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# Doubtful dialogue: how youth navigate the draw (and drawbacks) of online political dialogue

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## ABSTRACT

Social media platforms like *Twitter* are venues for 24/7 political discussion – including deliberation, everyday banter, and bickering. For youth, these platforms offer new opportunities and risks for participation, and suggest corresponding implications for civic education. This qualitative, exploratory study examines how 15 civic youth (ages 15–25) in the United States define and carry out political dialogue on social media platforms. We compare youths’ reported online dialogue strategies with strategies observed in digital artifacts of their posts. Findings suggest that youths’ conceptions of good online dialogue and its key ingredients – knowledge, respect, and diversity – are aligned with their practices in many respects. However, juxtaposing artifacts of youths’ online dialogue threads with reported strategies surfaced disjunctions, related to (1) perceived dialogue style and (2) perceptions of the value of online dialogue. Building on recent studies of novel classroom approaches, this study suggests promising entry points for educators and curricula to support youth to navigate the risks and opportunities of online spaces for civic expression and dialogue.

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## KEYWORDS

Youth; social media; dialogue; political talk; civic education

## Introduction

Following the February 2018 shooting at high school in Parkland, Florida, students organized rallies to advocate stricter gun control laws. *Twitter* was a key venue for expressing grief, mobilizing support, and exchanges (sometimes sharp) with gun rights’ advocates, politicians, and journalists. Such events bring to the forefront distinct civic education aims as teachers try to guide students who engage, wish to engage, or are silenced in this complex online political landscape. Indeed, digital and social media bring new venues for political action and dialogue with friends and strangers alike and, accordingly, new opportunities and risks. For instance, *Twitter* offers youth, who often lack political power, a chance to voice ideas on public issues with large audiences. *Facebook* can enable youth to voice and exchange political ideas with online ‘friends.’ Or, such speech can be ignored or met with backlash and in turn silence participants.

Recent polling indicates that 64% of youth are more fearful than hopeful about the future of democracy in America (Harvard University Institute of Politics 2018). While two of three young people polled reported believing ‘the country is off on the wrong track,’ more than half of 18–30 year olds, across all ethnic groups, also reported participating in political activities since the 2016 election, including signing online petitions, liking candidates on *Facebook*, advocating via *Facebook* or *Twitter*, and participating in online discussions (Black Youth Project 2017).

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This paper draws on data from interviews with American youth who use social media for political participation, focusing on a subset who engage in political dialogue. We focus on youth because of their frequent use of social media (Anderson and Jiang 2018) and because their practices may indicate current and future civic participation trends. Further, youths' online experiences surface support needs which should inform the design of civic learning experiences. Although all 38 study participants use social network platforms for political expression, only a subset of 15 engaged in frequent online *political dialogue*<sup>1</sup> – back-and-forth exchanges with others which may have deliberative qualities as well as features of political talk broadly defined (Yan, Sivakumar, and Xenos 2017).

This study explores youths' conceptions of *good* (i.e., productive, valuable) and *not-so-good* (i.e., unproductive) online political dialogue and the strategies they report using. To better understand the dynamics of their online dialogue and the implications of online experiences for civic pedagogies, we examine what youth actually do in their political conversations on social networking platforms. We compare youths' beliefs and reported strategies with observations of digital artifacts – screenshots of online exchanges. Our findings suggest that youths' conceptions of good online dialogue are aligned with their dialogue strategies in many respects. However, we also observed disjunctions related to how youth describe their dialogue style versus their actual practices and a broader disjunction around youths' doubts about the value of online political dialogue and their continued engagement despite this uncertainty. In the discussion, we explore how these findings suggest new insights about youths' aspirations for political dialogue and the challenges they negotiate – internally and externally – as they engage politically on social media. Our data, and a careful examination of the disjunctions which emerge, prompt us to propose new strategies for supporting online dialogue in the classroom and suggest implications for civic education more broadly.

## Context and existing research

### *Political dialogue gone digital*

Dialogue, broadly conceptualized, involves a reciprocal exchange of ideas with an emphasis on authenticity, open listening, and respect (Bakhtin 1986; Buber 2000). General consensus exists that dialogue is an important ingredient of democratic life. Yet, there is more debate about the relative value and achievability of different forms of dialogue. Some privilege deliberative discourse – public, rational exchange of perspectives for the purposes of decision-making (Gutmann and Thompson 1986). Others point to informal, dialogic deliberation (Kim and Kim 2008) or everyday political talk as a vital space for exploring perspectives and a necessary precursor to public, goal-oriented deliberation (Barber 1984; Habermas 1984; Yan, Sivakumar, and Xenos 2017).

New avenues for political expression and dialogue exist online and hold mixed potential for instrumental and dialogic forms. On the one hand, the barriers to online participation are low; all voices can participate, weigh in on public issues, and even give direct feedback to political leaders and decision-makers. Yet, digital literacies and political engagement skills are inequitably distributed across potential participants (Hargittai and Hsieh 2013; Selwyn and Facer 2010). Further, with many voices on social media, the odds of being heard and responded to may be low (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).

Digital media afford expansive forms of political speech – images, likes, and memes proliferate and may inform public discourse (Jenkins et al. 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 2016). Yet, text-based, asynchronous dialogue is still important; with it, come opportunities to reflect before posting but also challenges (e.g., lack of tone). Online spaces created for nonpolitical purposes can be leveraged for instrumental deliberation, opinionated monologues aimed at like-minded audiences, or open-ended, dialogic exploration of political ideas (Barber 1984; Yan, Sivakumar, and Xenos 2017). Online, political talk opportunities abound, although the uptake and quality of ensuing exchanges are less understood.

### ***Youth and online political dialogue***

Online contexts may be particularly important for youth civic participation, given youths' frequent use of digital media and expanded voice opportunities online (Jenkins et al. 2016; Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015; Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen 2015). Both voicing and exchanging ideas with others are understood to support civic development (Flanagan and Faison 2001; Youniss 2011). Understanding how youth – often avid social media users – are leveraging online civic potentials may indicate emerging and novel civic practices. Indeed, research indicates that youth manage and leverage the 'social groundlessness' or flux in norms online for political talk (Thorson 2014; Thorson, Vraga, and Klinger-Vilenchik 2014).

Yet online political opportunities may go untapped. Research has uncovered an 'agency gap' in youth's use of social media, as online norms and structures may encourage broadcasting opinions, but restrict political dialogue and action-taking (Mihailidis 2018). Further, political expression can bring risks – including surveillance from employers, backlash from known and unanticipated audiences – that lead youth to quiet civic voices online (Weinstein 2014; Weinstein, Rundle, and James 2015). Many hesitate to engage politically, having witnessed emotionally charged interactions and outrage language online (Middaugh, Bowyer, and Kahne 2017; Middaugh and Evans 2018). Social media is perceived as a 'risky setting' for political dialogue (Thorson 2014; Vromen et al. 2016); messages can be misused or misunderstood by audiences. Youth are thus often 'more reluctant about, than inspired by, the potential scale of a political act in social media' (Ekström 2016, 16). Moreover, the framing of social network sites as spaces for socializing leads some youth to doubt the efficacy of online civic dialogue (Mihailidis 2014). Further, the existence of trolling as 'a new genre of political speech' (Hannan 2018, 221) and rapid increase of hate speech online (Brisson-Boivin 2019) can also discourage. Even so, some youth persist in talking politics online, engaging an impressive range of dialogue strategies (James et al. 2016). Understanding how they pursue productive online discussions despite noted challenges can surface both strategies and skill development needs to inform educational interventions.

### ***Bringing the digital to civic education: emerging frameworks***

Discussion of public issues is a core feature of traditional civic educational approaches where 'best practices' include face-to-face simulations of legislative processes and practicing civil discourse through debates (Hess and McAvoy 2014). With digital avenues for politics expanding, there are calls for reimagining civic education. As Kahne, Hodgkin, and Eidman-Aadahl (2016) argue, digital media extend long-standing civic practices in new directions, bringing opportunities and challenges for youth civic development and learning. The authors highlight 'participatory practices' – investigation, production, circulation, dialogue, and mobilization – that are enriched and vexed by digital contexts. With respect to dialogue, 'discussion of current events and controversial issues' is an acknowledged civic competency (Gould et al. 2011; Youniss 2011) yet online features press for new considerations, strategies, and educator supports.

The extent to which civic educational approaches are changing given this context is unclear; one study suggests scarce supports for digital civic dialogue (James et al. 2016). Other research highlights educators experimenting with *Twitter* or blogging to support students' political opinion writing yet reluctance to encourage dialogue due to concerns about conflict (Journell, Ayers, and Walker Beeson 2013; Levy et al. 2015).

Researchers increasingly call for civic media literacies-oriented pedagogies (Mihailidis 2018) and stress strong teacher scaffolding for developing digital civic skills (Middaugh and Evans 2018). Dishon and Ben-Porath (2018) call upon schools to actively support students' development of 'digital civility' in their online interactions as a way to tackle the challenges to civic interactions online. Kahne et al. advocate educational supports around expressing perspectives persuasively and respectfully; seeking opportunities for exchange across diverse perspectives; and reflecting on risks of online

speech (2016, 10). Hodgin's (2016) study of teachers' strategies calls out five 'stages of opportunity' for preparing youth to navigate online discussions: (1) creating online dialogic communities; (2) analyzing discussion of civic issues; (3) engaging in productive online dialogue; (4) going public with one's perspectives; and (5) moving from voice toward influence. Our study explores data from youth engaging politically online, outside of school, which have relevant implications for pedagogical approaches Hodgin surfaced – particularly, the learning potentials of analyzing features of productive online political talk.

We seek to deepen understandings of how youth who use digital media for civic aims think about and seek to achieve good online political dialogue. We draw on interviews and artifacts of online exchanges to explore the following research questions:

- (1) How do digital civic youth define good online political dialogue?
- (2) What strategies do they report using to achieve such dialogue?
- (3) How do their reported online dialogue strategies compare with strategies observed in online exchanges?
- (4) What considerations are youth weighing that may explain apparent disjunctions?

## The current study

Our study responds to calls for more qualitative work on youth online dialogue and contributes a unique perspective through digital artifact analysis.

## Methods

In 2015, we conducted in-depth interviews with 38 youth, ages 15–25, in the United States. We recruited youth who engage extensively on social media in service of civic issues and identified participants through recommendations from activist groups, college and community youth organizations, and media coverage of youths' online campaigns, including awards for online activism. Surveys confirmed participants' eligibility and collected initial data regarding civic activities, media use, and educational supports for digital literacy and civic engagement. Our recruitment strategies sought to involve youth who represent a range of ideological and political viewpoints; yet, youth who agreed to participate tended to identify as liberal. Although our sample of participants engaged with a range of issues, many were politically left-leaning (e.g., environmental issues, the Israel-Palestine conflict, immigration, education reform, racism, queer issues, women's health, and sexual assault).

Our overall sample was diverse regarding gender, race/ethnicity and age (see Table 1). Although we mention selected findings across the full sample ( $n = 38$ ), we focus primarily on data from the subset of 15 *political dialoguers*, which is diverse with respect to age and race/ethnicity, although disproportionately female. Notably, although all participants use social media to advocate for civic issues, only 40% engage in political *dialogue* online.

Interviews explored participants' online activities, especially civic expression and dialogue, probing for strategies. In order to elicit participants' conceptions of online civic dialogue, we asked them to describe features of *good* and *not-so-good* online dialogue; our word choice was purposefully broad to avoid leading participants. We captured artifacts by taking screenshots of selected social media exchanges identified by youth as illustrative of their dialogue approaches. Following our IRB protocols for informed consent and confidentiality, we captured and included in our analysis only those artifacts participants elected to share. Youth were informed during our recruitment phase that they would be asked to share examples of their posts and were given time during the interview to search on different platforms to find conversations they believed represented *good* and *not-so-good* dialogue. Screenshots of dialogue inevitably included comments from participants' online 'friends' and followers who were not consented participants of our study. We set ethical parameters in this study

**Table 1.** Participant demographic characteristics.

Demographics	Overall sample ( $n = 38$ )	Subset of 'political dialoguers' ( $n = 15$ )
Gender		
Female	22	11
Male	16	4
Race/Ethnicity		
White	17	7
African American	10	3
Asian	6	3
Hispanic	2	0
Multiracial	3	2
Age		
15–18 years old	13	7
19–22 years old	15	4
23–25 years old	10	4

which included deidentifying commenters and analyzing their comments from 'friends' strictly in relation to our participants' dialogue. While these conversations took place in public (*Twitter*) and semi-public spaces (*Instagram*, *Facebook*), we acknowledge that considering these from a research ethics perspective can blur the lines between public and private spaces online as we consider intended audiences (Roberts 2015). In weighing the research risks and benefits, we have decided to publish a limited number of deidentified conversations and share this case as an ethical dilemma related to conducting research in online spaces (Battles 2010).

Acknowledging that social media platform affordances and changes affect research (Ellison and boyd 2013), relevant practices captured in this 2015 data collection include: profile pages, selected posts/tweets, likes, and comment threads from *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and/or *Twitter*. A total of 539 screenshots from our overall sample and 262 screenshots from the subset of 15 dialoguers were collected.

### **Interview and artifact analysis**

We examined interview data for youths' conceptions of online dialogue, attitudes about online political practices, self-reported online expression strategies and considerations, and *disjunctions* or contradictory statements (See Appendix: Interview protocol.) Interviews lasted two hours on average, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Taking an iterative and thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis 1998), four researchers developed a coding scheme comprised of 22 parent codes and numerous sub-codes. We coded a selection of transcripts until we obtained reliability with parent codes (Cohen's Kappa coefficient = 0.7, accuracy of approximately 85%) (Bakeman and Quera 2011). We maintained reliability by shadow coding each transcript and resolved discrepancies through discussion.

Our analysis of digital artifacts was an iterative process between interview transcripts and artifacts. During interviews, we asked participants about conceptions of online dialogue, e.g., 'How would you describe a good online discussion?' We requested examples of discussion threads, took screenshots, and probed what made them good or not-so-good discussions, dialogue moves used, moves they observed others using, feelings during and after discussions, and impacts on their thinking.

Our aim was to identify alignments and misalignments between self-reported data and practices through iterative analysis of interviews and accompanying digital artifacts, which we systematically coded. We compiled key themes and quotes, creating detailed portraits of participants. Juxtaposing interview data with digital artifacts provided multifaceted data about youths' social media lives, a key contribution of this paper and its implications for civic education.

### **Findings**

We report findings on civic youths' conceptions of online political dialogue, dialogue strategies, considerations, and disjunctions between accounts of online actions and observations of artifacts.

### **Good online political dialogue**

Before exploring participants' strategies and considerations, we sought to understand how youth define dialogue. All participants had robust conceptions of good online political dialogue and pointed to a range of qualities. Across our sample ( $n = 38$ ), we observed three broad themes: good dialogue is respectful in tone, engages diverse perspectives, and includes knowledgeable or informed participants. In short, knowledge, respect, and diversity are key elements of good online dialogue.

Among the 15 dialoguers, we heard these themes and more. For instance, Julia,<sup>2</sup> age 23, describes good online dialogue as 'respectful' and 'nuanced,' and adds that people should post and respond to comments online 'because they genuinely are interested in discussion, and not because they're interested in a screaming match.' Assata, age 16, echoed this idea, saying that good online exchanges 'make you think more,' while Julian, age 15, suggests talking openly 'without shutting anyone down.' Ann, age 18, characterizes good dialogue as 'productive,' where participants ask questions or contribute 'actual content,' rather than one-word or negative responses. Some youth raised further outcomes of good online discussions, including increased connections, a sense of community, and a 'shared narrative' that mobilizes participants toward action.

### **Not-so-good online dialogue**

We also asked youth to describe features of *not-so-good* dialogue. Not surprisingly, they noted the absence of good dialogue qualities in addition to specifically negative features, including 'unproductive' comments, such as those containing limited or no evidence. A dominant theme was the tone of threads and the level of genuine engagement across different perspectives. Sarah, age 17, and June, age 16, discussed posts or comments with an 'overly aggressive,' 'angry,' or 'condescending' tone. Others spoke about exchanges that suggest commenters are closed to alternative points of view or aren't listening. Assata discussed concerns about threads where participants 'walk away from an opportunity to learn something.' Finally, youth shared concerns about comments that go beyond the issue and become personal (e.g., ad hominem attacks, racial slurs, or shaming messages). Sarah articulated many of these features when she described not-so-good discussions as those 'where people are throwing out mean words, being really rude to each other, saying awful things to each other without having respect for other people's opinions.'

Some youth attributed not-so-good dialogue to features of online spaces – such as the challenge of conveying tone or opportunities for anonymity. For many, this meant that the value of online political dialogue was often questioned, even as they continued to engage.

### **Strategies for good online dialogue**

While ideal and not-so-ideal ingredients of good online political dialogue are fairly clear-cut to youth in our sample, achieving them is another matter. According to participants, the success of online political dialogue depends not only on the *what*, or the content of the discussion, but also *how* they engage. The dialoguers, along with our larger sample ( $n = 38$ ), indicated that the *where* often matters, too, given differences in audience and affordances across sites (e.g., *Twitter's* character limits, ability to tag people on *Facebook*). Below, we describe how participants draw upon the complexity of their lived experiences online to share the strategies they have developed in their online dialogue. We stress the importance of these strategies and corresponding considerations they weigh for civic education.

One aspect of the *how* of good online discussions is frequency – *how often* one posts; this consideration often intersects with *where* one is posting. Some youth contend that frequent posts are essential, especially on *Twitter* where reaching broader audiences through trending hashtags is possible. Nineteen-year-old Bill posted over 30,000 tweets on *Twitter* and, at the time of our interview, had nearly 13,000 followers and often engaged with public figures. Yet other dialoguers, especially

*Facebook* users who limit their political dialogue to narrower audiences of ‘friends,’ intentionally limit the number of posts. Many shared concerns about friends tuning out their posts, getting irritated, and ‘ghosting’ or unfriending them. Julia, who has 4465 *Instagram* followers, emphasizes that posting relevant content is essential: ‘Use social media for social good. Don’t share about guacamole or your boyfriend.’

Turning to the *how* of posting and commenting, youth described several strategies as effective, including using a light, humorous, or casual style and asking questions that communicate a desire to learn about different perspectives. Cortana cited storytelling as a powerful strategy to prevent conflict, ‘You can’t disagree with a story, I found. You can’t disagree with a very sincere experience.’ Finally, Sarah spoke of the hidden work of pausing and reflecting about the wording of posts and potential for misinterpretation.

In regards to the *how* of responding to disagreements, taking time to sift through different points and respond to each in turn was a strategy favored by Scooby, age 21. Further, ‘attacking ideas not people’ was another strategy mentioned by Sassy, age 25, who noted the importance of persistence – the willingness to stay in a hard discussion until mutual understanding is achieved. Use of respectful language or a ‘neutral tone’ was a key tactic mentioned by many youth, although one argued that it was more important to have flair, even if it meant being less respectful.

### Considerations youth weigh

We also surfaced an array of considerations that appeared to influence whether and when youth engaged politically online (see [Table 2](#)).

Given the weight of such considerations, many participants noted that *not* engaging or *not* responding to specific comments was the best strategy for keeping online discussions productive or safe (see James et al. 2016). That said, a few participants were willing to disagree online and used strategies such as using respectful tone, and quoting and responding to each specific point made by fellow commenters.

### Walking the talk: points of alignment

Turning to our artifact analysis, we observed impressive alignment between youths’ accounts of actions and observations of digital artifacts. Among 10 of 15 dialoguers, reported approaches aligned with all actions observed in online posts shared. For example, Assata described use of casual language, questioning, and conveying uncertainty as key dialogue moves and her posts illustrated her strategies to engage *Facebook* friends. Shown in [Figure 1](#) below, she said, ‘I really like to ask questions about things on *Facebook*, ‘cause it’s interesting to see what people read and want to say. You get a lot of different views and like a really cool conversation [can] happen.’ In keeping with her emphasis on questions, one of Assata’s *Facebook* posts reads.

**Table 2.** Considerations youth weigh before engaging politically online.

Consideration type	Examples of what youth consider
<i>Civic issue impact</i>	‘Will online dialogue contribute positively to the issue?’
Target and unintended <i>audiences</i> on the social media platform, app, or site	‘Who’s in my network? How will they respond?’
Personal <i>risks</i> or <i>benefits</i> of political talk	‘What will I gain or risk by participating?’
Affordances and constraints of the <i>online environment</i>	Persistence of posts; lack of tone; platform-specific advantages or limitations.
Perceptions of whether discussions would be <i>productive</i> or worthwhile	‘Will people listen and/or change their minds?’
<i>Issue knowledge and sensitivity</i>	‘Do I know enough about the issue?’ ‘Is the issue controversial?’
<i>External pressures/constraints</i>	‘My employer/civic group asks me to post or prohibits me from engaging politically online.’
<i>Digital or civic resources/literacies</i>	‘Do I have the time and/or skills to engage?’



**Figure 1.** Example of a ‘good’ Facebook post – Assata.

What came next was an online exchange with two *Facebook* friends, one of whom recommended Assata read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, which this friend describes as ‘right on point for your question.’ This exchange showed Assata’s signature move of questioning and tactics of indicating uncertainty and using casual language. Another participant, Cortana, shares links, articles, and multimedia with two goals in mind, ‘One would be to start conversations with people about important topics and two would be to raise awareness.’ Cortana’s artifacts confirm her frequent use of these tactics.

Many youth showed alignment between their reported emphasis on respectful tone and strategies for confronting different perspectives. Sarah advocated disagreeing respectfully online and moves we observed matched this goal. As displayed in *Figure 2*, when a friend (Toby) shared a critical comment, she responds: ‘I don’t hate you! And I respect you’re [*sic*] opinion.’ Her reply is closely aligned with her recommended strategy of respectfully ‘stand[ing] strong in your beliefs.’



**Figure 2.** Example of ‘good’ online dialogue – Sarah and her ‘friend’ Toby.

More generally, we observed many participants ‘making good on’ their reported commitment to using social media for their causes, evidenced by the sheer number of political posts they make. Julian, a feminist activist, argued, ‘I think ... in this technology-reliant world, the number one way change can happen, is if a lot of people start posting on social media and get a lot of support and power via that platform.’ She then shared nearly 30 artifacts packed with evidence of prolific posting and exchanges on her blog, *Instagram*, and *Facebook*.

These examples illustrate important areas of alignment between youths’ self-reported strategies and online posts. We also observed misalignments.

### **What they say vs. what they do: disjunctions**

In comparing self-reported data to online practices, we noticed disjunctions between what some youth say they are doing and what they appear to do (based on the artifacts we were able to capture). Below, we describe disjunctions related to (1) dialogue style or approach and (2) the value of online political dialogue.

#### **Disjunctions of dialogue style**

**Scooby: destroyer or effective debater?.** Scooby is a 21-year-old college student whose political interests focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Like others in our study, Scooby asserts that well-informed participants are key to good online dialogue. As he put it, a solid knowledge base lends ‘a foundation of confidence’ to engage and respond to challenges that surface in discussions. Yet, being informed isn’t enough. He said that ‘there needs to be a little flair’ and even ‘a hint of condescension’ or is ‘a little biting’ although, ideally, without outright disrespect. Further, Scooby asserts that he is ‘not interested in being productive with another person ... I think a good online discussion is where I just like destroy someone in debate.’ His goal in engaging in this type of dialogue strategy is to inform and educate.

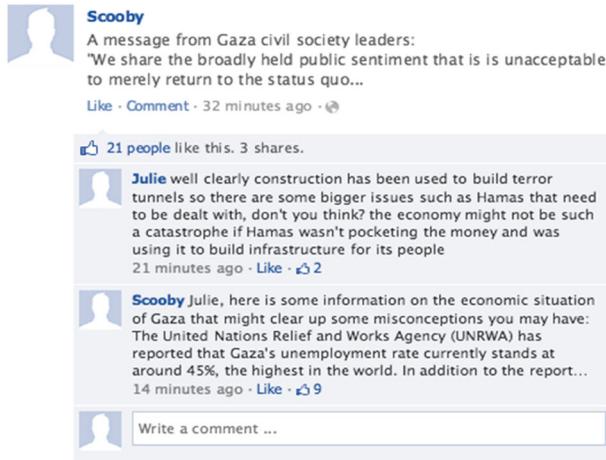
Scooby shared six screenshots of a *Facebook* discussion about demands for a ceasefire shared by Hamas, the Palestinian authority on the Gaza Strip. Scooby launched the discussion with a detailed status update regarding the demands and shared seven subsequent lengthy comments he posted in response to online peers. The ensuing comment thread included some points of disagreement. As Scooby described,

Someone responded ... with some platitudes that are often said about Hamas and Gaza and the situation. And so I took that opportunity to write her an essay on something I’ve actually studied in an academic sense, which is the economic, well, various effects of the blockade on Gaza. And so I took the time to write all of it out, using a lot of quotes, sourced information. And then other people jumped in. She responded, and then I responded again.

Based on Scooby’s strong, even emphatic, claims about his aggressive dialogue style, we expected to see language that was overtly challenging in substance and in tone. Yet, as [Figure 3](#) shows, his comments engaged questions, facts, and substantive points in what appeared to be a balanced, respectful way.

Another comment reads, ‘for anyone who is interested in some further debate on this topic’ and Scooby includes a link to a televised debate on the Israel-Gaza conflict from [democracynow.org](#). Again, Scooby’s description of his approach seems at odds with the style we interpret him using on actual comment threads. This by no means suggests he was misleading us about the character of his exchanges online. It may be the case that he is a more explicit ‘destroyer’ in other exchanges not shared with us. It’s also possible, though, that Scooby’s perception of his approach – destroying – is out of step with how we, and perhaps others, interpret his talk.

**Alice: light-hearted or in your face?.** Alice is a 21-year-old college student who is active on *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter* around feminist and women’s health issues. To Alice, good online political



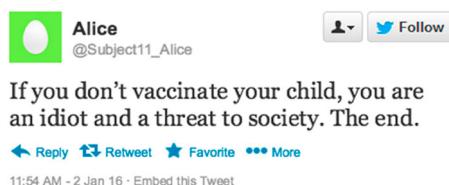
**Figure 3.** Example of ‘good’ online dialogue – Scooby and his ‘friend’ Julie.

dialogue leverages the internet’s resources by sharing links and credible facts rather than ‘just spouting of opinions.’ Good discussions provide opportunities to ‘make legitimate points’ and keep focus on the issue, as opposed to drifting to tangential topics. A recurring theme across Alice’s interview was the importance of humor as a strategy to engage people and reduce tensions. Characterizing social media as ‘a place of like friendship,’ she insists it’s ‘always better to keep it light [and] funny as opposed to make it extremely serious and like potential for awkwardness later.’

Alice suggests posting content with just ‘a hint of political ideology.’ She aims to create content on ‘the more palatable side.’ In turn, Alice describes as unproductive strategies such as ‘looking to pick a fight,’ creating an ‘uninviting atmosphere,’ using a ‘harsh tone,’ going off on a rant or engaging in name-calling. In examining 18 of Alice’s posts, we observed link sharing, leveraging facts, and use of humor to engage her networks. However, we also observed two posts that were arguably at odds with her characterization of her style as ‘light,’ ‘palatable,’ and not ‘obviously so one-sided.’ The most glaring example was the following tweet (Figure 4).

Alice also shared a *Facebook* post that was directed ‘To the young man seated behind me [and making sexist remarks] during tonight’s viewing of [film about sexual assault].’ Her post included substantive points and facts, but also characterized the young man as having a ‘complete lack of intelligence.’ While such ‘in your face’ posts were infrequent as compared with posts that are lighter, the disjunction is notable.

We chose to highlight the cases of Scooby and Alice because we observed some stark differences between their characterization of their dialogue style and their posts. However, if we consider these disjunctions to be examples of a broader gap between self-perception and action, similar themes were found among five of the fifteen dialoguers in our study. Generally, we were struck by disconnects between the content of posts and the emotional significance youth placed on them. Confident, even brazen, posts sometimes obscured feelings of uncertainty, and posts that suggest openness to



**Figure 4.** Example of a recent tweet – Alice.

alternative perspectives belied more closed-minded stances. Michael shared an artifact of an online disagreement with a colleague about Israel-Palestine which involved polite overtures of listening that belied his 'rigid' stance. Interview-artifact comparisons suggest that participants' knowledge about a given topic, its sensitivity, and their emotional investment in it may trigger such disjunctions.

### ***Disjunctions regarding the value of online political dialogue***

While our study's political dialoguers are named as such because they regularly engage in dialogue, just over half (8/15) maintain a meaningful degree of ambivalence about using social media for political discussions.

***Assata: waste of time or opportunity to think more?*** Assata is a 16-year-old African American female interested in racism, sexism, youth voice, 'what it means to be an African' in American society. Assata has mixed feelings regarding affordances and limitations of discussion on *Facebook*. Her views regarding the platform have changed over time: 'I was an advocate person against *Facebook*, and I've completely reformed.' She enjoys creating events and sharing news, but isn't sure that online dialogue with people with different political views is always 'worth it.' She characterizes online discussions with people with different opinions as 'a waste of my time' because they will likely 'keep having the same views and opinions.' This could suggest that Assata rarely engages in online dialogue where disagreements surface, but artifacts (including 27 *Facebook* status updates and comments) suggest otherwise.

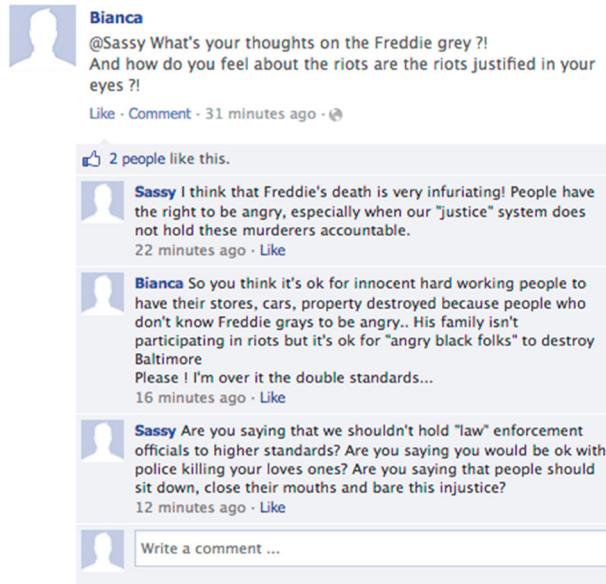
A screenshot of her *Facebook* page captures Assata's post, 'So done with this racist, sexist, hetero-normative, classist, islamophobic curriculum.' A discussion that Assata qualified as 'heated' ensued with someone who challenged and disagreed with Assata's post, but also led her to 'think more.' In fact, the discussion unfolded over several hours from 11 pm to 2 am one night. Reflecting on this exchange, Assata shares

I'd never really thought about what my ideal education system would look like, but those questions prompted me ... And she and I tend to butt heads with each other but this was a good conversation because I think she learned something and I think I learned something too, about myself.

Yet, Assata retains a posture of ambivalence regarding online dialogue that is more skeptical than not. Perhaps this stance is productive given the acknowledged challenges of online dialogue. Her persistence in dialoguing despite challenges can be traced to her passion and sense of responsibility for the causes and ideas she engages. Arguably youth like Assata are performing an additional civic duty – making their way in a fraught, but potentially rich opportunity space, testing out strategies that may form the toolkits of civic actors down the road.

***Sassy: stay in the discussion or take it offline?*** Sassy is a 25-year-old youth and juvenile justice coordinator. She is involved in activism related to countering racism/white supremacy and police brutality and supporting feminism. Sassy believes that one can only change another person's mind through face-to-face discussions, 'You can just see the changes, and it becomes harder to defend in person when you're right there in front of someone.' Yet, her artifacts (including 5 *Facebook* status updates and comments) and interview paint a more complex picture. Though she contends that change is better achieved offline, Sassy has over 1000 *Facebook* friends and is very active on the site, often engaging in long, back-and-forth conversations about social issues. Several artifacts depict a heated exchange with a *Facebook* 'friend' regarding protests in Baltimore sparked by the case of Freddie Gray, an African American man who died in police custody. Shown in [Figure 5](#), the two women go back and forth over several hours, expressing their opposing views. Sassy asks a lot of questions, including, 'Are you saying that people should sit down, close their mouths and bare this injustice?'

While Sassy conveys skepticism about such online exchanges, her artifacts suggest a productive back and forth. When reflecting on the impact of these conversations, she shares,



**Figure 5.** Example of 'good' online dialogue – sassy and her 'friend' Bianca.

I think through these conversations, the dialogue that I engage with other people with, it forces you to ask questions of yourself, that you probably wouldn't if you were just alone, with your thoughts, right? And people make arguments that push you to support and to just prove why you feel a certain way. So, I definitely think that it has helped me develop the ideas, or forced me to I should say.

Key dialogue strategies Sassy adopts online include asking and responding to challenging questions, presenting clear arguments, and staying in the discussion. Despite her ambivalence about possible impacts, our analysis suggests that Sassy is committed to political dialogue online – especially on the topic of racial justice.

**Cortana: coast-to-coast connections or private discussions?.** Cortana, a college student and advocate for women's rights, discussed the importance of online discussions for raising awareness and exploring 'big questions.' She went on to explain, 'I really like that this kind of conversation can happen online between people who are on opposite coasts and have never met each other.' Yet, while showing us her extensive social media presence (including over 20 *Facebook* or blog posts and *YouTube* videos), she provided an example in which she refrained from commenting and instead contacted the person to discuss offline. Cortana shares her rationale as follows,

So I think ... I have, in some ways, given up hope on having more weighty discussions on comment threads, because I've realized that the reason *Facebook* arguments that are out on someone's wall never really go that well is because people behave very differently when they know that their friends are watching. I think that having a conversation, like via *Facebook* comments, isn't really a conversation so much as it's almost akin to having a discussion that's filmed and broadcasted. You feel like you're on camera, or you definitely think about how people see it.

Cortana seems to be torn between social media's ability to connect people who wouldn't otherwise have the chance to discuss issues and the ways platforms fundamentally change how people converse. Notably, she points to audience concerns – 'you definitely think about how people see it' – as salient to her ambivalence.

We observed this ambivalence among other youth, too. June hesitates before posting about polarizing topics, like the death penalty, because of audience pushback concerns: 'social media has a lot of opportunities for really negative feedback' and therefore 'probably isn't the best place' for discussions

about social justice issues. Yet, June also concedes that online is ‘often the only place people are willing to have them, so you kind of have to take whatever you can get.’

### Discussion: aspirations vs reality

This study explores how digital civic youth conceptualize good online political dialogue and the dialogue strategies they use, and distills related educational implications. A focus on what constitutes good online dialogue according to youth is important – especially given widespread use of social media alongside the prevailing wisdom that online political discussions are a ‘trainwreck.’ Focusing on youths’ definitions of dialogue is a necessary first step in developing youth-centered civic education pedagogies and practices. Our analysis suggests that digital civic youth have robust conceptions of good online political dialogue; indeed, the key ingredients of good discussions that youth describe – knowledge, respect, and diversity – accord with long-held models of productive political dialogue (Mutz 2006). Youth in this study also share detailed accounts of the ways they consider the *what*, *where*, and perplexing *how* of opening and conducting online political dialogue. We placed these conceptions alongside their reported dialogue strategies and examined evidence of their practices – screenshots of social media posts. This analysis revealed that youth are in many ways ‘walking their talk.’ They engage many of their reported strategies in their posts, including using humor, strategic hashtagging, asking questions, storytelling, and using a casual or neutral tone. Further, we see some evidence of qualities of good online discussions they value, including respectful language and productive information sharing, and a multiplicity of dialogue forms including instrumental deliberation and exploratory political talk (Barber 1984; Kim and Kim 2008), echoing findings from prior studies (Yan, Sivakumar, and Xenos 2017).

We observed two types of disjunctions between youth’s interviews and screenshots of online posts. First, we found disconnects between how several youth described their dialogue style and what we saw in artifacts. One youth described himself as a ‘destroyer,’ yet his posts looked more like those of a skilled, productive debater. Another youth reported her style to be light and humorous yet some posts were aggressive and explicitly challenging. These disjunctions are likely driven by a range of forces including algorithms which influence visibility of posts and outside content as well as other qualities of online spaces. Design features are political as they can condition conversations in relation to audience, for example in public (*Twitter*) or semi-public (*Instagram*, *Facebook*) spaces, or limit conversations by encouraging users to create their own posts rather than respond to each other (Freelon 2011). Such platform-specific features potentially influence dialogue styles or behaviors, despite desired dialogue strategies.

Interviews with youth also reveal often invisible feelings and emotional significance attached to posts that may appear calm and neutral when the intention is otherwise, or vice versa. The text-based nature of posts is a key factor here. Online, the ‘interpretive gap’ – the distance between what one intends to share and how people (including researchers) interpret it is often at play and contributes to anxieties about online expression (James 2014). Indeed, as reported elsewhere (James et al. 2016), all but one dialoguer in this study reported experiencing uncertainty or even stress before posting online. This is consistent with other research; considerations noted by digital civic youth include audience-related risks, such as online backlash or surveillance from potential or current employers (Ekström 2016; Thorson 2014; Vromen et al. 2016; Weinstein, Rundle, and James 2015). Such anxieties and risks challenge claims that online political acts are ‘slacktivism’ (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2009) at least by revealing that online actions don’t *feel* easy or low stakes to participants. Finally, the gap between self-perception and action regarding dialogue strategies was observed in different ways across participants, subjects and platforms, highlighting the complexity of online dialogue. Indeed, even civic youth who frequently use social media for political dialogue struggle to achieve consistency in realizing their personal definitions of good dialogue.

A second disjunction centered around the perceived value of online political dialogue. While we often heard youth across our sample of 38 wonder about benefits and/or harms of engaging

politically online, some youth from our subset of 15 dialoguers dwelled on this theme to a surprising extent given their persistence in online dialogue. It is perhaps best to understand the disjunctions observed among Assata, Sassy, Cortana, and others as revealing an expectation that online dialogue should lead to discernable change and a warranted set of tensions and unknowns about its efficacy. In deciding whether or not to engage online, youth weighed a variety of considerations including those related to the qualities of digital contexts (e.g., public, asynchronous), audiences, potentials for impact, and personal risks vs. benefits of engaging.

Social media afford opportunities to engage different audiences (including curated, close friends-only groups versus broad, geographically dispersed publics) in asynchronous discussions of public issues. On the one hand, youth recognize how their voices are potentially more impactful online given the scale of audiences that may be reached (boyd 2007; Shirky 2008). Yet, youth also harbor concerns. Some question the value of online dialogue with like-minded networks because of the tendency to 'agree on everything' or with diverse networks due to their perception that people are unlikely to change their minds. Accordingly, Cortana laments the lack of 'weighty' political discussion online despite the potential for meaningful talk across ideological and other forms of difference. Further, Assata cites difficulties with conveying uncertainty online (due to lack of tone), a reluctance to explore different perspectives, and thus untapped opportunities to 'think more' about issues. Other youth express skepticism about the larger impacts of online dialogue.

Concerns shared by youth in our study echo arguments about slacktivism (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2009) and research highlighting youths' doubts regarding the efficacy of social networks for daily civic life (Mihailidis 2014). Yet, these youth also appreciate the upsides of online engagement. Indeed, despite the acknowledged tensions, many persist in navigating the numerous unknowns or 'social groundlessness' of online dialogue in similar ways to Thorson's (2014) 'entrepreneurs of political talk' (204). This study shows how youth are negotiating risks and pressures from real or potential audiences, testing out dialogue strategies, expecting the worst yet hoping for the best because, as June reflected, social media is 'often the only place' youth will engage in political dialogue 'so you kind of have to take whatever you can get.' Their persistence suggests a hope if not a belief that online voice and dialogue will ultimately lead to influence (Allen and Light 2015).

There are potentially important learning implications for youth more broadly – perhaps especially youth who are civically engaged offline, but reluctant to share their views online. For these youth, decisions to speak up or quiet down online may be shaped by the aforementioned features and audiences in online spaces as well as youths' civic dispositions and skills, including the strength and rigidity of their stances, their open-mindedness to diverse perspectives, tolerance for pushback, and skills for navigating disagreements online. Relatedly, Ekström (2016) argues that social media represent a 'resource' for youth who are confident enough in their views to defend their opinion in a public social setting and 'an unsafe context' (16) for youth who wish to explore topics, opinions, and their own political self-identity. Our study suggests that online political dialoguers may be less confident and more ambivalent about online politics than meets the eye. Their persistence in online political dialogue, though, suggests that the anxieties and uncertainties are potentially worth enduring, especially given that the role of social media in public life is unlikely to diminish. While social media allow youth to extend political discussions beyond the classroom walls, our work highlights the need to support youth to appreciate the potential upsides and navigate inevitable challenges of leveraging social media for political dialogue and action. We look to educators to facilitate such civic learning opportunities.

### ***Implications for educators: surfacing alignments and disjunctions***

Building on youths' voices and experiences, we draw attention to the ways that online civic engagement is being defined and experienced by youth themselves, outside the walls of schools (Hollet and Ehret 2017), while highlighting their implications inside the walls of schools. Table 3 highlights youth's conceptions of the features of good and not-so-good online political dialogue, their reported

**Table 3.** Online dialogue: Youths' conceptions and reported strategies.

Online dialogue features	Reported strategies	Considerations youth weigh	Implications for educators
<p>Features of good online political dialogue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respectful in tone</li> <li>• Engages diverse perspectives</li> <li>• Knowledge regarding topic</li> <li>• Develop new ideas/learn something</li> <li>• Increased connections/community building</li> </ul>	<p>Across platforms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light, humorous, or casual style</li> <li>• Asking questions that communicate a desire to learn about different perspectives</li> <li>• Storytelling</li> </ul> <p>Differentiated strategies in relation to platform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency of posts</li> <li>• Length of posts</li> <li>• Public, semi-private or private nature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Civic issue impact</i>: 'Will online dialogue contribute positively to the issue?' 'Will people listen and/or change their minds?'</li> <li>• Target and unintended audiences on social media: 'Who's in my network? How will they respond?'</li> <li>• Personal risks or benefits of political talk: 'What will I gain or risk by participating?'</li> <li>• <i>Online environment affordances and constraints</i>: 'Will my tone be misinterpreted?' 'How can I keep the discussion respectful?' 'Which platform is best suited for this conversation?'</li> <li>• <i>Topic or Issue knowledge and sensitivity</i>: 'Do I know enough about the issue to engage?' 'Is the issue controversial?'</li> <li>• <i>External pressures/constraints</i>: 'My employer/civic group asks me to post or prohibits me from engaging politically online.'</li> <li>• <i>Digital civic resources and literacies</i>: 'Do I have the time and/or skills to engage?'</li> </ul>	<p>Invite youth to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a list of the features of good online dialogue as well as the dialogue strategies they recommended</li> <li>• Analyze discussions they have had online to identify good and not-so-good strategies</li> <li>• Reflect critically on the ways in which different platforms impact their online civic participation and dialogue</li> <li>• Share and develop strategies to prevent conflict in online dialogue</li> <li>• Reflect critically on the risks related to online political dialogue and ways to minimize these risks in their daily online civic participation</li> <li>• Think through and anticipate possible consequences before posting and adapt posts or messages accordingly</li> <li>• Share their reflections and strategies with other community members (eg., other students, siblings, parents)</li> <li>• Consider the value of different forms of online political dialogue – including open-ended, exploratory 'talk' that foregrounds listening and understanding over persuading</li> </ul>
<p>Features of not-so-good online political dialogue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disrespectful tone</li> <li>• Limited or no evidence</li> <li>• Personal attacks</li> <li>• Closed to alternative points of view</li> </ul>	<p>Strategies for responding to disagreements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respond to each point of view</li> <li>• Focus on the idea not the person</li> <li>• Persistence: stay in difficult conversations</li> <li>• Respectful language</li> </ul> <p>Strategies for exiting not-so-good conversations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding controversial or emotional topics</li> <li>• Not engaging or responding</li> </ul>		

strategies, key considerations, and the implications of these findings for educators. Our work adds new insights to research-based calls to reimagine civic education. We specifically advocate civic learning opportunities related to online political dialogue for all youth, thereby promoting more equitable and wide-ranging engagement (Kahne and Bowyer 2019).

Yet, the multiple disjunctions that surfaced in analyzing artifacts collected from youth who are deeply engaged in online political dialogue may hold the largest potential for educational innovation. While our digital artifact analysis was developed as a research data collection and analysis tool, findings point to the ways artifact analysis could be integrated as an instructional tool to provide authentic and nuanced civic learning opportunities. The tensions encountered in online political dialogue are not easily overcome. Even youth in this study, who have numerous dialogue strategies, are not always able to meet their own dialogue standards, leading to disjunctions in style or tone of their posts. These disjunctions, and the resulting disagreements that can occur when youth engage in not-so-good online dialogue, nevertheless, hold meaningful learning potential (Middaugh and Evans 2018). Other youth persist in online dialogue while harboring real concerns relating to its value. By surfacing such disjunctions in youths' perceptions versus actions, this study uncovers complex intentions, considerations, and emotions underlying online talk.

Teachers are encouraged to create opportunities to discuss and model good political dialogue practices (Journell, Ayers, and Walker Beeson 2013) and to acknowledge different forms of talk

and why they matter. Moreover, encouraging youth to examine (and juxtapose) their aspirations for online dialogue with the realities of their online conversations is a potentially valuable first step toward supporting deeper conversations about the how, where, what, and ‘so what’ of online civic dialogue.

Findings from this study deepen prior work on educating for digital civic participation – especially Kahne, Hodgin, and Eidman-Aadah’s (2016) recommendations around supporting youth to dialogue in persuasive, respectful, effective, and reflective ways (10) and Hodgin’s (2016) ‘stages of opportunity’ for educating youth to navigate online political dialogue. Teachers in Hodgin’s (2016) study invited youth to analyze online discussions. Our study similarly suggests the value of inviting youth who are already consistently engaged in online political dialogue to examine their own discussions. To deepen Hodgin’s pedagogic recommendations, we see potential in inviting youth to conduct artifact analyses of their online political discussions across platforms to surface points of alignment and disjunctions; to articulate the considerations they weigh as they post; and to reflect on their strategies, goals, and the value of online political dialogue. Educators can explicitly encourage consideration of the value of different forms of online political dialogue, including instrumental, goal-oriented deliberation and open-ended, exploratory ‘talk’ that privileges listening and understanding perspectives over persuading others to adopt a particular stance (Kim and Kim 2008). Learning experiences that routinely invite students to critically reflect on their online exchanges have the potential to support reflective ‘dispositions’ beyond the classroom, when youth engage on social media (Perkins, Jay, and Tishman 1993).

### **Limitations and future research**

This study represents an exploratory analysis of online political dialoguers’ beliefs and practices. Limitations include a small, non-representative sample of American youth. Though our overall sample was fairly balanced regarding gender (22 females and 16 males), our subset of *political dialoguers* was disproportionately female. Participants typically represented left-leaning political stances; future research including youth on the political right is warranted. A second limitation is that our observations were limited to artifacts youth were willing to share and able to find easily during interviews. Our analysis thus captures patterns observed in a small, selected sample of threads. Furthermore, participants may have chosen artifacts considered socially desirable, causing a possible response bias. A third limitation we wish to highlight is that we did not interview the ‘friends’ with whom our participants engaged in political dialogue. A fourth limitation associated with the artifact analysis is that we, the researchers, interpreted youth’s online strategies as having particular qualities (e.g., reasoned, aggressive, etc.). We acknowledge the potentially subjective nature of interpretations; by noting this limitation and including selected artifacts, we invite critiques of our analysis.

This study lays the groundwork for future research with larger samples of online political dialoguers. Benefits and limitations of this study’s digital artifact collection highlight the need to continually adapt this method; suggestions include collecting more artifacts over a longer time period; capturing screencast video data (instead of separate screenshot pictures) in order to connect self-reported data tightly to accompanying artifacts; and asking participants to self-assess whether their online actions align with their reported dialogue approaches. Future research questions include: How do different dialoguers relate their experiences and strategies within the same online dialogue thread? How do digital civic youth determine the value of online political dialogue? How do they gauge the impact? How do civic youth describe their online sharing behaviors? How do platform algorithms that shape visibility of posts inform dialoguers’ posting practices?

### **Conclusion**

This study explores how digital civic youth define, seek to achieve, and actually carry out political dialogue online. While all youth in our study have clear models of good online dialogue, they

appreciate that such discussions are hard to achieve. This study explores how some youth navigate this landscape, persisting in engaging politically via social media despite known challenges, uncertainties, and their own ambivalence. These findings have important implications for civic educational approaches, highlighting the value of reflecting upon and analyzing online engagement. We provide a guiding framework for such activities and conversations with youth. Notably, this research underscores the value of investigating the complexity of youths' online voices – voices which simultaneously advocate online civic dialogue while also questioning its value – as a foundation for designing civic learning experiences today.

## Notes

1. Our use of the word, 'political,' is intended in a broad sense, meant to capture not just electoral or institutional politics but also 'issues of public concern' (Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen 2015, 37) and 'civic' to encompass the even broader realm of public and community life (Flanagan and Faison 2001). We also use the terminology of 'digital civic youth' and 'digital civic participation' to reference young people's use of digital technologies and social media affordances to engage in public life – e.g., tweeting about a preferred candidate for political office, posting memes that mock public figures, organizing rallies, using crowdfunding sites to raise money to address a community need, etc.
2. To protect their identities, participants' names are replaced by pseudonyms of their choosing and social media posts are de-identified.

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## Appendix

### Interview protocol

#### A. Entry questions

School/work

*Depending on whether subject is in school or working*

1. What grade are you in high school? What is your favorite subject? Why?  
 OR What year are you in college? What is your major/study area of interest? Why did you choose this as your major/study area of interest?  
 OR What is your job title? What do you do? Why did you choose to do this work?
2. Do you have any plans for the future in terms of job/career (or plans after college graduation)? Please explain?  
 Now I would like to turn attention to your interest in various issues you care about.

Civic/political interest and theory of change/root cause

1. You mentioned in your survey issues v, w, x, y and z.
  - a. Pick **2 of those that are MOST important** to you to focus on for the following questions?
  - b. Why do these issues/does this issue concern you?
2. How did you first learn about these issues?
  - a. Are there things you continue to learn about these issues? How does that happen?
  - b. How did you go about figuring out your stance on these issues?
  - c. How did you familiarize yourself with other people's stances?
  - d. Have you ever changed your mind, your position, or your point of view on **ANY** issue of public concern?
    - i If yes, what was this issue? What led to you changing your mind?
    - ii If no, are there any issues or circumstances where you may change your mind?
  - e. Are your family and friends concerned about these issues in the same way too? Do you have similar or different views on most issues?
    - i If not, what do they think of your concern or involvement?
3. What is the most recent thing you have done in connection to these issues – **online or offline**?
  - a. In what way are you/were you involved? What do/did you do?
4. Are any members of your family, or any of your friends, or others you know well active in addressing issues? If yes, in what way? If no, have they been in the past?
5. People have different ideas about how you can make a change/difference in the world. Thinking about the issues you care about – how do you think change could happen? What needs to happen and why?

#### B. Online participation

Now I'd like to turn attention to (1) what you do online, in general and (2) what you do online for the issues/causes that you care about.

1. On the survey we asked you to list the online sites/spaces that you go to and what you do there – do you just view or read – like, add to favorites, forward, retweet – or add content (such as posting photos, comments, links, videos, responding to others, etc.)
  - a. The online sites/spaces where you just go to read or view – you mentioned XXX – is there any particular reason (s) why are you don't participate there more?
  - b. Are there any online sites that you used to participate on a lot but don't anymore? Which ones and why the change in your participation?
  - c. Which online sites/spaces would you say you **currently participate on most, adding content**? Why do you participate most there?
  - d. How long have you been (posting)? How often do you (post, upload, comment)? How much do you (post)?
2. Do you think people in your networks can figure out your view or stance on issues that you care about based on what you do online? How would they know?
  - a. Do you have any information or content related to the issues that you care about on any of your personal social media (e.g., *Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube*)?
  - b. IF YES: Which ones? What sorts of things do you have on there (photos, links to articles, videos, blogs)?
  - c. What's the purpose of including this information on your profile/timeline?
  - d. IF NO: Why not?

3. Have you ever felt uncertain about whether or not to post something related to issues you care about – either via your own personal social media presence or (if applicable) via that of your civic org/group/etc.? Describe/explain.
  - a. Are there things that you don't and won't share on social media about your civic or political beliefs, ideas, activities, etc.?
  - b. How do you decide what to share vs. keep offline?

### C. Online participation, Artifact Section

For the next part of the interview I would like to focus on one or two sites where you are **really active in discussing topics that you care about**. Not just posting your opinion, but having back and forth conversations with the other people on the site(s).

1. Which site(s) would you like to choose to focus on?

#### The 'Why'

1. When did you first join (chosen site(s))?
  - a. Why did you join? What did you hope you would get out of being a member?
  - b. Why do you still participate there? What are your goals (reasons, motivations) now for engaging in discussions on this site? What do you hope happens as a result of your participation in discussions?
2. What do you know about the other people who are on this site?
  - a. Who are your 'friends' or 'followers' on this site?

#### The 'What'

1. In what ways do you participate on this site? What do you do?
  - a. Do you usually respond and join in a conversation? Or do you usually post first to get a conversation going? Something else?

Instead of talking in the abstract, it would be great to actually see some of your discussions.  
Would you login into (chosen site(s))

1. Walk me through what you usually do.
  - a. What do you do when you first log on?
  - b. Do you logon because you have something you want to post? – Something to start a conversation?
  - c. Do you just skim, read some posts, look for tags, look for particular contributors, and see what you want to respond to?
  - d. Is there anything in particular you want to point out about your profile?
2. What kinds of things do you discuss here?
  - a. Are there any topics you wish were discussed in this space? Why? Why do you think they are not discussed here?
  - b. Are there any topics you wish were not discussed in this space? Why is that?

#### Considerations/ Quality Dialogue/Thinking

1. How do you decide what to respond to or not? How to respond or not respond?
  - a. What sorts of things do you think about before deciding to start or contribute to a discussion?

#### The 'How'/Quality Dialogue

1. How would you describe a good online discussion? Are there different kinds of good discussion? Please explain.
2. Would you show me some threads that you were involved in that you think are examples of GOOD discussion. [If none, any threads that are good examples]
  - a. What exactly makes this a GOOD example?
    - i. What did you do? What did other people do?

- ii How did you feel during and after the discussion? Did it affect you in any way? Change the way you think about online discussion? Did you learn something new? Change the way you think about the topic under discussion?
- 3. How would you describe a NOT SO good online discussion? Are there different kinds of NOT SO good discussion? Please explain.
- 4. Would you show me some threads that you were involved in that you think are examples of NOT SO GOOD discussion. [If none, any threads that are NOT SO GOOD examples]
  - a. What exactly makes this not such a NOT SO GOOD example?
    - i What did you do? What did other people do?
    - ii How did you feel during and after the discussion? Did it affect you in any way? Change the way you think about online discussion? Did you learn something new? Change the way you think about the topic under discussion?

#### Considerations/Mentors/Quality Dialogue/Thinking

1. The way that you engage in discussions on this site – would you say you discuss in a similar or different way on other sites? Please explain.
2. Is there a particular person/contributor on this site (or another site) that you would consider a good role model for discussing issues? What is it that they do you admire? Has their style and approach influenced your own approach to online conversations? How so? Would you show me an example?
  - a. Is there a particular person/contributor on this site (or another site) that you would consider a bad role model when it comes to discussing issues? What is it that they do that gives you pause? How has their style and approach influenced your own approach to online conversations? Would you show me an example?
3. Where or from who else have you learned important things about how to have good conversations, offline and online, around civic or political issues?
  - a. Are there any elements of a good online conversation you feel you wished you had learned but didn't? What are they and why? How could you have been supported in learning these elements?
  - b. Are the elements of a good conversation the same or different for online discussions as compared with offline discussions?

#### **Wrap Up**

So we are near the end of the interview. I have just a few last general questions.

1. How would you describe success in your ONLINE efforts related to the issues you are interested in?
  - a. What benefit has come out of your action? For whom?
2. In thinking about sharing/posting/discussing your civic and/or political work and beliefs online – what do you personally enjoy most about doing this? What is least enjoyable to you?
  - a. Thinking more broadly, what are the main opportunities and advantages of doing this? How can those opportunities be tapped by more people?
  - b. How can the challenges/concerns be addressed?
3. I would like to follow up on one or two things from the survey that I was curious about – refer to items XXX
4. Is there anything else you would like to add about your online civic/political participation?
5. Were there any questions that were surprising to you? Or questions you thought we would ask?