

Review 2

Title: *Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect.*

By Philippa Collin. 2015. Palgrave MacMillan, 208 p. ISBN: 1137348836, 9781137348838

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In “Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect” Philippa Collin examines the intersections between youth, citizenship and digital media. By using theories from political science, communication science, psychology and sociology tries to identify the features and implications of political participation by youth in a society which has an increasingly mediated and networked social life. Many scholars already explored the democratic disconnect of the younger generation, Collin tries to get a helicopter view of the young, participation, digital media and the *democratic disconnect*.

Collin uses a qualitative method to examine youth participation, by conducting in-depth interview. Over the period of five years Collin interviewed 60 people who are active in or are associated with youth organisations in Australia and the United Kingdom. These interviews are analysed in terms of different frameworks to do with citizenship, identity and new media. Collin structures her book by exploring a different angle in every chapter. In the first chapter she examines the academic theories of citizenship to provide a framework. The most important models she uses are the models of citizenship by Coleman (2008) and the classifications of the *Expert Citizen* and the *Every Maker* by Bang (2005). In the second chapter she explores the political context of her material, describing the difference in participation policies between Australia and the United Kingdom. In the third chapter she looks at the material from an organisational point of view. She describes the aims, history, discourses and mechanisms of participation of the organisations she studies, using Fisher’s (2006) description of new civil society organisations to interpret the aims of the organisations. In the fourth chapter Collin focuses on the youths and their perspective on their own participation. Collin frames this chapter in terms of the *Expert Citizen* and *Everyday Maker* classifications as described by Bang (2005). The fifth chapter is focused on the role of digital media in youth participation. Collin looks at the initiatives some of her organisations to connect and reach their target group online. She particularly looks at new initiatives they took to increase digital participation. Collin ends her study by explaining how her earlier research all relates to the problem of the democratic disconnect. Her conclusion is that the younger generation is not less inclined to participate in society, but are less inclined to use traditional channels. They are more *Everyday Makers*, than *Expert Citizens* (Bang, 2005),

meaning that they are pragmatic and integrate their work for society with their social activities. Young people are driven by the desire to belong to a particular networks. Digital media is as well the cause and the effect of this desire to connect with likeminded. Collin concludes that if organisation, either non- governmental or (semi-)governmental, want to increase the participation of the young, they need to make sure they are connected to them in a social network.

Collin is ambitious with her study to look at youth participation from different angles and different disciplines. While that helicopter view may be one of her biggest strengths of her study, it is also her biggest weakness. Collin shies with her research away from simple answers and tries to get grip on a complex matter. Using different angles in every chapter could make the reader confused, however Collin manages to keep the reader on track. She does this first of all by relating all new information to the frameworks of Coleman (2008) and Bang (2005), introduced in the first chapter. Another way she keeps her book structured, is by meticulously introducing every subject, theory, organisation or person. Although not all theories and subjects are that well explained, Collin makes sure the reader understands why she mentions the subject or theory and in its relationship with earlier theories. The same goes for the countries, organisations and persons; Collin gives a lot of background information. By providing such background information Collin makes the book also accessible for reader outside the academic world.

The study of Collin is a comparative study; she examines organisations from Australia and the United Kingdom. While the countries are very similar in culture, the political context of the countries differ. Collin's explanation of the differences in political context is very clear. The choice to make a comparison between different countries and not examine just one country, highlights the necessity for another approach by governmental organisation to youth participation. Australia and the United Kingdom adopt different views and approaches to youth participation, but both fail to convince youths to participate in a traditional way. The similarity between the Australian and British culture, but differences in political context accentuate this need for change even further.

Another strength of the study by Collin is that she is very strict about her selection of the organisations she found suitable to examine and interview. In her introduction she explains that she selected organisations according to three criteria. Organisations were selected if they: sought services to benefit young people, if they explicitly used the internet to engage with young people and if young people contribute substantially to strategic and practical decision making. In the organisations she examined youth were not just volunteers, but also took part in the strategy and management of the organisation. The young people Collin interviewed were all part of an organisation that took them seriously. This does not only improve the reliability, it gives Collin the opportunity to go beyond the question: what has to change?

Like discussed before, Collin's use of different angles are a strength, but also a weakness. In her introduction Collin gives seven key questions she wants to answer with her study. However, she only answers half of them satisfactorily. Collin gives an adequate answer to the questions about what youth participation is in a digital society, what the implications of participation is in Australia and the United Kingdom, how the state can deepen youth society and evolve democracy to better serve a network society, and how citizenship is defined. Some questions, nonetheless, remain unanswered. With her study

she refrains from going into the psyche of her interviewees and describe what the nature of youth is, how they develop and shape their political identities and what the role of policy discourse is in this. Collin interprets identity only in terms of the citizen models by Coleman (2008) and Bang (2005). All statements the interviewees make about the way they see themselves and others are depicted as characteristics of the Expert Citizen and Everyday maker by Bang (2005). Collin does not use other theories about social psychology and political socialisation to explain the views the interviewees have on identity and youth.

In other words, by using so many different angles to look at youth participation, like policy, political context, new media, citizenship, etc., Collin forgets to investigate the object of her research: the young. The same goes for the role of discourse on the political identities of the young. Throughout the book Collin mentions the influence of discourse on the shaping of the political identities, but fails to delve into the implications of certain discourse on certain people. She briefly mentions the promotion of citizenship and the role of discourse in chapter 3, but does not go beyond the observation that discourses play a role in the development of (political) identity.

Another weakness of Collin's study is the chapter on mediated participation, focussing on new media. Is it necessary to have a separate chapter on mediated participation? First of all there is repetition of information already discussed in the chapters before. Second of all, Collin goes against her own advice by examining digital participation as a separate study object. In the conclusion she appeals to organisations to synthesise offline and online participation, but treats them as different items. Collin's research would have been more innovative, if she let go of the traditional way of looking at online participation and worked towards a broader definition of participation.

Lastly another minor weakness of the book is the structure of the final chapter. The earlier chapters all focused on a single angle, these angles come together in the last chapter. The first chapters are well structured and easy to read. The last chapter, however, is a bit chaotic and not as well structured as the earlier chapters. There is no clear answer to her key questions from the introduction and the connection of some of the different angles and theories seem forced. The ending is sudden and feels that there is more to say about the conclusions of the research.

"Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect" by Philipa Collin is easy to read and suitable for those who do not have a background in political science or communication science. The ambition to examine youth participation from different angles is not only useful for further research, but it also gives Collin the opportunity to give practical advice to governmental and non-governmental organisations that want to improve their youth participation offline and online. The choice for a comparative study between Australia and the United Kingdom and the strict selection of cases makes it a valid and reliable study. However, the study as a whole does not really live up to the expectations formulated in the introduction. Collin introduces her study as multidisciplinary; using many different theories from political science, communication science, psychology and sociology to get a grip on youth participation. However, the only theories she really explains in detail are those about citizenship. She links these theories to identity, but fails to grasp her object of study: the young. Half of the key questions she poses in the introduction are only half-answered or

remain unanswered at all, which is a disappointment. The last chapter feels rushed and leaves the reader with a feeling of something missing. Collin's book is easy and enjoyable to read, but could have been more.