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Promoting Critical Reasoning: Civic Engagement in an Era of Divisive Politics and Civil Unrest

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Abstract

In this article, the authors advocate that civic engagement education must focus on antiracism, anti-extremism, and digital literacy in the wake of the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. This critical turn is necessary to stabilize democracy, restore trust in institutions, and address the problems presented by the post-truth era.

Keywords: civic engagement, antiracism, anti-extremism, digital literacy, post-truth

Out of the scree of the January 6th Capital insurrection, Simon (2021) anticipated two possible outcomes: The first posited that “the fever has broken and the United States is now on a path to recovery. Republicans are looking at the carnage and doubting whether it was worth it. A new pattern of cooperation will emerge,” and the second depicted a “far grimmer scenario ... [whereby] the country remains in a state of civil instability, on the verge of a decisive breakdown in consensual government” (p. 13). Simon gave more credence to the second scenario. Online communication platforms will increasingly “fuel conspiracy-driven paranoia,” while “tensions pulsating through society and politics will make it harder to manage the challenges of climate change and the pandemic, and to rationally allocate national resources to cope with their effects. Divisions are likely to sharpen” (pp. 13–14).

The select committee investigating the Capitol attack held its first hearing on July 27, 2021. The nearly 4-hour hearing featured testimony from four police officers who recounted their experiences that day, relaying how an angry mob hurled racial slurs, attacked them with metal pipes and other objects, and showered them with mace and bear spray. Further, a DC police officer, Michael Fanone, described how he was beaten unconscious and suffered a heart attack. Another officer, Daniel Hodges, characterized the attack as a “white-nationalist insurrection” (Givhan, 2021, para. 8). Meanwhile, on the same day of the hearing, six congressional Republicans marched to the Department of Justice to protest the “political prisoners” there awaiting trial for their role in the Capitol attack, blaming the events “not on the seditionists but on Capitol Police, and particularly, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi” (Milbank, 2021, para. 7).

As the Capitol insurrection and subsequent reactions of congressional Republications affirm, American democracy is more fragile now than ever—which is evident to college students. Data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE; 2019) indicate that young people’s faith in democracy has been shaken. America is deeply divided over election fraud, COVID-19, and systematic racism, divisions that have been exacerbated and perpetuated by the media ecosystem. The “Big Lie” that ex-President Trump and Republican adherents continue to tell is spread through traditional and social media. Thus, instruction in media literacy is crucial, as is restoring students’ faith in the democratic process. Moreover, civic engagement education is critically important at this moment because it provides an avenue to become involved in the processes for positive change and can provide students with a sense of control over a situation that might feel beyond their control, thereby guarding against feelings of political apathy.

We propose that civic engagement education must take a critical turn, focusing on antiracism and anti-extremism as well as digital literacies. To advance pedagogies of antiracism and anti-extremism, educators must encourage students to grapple with big issues through civic engagement via emergent digital literacies, rather than smaller and more localized issues, to help them understand how local issues are tied to broader societal issues and affect wider audiences. Given the current threats to democracy, higher education urgently needs to focus on teaching civic engagement at the macro level, which is now digital and online, rather than micro-level civic engagement, which is community- and service-learning-based. Educators must develop emergent literacies to include functional, critical, and rhetorical competencies (Damasceno, 2021). Carr et al. (2018) argued,

If the role of education is to create informed, creative, global citizens, then media literacy for a critically aware populace, one that strives to build a more cogent, socially just,

engaged, and critical democracy—must also be incorporated into the teaching and learning process. (p. 80)

Reimagining Civic Engagement

Teaching students to be civically engaged is not an apolitical endeavor—nor is civic engagement itself. After all, higher education’s primary objective is to help students become democratic citizens. While that objective ought not be political, it certainly is in the current political climate—and perhaps it always has been. Outcries that the 2020 presidential election was stolen and fraudulent have turned the very idea of democracy into a political issue. Yet, universities must persist in promoting democratic efforts, even if that is seen as political. “Democracies are fragile,” Bennett (2021) wrote. “They require both citizens and elected officials who understand how a democracy works and who actually want to keep it. Most Americans would fail the first test, and an alarming number would fail the second” (para. 11). Disturbingly, the threat is not in the nation’s rearview mirror. Recent “armed events appear to have been orchestrated, carefully planned, masterminded actions building toward an insurrectional strategy,” meaning that

Next time—and if this is trivialized there is a 100% chance of a next time—lawmakers could be held hostage or killed, and insurrections could take place simultaneously at state and local levels in a progression resembling previous fascist takeovers in other countries. (Morabia, 2021, p. 538)

Social media appear to be key conduits in the struggle over democracy. As Van Dijke and Wright (2021) noted, “Socio-political isolation, proximity to a prominent hate group, the Proud Boys, as well as the intensity of local misinformation posts on social media are robustly associated with participation” (para. 2) in the Capitol insurrection.

Educators must ask if institutions of higher education are doing their part to foster democratic ideals and reduce threats to the fabric of democracy. Honestly, our answer is that they must redouble their efforts and rethink their approach. There is an entirely different path to civic education, one that recognizes that student involvement in their communities is not enough. Rather, a critical approach to civic engagement embraces the notion that educators are instilling democratic values in students and inspiring them to raise their voices to affect positive social change while calling out systems of oppression. Hess (2021) wrote,

It too often seems that our schools and colleges—which should play an outsized role in teaching the responsibilities of citizens and the discipline of democracy—have instead opted to focus on teaching those things that instructors find more gratifying or students find more appealing. (para. 11)

Rather than avoiding difficult conversations, civic educators should help students value diversity and dialogue. Though it might seem unfair to blame higher education, the latter has an obligation to help preserve democracy. “The challenge is bigger than the right or the left. It’s our national problem. And our schools, colleges, and commitment to civic education have a crucial role to play in tackling it” (Hess, 2021, para. 15). If America “suffers from a pandemic of civic ignorance and a deep deficit of civic respect” (Davenport, 2021, p. 84)—which it does—then higher education has a responsibility to combat that ignorance and lack of respect.

The Post-Truth Era

Political polarization, dissemination of disinformation in social media echo chambers, racism, and extremism are just a few of the obstacles that must be confronted to heighten civic engagement among college students. Higher education does not operate in a vacuum; thus, promoting civic engagement among students is not a mission that can be accomplished without addressing the challenges of the post-truth era. If educators are to help students become savvy navigators in the post-truth era, they must help students recognize the difficult conversations in which they need to become advocates. Students need to become advocates for democracy and for those whose rights are threatened. Along the way, students will need to know how to advocate in an environment that is vastly different from that which existed even 5 years ago. Thus, higher education should embrace critical civic engagement education—critical in the sense of advocating for social change. Students need to be aware of and question structures and underlying systemic power imbalances that entrench oppression and disenfranchise citizens. In the post-truth era, students cannot expect facts and science alone to convince all audiences; rather, they must turn to narratives, emotional appeals, and personal connections, and use social media and digital technologies to advocate for social change while interrogating the part those very tools play in furthering inequalities and diminishing democratic rights.

Polarization

Polarization contributes to America's current predicament. Kydd (2021) noted, "Conservative radicalization was driven by partisan polarization, media polarization, the emergence of social media and associated conspiracy theories, and the formation of armed right-wing groups," adding that the "structural conditions generating the attack are unlikely to ameliorate, so the potential for political violence will remain" (p. 3). Social media structures deepen problems and, thus, must be called out by civically engaged students, but these platforms might also provide tools through which students advocate for social change. "The bottom-up market nature of mass self-indoctrination became even clearer with the advent of social media. Social media companies, driven by the profit motive, further segmented the media market, tailoring their information to the individual consumer" (Kydd, 2021, p. 11), while algorithms aligned provocative content, devoid of truth and context, with preexisting preferences, creating echo chambers where those skilled at manipulating social media could crank out viral fake news. Social media fanned the flames of conspiracy theories. "With the rise of social media in the 2000s, conspiracy theories" accelerated while social media destroyed the previous hierarchy of the media world since "individuals with little or no organizational backing could put out information that would travel as far as a news broadcast" reaching enormous audiences (Kydd, 2021, pp. 11–12).

Disinformation

Though civic engagement education has already begun to address ways of preparing students to recognize misinformation, there is a great deal more to accomplish. Recognizing misinformation is a start, but students also need training to counter *disinformation* in various traditional and online media environments as well as within their personal networks. Overcoming disinformation will increasingly be necessary for civic engagement campaigns and activities to be successful. Rational thinking and appreciation for objective facts—not "alternative facts"—that are verifiable should become the overarching learning outcome for students. Benkler et al. (2018) noted that a "shared means of defining what facts or beliefs are off the wall and are plausibly open to reasoned debate is necessary to maintain a democracy" (p. 5). They also contended that "as a public we have lost our capacity to agree on shared modes of

validation as to what is going on and what is just plain whacky” (p. 6). Thus, students must learn to call out lies, irrational thinking, and crazy opinions or beliefs for what they are.

Given the present media ecosystem, however, the ability to do so requires digital literacy. “People usually hear what they want to hear because they get their news exclusively from sources whose bias they agree with” (Gregor & Mlejnkova, 2021, p. 34) and trust sources that provide them with facts that they find likeable. An additional problem is that “disinformation and lies spread faster and to a broader audience than truth” (Gregor & Mlejnkova, 2021, p. 34). Without digital literacy competency, citizens are susceptible to manipulation and propaganda. Some people use social media “to knowingly and unknowingly spread misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy and partisan talking points” (Mercieca, 2021, para. 15), conditioning them to communicate like propagandists, expressing outrage. This new propaganda model, capitalizing on social media and characterized by much fighting but little discussion, manufactures dissent (Mercieca, 2021). Thus, digital literacy competency should be a point of emphasis in civic engagement pedagogy.

Pedagogical Pathways Forward

We recommend three pathways for civic engagement pedagogy to take a critical turn. First, civic education must explore systemic inequalities and racism. Second, preparing students to be civically engaged necessitates countering extremism. Third, engaged students must be digitally literate to navigate media. Each of these foci ought to inform the content of students’ engagement topics as well as methods of instruction and course material.

Antiracism

Those in the civic engagement movement in higher education should embrace pedagogies of antiracism. Research has suggested that students are interested in engaging in conversations about racism. For example, recent research by CIRCLE (2021) suggests that concerns about systematic racism drove youth to vote in the 2020 election in record numbers. However, despite student interest in the topic, McCoy (2021) noted that most students, faculty, and staff in higher education have had few opportunities to engage in conversations about racism. Yet, McCoy argued “college campuses are frequent flashpoints for broader polarization around issues of race and provide unique opportunities for diverse conversations in the midst of complex, painful, and conflictual challenges on college campuses” (para. 13).

Robinson (2019) argued that foundational civic engagement theory fails to account for “inequality as the cornerstone of American society” (p. 3). Specifically, systematic inequality results in the exclusion of Black Americans and other persons of color from many forms of civic engagement. As Robinson maintained, “Black people were omitted from American democracy in its founding documents and therefore were barred from traditional notions of American civic engagement that continue today” (p. 4). Given this historical marginalization, educators and researchers have an obligation to fundamentally reconsider and critique theories around and pedagogical strategies for civic engagement.

Further, Dancy et al.’s (2019) research demonstrated that those in higher education can create meaningful pathways to civic engagement for historically marginalized individuals. Specifically, they found a strong link between higher education and civic engagement for Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgendered (LGBT) people and showed that connectedness to LGBT communities facilitated civic engagement. They concluded that conversations about race,

gender, and sexual orientation must happen in higher education to provide a “fuller learning experience for all students in the classroom” (Dancy et al., 2019, p. 21). Similarly, research by Bañales et al. (2020) revealed that providing an opportunity for Latinx and Black students to reflect on systematic racial marginalization created pathways to civic and political engagement. They noted that the positive relationships between critical reflection and civic engagement “among both ethnic/racial groups suggest that such reflections on inequality might be a stimulus for young adults’ of color involvement in the sociopolitical system” (p. 186).

Leath and Chavous (2017) examined the interactions between Black students’ civic engagement and their sense of belonging and perceptions of campus racial climate at predominately White institutions. They found that Black students’ “sociopolitical beliefs and sense of political agency interact with their college racial contexts to influence their engagement within these settings” (p. 232). Leath and Chavous recommended that courses be developed to support students of color “but also require participation from White students and institutional agents to encourage groups to work together across differences” (p. 233). They also contended that students of color need support when dealing with the emotions they experience when encountering racism and violence against Black bodies on the internet and social media.

Zembylas (2012) observed that discussions of antiracism in higher education are often marked by strong and discomfiting emotions by faculty and students. To facilitate meaningful conversations about race, Zembylas advocated for a pedagogy of strategic empathy whereby faculty are willing to use empathy “strategically to engage in in-depth critical inquiry of troubled knowledge, that is, an emotional willingness to engage in the difficult work of empathizing with views that one may find unacceptable or offensive” (p. 122). Importantly, this does not mean unacceptable or offensive views should be accepted or viewed as meritorious. Instead, the focus is on creating a classroom climate that facilitates the development of “affective connections without dismissing the critical interrogation of past emotional histories, knowledges, and experiences” (p. 123).

Anti-Extremism

Democratic learning and civic engagement efforts are impeded by extremism and radicalization spurred in social media echo chambers. This is especially important considering the challenges facing democracy in the wake of the January 6th insurrection. For example, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS; 2020) report found that white supremacist extremists now pose the most significant threat to America. Further, a Homeland Security Academic Advisory Council (2017) report urged the DHS to establish partnerships with colleges and universities to raise awareness of instructional strategies that counter extremism. At a minimum, civic engagement education should provide a blanket of protection for students, equipping them with knowledge and skills to avoid becoming radicalized or veering toward extremism. Thus, a critical approach to civic engagement should simultaneously protect students from future radicalization and extremism, and provide a means of countering such behavior among other populations.

Scholars and educators have developed and tested numerous models for teaching anti-extremism. For example, Aly et al. (2014) described a program designed to activate students’ moral agency and immunize them against social pressure that might otherwise cause them to embrace violent extremism. Qualitative evaluations of this program have shown that it helps students view violent extremism as inhumane, facilitates empathy with victims, and aids them in

developing “self-efficacy in resisting violent extremism influences and responding to influences in positive, productive ways” (Aly et al., 2014, p. 383).

Sklad et al.’s (2020) research evaluated a pedagogical model designed to combat extremism called the Universal Curriculum Against Radicalization in Europe (UCARE). The UCARE model addresses factors contributing to radicalization, facilitates the development of positive attitudes about the utility of prosocial civic engagement, and helps participants develop empathy toward others. Sklad et al. confirmed that “schools may effectively engage in fostering civic and social competencies with the intention to prevent processes that contribute to radicalization” (para. 52).

Similarly, Brown et al. (2021) argued that interviews with former extremists suggest that education efforts should include exposure to diverse races, cultures, and religions as well as skill development related to empathy, critical thinking, and media literacy. Ultimately, when it comes to pedagogies of anti-extremism, we agree with Davies (2014) that it is the job of educators to combat the forces “which too often lead to extremism or violence, and to foster the orientations, plural social relations and horizontal social networks, and skill sets which can provoke young people to take positive action for equity and just peace” (p. 466).

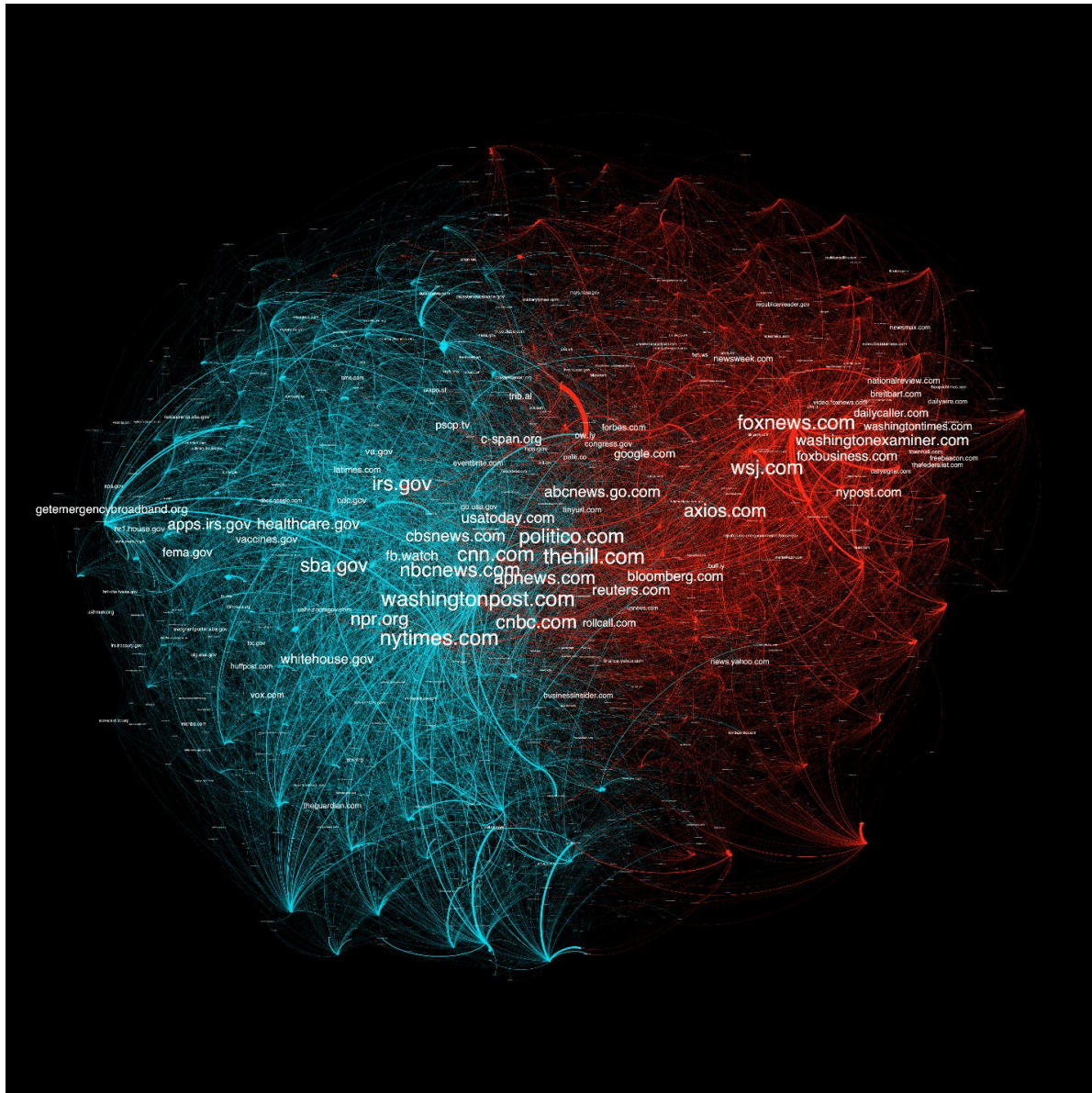
Emergent Digital Literacies

Social media and digital technologies present obstacles that are problematic for civic engagement. For example, social media offer extremists the means of fulfilling their self-worth, and, as Bail (2021) argued, the social media prism fuels radicalization by normalizing extremism and exaggerating the perceived extremism of those on the other side. “Unfortunately, these two types of distortion combine to create feedback loops of extremism. While the prism makes one’s own extremism seem reasonable—or even normal—it makes the other side seem more aggressive, extreme, and uncivil” (Bail, 2021, p. 67). As a result, educators need to teach students digital literacy and how to use social media and technology generally to engage for the common good.

Faculty can utilize social media analytics to teach students how to identify misinformation and extremism, thus creating a pathway for future civic engagement. For example, social network analysis can reveal how social media can inherently polarize through algorithms that create echo chambers (Gregor & Mlejnkova, 2021). To further illustrate the role of social media in amplifying this asymmetric ecosystem, we used the R package “rtweet” (Kearney, 2019) to collect tweets from all current members of Congress from January 20–June 10, 2021, and isolated the URLs used in each tweet. Using Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009), an open-source network graphing tool, we mapped the relationships between lawmakers’ Twitter accounts and the URLs they used. These network graphs (see Figures 1 and 2) reveal an asymmetrical network consisting of traditional news publications shared at the center by members of all parties, and a separate network of right-wing media shared almost exclusively by congressional Republicans.

Figure 1

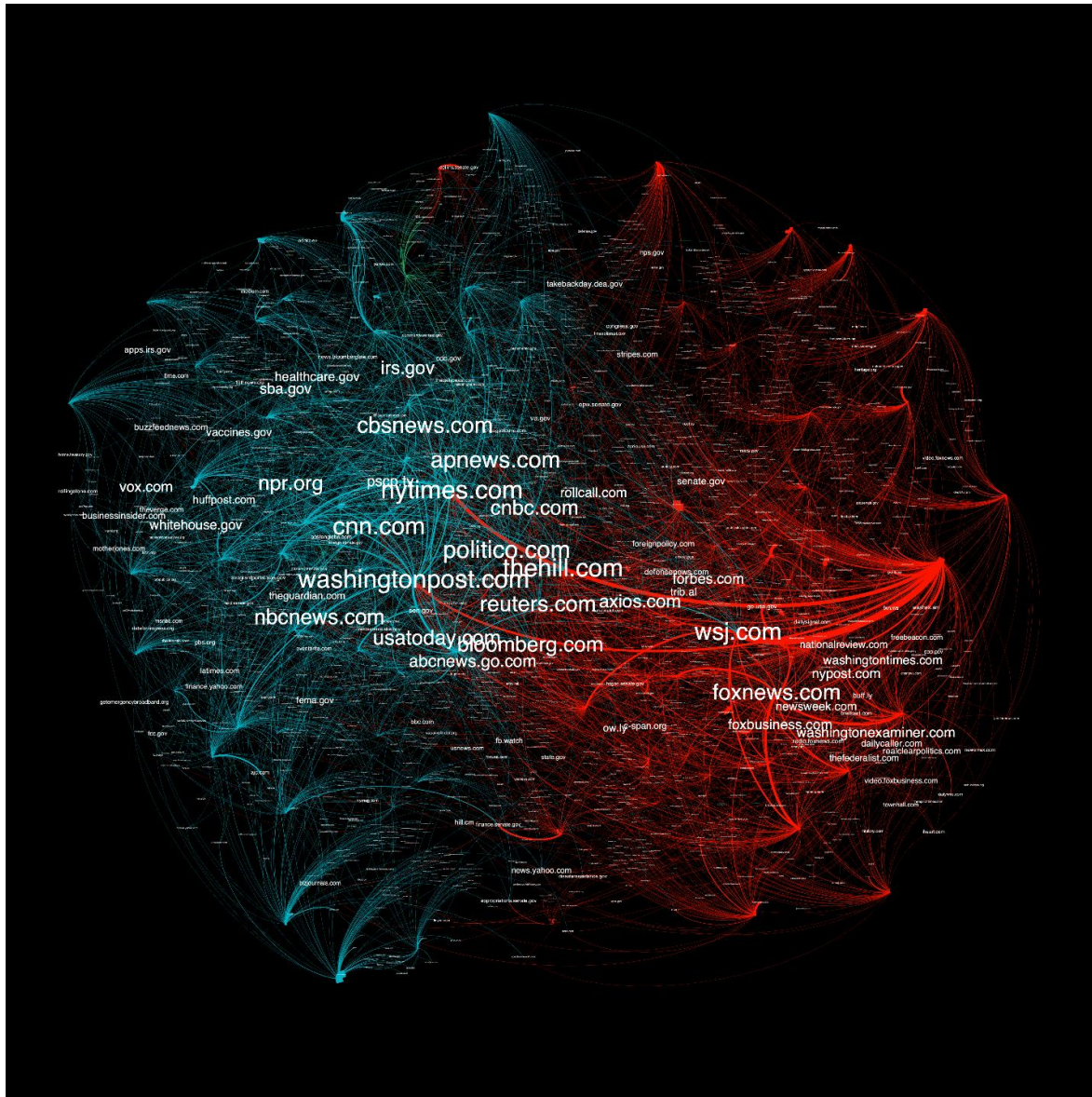
Network Graph of URLs Used in Tweets by Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, January 20–June 10, 2021



Note. In this network graph, larger URLs are used more frequently. The color of each line corresponds to the party of the congressional member tweeting the URL (red = Republican, blue = Democratic, green = Independent).

Figure 2

Network Graph of URLs Used in Tweets by Members of the U.S. Senate, January 20–June 10, 2021



Note. In this network graph, larger URLs are used more frequently. The color of each line corresponds to the party of the congressional member tweeting the URL (red = Republican, blue = Democratic, green = Independent).

Galloway and Thacker (2007) offered yet another way of thinking about extremism which educators could use to help students understand how power is exerted in social media. They theorized power as a struggle between asymmetrical power blocs: those that are highly centralized and those that are distributed across networks. In this theoretical diagram, we might consider the American traditional political and media landscape as a type of centralized power, and the January 6th insurrectionists and their media ecosystem as a group of networked actors struggling against this centralized power. This asymmetrical struggle leads to the discovery of an

“exploit,” which Galloway and Thacker defined as “a resonant flaw designed to resist, threaten, and ultimately desert the dominant political diagram” (p. 21). Using this theory of asymmetrical network struggle, educators might identify the exploits used by extremist groups in social media contexts. Additionally, as the tactics of the far right potentially become normal and centralize their own power blocs, educators might encourage students to find the emerging exploits in these systems in order to undermine them.

Xenos et al.’s (2014) study of social media use and youth political engagement found that digital civic education experiences, “which mix digital media literacy with civic or political discussion topics” (p. 31), were significantly and positively related to individual and collective political engagement. In fact, they argued that if “one were seeking an efficient single indicator of political engagement among young people in the countries studied here, social media use would appear to be as good as, or better than” (p. 33) income. This is consistent with Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) argument that younger citizens relate differently to politics by seeking digitally networked action that includes choice in contributing content and interaction through digital media. However, because social media tend to “promote self-focused values, interests and talking about personal rather than public life,” educators need to help students embrace a commitment to the common good as they encourage digital political engagement (Ekström et al., 2014, p. 55).

Beyond an exclusive focus on social media, Ryland (2018) argued that education for digital citizenship must “combine media literacy, digital literacy, and citizenship education to teach the skills necessary to create the digital world as a political space” (p. 61). Importantly, Ryland maintained that “curriculum that fails to include these elements pursues an agenda that emphasizes individual virtues and neglects collective public goods” (p. 61). Carr et al. (2018) argued that having students create their own media, “especially within the age of YouTube, blogs, and social media, is also an effective way of seeking insight into media construction, messaging, and bias” (p. 78).

Mellor’s (2014) study of a digital citizenship model in Australian schools revealed that combining digital literacy and civic education enhanced student learning, strengthened their sense of intrinsic value, and increased their civic skills. Mellor concluded that when “creatively and extensively utilised by all stakeholders, Web 2.0 and social networking can be powerful factors in developing student independence, in students having a positive view of the world, their place in it and their capacity to engage with it” (p. 126). Further, Damasceno (2021) proposed a multiliteracies framework that equips students with the skills to identify misinformation and understand the factors that contribute to the spread of misinformation as a strategy to combat information disorder. Damasceno concluded that students must have such skills to “ethically participate in civic debate and dialogue” (p. 8).

Taken together, it is clear that training in emergent digital literacies helps students advance the causes they are interested in, equips them to identify propaganda, and offers them insights into how networks form and how (dis)information spreads online.

Conclusion

The events of the Capitol insurrection make clear that much work is needed to stabilize democracy. Packer (2021) argued that the survival of democracy “depends on what happens inside our skulls, where anything is possible. The destruction of a shared reality does more damage than the economic decline or impeachable acts” (p. 32). Packer’s remarks were made in

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the context of a failed response to COVID-19, declining trust in democracy following the insurrection, and the rise of post-truth. Given current and ongoing threats to democracy, we believe that civic engagement education must take a critical turn to prepare students to be democratic citizens who advocate for positive social change. Specifically, civic engagement efforts need to focus on antiracism, anti-extremism, and digital literacy.

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