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Civic laboratories: youth political expression in anonymous, ephemeral, geo-bounded social media

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ABSTRACT
While political expression is theoretically important for young citizens, research finds that young people approach expression on dominant social media (e.g., Facebook) with trepidation and uncertainty. What might a social media that facilitates youth political expression look like? We address this question by examining young people’s experiences with the mobile social media Yik Yak, whose affordances (i.e., anonymity, geo-boundedness, ephemerality) offer a theoretically beneficial infrastructure for political expression. Using in-depth interviews conducted during the 2016 US election, we find that Yik Yak’s affordances allowed users to assess the opinions of their peers, experiment with political expression and articulate their political voices. Participants also raised concerns over whether political talk on social media like Yik Yak could result in substantive dialogue or meaningful change. Based on our findings, we propose the concept of civic laboratories, which are social media that maximize opportunities for experimentation with political expression, while minimizing social risk.

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As young people in the late-modern era seek their place in political life, they must traverse a rapidly changing media ecosystem with an often fuzzy sense of how to play their part as citizens (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Thorson, 2014). Theorists argue that in an era of social disruption, political self-expression has become an important way for young citizens to make sense of their personal relationship with the political sphere (Bennett, Wells, & Free-lon, 2011; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Zuckerman, 2014). Consequently, social media, which offer rich environments for creative self-expression, have become important spaces for youth to express and explore their political selves (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). This has led some to argue that the expressive affordances of social media can bring seemingly dis-affected young people into the political process (e.g., Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014), or even reinvent ‘participation’ itself (Zuckerman, 2014).

In the US context, research has also highlighted the profound challenges that young people face when seeking a political voice on social media. Political expression on
dominant sites such as Facebook is often viewed as unpleasant and socially risky (Thorson, 2013; Thorson, Vraga, & Kliger-Vilenchik, 2014). Rather than offering new pathways to citizenship, social media can push young Americans further away from opportunities to explore their political identities (Weinstein, 2014). It is easy to conclude that, despite hopes that social media might stimulate youth citizenship, such spaces may in some cases reinforce political apathy and cynicism.

How are we to reconcile the tension between the theoretical importance of youth political expression and the difficulty that young people report in engaging with politics on social media? One approach is to take a closer look at how the affordances of social media shape opportunities for young people to express themselves. In doing so, we might ask; what would a social media that facilitates youth political expression look like? We adopt this perspective in the current study, in order advance current theory on the role social media plays in the political lives of a new generation of citizens. Our study examines Yik Yak, a mobile social media app that operated from 2013 to 2017. Through a series of in-depth interviews conducted during the 2016 US national election cycle, we explore how the app’s affordances of anonymity, ephemerality and geo-boundedness presented unique possibilities and challenges for political expression. The experiences of our participants during this politically consequential period suggest that political talk can arise from within the sociability of college life and that Yik Yak’s affordances created an infrastructure that supported experimentation with political expression. Simultaneously, Yik Yak introduced new challenges for those desiring to engage in deeper dialogue or create tangible change. Ultimately, our findings shed light on a different type of online context for political expression than those examined by previous literature and suggests a new theoretical approach for studying youth political expression on social media.

**Theorizing youth political expression for young citizens**

As we have noted, social media often create contexts that pose challenges for young people who want to express themselves politically (Thorson, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). Scholars have argued that the structure and design of media technologies fundamentally shape the nature of political talk (e.g., Stromer-Galley, Bryant, & Bimber, 2015; Wright & Street, 2007). Research in this area has specifically highlighted the role that affordances play in shaping the dynamics of political expression on social media (e.g., Weinstein, 2014). The term ‘affordances’ describes the action possibilities that arise from the relationship between an environment and its inhabitants (Gibson, 1979). In the context of social media, the design of a given site interacts with individual users, ‘affording’ them the ability to take different actions and in turn shaping their experiences (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In a sense, the barriers to youth political expression on social media are partially attributable to the affordances offered by dominant sites. For example, Facebook has a specific set of affordances (e.g., social observability, persistence) that allow users to build and maintain relationships. While these affordances are arguably quite useful for socializing, they create contexts in which young people avoid political expression out of uncertainty over how they will be perceived (Thorson, 2013; Thorson et al., 2014).

A challenge in the present research is identifying a theoretical framework for analyzing which affordances might better facilitate youth political expression. Evans, Pearce, Vitak,
and Treem (2017) emphasize that affordances emerge from the interaction between the design of the technology and the user. Therefore, we first attempt to more precisely define how young people (the users) are oriented toward political expression, before examining which affordances might meet their expressive needs. Existing theory suggests that young people desire political expression that is (1) identity focused, (2) compatible with other online identities, and (3) able to afford them a political voice.

First, citizenship scholars argue that recent generations seek a highly personalized relationship with politics (e.g., Bennett et al., 2011). Because contemporary youth have grown up with weaker ties to the groups and institutions that have helped previous generations navigate political life (e.g., religious groups, political parties) (France, 2007), they are largely forced to invent their own political identities (Giddens, 1991; Wells, 2015). Political self-expression is one important way young people craft their political selves (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Second, because many crucial parts of youth social life occur online, young people must carefully manage multiple online identities (Buckingham, 2008). Many are unwilling to engage in political expression if they perceive it will negatively affect their online self-presentation (Thorson, 2013). Therefore, political expression needs be compatible with young people’s performance of other online identities. Finally, research suggests that young people may engage in political expression as a means of gaining a political voice (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Such a voice can serve to both exert influence over the political process and to express more symbolic forms of dissent or agency (Allen & Light, 2015). Research on youth political voice repositions expression from simply a component of political speech to a valued participatory action unto itself. For some young people, having such a voice is the most important purpose of political expression (Weinstein, 2014).

Online communication infrastructures for youth political expression

We next consider which social media affordances might create a context conducive to the type of meaningful self-expression reviewed above. Here, online communication infrastructure theory (Thorson, Xu, & Edgerly, 2017) offers a useful approach. Thorson et al. (2017) define online communication infrastructures (OCI) as, ‘largely invisible systems that facilitate flows of content among individuals, news media, politicians, and other communicating actors’ (p. 3). Such systems allow users to gather political information, express political views and nurture their interest in politics. Just as the physical infrastructure of a neighborhood determines the extent to which neighbors can share stories with each other and engage in their community (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006), the affordances of social media interact to shape the possibilities for political expression.

We argue that, in addition to other influencing forces (e.g., user actions, algorithms) (Thorson et al., 2017), OCI are shaped by the architecture of social media platforms. The mix of affordances on social media should create infrastructures that differentially facilitate young people’s engagement in the types of expression that are meaningful to them. In the next section, we review three key affordances (anonymity, ephemerality and geo-boundedness) that previous research suggests may help create OCI that encourage political expression with the qualities we have outlined in the previous section (i.e., identity related, compatible with other online identities, affording a political voice).
Affordances enabling youth political expression

Anonymity

Previous research has identified the complexity of online self-presentation as a key factor in young people’s avoidance of political expression on social media (Thorson, 2013; Weinsten, 2014). Thorson (2013) argues that the complex social environment on Facebook heightens a sense of ‘social groundlessness’ (Warren, 1996) or ambiguity about the etiquette and consequences of political expression. For example, on Facebook, a young person must consider how their political posts will be received by a network that contains their socialist childhood best friend, their conservative great aunt and their potential employer. This phenomena, often referred to as ‘context collapse’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011), makes political expression potentially threatening to young people’s developing political identities (Ekström, 2016). Fundamentally, such identity management issues are a result of users being identifiable.

On the other hand, research suggests that self-presentation concerns are likely to be reduced when users’ actions are not tied to a fixed identity. Under conditions of anonymity, users may become ‘dissinhibited’ and more willing to express themselves honestly and openly (Suler, 2004). Anonymous users experience greater freedom to shape and express their online identities (Tanis & Postmes, 2007). At the same time, anonymity can lead individuals to flout social norms that govern polite or civil conversation (Suler, 2004) and degrade the quality of political discourse (Rowe, 2015).

Despite these mixed effects of anonymity, there is evidence that young people have used anonymous social media to ameliorate self-presentation concerns. For example, Ellison, Blackwell, Lampe, and Trieu (2016) find that young people use anonymity on the site Ask.fm to pose sensitive questions without fear of social sanction. The reviewed research suggests that anonymity might allow young people to engage in identity focused expression without risking other online identities.

Ephemerality

Expression on sites like Facebook is stored indefinitely and may become part of a user’s persistent online identity. As a result, young people may be less likely to engage in the sort of expressive experimentation they value, for fear that it will negatively affect their future self-presentation (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Thorson, 2013). Increasingly, young people have dealt with self-presentation concerns by turning to ephemeral social media, which are explicitly designed to make communication accessible for a short, finite period (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2015). Bayer and colleagues argue that young people are drawn to ephemeral social media, because of reduced self-presentation and surveillance concerns. While there is little empirical work on ephemerality and political expression, studies demonstrate that ephemerality can facilitate self-expression in social contexts (Waddell, 2016; Xu, Chang, Welker, Bazarova, & Cosley, 2016). Bayer and colleagues find that the ephemerality of the mobile app Snapchat allows young people to engage in a wide range of self-expression within their peer groups. This work suggests ephemerality might be another affordance that helps young people engage in meaningful political expression without endangering other online identities.
**Geo-boundedness**

While the internet is often lauded for its ability to facilitate communication globally, it has long played an important role in facilitating communication between individuals in close proximity to each other (Schlesinger et al., 2017). Geo-bounded online communities, which constrain membership to users within specific geographic bounds (e.g., Yik Yak), can enable the formation of community identities and facilitate local knowledge sharing (Schlesinger et al., 2017; Tripodi, 2016). Studies examining the role of ‘place’ markers on platforms such as Twitter suggest that activists who use social media to organize action in a specific geographic location (e.g., Tehran Square) create new types of discursive communities within their broader networks (Hemsley & Eckert, 2014). Contributors to Allen and Light’s (2015) collection of scholarship on voice in digital citizenship suggest that voice often originates from within discrete communities (e.g., cultural, ethnic, interest-based). Geo-bounded social media create similar communities that share a set of local cultural understandings (Tripodi, 2016). Therefore, geo-boundedness may serve to enhance young people’s ability to achieve a meaningful political voice, by creating local peer communities.

**The present research**

The present research examines how the affordances reviewed above might create the type of online communication infrastructures (OCI) that should theoretically facilitate youth political expression. In doing so, we are guided by the following research question: How do young people experience political expression in OCI shaped by the affordances of anonymity, ephemerality and geo-boundedness? This question was generated during our examination of the mobile social media app Yik Yak as a site of study. Yik Yak launched in 2013 as a location-based anonymous ‘Twitter,’ which attempted to ‘capture the experience of college on campus’ (Smerch, 2014). Yik Yak offered the kind of social (i.e., non-political) space, which previous research suggests might be particularly fertile ground for political talk (e.g., Wright, 2012). Wright, Graham, and Jackson (2016) use the term ‘third spaces,’ to describe such everyday online communities where political talk arises organically and informally.

In addition to its potential as a third space, Yik Yak had all three of the affordances we have identified as theoretically consequential for youth political expression (anonymity, ephemerality and geo-boundedness). Posts of a maximum of 200 words (also known as ‘yaks’) were anonymous, visible for a limited amount of time, and created exclusively by users within a several-mile radius. In addition, the app’s social signaling features allowed users to up and down-vote each yak, which then determined the order in which posts were visible. Users could also respond directly and anonymously to individual yaks. These capabilities further expanded the ways users could express themselves.

Within two years of its founding, the app had 3.6 million active monthly users, 98% of whom were college students between the ages of 18 and 25 (Yik Yak | Crunchbase, 2016). While the app was popularly portrayed as a tool for bullying and racial harassment (Smerch, 2014), it was used by millions of young people to communicate about everyday life on campus (e.g., sex, greek life, pop culture; Black, Mezzina, & Thompson, 2016), as well as more serious issues relating to mental health (Koratana, Dredze, Chisolm, Johnson,
& Paul, 2016). By 2015, Yik Yak’s user base began to decline and eventually it shut down in 2017. Despite its commercial failure, Yik Yak offers a unique context in which to examine youth political expression. In studying Yik Yak, our goal was not to test any specific theoretical proposition, but to allow the experiences of individual users to inform our broader conceptual understanding of how anonymity, ephemerality and geo-boundedness shape youth political expression.

Method

Data for this study comes from 20 semi-structured interviews with Yik Yak users who attended a large, public, mid-western university. Given that our goal was to examine the experiences of individual users on a specific campus, our methodological choices were made using validity and reliability as quality criterion (Bleich & Pekkanen, 2015). Definitions of ‘youth’ vary in the literature, with individuals from 14 to 34 variously considered as part of this group. Consistent with similar studies of youth political expression (e.g., Thorson, 2013), we focused on voting-age young people, 18–22. A purposive sampling frame was adopted to ensure a sample that included a mix of political and non-political users. Participants were recruited using an undergraduate research pool, direct recruitment through Yik Yak and snowball sampling. Our sample contained a roughly equal number of males (n = 9, 45%) and females (n = 11, 55%). Participants identified as White (n = 15, 75%), Asian American (n = 2, 10%), Arab American (n = 2, 10%) and African-American (n = 1, 5%).2 Pseudonyms are used throughout our analysis to preserve participant anonymity.

Interviews were conducted by the first author in a casual campus setting between January 2016 and September 2017, covering the period prior to and following the 2016 national election. This allowed us to examine political expression during a time when politics was a highly salient topic for many students. The interview guide was structured around our research question and the affordances of interest. During each interview, we showed participants screenshots of sample political yaks to provide concrete examples for discussion. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio recorded. In addition, field notes were taken during interviews and interview memos were created after the conclusion of each interview. Data were analyzed using a modified-grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), framed by theory, but privileging themes emerging from participant data. During an initial open coding phase, basic codes were assigned to segments of data using a spreadsheet and recursively sorted into broader categories that reflected consistencies and differences between participant accounts. Ultimately, themes were identified and validated against existing theory and a secondary review of the transcripts. Additional methodological detail is provided in the supplemental Interview Methods Appendix (see Bleich & Pekkanen, 2015).

Findings

Several key themes emerged from our analysis. Yik Yak’s affordances allowed users to (1) assess peer opinions, (2) experiment with political expression and (3) articulate their political voice. After providing an overview of participants’ general experiences with the app, we report findings related to each of these themes and conclude by examining participants’ reflections on Yik Yak as a ‘productive’ space for politics.
‘That is so Yik Yak’: using the platform

‘I just wanted to stay in the loop … I guess that’s why I got it.’ Jenny’s (Female, 19) introduction to Yik Yak captures the special place it held in the communicative ecosystem of the campus we studied. While participants’ high school experiences with Yik Yak were dominated by gossip and cyber-bullying, many describe the app as a key source of diverse information about college life (see Tripodi, 2016). Interaction on the app was defined by (1) its relevance to daily college life, (2) its focus on humor, and (3) its raw, truthful quality.

For many, a key appeal of Yik Yak was that its content was ‘relevant’ to them. This was reflected in the topics participants recall seeing on Yik Yak, including the daily weather, collective anxiety over an Econ 101 exam, insults toward football rivals, and mental health (see Koratana et al., 2016). Political posts were similarly evaluated for personal relevance, with participants expressing disdain for political talk that felt distant or ‘too political.’ For example, Shelley (Female, 19) recalls a yak reading: ‘you know you made a mistake when your ex-boyfriend goes to [RIVAL UNIVERSITY] and is a Trump supporter.’ This resonated with Shelley, because it described her roommate’s exact situation and tapped into specific local knowledge about the political climate on campus that made the post feel relevant to her.

Most participants used the app as a source of humorous entertainment to fill gaps between classes and to ‘avoid real life.’ Posts had to be funny and not ‘too serious.’ As Jenny (Female, 19) puts it, ‘Facebook is very formal and so you have to like speak formally on Facebook […] on Yik Yak you know that you don’t have to be formal.’ Political yaks were often similarly tinged with humor and sarcasm, which helped fold politics into the broader flow of social talk. As Jenny explains, ‘if it’s just a stated opinion, people might take it harshly … if it’s mask[ed] with humor, usually you can get away with it.’

While users discouraged overly sexual or blatantly nonsensical content (via down-votes), expression on Yik Yak was perceived as much more ‘honest’ and ‘free’ than conversations elsewhere on campus (see Tripodi, 2016). When showing Mindy (Female, 19) a sarcastic yak about the lack of political tolerance on campus, she chuckles, explaining, ‘That is like so Yik Yak to me! … They’re talking about something serious, but they just put this spin on it … so like inappropriate.’ Like others, Mindy used Yik Yak precisely because she enjoyed the adult-free atmosphere, where inappropriateness signaled authenticity. As we will see, this raw and truthful nature of the app was not viewed positively among all participants, particularly those who felt marginalized on campus (e.g., African-American, conservative and transgender students). Nonetheless, the broad consensus among participants was summed up by Jasmine (Female, 19): ‘It definitely creates that space where you feel like you can like say anything.’

These defining characteristics of Yik Yak (humor, relevance, truthfulness) were linked by participants to the platform’s affordances of geo-boundedness and anonymity, which grounded talk in the local and allowed for free expression that was delightfully (or dangerously) truthful. This picture aligns with theoretical accounts of third spaces, where political talk arises in online venues that are personalized (i.e., identity focused), sociable (i.e., humorous) and inclusive (i.e., users can express themselves truthfully) (Wright, 2012; Wright et al., 2016).

‘The Beat of Campus’: assessing the opinion environment

Politics and social issues appear to have been a small, but consistent topic of conversation on Yik Yak, with almost all participants recalling such content. Mindy (Female, 19),
disliked political yaks, declaring ‘Stop! No one cares … like … this isn’t the place for that.’ Some expressed similar annoyance with ‘serious’ content intruding on a ‘free’ and ‘entertaining’ space. However, others felt that Yik Yak provided a rare window into the opinions of their classmates. As Jasmine (Female, 19) puts it, ‘I think it’s just cool to see like … the beat of campus … I think Yik Yak does a good job of like capturing that.’ Jenny (Female, 19) concurs: ‘With political conversations, [users] can see what kids their age are talking about these days.’

Participants uniformly described campus as a politically polarized place in which talking about politics and social issues was fraught and difficult. At the time of our study, the 2016 election was in full swing and, as on many college campuses, there was controversy over issues surrounding student partisan political speech, trigger warnings and safe spaces (Hartocollis, 2016). In the absence of open discussion of politics in other contexts during this period, the affordances of Yik Yak allowed participants to assess the opinion climate in two unique ways.

First, Yik Yak offered an accessible snapshot of opinions on campus. Omar (Male, 21) explained that the social signaling features of the app (in the form of up-votes) allowed users to ‘gauge how people felt on a certain issue.’ Up-votes served as a heuristic that contextualized posts and allowed for quick assessment of the popularity of different ideas. Although some political posts challenged or even offended participants, many felt that Yik Yak’s anonymity, allowed ‘people … to share their frank thoughts’ (Omar – Male, 21), more so than in other campus settings. For participants, this authenticity felt particularly useful in a local context where honest exchanges of political views face-to-face were perceived as risky and rare.

Second, Yik Yak provided a space for students to compare their political views to those of their classmates. For Rebecca (Female, 21), a transgender participant, Yik Yak showed that campus was, ‘not as liberal as I would have thought.’ Conversely, Omar (Male 21) said Yik Yak’s ‘liberal skew’ offered confirmation that he and his fellow conservatives were a silenced political minority on campus. Mindy (Female, 19) also used Yik Yak to confirm her opinions: ‘you think that you’re alone in [your] thinking … and then you go and see 192 other people feel the same way!’ Like others, Jeremy (Male, 20) appreciated the diversity of views he encountered on Yik Yak: ‘It was the only place that I could view more than one side of the coin.’

These experiences suggest that Yik Yak’s affordances created a unique opportunity for participants to learn about the political views of their peers. Anonymity made many posts feel authentic or honest, while ephemerality created a streamlined flow of information that allowed for quick and easy evaluation of the opinion environment. Crucially, the geoboundedness of Yik Yak made the opinions expressed on the app meaningful, because users understood them as reflective of a community to which they belonged.

The sandbox: experimenting with political expression

Many participants did not post about politics, because they either labeled themselves as ‘not political’ (Thorson, 2013, 2014) or saw the app as an ‘escape from the organized chaos of the everyday life’ (Ned – Male, 18), where politics had no place. Those who did engage in political expression on Yik Yak often described their purpose as ‘mostly for the competition between friends as to who could get the highest [upvotes] … it’s
like a game’ (Jenny – Female, 19). The perception that Yik Yak was ‘like a game’ often encouraged provocative or humorous political posts such as Jeremy’s (Male, 20): ‘Look at China they have hardly any Mexicans and they built a wall.’ While Jeremy explains that his goal was to be funny and get up-votes, posts like his often blurred into the more purposeful endeavor of testing the political waters.

Several social justice-minded participants, such as Rebecca (Female, 21), told us the goal of their posts was to explicitly ‘educate’ or ‘inform’ their peers. However, many participants described using the anonymity and ephemerality of posts on Yik Yak to simply experiment with political expression. Derrick (Male, 19) explains that on Facebook, he avoids politics because he does not ‘want to strain friendships if people disagree.’ In contrast, Yik Yak felt to Susan (Female, 19) like, ‘a space where you feel like you’re not judged … or like you shouldn’t have to suppress your opinions.’ For Sarah (Female, 19), the freedom of Yik Yak allowed her to ‘practice’ expressing her political ideas:

[Freshman year] you’re just starting to educate yourself. It’s hard to have, like, a political conversation. This is kind of embarrassing, but I feel like I would just use [Yik Yak] to scope out how people would react.

Without fixed identities or reputations to maintain, participants like Sarah could test out how different ideas or rhetorical techniques went over with their peers. Sarah’s political expression on Yik Yak allowed her to accrue enough confidence to eventually engage in more ‘risky’ political conversations on Facebook.

Yik Yak provided instant feedback about expression in the form of up-votes and down-votes. This engendered the type of playful, exploratory political expression that Ned (Male, 18) describes: ‘I was like, “All right I’ll post something about a political figure, but without like giving away any real like political opinions and see what happens …” it actually, like, led to some like pretty insightful discussions.’ This ‘see what happens’ mentality seems to have been facilitated by the ephemeral nature of posts, which sped up the flow of information and prompted users to post impulsively. As Shaun (Male, 18) explains, ‘people just write whatever comes to their mind at first, without thinking about the consequences or about the reactions.’ Ephemerality seems to have helped bypass the mental defenses that may have inhibited expression in other contexts.

The experimental nature of political expression on Yik Yak is evocative of Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison’s (2009) notion of ‘play,’ in which problem solving is achieved by experimental interaction with one’s environment. On Yik Yak, anonymity and ephemerality created an environment where such a playful approach helped young people meet the real goal of rehearsing and refining their political ideas.

Yet, Susan (Female, 19) felt the experimental nature of Yik Yak limited the impact of expression.

Yik Yak is like a little brainstorming sort of environment, where you can just like spew ideas into this space, but I feel like if I actually wanted to get support and get people involved … I would make like a huge Facebook post.

As we will discuss later, the value participants saw in an experimental space for political expression was tempered by concern over Yik Yak’s ability to facilitate sustained and meaningful political conversation.
'I wanted my voice to be heard': actualizing identities

While some participants were cynical about the possibility of ‘productive’ political talk on Yik Yak, many felt the app created a space where they could achieve a political voice. Kayla (Female, 19), explains that her whole reason for joining Yik Yak was, ‘because I wanted my voice to be heard.’ Despite the theoretical importance of voice for young people (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017), many participants felt voiceless elsewhere on campus or online. Participants who used the framework of voice to understand their participation were those who experimented the most with political expression on Yik Yak. The app allowed these participants to (1) express socio-political identities that were socially unacceptable elsewhere, (2) seek out and confront identity threats, and (3) experiment with different identities.

Expressing socially unacceptable identities

As predicted by spiral of silence theory, several participants who identified themselves as conservatives avoided expressing their political views on campus for fear of social conflict or isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). These participants felt that Yik Yak normalized their minority political views and provided them with a tool to speak out against a repressive liberal political culture. As Jeremy (Male, 20) puts it,

I [previously] recognized that this was a liberal campus or whatever ... whereas on Yik Yak I realized there are those few other people that kind of share what I view, because they are more outspoken.

The normalization of conservative views on Yik Yak encouraged conservative users to express opinions on race, religion, guns and the presidential election, which were controversial in other campus contexts. As Omar (Male, 21), an outspoken conservative explains: ‘There is less of a consequence for having an unpopular opinion on Yik Yak.’ For Omar, posts on Yik Yak still skewed liberal views, but his ability to comment on others’ posts without fear of social punishment allowed him to, in his words, ‘break the echo chamber at the university.’ Conservative students saw Yik Yak as a space where their political identities were legitimized and reinforced.

Confronting identity threats

Kayla (Female, 19), an African-American student, characterized Yik Yak as a space where racist views were common. ‘It really opened my eyes to what people think ... it’s scary that people actually think that way.’ At the same time, she also valued having such views out in the open where she could confront them. She emphasized that she would challenge bigotry in any context, but that Yik Yak gave her explicit evidence of the racism she had experienced implicitly on campus. ‘It helped me understand their way of thinking,’ she explains. Yik Yak made views that threatened Kayla’s identity visible, but it also provided her with a way to confront and challenge them. She began commenting on posts she felt were racist or that conflicted with her political views. Other participants similarly valued the ability to see how their political adversaries felt, if only because it helped them formulate better arguments for defending themselves. As Omar puts it, ‘if you’ve never been challenged in your opinions you’re never learning to respond in a way that actually produces ... a cogent argument.’ Ultimately, Yik Yak became a training ground for community-based identity conflict, where threats could be publicly viewed and challenged. Without having
to manage their impressions, users like Kayla and Omar could engage in the sort of contentious political discussion young people often avoid on other social media.

Experimenting with different identities
Implicit in many of our interviews was the acknowledgment that a great deal of effort went into maintaining participants’ identities in online settings. For Rebecca (Female, 21), the transgender student quoted earlier, Yik Yak offered something unique in terms of managing her identities and exploring her political self.

Rebecca used Yik Yak to speak out about her transition and educate people about issues affecting her community. She repeatedly told us she was averse to politics, yet described a pattern of expression that appeared quite social justice-oriented. In narrating her use of Twitter, Rebecca describes creating multiple accounts so her public identity as a video game enthusiast did not interfere with her private identity as a trans person. Strikingly, Yik Yak seemed to offer Rebecca the freedom to switch back and forth fluidly between identities and experiment with them publicly. In explaining who she ‘is on Yik Yak,’ she says, ‘I am the Pokémon playing girl. I am the trans girl … and I am one of those suicidal people.’ This multiplicity of identity in a single public space seemed to embolden her to talk more openly about trans issues and accentuated the activist nature of her expression. In one notable Yik Yak post, Rebecca offered to answer any question from the community about what it is like being transgender. She describes a largely curious and positive response:

They asked everything from … my genitals … to what bathroom I use. How long I’ve been on hormones … It made me feel good that people were receptive to the trans community. They were asking questions and learning from what I had to say.

By offering to honestly answer her peers’ questions about her identity, she felt she was playing her role as an educator. In describing another post designed to raise awareness about a recent uptick in the murder of trans women, Rebecca’s expression related to her private journey of transitioning took on a more activist tone. The geo-boundedness of Yik Yak provided her with a context in which her experimentation with political voice was both possible and meaningful: ‘You get more reward doing education with local people, because you interact with them every day.’

Our interviews suggest that one reason that young people struggle to develop and express their political identities is that they so frequently come into conflict with other identities. To have both political and non-political identities in the same space requires complex management. As opposed to the bifurcation of identity that occurred on other platforms, Yik Yak created a space where several of Rebecca’s identities could be co-present and locally understood.

Voice as impact
In some cases, the potential to have one’s voice heard was offered as a counter-balance to the lack of reasoned deliberation on Yik Yak. Expression was imagined as both an individual and collective good, not for its dialogic quality, but because having a voice was a right. What emerged was a novel understanding of political talk, in which individual voices are understood collectively. Brian (Male, 20) captures this with the image of a forum:
It’s hard to gather 20,000 undergrads together in a forum to talk about things. Yik Yak provides a seamless place where people can talk and actually get their voice out there instead of standing up in an auditorium saying, ‘I believe this and I believe that,’ because that’s not an efficient way to hear everyone’s opinions.

For Brian, the goal is not to debate or to persuade, but to be heard. In grappling with the reality that a 20,000-person conversation would be ‘inefficient,’ he suggests that individual voices can add up to something bigger. This echoes Susan’s notion of a ‘collective brainstorm’ (see p. 18), as well as theoretical accounts of public life in a networked society that imagine the collective as a network of individuals (Wells, 2015). Ultimately, Yik Yak’s affordances created an infrastructure in which individual youth voices were able to evoke a sense of collective agency and influence (Allen & Light, 2015).

A productive space for politics?

As we have shown, Yik Yak offered some participants a unique window into their classmates’ opinions and allowed others to experiment with expression and exercise their political voice. However, when asked if Yik Yak was a productive space for politics, many participants remained skeptical. As Michael (Male, 19) puts it: ‘I guess [Yik Yak] is a safe way to voice your opinion, but that doesn’t really lead to anything. It’s just some anonymous app.’ These comments are indicative of a loose consensus among participants that the same affordances that made Yik Yak a good tool for political expression could also make political dialog feel fractured, confusing or futile. As Derrick (Male, 19) tells us, ‘you don’t know who’s looking or watching or listening, but you’re just kind of shouting into this abyss of whoever’s there … somebody might shout back … ‘ Anonymity was dislocating and disorienting for participants, creating a lingering uncertainty that sometimes made posts less trustworthy or useful (see Rowe, 2015). The rapid pace at which posts appeared and disappeared discouraged sustained engagement in complex issues. As Susan (Female, 19) complained, ‘If I want to show the world a really strong opinion of mine, that I really believe … I want it to last.’ Ultimately, a tension remained between the app’s ability to offer some users a political voice and user perceptions that such voices on Yik Yak could never exert meaningful influence.

Discussion

The experiences of our participants demonstrate that the affordances found on Yik Yak produced a unique context for political expression. Our findings suggest that the app offered an online communication infrastructure (OCI) that met three needs suggested by theorists as important to young citizens. First, it allowed users to express political ideas that were identity focused, by creating an online audience of their peers and prioritizing topics relevant to their experiences (Bennett et al., 2011; Cohen & Kahne, 2012). Second, it minimized the social cost of expression, as well as the fear that expression would become a permanent part of users’ online identities (Thorson, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). Finally, it offered those who felt voiceless elsewhere on campus a meaningful political voice (Allen & Light, 2015; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017).

Given participants’ concerns about the efficacy of political talk on Yik Yak, we do not conclude that Yik Yak somehow increased the quantity or quality of political
communication among youth. Rather, our data suggest a distinct, under-theorized type of OCI for experimental youth political expression. To better frame our findings, we propose the concept of civic laboratories to describe an ideal type of OCI, which provides young people a level of flexibility and freedom to experiment with political expression.

Conceptually, civic laboratories stand distinct from OCI traditionally found on social media such as Facebook in at least three ways. First, they create flows of communication that are easy to access, simple to evaluate and locally relevant. Second, they are far more responsive to the expressive needs of young citizens, in that they provide means of experimenting with expression without risking other online identities. Third, they provide a space where youth can exercise a meaningful political voice among peers. Each of these qualities of civic laboratories should facilitate the kinds of flexible and creative self-expression that scholars of youth participatory culture argue connect young people to civic life (Jenkins et al., 2009; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Further, such environments may serve as important third spaces for young people, where political expression can arise organically, without adverse consequences for other online identities (Thorson, 2013; Wright, 2012).

Our study also shows that the above advantages of civic laboratories may make them less deliberative than other OCI. By removing the social information that can make expression costly, anonymous and ephemeral social media like Yik Yak can limit genuine give and take of ideas. Geo-boundedness may accentuate partisan biases accumulated from the local environment and lead to a new variety of opinion insularity. While civic laboratories may reduce the type of ‘social groundlessness’ found on Facebook, our findings suggest that they can also introduce new uncertainties over the efficacy of political talk in such environments. More work is needed to unpack the tradeoff present in OCI that cultivate opportunities for political voice, while simultaneously weakening the perceived influence of that voice.

Ultimately, the concept of civic laboratories serves to problematize our understanding of how young people think about political expression in the context of citizenship. While our participants clearly value the expressive power of Yik Yak, they also believe that a reasoned exchange of ideas is an important goal - one that may be unattainable through app. This tension between experimentation and deliberation highlights the complex mix of new and old citizenship norms young people hold. This echoes Thorson’s (2014) contention that we are in an era of ‘do-it-yourself’ citizenship, where young people must cobble together their own understanding of what it means to be political. It is in this regard that civic laboratories are most worthy of further study. If young people’s first task is to make sense of the many civic options available, then perhaps spaces for experimentation are equally as valuable as spaces for deliberation or learning.

Our findings suggest that anonymity, ephemerality and geo-boundedness are all affordances that can contribute to the creation of civic laboratories. By examining political expression on other social media, with distinct architectures (e.g., Nextdoor, Whisper, Snapchat), researchers can better clarify which affordances are most important to the creation of civic laboratories. Future research should also explore possible expression effects and identity development processes that occur within civic laboratories and clarify the potential negative consequences of online environments that are more expressive than deliberative.

Although Yik Yak is no longer operational, it does reveal a strikingly different social media context for youth political expression than those examined by previous studies.
Research should continue to explore online spaces where political talk is likely to emerge from the sociability of everyday youth life (Wright, 2012). In doing so, the concept of civic laboratories may serve as a useful means of connecting theory on youth citizenship with the architectures of social media. The affordances we examine here will surely endure as social media evolve and are likely to offer new possibilities and challenges for young people as they seek to express and explore their political selves.

Notes

1. During our research, Yik Yak changed how anonymity was established several times. Most of our data come from participants’ experiences during the period in which users’ identities were cued simply by a random icon and an optional handle.
2. While Whites make up the majority of the university population we sampled from, we note that they are further over-represented in our sample. Given the anonymity of Yik Yak, we are unable to determine whether the racial/ethnic makeup of our sample is reflective of Yik Yak’s user base or our sampling strategy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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