



Executive Summary

Digital media – and the Internet in particular – have fallen short as both a destroyer and saviour of civic life. Asking what effect any medium has had on civic engagement is a chicken and egg question; the truth is that people design technology to meet their needs and that technology in turn shapes people’s habits. Nonetheless, given that young people are the most avid users of digital media throughout their daily lives, we can also expect that digital media will be central to their civic lives. As well, civic organizations are so deeply enmeshed in the online world that basic participation now requires a certain amount of digital literacy. With civic life rapidly digitizing, a crucial component of teaching students the skills to engage as competent civic actors is teaching them how to engage in virtual spaces persuasively, critically, collectively, and before invisible audiences. Even children who have grown up in a world where the Internet has always existed do not have these requisite skills “built-in”: their affinity needs instruction, refinement and polishing for them to be truly effective in the civic arena.

This brief, prepared by Media Awareness Network, focuses on the impact of media – especially interactive technology – on civic and political engagement for children and youth. We consider the following questions which have come to the forefront of research, education, and politics: are media a distraction from civic and political life, or can media enhance young people’s involvement? What forms (television, e-mail, instant messaging, social networking systems, World-Wide Web, etc.) and uses (information, entertainment, socializing, etc.) of media engender which effects? Most importantly, since civic and political bodies are racing to establish a presence online and a great many civic and political actions now occur in virtual spaces, we wish to consider the importance of digital literacy skills development as a means for children and youth to be competent and engaged civic and political actors at all ages.