

Digital citizenship opens doors for marginalised

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An Alfred Deakin Institute researcher has uncovered a digital world of civic identity and practice.

Do young people express their citizenship online? Alfred Deakin Institute Research Fellow, Dr Amelia Johns, has co-authored a new book that explores this question and proposes that digital citizenship should be considered in a new way by policy makers.

Dr Johns is currently finalising a research project examining the digital practices of Malaysian-Chinese youth and the role "the digital" plays in political participation, citizenship and belonging in Malaysian society.

"People, young and old, are now deeply engaged in digitally-networked publics, cultures and practices that challenge the existing and dominant way politics and citizenship is thought about," she explained.

"Young people were a focus of the book because they are the standard bearers of what the digital world is going to look like in the future, and, therefore, the shapers of what citizenship online will entail.

"When we started to look closely at the concept of digital citizenship, we realised it was quite a vague term and, in Australia and other countries across the region, creating digital citizens has become a way of monitoring and often curtailing what young people are doing to claim rights and act collectively around politically-contentious issues.

The book "Negotiating Digital Citizenship Control, Contest and Culture" was co-authored with Dr Anthony McCosker (Swinburne University of Technology) and Dr Son Vivienne (Flinders University).

Dr Johns noted that it suggests alternative ways for policy makers to frame digital citizenship.

"Over time digital citizenship in policy has become focused on how we keep the online space civil," she said.

"Much policy activity has therefore focused around schools and promoting positive civil behaviour among young people. However, the online environment is a diverse space with young people engaging in often provocative speech acts and digital cultures to advocate for social change.

"A series of case studies shows a range of groups and situations that demonstrate youth-led digital citizenship.

"While these may be considered productive expressions of social media activity, they can also produce what Belgian political theorist, Chantal Mouffe, would refer to as 'agonistic' political practices that challenge and bring into question the boundaries of civil discourse.

"Young people's engagement with digital cultures and practices, even if they aren't specifically motivated by capital 'P' politics, may also address social and political inequalities through forms of cultural practice.

"This has often been described as 'cultural citizenship'. We draw on these and other concepts and theories of critical citizenship to flesh out how young people are performing digital citizenship.

"We also wanted to understand how [young people](#) in digital communities

structure their identity, and what new articulations of citizenship and belonging might be generated by these 'performed' identities."

Dr Johns explained that this was particularly relevant for minority groups and communities for whom recognition of their identities and rights claims, many of which span nation-states and citizenship status, are often marginalised or missing from national, mainstream public debates.

"What we found was that these groups used the online environment to contest narrow modes of [citizenship](#) that didn't recognise their cultural identities or claims," she said.

"Migrant youth also used the online environment to shape a space for themselves. They negotiated how digital spaces could be used to forge their own identity and voice online, often in contradiction of state policies and forms of recognition. By doing so they came together and shaped a community."

Marginalised groups covered in the book include those in LGBTIQ+ communities, ethnic and religious minority youth, and indigenous and feminist voices, as these were mobilised, ie through #SoBlakAustralia [sic] and controversies such as #GamerGate.

Dr Johns' co-authored chapter focuses on a group of Muslim 'hipsters' in the US – #MIPSTERZ— who used social media to connect with like-minded people, discuss politically-relevant topics (in addition to a range of other cultural, religious, pop cultural and lifestyle orientation topics) and to redefine how Muslims were represented in the broader public sphere, where they were often reduced to the category of 'problem citizen'.

The group used a range of online platforms including Facebook, Instagram and web forums to provide support for other young Muslims

struggling with the broader social and marginalising public debate.

"The digital space they have created gives them a place where they are able to negotiate their own ideas of safety and free speech, and to express their diversity in ways that challenge the reductive views of Muslim youth presented in the dominant public sphere," she said.

"These online discussions were critical of, but also contributed to, broader democratic processes.

"They enabled these youth to start to take charge of how they are represented, but not without 'democratic' processes of internal contestation and conflict."

More information: Abbas Rattani et al. Collaborative Partnerships and Gatekeepers in Online Research Recruitment, *The American Journal of Bioethics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/15265161.2016.1274800](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2016.1274800)

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