by other political resources. Acquiring reliable, relevant information by educated voters can level the field in favor of the public.

Expert Use of Information

Opportunities to gain an alternative, reliable and tolerant understanding of public matters are a basic requirement of democracy. Within reasonable limits each citizen must have equal access to learning about relevant issues, policies, their alternatives and likely consequences. This needs institutional support.

Every area of knowledge has information both for the novice and for experts. In most fields of knowledge, access to good information is determined by expertise and/or by money. Information is a commodity that can be purchased and experts know where to find information they need, how to identify it and obtain it most efficiently.

Academic institutions pay large sums of money so their faculty and students can access knowledge by experts in various fields. Bankers pay for expensive products like Capital IQ, Bloomberg and Factset which give them quick and relevant information. Doctors pay heavily for medical and scientific literature that helps them stay up to date in their field with minimum time and effort. Private companies publish these for profit.

Before the information explosion, a citizen could ferret out useful information about local and some national issues from the daily paper. But now issues are more complicated and often global in nature. The excess of information gives one the illusion that relevant information can be found for free any time one needs it. But this is a myth. Experts know that good information has always been

hard to find, costs time and effort, and is rarely found for free. Contrary to popular belief, a Google search does not search the entire web. It barely skims the surface because much useful content is private and 'invisible' to most search engines. Citizens cannot rely only on Google and other free search engines as their sole source for information on public issues.

Online forums for good information exist but are not the norm and cannot always be relied on. The most prominent example is Wikipedia. Here, expert and novice volunteers alike gather online to jointly create knowledge that is indeed free of cost for the user and is subject to the due process of vetting. But this source is more of an exception and one has to be vigilant about information accuracy.

Good information is harder to identify and acquire in the political arena than it is in, say, the financial, medical and legal fields. Information that a citizen needs to keep track of issues spans a wide variety of subject areas and geographic boundaries and may conflict with corporate interests or with the interests of their political representatives. It is thus much harder for citizens to identify or obtain for free. There is no Bloomberg terminal for issue based information for citizens or the equivalent of Capital IQ for the voter. Such software makes it easy to visualize information in context and a similar model would be useful for the citizen.

There is precedent for the government aiding in information retrieval, such as in the medical field. PubMed, created by the government-funded NLM (National Library of Medicine), indexes relevant medical research articles and thus allows the public access to medical articles, systematic reviews and clinical trials. Not all the information is free, but scientists and scholars are attempting to change this to benefit the public.

Citizens looking for relevant information to engage in public affairs are primarily left to their own devices. A diverse set of non-profits exists to disseminate useful information but there is no clear consensus on which ones are reliable, neutral, fact based, partisan or accurate. There is no company or group that systematically provides issue based information to help citizens with lifelong civic learning and participation.

The Old Model: Current Civic Education

Citizens acquire a civic education from a combination of formal and informal methods such as schooling and the media. This is supplemented by information from political office seekers which is often propaganda disguised as neutral information. Many citizens also belong to associations that lobby and voice their concerns. This low-cost information coupled with low information seeking skills equals low quality information. This may have been acceptable in the past when citizens knew finite print sources for reliable information. But changes in the scale of public life, increasing complexity of public policy and changes in the information world suggest we need a systematic approach to delivering and consuming information for use by citizens.

Most governments carefully select the facts they want to convey to citizens. It is often a one-way communication with the government transmitting what may best serve the interests of the people in power: the representatives and the executive.

Similarly, traditional education was based on finite content conveyed from authorities to students. Students were given a list of encyclopedias and books to consult and the classics were familiar to all. Curated sources and subject encyclopedias kept things anchored and manageable. But with the information explosion students need to know how to evaluate an information deluge, and also how to create for it.

Traditionally, people trusted national newspapers with a reputation for fact checking. But in the online world the rate of information is fast and time short so the emphasis is often more on speed and currency than on accuracy. This burdens the consumer. It raises the question of how to educate

people about what is important and reliable and how it connects with their life. Scale, complexity, and the quantity of information make a citizen's task harder.

Surveys indicate that citizens do not put much value in participating in political life (Dahl, 2000, p. 249). This non-participation is taken as a sign of indifference. However, it can also signify that voters value the ideals of democracy but are indifferent to actual political participation. Or that they would participate if they knew how. The majority of citizens value the rights and opportunities their democratic system of government provides them. They may choose not to exercise their rights. These two views are not inconsistent (Dahl, 2000, p.249). People's decline in confidence in political institutions is not accompanied by a decline in confidence in democracy.

The Proposed Model: Citizen Participation

Changes in the information world have brought about changes in the education world. The old model of schooling and education is being transformed, placing more emphasis on process than on content. Content is now easily discoverable and ever expanding so students are encouraged to learn the process of discovering knowledge rather than memorizing content. Civic education in the traditional model is content-based. It needs to move to a process-based model that stresses participation and the skills to access, navigate and evaluate information.

Good Information Skills as the new Civic Curriculum

Voters often don't know which information to trust or what questions to ask. Inundation of information in the name of transparency doesn't help; aid is needed to view the information in context and connect the dots. As a recent article on transparency by multinationals in the workplace points out, "those trying to make sense will be better informed but none the wiser. Some transparency campaigners acknowledge a risk of drowning in data or of comparing apples with oranges" ("Corporate Transparency," 2014). In the political arena, there is often a benefit to obfuscating information to serve the advantage of the politically powerful. It is thus important that citizens have good information skills.

In the classroom, students can be taught to use information skillfully. They can be taught the difference between data and knowledge. They can determine the reliability, accuracy or veracity of information by asking questions about its currency, relevance, authority and purpose. Do the sources, assumptions and evidence portray a coherent picture, or does the evidence contradict itself? Asking these questions enables them to think actively about information.

Interacting with information creates knowledge. In class, students are taught the content of a discipline and how knowledge in the subject is created. But they absorb this only if it helps them solve a question or problem they have. This is the premise of problem-based learning. Education is meaningful only if it helps solve tangible questions.

Similarly, knowledge is created within a context. "Information in any format is produced intentionally to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method. The iterative processes of researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information vary, and the resulting product reflects these differences." That is, information is created in a context, whether political or economic, to educate, entertain or to advertise (ACRL, 2015).

The framework recently created by the *American College and Research Libraries* is very helpful in that if focuses on concepts that form the core of information skills. It outlines interconnected core concepts such as, 'authority is contextual', 'knowledge as conversation', 'the strategy of searching' and the 'process of creating information' (ACRL, 2015). Any discipline can use these concepts because they are essential to the process of information discovery and creation.

Citizens with the right skills can now participate across geographic boundaries, given the advances in technology. They may not vote but they participate in forums, post comments to news articles and write blogs. We see comments by readers to articles from major newspapers and periodicals. This is a meaningful contribution where average voters deliberate publically and add to knowledge if they have the right skills. One can often gain more insight from reader comments than from the original article, written by an expert. Being aware of political and current issues and debating them online is an important form of civic participation; often it is the gateway step. These contributions need to be acknowledged and supported institutionally.

A faculty with navigating online information and interacting in various formats goes a lot further than specific knowledge about the functions of government.

Alternative Sources and the Role of Government

If citizens are to be informed participants it is essential they have an opportunity to access alternative sources of information that are not controlled by the government, group in power or monopoly view. Ironically, however, the government is the best-suited to support these alternative sources and citizen's access to them, if done in a regulated manner. Governmental support can range between financial support for news organizations, mandates for accurate labeling, and ensuring legal recourse to free expression for citizens such as bloggers.

Develop independent institutions to provide access to alternative sources or fund existing ones. In some countries, the government has made it a priority to keep citizens informed. Countries such as Britain and Finland have funded independent news outlets to supply reliable information. The BBC is seen as a public service rather than as a commercial enterprise. It is funded by a license fee and does not sell advertising. Its founding mission was to "inform, educate and entertain." It has six public purposes including "Sustaining citizenship and civil society." It tries to accomplish this by providing high quality journalism, engaging the audience in current affairs news, and encouraging "conversation and debate about news, current affairs and topical issues" (BBC – Mission and Values).

Finland has the YLE, originally modeled after the BBC. It is the public service television and radio arm of the Finnish Broadcasting Company and was initially financed by license fees. The Finnish government has actually adopted the explicit goal of making sure its citizenry are well informed. According to the European Journalism center "basic guidelines" were established in 2007, wherein the "special focus is to promote the information society in everyday life, aiming towards a ubiquitous information society" (Finland - Media Landscape, EJC). Since the beginning of 2013 the license fee has been replaced by a public broadcasting tax (known as the "YLE tax"), which is collected annually from private individuals together with their other taxes, and also from corporations, with payments assessed on a sliding scale. YLE receives no advertising revenues, as all channels are advertisement-free. YLE has a status that could be described as that of a non-departmental public body.

In the U.S., the existing public broadcast networks, which provide good quality programming, such as PBS and NPR, are constantly strapped for funds. Readers of investigative journalism crave good content but it is not clear where the funds to support it will come from. Traditionally advertising paid for good content in print and media but the pattern of advertising revenue has changed in the online world.

PBS's independent documentary series take on topics of public urgency. "Food Inc." (2010), exposed harms in the food industry. "Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story" (2011) showed harsh prison sentences for minors, and "The Invisible War" (2012) led to changes in the military's handling of sexual assault (Lear, 2015). PBS takes on critical social issues overlooked by commercial outlets. They help give voice to citizens whose voices are not easily heard in public. Journalists interpret expert information in lay terms and disseminate it. But established media outlets cannot offer good

information for free. Even PBS has recently made changes to its offerings, with an eye to ratings, downgrading its documentaries to a different time slot (Lear, 2015).

Public intellectuals and journalists can play an important part by interpreting abstract, specialized subject matter for the benefit of the layperson. Such writing is eagerly consumed as is evidenced by the popularity of investigative journalism as well as by the impact of documentaries. 'Long Form' investigative publications tackle specific issues. They state a problem and explain accompanying information and background. These articles gives context and help citizens make sense of seemingly random events. The same can be said for documentaries, an interesting new tool of journalism, which are proving to be influential with the public and are important educational tools for citizenship.

The 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism was awarded for tackling subjects as diverse as: Chris Hamby's series *Breathless and Burdened*, describing how the coal industry beat back miners' claims for black lung health benefits (*Center for Public Integrity*); Commentary on struggles of bankrupt Detroit and its financial collapse by Stephen Henderson (*Detroit free Press*); Reporting on mistreatment of wounded veterans by Dave Philipps (*The Gazette, Colorado Springs)*. This reporting was both popular with the public and performed a useful service by articulating the voice of the powerless. All the above organizations run on a shoestring budget.

Journalists, public intellectuals and activists are looking for creative solutions to fund good information for the public but they are sporadic and insufficient. Evan Smith of *The Texas Tribune* wagered that as newspapers retreated, government and the private sector would support a non-partisan news site to cover Texas state politics. He worked hard to make this vision a success. "The nonprofit site now has 50 full time staff members doing work that any media outlet would be proud of, including a 15-part series on how the shale boom has affected life in Texas and a huge series on the private conflicts of a part-time legislature, with a companion data project called The Ethics Explorer." (Carr, 2014). Its live stream of a filibuster became a national sensation.

Technology can help us. The Bloomberg terminal is a user friendly application developed for novice and expert traders to get vast amounts of disparate information and provide it in an actionable format. In a Bloomberg terminal, a trader can use multiple screens customized to her/his context and interact with diverse set of data, across all relevant markets and is able to view diverse and multiple sets of information in real-time. A user can access real time market data across the world and trade in those markets. S/he is able to interact meaningfully with an extremely large and hard to define universe of data and most of the work is automated by software. The user primarily needs to know how to use the terminal. A similar terminal could be developed for social and political information for citizens.

Accurate labels serve as powerful filter. Information that is most visible in the online world is often media-centered news, or advertising masquerading as neutral information. The lines between different media businesses are becoming blurred. "Media companies are producing more content on behalf of advertisers, dubbed "native advertising". At the same time some advertisers have taken to hiring their own journalists to produce stories, websites and videos. Real time bidding or "programmatic buying" is a new system for targeting consumers precisely. Ads, including political ads, can be targeted to specific consumers at a fast speed. It is hard to distinguish facts from fiction because it is not clear where the information is coming from ("Little Brother", 2014).

Carr, writing about native advertising, found that, "historical models of funding original content are under duress, and a variety of efforts have emerged to innovate around that new reality: nonprofit news sites, digital news operations with low-cost approaches and yes, brands like Verizon that are also beginning to finance their own media operations" (Carr, 2014). This is advertising masked as original content.

It would help to have accurate labels for different information sources. This would enable information to be filtered into useful categories. Information created for traders, lawyers and doctors is organized and labeled carefully for easy access. This knowledge is hidden from the public eye because it is behind a paid wall. Accurate labels would save time and money for citizens and consumers. For example, 'The Center for Science in the Public Interest' recently published a report that shows the underbelly world of supplemental marketing. An unknown compound, "Green coffee bean extract" was sold to consumers who wanted to lose weight. Fake clinical trials and fake data was published to sell the product. The FTC concluded that their study, "was never conducted or suffers from flaws so severe that no competent and reliable conclusions can be drawn from it." The scheme to fool consumers into buying a 'scientifically valid product' was elaborate and hard to evaluate by the casual reader ("The Green Coffee Caper", 2015). Similar scams plague the political realm.

Afford bloggers and citizens the legal protection of journalists. Independent news websites feel pressure from government to echo the opinion of the prevailing wisdom. The world's leading democracies have a poor record of responding to the rise of authoritarianism in their own regions, according to a *Freedom House* report released in November 2014 (Karlekar, Dunham, 2014). Writers and bloggers often provide independent points of view and are not always allowed free expression.

A government can sometimes penalize citizens for publishing information that is contrary to what the government may want them to know. The recent attempt at making a distinction between a blogger and a journalist seems an attempt at censorship. A journalist is afforded special protections under the constitution. This makes the question of who is a Journalist a legal one as it determines whether only those who work for a newspaper organization or also those who get paid for newsgathering and everyone with a Facebook page get legal protection and at what level. Is Glenn Greenwald, the constitutional scholar and activist, a blogger or a journalist? The answer to this question is important because Greenwald is accused of aiding Edward Snowden, the N.S.A leaker. Should he get the protection a journalist is afforded?

When citizens are discouraged from expressing themselves or for sharing information the issue is important enough to need public discussion. The stakes are high because, "Once reporters are branded as activists, once their work is tainted by the accusation of criminal activity and they are cast out of the circle of protections for journalists, they are vulnerable to criminal treatment" (Greenwald, 2015, p. 236).

One of the few places that some of these ideas are being discussed is on online political blogs, so it is important that bloggers be protected (Greenwald, 2006). Greenwald claims he started his blog to get his voice heard by the government. "This is about whether we are a nation of laws and whether, in the name of our fear of terrorists, we will abandon the principles of government" (Greenwald, 2006, p. 6).

Similarly, Wikipedia provides citizens a portal to share information and help each other. It is a testimony to volunteer citizen effort and should be encouraged by the government. But users of Wikipedia feel threatened by their own government and in March 2015, Jimmy Wales and Wikipedia filed a suit against the National Security Agency to protect the rights of its users to exchange knowledge and ideas freely. Every year about 75,000 volunteers in the U.S. and around the world contribute their time and passion to share and help others and they should be able to do so without fear of the U.S. government monitoring what they read and write (Wales, 2015).

Wikipedia is an example of citizens seeking to inform themselves about issues that concern them. It shows that people are interested in reading and creating information that is useful to themselves and others. It speaks to the power of volunteers and the spirit of sharing, of being informed and informing others. But instead of getting support from its government its users feel threatened.

Even for a discerning consumer it is efficient to have organized expert sources to refer to. The worst option is to leave citizens to fend for themselves with no institutional support. Issues are complicated and information abundant and unorganized and this makes the task daunting for an individual.

The government can develop institutions and applications or fund existing organizations that provide reliable and relatively independent information. Bloggers and investigative journalists can feel intimidated because they may provide information not sanctioned by the party in power. They need to be protected by law so citizens can get the information they deserve.

Conclusion

At the heart of democracy lies the goal of political equality: an equal opportunity to vote, speak and govern the association we live in. At the root of this is the claim that ordinary people are competent to govern themselves and capable enough to have final say in decisions that govern them. No person's interests are more important than another person's. Further, no one is so much better qualified than others that they be given final authority over the government of a state. We need to govern ourselves. It is thus important that citizens are competent and have an informed understanding of the issues that impact them.

Our current methods of civic education arose in the nineteenth and twentieth century, in an era of scarcity of information. In the modern era, the explosion of information and informal news sources of varying reliability begs for an update to the old model of civics education. With a media environment that changes almost daily, citizens are better off learning how to navigate that environment than learning about traditional practices from a century ago.

However, low citizen participation is a structural issue and cannot be solved by curriculum reform alone—nor does the onus of participation rely solely on citizens. It is also the responsibility of the government. Each citizen must have equal opportunities for learning about relevant alternative policies and their consequences. Citizens cannot function effectively if all their information comes from a single source, whether the government or ruling party. Citizen participation in online blogs, forums, news sites and encyclopedias such as Wikipedia show that the spirit of volunteering and participation is alive and well in the U.S. and individuals are willing to debate and discuss if they have access to relevant information. Government support can vary between financial support for news organizations, mandates for accurate labeling, and ensuring legal recourse to free expression. They can help develop institutions or applications that provide citizens with better access to reliable, independent and relevant information.

It is imperative that citizens participate in their governance. A decline in the direct influence of citizens in government decisions and those of their elected representatives may put the level of U.S democracy below the threshold for a level of democracy considered acceptable at the beginning of this century. It is crucial to provide members effective opportunities for learning about relevant alternative policies and their consequences to continue being considered a democracy.

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