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Tuning out or tuned out? A critical Discourse Analysis of Youth Political Participation in Britain

Young people do not vote in the same numbers as older generations, which causes considerable concern within British democratic life. They are seen as detached and disengaged, however, the focus on voting and other traditional forms of political participation is arguably a narrow way of assessing this generation's political engagement. This paper discusses a critical discourse analysis of recent media texts on youth political participation and argues that media coverage of young people's political participation furthers the misconception that the youth of Britain today are not interested in politics and political issues. It is argued that notions of youth political participation must extend beyond traditional political engagement, namely voting.

Key words: Political participation, young people, enfranchisement



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INTRODUCTION

Young people in Britain are often branded as detached from the political process and democratic institutions and this so called decline in youth political participation is a widely recognised and debated topic. The role of young people within British democratic life has caused concern and their noticeable absence in traditional forms of political participation continuously leaves them characterised as a 'disengaged generation' (Mycock and Tonge 2012). Young people are without doubt becoming ever more disinterested in *traditional* politics, shown in startlingly low election turn outs and dwindling affiliation with political parties (Sloam 2007). The role of young people within British democratic life is often discussed within terms of a decline because of their lack of presence in general elections and their weakening party identification. Voter turnout amongst 18-24 year-olds has been in a steady decline over the last two decades, ranging from 59.7% in 1997, dropping to 49.4% in 2001, and then plummeting to 37% in 2005 (Ipsos MORI 2010). Despite turnout amongst young people increasing to 44% in the last general election in 2010, this figure still remains alarmingly low and leads to assumptions that youth political participation in Britain is in crisis. The frequent

generalisation in academic literature and news media of a 'disengaged British youth' is a theme worthy of debate as young people not voting does not necessarily mean that they are disinterested and disengaged with politics. This paper discusses a critical discourse analysis of two news articles from *The Guardian*, to explore how youth political participation in traditional and non-traditional ways is represented discursively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before discussing political (dis)engagement by young people, it is important to consider the experiences of young people in contemporary Britain as documented in the literature. Mycock and Tonge (2012) make an interesting point about the dependence of today's British youth that no generation before has experienced. They note that young people delay leaving their parental home and buying their own, having a family, entering employment and many are choosing to undertake a university education which comes with financial dependence on either the government or youth's parents. Sloam (2007) echoes this notion in stating that the transitions we see from youth into adulthood are becoming postponed and more complex in modern society. He too points to 'traditional lifestyle indicators' that are delaying independence, creating a 'quasi-citizenship' where youth are isolated in political, social and economic life. Young people are struggling to find a political identity and a predominant theme to come out of existing literature is young people's dissatisfaction and alienation with the political process (Delli Carpini 2000; Loader 2007; Henn et al. 2012). The lack of political identity is a direct result of a lack of political representation for young people with the average ages of MPs, local councillors and members of political parties being over 50 (Mycock and Tonge 2012). Mycock and Tonge (2012) state that the interests and aspirations of young people are repeatedly talked about within political discourse 'in a future tense,' and that currently, more than in previous generations, young people are not consulted enough in youth-oriented policies and therefore feel overlooked and alienated from the political process.

There has been a strong lack of faith in the efficacy of civic involvement and this has derived from the devaluing of the public sector (Delli Carpini 2000). This lack of confidence in politics can be directly correlated to events such as the MPs expenses scandal as well as failures by the Liberal Democrats to maintain their campaign promise and abolish higher tuition fees. This separation from the political process amongst youth has created a growth of individualism amongst young people (Sloam 2007). Young people expect less from the state, they do not expect a house, a job nor a pension like other generations received. This lack of expectation from the government creates 'life politics' amongst the younger generation - that their personal political experiences take a bigger role than that of British politics as a whole (Sloam 2007).

At the same time, it must be taken into account when discussing youth political participation that a great proportion of young people in Britain may suffer from a lack of political literacy and knowledge. Political terminology and buzzwords can put young people off due to the difficulty in understanding the political language and the issues surrounding it (Mycock et al. 2012). This lack of information is a key issue within this debate and often stops young people becoming active in public life. Delli Carpini (2000) develops this notion further by directly correlating the decline in civic ability to the relative lack of attention paid to young people and the issues that matter to them. He states that the failings from the education system and the poor quality of civic education in schools pave the way for a disengaged generation. Similarly, Pentland (2013) found in

her study that lack of understanding was a significant barrier to entry for young people. This was in terms of engaging in traditional ways – voting in the next election – and otherwise informal engagement, including talking about or reading about politics. However, she points out that this lack of knowledge is not tantamount of a lack of interest as young people in her study wanted to learn more about politics.

It is a common misconception that young people are retreating away from politics, rather, young people are the most likely to engage in ‘cause-oriented’ styles of politics. Due to the escalating mistrust amongst government institutions, youths are likely to engage in non-conventional political participation such as demonstrations, boycotts and direct action (Norris 2003). Many young people are more likely to associate themselves with NGO’s and charities rather than political parties and they take part in localised social activities that include, volunteering, campaigning, being involved in community networks and raising awareness of issues (Roker et al. 2002). The increased involvement seen in youth councils and online youth forums has created a shift in the way in which young people are engaging with politics and this is facilitated by new media and technologies (Matthews 2001).

The proliferation of new forms of technology has the ability to create new methods of political participation and low-cost websites and open source tools have created online civic networks that address political issues facing the youth of today (Bennett et al. 2009). Bennett et al. (2009) go on to state that this growth in political and civic websites and online activity has created a generation of ‘digital natives’ that are forming a ‘youth civic web-sphere.’ For the first time in 2010, the UK had televised political debates and these opened up new channels of political communication for young people. Although some argued that the televised debates had little impact on youth voter turnout, one cannot deny it allowed young people access to political information in a more current and exciting way (Loader 2007).

The extensive social change of the last few decades has seen the demise of traditional socialisation agents, such as a young person’s family, teacher or social class, and the growth of new socialising agents (Jennings et al. 1968). Youth of today are having their identities shaped in different ways through new media, popular culture, TV, blogs, and websites. Media such as television and the internet, as well as interactive communication, have been positively attributed to youth political participation (Esser and de Vreese 2007). Forms of political communication, such as campaigning, can lead to information searches and greater engagement with such campaigns. However, Esser and de Vreese (2007) take into account that mediated communication can be singled out as one of the reasons for young people’s disconnect with public life. Delli Carpini (2000) develops this statement by proclaiming that with the internet comes fragmentation, manipulation, consumerism and the dominance of celebrity and showbiz that takes over public life.

METHODOLOGY

To address the above aim, the research used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to look past the ‘sentence boundary’ in the sampled media materials (Fairclough 2003). This allows for deeper exploration of the ways in which youth political participation is represented and a consideration of the potential implications of the media’s representation of it, especially the implications for young people by relating findings to the literature review. Critical discourse analysis allows researchers to look not only at what is *said* in the media

materials selected, but also at what is *meant* by them (Fairclough 1989). It is an empirical tool that prioritises content and its potential meanings more deeply than quantitative content analysis. As CDA focuses on the psychological processes that may be underpinning the content in question, it can greater explore the meanings of texts (Wood et al. 2000). Where this study is limited in scope and size, two articles from *The Guardian* have been analysed in order to achieve an in-depth analysis. Both of the chosen articles directly look to discuss reasons behind youth political disengagement and ways to get youths engaged with politics in the future. The first article calls for politics to be put on the school curriculum and discusses the lack of available and understandable political information available to youths. The second article explores ways to get young people in Britain excited about politics and local elections, discussing the reasons why politically engaged youths aren't at the polling booths.

ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis begins with a comment piece by student Sophie Grubb, who has written a number of articles for *The Guardian* on issues impacting students and young people, including one from 6 September 2014 titled, 'Put politics on the curriculum if you want young people to vote.' In the comment piece, Grubb (2014) argues that schools should "...be the drivers of political engagement, nourishing an interest from a young age" and that they should "serve a civic duty to get pupils excited about less accessible topics." Grubb (2014) demonstrates a real desire to learn more about politics and indicates that politics is not a topic of conversation for her and her friends, echoing the sentiments of Pentland's (2013) participants and the work of Delli Carpini (2000) which highlights that young people simply do not feel informed enough to make decisions about politics from registering to vote to differentiating between political party's manifestos. Grubb (2014), a Cardiff University student studying media, journalism and cultural studies, creates a sense of identification with her 18-24 year old readers by talking about her own political experience - or lack of such experience. Grubb (2014) is relatable to her young readers as she counts herself in as falling "bang in the middle of the UK's least politically active age bracket" and openly admits to not being "interested enough" in the political process. This is echoed by some of the 87 comments under the piece and sparked some debate and discussion amongst readers, including some who identify as young, eligible voters who are not politically active. Media coverage of an issue that is about young people needs young people writing about it. As Mycock and Tonge (2012) stated, too often young people are represented by the middle class, white males that do not reflect their political beliefs and interests. By using a young journalism student to talk about problems facing youth political participation, it gives the article credibility and allows immediately for young people reading this article to engage and connect not only with the author but with the message the author is portraying.

As academic literature highlights, there needs to be a politically informed society in order to have a politically engaged society, but as Pentland (2013) points out explicitly, in order to have a political engaged society, we must have a political *educated* society. Mycock and Tongue (2012) further this notion by claiming that political jargon is too complex for the average young person to understand and this confusion is enough to put young people off getting involved in politics. All this is featured in Grubb's (2014) claims that "the political landscape is complex" and it is a near impossible challenge to teach oneself the "whos, whats, and whys of the main parties." This was a key element of

Pentland's (2013) 'barriers to entry' in politics and political discussion, as political engagement and participation requires accessible and understandable information. Political engagement must come, like the authors (Delli Carpini 2000; Pentland 2013; Mycock et al. 2012; Grubb 2014) suggest, from education.

Meanwhile, Grubb's (2014) comment piece narrowly defines youth political participation to traditional notions, specifically focusing on voting, and has not recognised what an emerging strain in the literature has highlighted in terms of non-conventional political participation. The lack of acknowledgment, in this selected media material of other forms of political participation that youths are taking part in, highlights the need both in academic literature and wider society to define 'political participation' and consider what role non-traditional methods of participation in politics, which research discussed above indicates young people are engaging in.

The second article, published on 12 March 2014 and titled 'How can we get young people excited about local elections?', is part of *The Guardian's* Public Leaders Network, and asked that question to Anthony Zacharzewski, a founder of The Democratic Society, and Richard Berry, a researcher for Democratic Audit at the London School of Economics. The piece is presented as two answers by experts to the same question. Zacharzewski's piece appears first and states that Britain has the largest gap between the oldest and the youngest citizens with only 32% of 18-24 year olds saying they are certain to vote in the next general elections compared to 74% of those 65 and older. Delli Carpini (2000) claims that this is because political parties do not want to devote their resources to 18-24 year olds as this age cohort is far less likely to vote. Meanwhile, that lack of resource toward reaching this younger age group would arguably further disenfranchise these voters. Furthermore, because younger people are less likely to vote, government officials are unlikely to be punished at the next elections and can get away with neglecting young people's interests. As Zacharzewski (2014) states, "the consequence of not voting is that you are ruled by others." The article claims, like in much of the literature, that Britain's young people are more likely to "engage in action to improve their community than anyone else in Europe" (Zacharzewski 2014). It goes on to state that young people *are* participating in politics, they're just not voting. This draws a parallel to Norris's (2003) argument that young people are more likely to get involved with 'cause-oriented' politics shown in the increased participation in localised social activities as well as growing community networks and campaigning (Roker et al. 2002). Zacharzewski's (2014) article calls for a reconnection of politics "back to the community" and if this is done correctly then young people will return to the polling booths. However, Roker et al. (2002) state that young people already *are* present in the community and that more needs to be done at a higher level of politics to include 18-24 year olds in the political process.

Zacharzewski (2014) begins on a pessimistic note using language such as "apathy" and "endemic" to describe youth political participation, which, as stated in the literature review, allows for sweeping generalisations about an age cohort simply on voting patterns. As he goes on, he broadens the sense of political participation to include community action and suggests that to engage young people in traditional forms of political participation – namely voting – that the connection between community and voting needs to be more strongly established. He suggests that it would help to strengthen the sense of voting as a 'civic duty,' which research suggests would mean young people would empower young people to vote.

Berry's (2014) response to the question begins with how low voter turnout costs money – claiming UK taxpayers have spent £222 million administering local elections over the

past 5 years. This startling statistic makes the reader sit up and pay attention, the connotations of 'the taxpayers money' immediately alerts the reader to just how expensive low voter turnout is *for them*. The article, however, makes a positive reference to the uses of online sources for youth political engagement. Both Berry and Zacharzewski cite the internet as a key way to engage young voters. Zacharzewski (2014) refers to 'Bite the Ballot' and 'Rock the Union' as examples of online virtual spaces that are trying to show young people they can have an impact in politics and that they can change the vicious cycle of low voter turnout amongst 18-24 year olds. Berry (2014), on the other hand, talks about the lack of information available, especially as it relates to the local elections. Even still, Berry (2014) sees online sources as the best way to engage younger voters, acknowledging that for this age group – "the least settled group in the population" – will move to a new local authority and so will lose their normal channels for information – community and family. Like much of the literature, the article states that online resources would give better access to information, recognising the lack of understandable and accessible information out there for ordinary people, and identifying that we must utilise the technology we have to better educate the electorate. This notion directly correlates with the literature, and one must also take into account the capabilities we have yet to experience from the internet in uncharted ways.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is often a misconception that the youth of Britain today are not interested in politics – you only have to look on Twitter to see that young people do care about politics and world issues. The importance of political education is a fundamental issue in this debate, without political education we cannot expect to see a fully engaged young generation and an in-depth critical discourse analysis of media texts concludes that without politically educated youths we cannot expect to have a politically engaged youths. Youth alienation from the political process is not surprising when youth oriented policies are being decided by an ageing political elite. Youth political participation must not be generalised only in terms of traditional participation, selected media materials have implicitly pointed to a number of ways in which young people are politically active despite having a low voter turnout and by solely characterising youth political participation on voter turnout leads to generalisations about an entire age group on one aspect of engagement. The combination of more youths seeking to contribute to political argument with positive and encouraging representation of the youth in the media on all aspects of political participation and the partnering of all political parties to get youths onside – youth political engagement could be a political debate of the past.

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