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# **Confident, Capable and World Changing: Teenagers and Digital Citizenship**

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# **Confident, Capable and World Changing: Teenagers and Digital Citizenship**

Around the world policy makers are exploring the kinds of skills and competencies that teenagers need to have to contribute to society as digital citizens. Based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child framework, this paper explores the competencies already demonstrated by many of today's adolescents and addresses the priorities identified by policymakers. This compares and contrasts the top-down conception of blueprints for digital citizenship with the active performance of citizenship in digital spaces produced by so many young people.

Drawing upon examples of small-scale teenage activism, and linking these to the big questions of our age: climate change, gender equity, gun control, and social justice, the paper moves beyond discussions of tech-addiction and online passivity to an investigation of adolescents' strategic employment of digital resources to share their vision for a more equitable future.

This paper is based upon a Keynote for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) Annual Conference delivered in the House of Representatives Chamber, the Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House, 4 July 2019.

Keywords: teenagers, digital citizenship, policy, activism, convention on the rights of the child

Subject classification codes: 2001, 2002

## **Background**

As part of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Australian New Zealand Communication Association, I am taking the opportunity to look back over the past 30 years of young people's digital engagement, and using that reflection to offer some hope for the future, focussing particularly on the period between now and 2030. We find ourselves at a tipping point of a global discussion around children's rights as these are made particularly evident in digital environments. This discussion had its foundation in the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989; OHCHR, n.d.). By happy coincidence, the year in which the Convention was first ratified was the same year in which Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, and set the tone for its use with an inclusive vision of universal access: “Had the technology been proprietary, and in my total control, it would probably not have taken off. You can’t propose that something be a universal space and at the same time keep control of it” (WWWF, n.d.). Berners-Lee’s vision aligns with the understanding that digital rights are part of, and not separate from and added to, human rights. Indeed, the United Nations’ current work on developing a ‘General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment’ confirms the centrality of digital rights to human rights (UNHR, n.d.). In contributing to this discussion, this article moves attention from the formulation of rights by adults for children to the active performance of their rights by children. Specifically, this paper interrogates the notion of children’s digital citizenship and the importance of recognising and valuing young people’s contributions in this space.

Over the past 20 years the relationship between children, technology access and young people’s future lives has been revised several times in the popular imaginary, noting that “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (Appadurai, 1996, 31). In the popular imaginary the focus driving the relationship between children and digital technology has transitioned through Provision to Protection and, with the UN’s General Comment in preparation, is poised on the brink of Participation.

Adopting these ‘three Ps’ of children’s relationship to technology, the turn of the millennium coincided with a policy framework that sought to provide access to information and communication technology resources for children. Educational policy mandated that children should be able to access computers in school contexts, libraries made ICT resources accessible to all and ran courses on how to use them, and households with children were the

drivers of domestic adoption practices in computers and related services, such as broadband connectivity. Within a decade, however, with computer ownership comparatively widespread and a large majority of children in western democracies connected to the internet, the popular imaginary moved from a discourse of Provision to one of Protection. In the Australian context, the debate transitioned from John Howard's NetAlert internet filter, which families could download for free if they wished (Stafford, 2007), to Steven Conroy's proposal for a mandatory filter at the level of the internet service provider (Hartley et al., 2010). Parents were advised to know at all times where their kids were when they were online, and to use internet filters to keep them safe. Research conducted at this time, and published in 2012, was ultimately to indicate that children over nine raised in technically mediated homes which used filters to manage safe access, were equally likely to say that they had encountered troubling content in the past twelve months as children of equivalent ages raised in homes with open internet use (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012). The exception to this rule was in the over-14 age group, where Duerager and Livingstone note that "Technical mediation ... is associated with more harm for 15-16 year olds." (2012, 3)

Complexities around how to protect children from what is on the internet whilst at the same time preparing them to manage their access in ways that promote resilience and informed decision-making has coincided with a new focus on children's participation in digital domains. This push to embrace children's participation has turned the spotlight on the notion of digital citizenship, digital democracy and children's rights to be active participants in these spaces (e.g. EU Council of Europe, 2019; UNESCO, 2019).

This discussion starts with a top-down conception of digital citizenship as promulgated by policymakers and legislators. It goes on to consider young people's constructions of digital citizenship actively claimed by them and communicated from the grassroots upwards. Next, the paper considers horizontal connections that enable young

people around the world to develop shared perspectives and to combine their voices, which can be a precursor to an activist politics embraced by those whose legislative frameworks deem them too young to vote. Moving towards a conclusion, the paper suggests that the uncomfortable conversations that are occurring at the juncture of young people's activism and established processes and political practices, are particularly suited to revealing the points at which adolescents' truth speaks to power. Finally, the paper suggests that we may indeed be witnessing the emergence of a new understanding of digital citizenship where people who are constructed as 'minors' are nonetheless recognised as having an equal claim on determining their future as those who control economic and other power-based resources.

### **Policy, Participation and Digital Citizenship**

According to Richardson and Milovidov (2017, 60), who completed a review of definitions from around the globe, Australia's Office of the eSafety Commissioner used to define a digital citizen as "a person with the skills and knowledge to effectively use digital technologies to participate in society, communicate with others and create and consume digital content". The Children's Commissioner for England's definition has a more upbeat tone around their education package in this area, seeing *Digital Citizenship: Young People's Rights on Social Media* (TES, n.d.) as being "designed to help students ... develop the resilience, power and information they need to thrive online". As with Australia's eSafety site, these resources are now stored elsewhere.

Recent work by UNESCO in the Asia-Pacific (UNESCO, 2019) argues that a "comprehensive and holistic set of competencies" (2019, xiii) creates five domains within which digital citizenship intersects with a children's rights framework. Those domains are: Digital Literacy; Digital Safety and Resilience; Digital Participation and Agency; Digital Emotional Intelligence; and Digital Creativity and Innovation (2019, 8-10). Elsewhere in the

world, the United States Center for Digital Democracy has a specific focus on digital youth that seeks to protect children and young people from being commercially exploited, particularly in terms of the on-selling of their data streams (CDD, n.d.).

Arguably, the leader in the concrete regulation of children's rights in digital contexts is the European Union, particularly via the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) that came into force in May 2018. This enacted a range of new privacy rights of particular benefit to children including what has been termed as 'the right to be forgotten' whereby a child's digital indiscretions can be uncoupled from the normally effective search terms so that past activities will generally not be associated with that child's identity on the future (Bunn, 2019). Although this provision is constructed as particularly benefitting children and young people, it is a remedy available to anyone but has been criticized on the grounds of impacting people's free speech and the public's right to know.

One potentially retrograde impact of the GDPR, however, is the rise in what has been termed 'the age of digital consent' to 16. The trailblazer in this area was the *Child Online Privacy Protection Act* (COPPA, 1998) in the US, which prevents children under 13 signing up for services where platforms and other data aggregators may use the child's personal data for commercial purposes (FTC, 2015). Following suit, the EU GDPR regulation says that, unless a member country chooses to set an age between 13 and 16, the default age at which children can consent to participate as agents in digital services in Europe is 16 (Milkaite & Lievens, 2019). This indicates a wide range of understandings about children's competencies across different ages in countries and around the world, with the age of criminal responsibility often being as low as 10 (AIC, 2005). Overall, however, the tenor of the debate remains focused on protection, rather than participation.

Adding to this mix of well-intentioned interventions is the medical model of digital safety, which tends to be oppositional to the value of digital engagement often perceived by educators. With a clear lineage from ‘screen-time guidelines’ of 50 years ago, the American Academy of Paediatrics has gradually come around to an acknowledgment that digital media is used by children and their families in a variety of ways, and blanket prohibitions (for example ‘no screens under two’) are insufficiently nuanced to be useful (Jaunzems et al., 2019). In general terms however, the medical model adopts a conservative approach mandating moderation and caution. It also pathologises certain digital activities popular with children by recently including, for example, ‘gaming disorder’ in the International Classification of Diseases (WHO, 2018).

In summary, somewhat mirroring the debate between health models (protection) and education models (empowerment), policymakers around the world provide ample evidence of a desire to discover appropriate settings that will enable children’s full digital participation whilst protecting them from negative consequences. Against this well-meaning and somewhat theoretical background is increasing evidence of young people autonomously using digital media to create their own futures via a spirited dialogue with established political institutions and powerbrokers.

### **A Children’s Rights Framework for Digital Participation**

Livingstone and Third (2017) are particularly succinct in mapping the rights of the child in ways that help illuminate their relevance to digital agency. Framing the contents of a special issue of *New Media and Society*, on ‘Children’s and young people’s rights in the digital age: an emerging agenda’, these researchers say, of the Articles of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*:

Important here are its four guiding principles – children’s right to life, survival and development (Article 6), to have their best interests respected (Article 3), to non-discrimination (Article 2) and to be heard (Article 12) – as well as many specific



rights, notably the right to identity (Article 8, including for children from minority/indigenous groups – Article 30), information and media of their choice (Article 17), education (Articles 28 and 29), play (Article 31), privacy (Article 16), protection from violence (Article 19) and sexual exploitation (Article 34), and freedom of expression (Article 13), thought (Article 14) and association (Article 15). (Livingstone & Third 2017, 662)

Hodgkin and Newell (2007, 1) note the complexities of identifying any age at which a child should lose some protections, becoming responsible for the consequences of their actions. They note that the specifics of matters like sexual consent and conscription in the armed forces will differ from country to country. However, in the overall case, people aged under 18 fall within the jurisdiction of the UNCRC. In the European Union, Macenaite and Kosta (2017, 149) note that “the EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child recognises as one of its objectives the achievement of ‘a high level of protection of children in the digital space, including of their personal data, while fully upholding their right to access internet for the benefit of their social and cultural development’ (EC, 2011, 10)”. What is clear, however, is that legislators, who are almost always adults, find it easier to mandate negative rights, ‘protection from’; rather than positive rights, ‘an entitlement to’. Across the political spectrum, however, young people who are nonetheless defined as children, are using digital media to make claims for their positive rights. This paper now considers five case studies that examine the interpolation of the digital within such claims, and argues that digital media has made children’s embodied performance of their rights more evident and more compelling.

### **Children’s Rights in Action: Five Case Studies**

The exercise of citizenship has traditionally been seen as a balance of rights, responsibilities and obligations. The case studies offered here include three that have a generally Australian focus, preceded by discussion of two child actors who have achieved global prominence in different areas, one starting from her base in Sweden, and the other from his experience of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (Parkland, Florida).

### ***Greta Thunberg and the School Strike 4 Climate***

Greta Thunberg proudly claims her autism spectrum diagnosis as a ‘superpower’ and says that “For those of us who are on the spectrum, almost everything is black or white”

(Thunberg, 2019):

I overthink. Some people can just let things go, but I can’t, especially if there’s something that worries me or makes me sad. I remember when I was younger, and in school, our teachers showed us films of plastic in the ocean, starving polar bears and so on. I cried through all the movies. My classmates were concerned when they watched the film, but when it stopped, they started thinking about other things. I couldn’t do that. Those pictures were stuck in my head. (Watts, 2019)

Having experienced a period of depression and immobilization in her early teens when she began to perceive the enormity of the climate emergency, Greta became inspired by the potential of taking direct action herself. According to Watts’s (2019) ‘G2 Interview’ in *the Guardian*, although not directly acknowledged in Thunberg’s TEDxStockholm talk, Greta was inspired by the direct action taken by the teen gun control activists after the Parkland, Florida killings. Starting as lone individual conducting a vigil in front of the Swedish Parliament at a time when she should have been at school, Greta swiftly became the focus and figurehead of the worldwide School Strike 4 Climate movement. By September 2019, her actions had inspired an estimated 6 million people in 150 countries (Taylor et al., 2019) to join the project. Greta’s success in motivating such an unimaginable number, working through small direct action organisations such as FridaysForFuture and 350.Org, provides persuasive evidence of horizontal connection and young people’s capacity to self-organize and collaborate.

Analysing the multifaceted aspects of digital citizenship evident in Great Thunberg’s life and activities, it is easy to identify that she is using her rights of assembly, shared culture, etc. etc.

In particular, the Climate emergency speaks to the four guiding principles (Livingstone & Third 2017, above). The emergency is made more pressing by Greta's perception, and the opinions of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, that the next 11 years are crucial: if the climate change clock is not reset by 2030, it may be beyond human agency to respond to the challenge (Watts, 2019). In response to people such as politician Scott Morrison, who argue that young climate change protesters should concentrate on their school work and leave politics to the grown-ups (AAP, 2018), Greta argues "what is the point of learning facts in the school system when the most important facts given by the finest science of that same school system clearly means nothing to our politicians and our society?" (Thunberg, 2019). Millions of people have watched and listened to Thunberg's TEDxStockholm, but this young woman, with a selective mutism diagnosis, has used digital media to mobilise seven greater numbers across the world.

### ***Kyle Kashuv and Teenage Indiscretions***

Kyle Kashuv reached global prominence for a tiny fragment of time when Harvard rescinded the place that it had previously offered to him (Beauchamp, 2019). Up to that point Kyle was almost unknown on the world stage, but he was celebrated by America's right-wing as being a survivor of the Parkland, Florida school killings. Advocating ways to address the school shootings crisis without using gun control, Kyle has over 300,000 Twitter followers and immediately took to digital channels when Harvard changed its mind about offering him a place.

Although Kyle's viewpoint on the efficacy of guns for controlling school shootings speaks to a global minority, it was not that which deterred Harvard from offering him a place. Indeed, it may well have worked in his favour since the exercise of citizenship may sometimes involve arguing for a sincerely held belief, whether or not the viewpoint is a

minority one. Instead, the digital activities that scuttled Kyle Kashuv's Harvard ambitions were posts by his younger self (at 16) that were judged to be racist and homophobic. Once these vestiges of Kyle's teen digital footprint came to the attention of the Harvard selectors, partly through the operation of a Change.org petition, the Dean of Admissions and others concluded that Kyle was unsuited to Harvard (Beauchamp, 2019), even though Kyle tried to distance himself from them by arguing that the shooting had changed his views.

This case study indicates the social limitations upon and consequences of the operation of Kyle's rights to freedom of association (Article 15) and expression (Article 13). More particularly, however, the *Vox* article (Beauchamp, 2019) and other commentary generally ignored the fact that Kyle was a minor when he posted the racist slurs. This example of the consequences of an under-18's exercise of digital citizenship raises the possibility that an American version of the European Commission's GDPR-based 'Right to be Forgotten' provisions might one day become part of the policy agenda as a result of the experiences of Kyle Kashuv and other, younger, digital media users.

### ***Georgie Stone: Teens and Sexual Self-Determination***

Georgie Stone's outrage at finding that the Australian legal system deemed that only the Family Court could allow her access to the hormone therapy that would allow her body to be aligned with her gender identity, led to her winning the 2017 Australian Young People's Human Rights Medal (Human Rights, 2018). The website's thumbnail sketch offers a detached overview: "Young People's Human Rights Medal: Georgie Stone: Georgie is a transgender advocate who, at the age of 10, became the youngest person to receive hormone blockers in Australia. She campaigned to allow transgender children and their families access to treatment without Family Court approval" (Human Rights, 2018).

“It felt weird”, said Georgie, “I was powerless - I was 15, and there was someone up there [in court] making a very important decision about my body. It was out of my hands, but I knew this was really wrong” (Nunn, 2018). According to BBC News, Georgie had been clear about her gender dysphoria from aged two, and was already receiving hospital treatment by the time she was seven. At 10, she was first required to persuade the Family Court to allow her to use hormone blockers, even though her family and doctors all approved the treatment. Georgie notes that it was “unfair and discriminatory that we had to ask a complete stranger who isn’t an expert for treatment that affects our bodies, after we’d already been approved by medical professionals” (Nunn, 2018). By 15, and back in the Family Court once again, Georgie was old enough to take steps to change the system.

Georgie used online campaigning organization, Change.org, coupled with a social media campaign the included Instagram and Twitter, to put pressure on legislators to end Family Court involvement in determining whether or not younger teenagers should be allowed access to hormone therapy. In achieving this feat, and presenting 16,000 signatures, Georgie not only improved recognition of the rights of transgender children in Australia: she also established Australia as a global leader in acknowledging the rights of young people to self-determination in terms of their gender identity at ages below that of sexual consent.

Georgie’s mother, Rebekah Robertson, calls out the validity of young people’s active political engagement. Applied in the family context, her statement is also relevant to society as a whole: “I think it is so important in raising young people to listen to them and to give them the skills to do what they need to do to create the world they want to live in. It’s not my world anymore. It’s their world. What I want is for there to be equity for our young people so the potential they have can be unlocked.” Georgie’s campaign and her success in changing policy, practice and the law, indicates her sophisticated and effective use of digital citizenship within a human rights framework.

### ***Will Connolly: Egg Boy***

On 15 March 2019, a terrorist massacred 51 worshippers attending two Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Australians were still coming to terms with the fact that the suspect was one of their citizens when then-Senator, right-winger Fraser Anning, suggested that the “real cause of bloodshed on New Zealand streets today is the immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand in the first place” (Baker, 2019). Whilst Anning’s statement outraged an overwhelming majority of Australians, it moved teen Will Connolly to take direct action. A day after the inflammatory statement, as Anning was justifying his viewpoint in a televised conference, Will threw an egg at him. Although he had immediately been thrown to the ground and manhandled by Anning’s protectors, there was a suggestion that Will should face assault charges and a GoFundMe page was set up to fund his legal defence. A second GoFundMe account was set up to buy more eggs. Australian Law Firm Gordon Legal offered to act pro bono and defend egg boy against charges, but in the event no charges were laid.

Will’s actions reached a global audience when one of Australia’s most successful exports, Ben Simmons (NBA team member in the Philadelphia 76ers), endorsed ‘Egg Boy’ by wearing yellow Nikes with the logo Egg Boy on them, while a supporter Tweeted “@bensimmins reppin [representing] an Aussie legend tonight” (Rynne, 2019). In Sydney a pub, where the under-age egg boy would not have been allowed to drink alcohol, had a mural painted in his honour (Broadsheet, 2019). On 28 May 2019, Will again reached global prominence when he donated the \$99,922.36, raised via the two GoFundMe appeals, to the victims of the Christchurch killings (Schladebeck, 2019). Will subsequently noted that his mother strongly disapproved of the way he had expressed his opinions, but warmly supported the fact he had spoken out against Anning’s Islamophobic remarks.

### ***Josie Pohla Changes the School Curriculum***

Josie Pohla lost her mother to domestic violence and found herself confronted by the fact that something that was so central to her life, and that had such a huge impact upon her and upon so many others, was invisible in the school curriculum. She rationalised this as evidence that educators just hadn't thought through the implications of what it might mean to inform children about domestic violence prevention. Acting singlehandedly, she set up a Change.org campaign that garnered over 100,000 signatures and successfully persuaded NSW Education to include "The Prevention of Domestic Violence Program" as part of the curriculum for students in years 7-10 (aged 12-15) (Change.org, 2015). Josie said "If domestic violence was addressed within the public schools educational criteria, I could have gotten help and saved my mum," (Duff, 2016).

These activities indicate how Josie's digital citizenship helped create discussion and education around the topic of domestic violence, and its prevention. Although too late for her own mother, Josie worked with digital media resources to demand a new curriculum that could make a difference for other families experience domestic violence.

### **Uncomfortable Discussions Around Digital Citizenship**

Children are increasingly claiming citizenship rights using the resources open to them in the digital sphere, but this may cause conflict and distress for guardians and carers who see themselves as regulating the child's journey into adulthood. While some aspects of children's exercise of digital rights aligns with expected and encouraged teen behaviours, minors may also move into areas traditionally reserved for adults: such as politics, the consumption and enjoyment of adult content, and direct action. This can make adults uncomfortable, and the lack of an agreed positioning for the under-18 teen in these circumstances can have discriminatory impacts. For example, Albury and Byron carried out

research on sexting with young people aged 16-17, and noted that these children felt they were in an invidious, legalistic, catch-22 situation. Regardless of their personal views around whether or not they would chose to sext as part of an intimate relationship, the 16- and 17-year olds were affronted by the fact that, because they were under 18, such activity was illegal. Taking a sexual picture of a minor leaves the photographer open to a charge of creating “‘child pornography material’ or ‘child abuse material’” (Albury et al., 2013, 6), even where that photographer is the child her or himself. For over 18s, the behaviour is constructed as age-appropriate. As Albury (2017, 714) argues, “this approach reflects a ‘negative’ model of children’s sexual rights, which excludes a positive right to access sexual information and a right to self-representation”. The teens participating in Albury’s research sought to challenge the systems that construct their activities as illegal and illegitimate, but accept the same behaviour from adults.

Young people’s sexual citizenship is a particularly challenging context for parents and society. In the same way that sexting is legally dangerous for under 18s, so is viewing pornography, even though the young people themselves are legally entitled to sexual citizenship and above the age of consent. Under-18s are positioned as having no legitimate rights to access adult content, yet Lim et al. (2017)’s work implies that a majority of young males have accessed pornography before they turn 14: “The median age at first pornography viewing was 13 years for male participants (95%CI=12-13) and 16 years for female participants (95%CI=16-16;  $p<0.001$ ).” (Lim et al., 2017, 440). In the state of Victoria, the Sexual and Family Violence Division of Victoria Police-supported *Reality & Risk Project* note that “Pornography is now the most prominent sexuality educator for many young people. Most young people discover porn well before they encounter sex – perhaps even before they have kissed or held a partner” (R&RP, 2014).



A generation earlier, Evans and Butkus (1997) had similarly identified teen's sexual curiosity and their unwillingness to engage with an adult timetable for sexual socialisation as a major point of friction between young people and their parents. They argued that: "Although parents still occupy the role of the initiated with regard to sexuality, if they are uninitiated technologically, then they lose the powerbase from which to set the markers of progressive socialisation" (Evans & Butkus, 1997, 68).

While the sexual regulation of young people under 18 occupies a central position in the policy agenda and parental fears, this is by no means the only point of friction where teens' demands are unpalatable for the adults who are expected to manage their behaviour. From the humane response to terrorism epitomised by egg boy, through Georgie Stone's principled fight for sexual self-determination, to Greta Thunberg's commitment to the environment, teens around the world, but especially in liberal Western democracies, are using digital media to demand recognition of their agency, their autonomy and their entitlement to rights around self-determination. This makes many adults uncomfortable.

As one of Greta Thunberg's teachers says: "Greta is a troublemaker, she is not listening to adults. But we are heading full speed for a catastrophe, and in this situation the only reasonable thing is to be unreasonable" (Crouch, 2018). Egg boy's mother told him that she was "glad I stood up for what I believe in but she definitely disagrees with the way I did it" (Paine, 2019), with Will Connolly recognizing that egging an Australian Senator is generally "not the right thing to do ... no reason to physically attack anyone" (Paine, 2019). Yet the acceptable public speaking positions open to young people under 18 are limited.

In an ideal world, discussions around under-18s' digital citizenship would recognize that the marker between childhood and adulthood as being the day of a young person's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday is a pragmatic device arrived at for legal and administrative convenience. In fact, in

almost every other area of life, the very notion of a chronological or biological marker that takes no notice of individual difference or personal characteristics and capacity would be decried as discriminatory. Instead of relying solely on notions of a hard and fast line between child and adult, a more nuanced and rights-based conversation would seem to demand a progressive recognition of young people's growing capacity to engage in digital and other activities as autonomous agents. This hoped-for mature conversation between pre-adult teens and adult decision-makers can be glimpsed in domestic conversations between parents of 17 year olds and their near-adult children. For example, research with a team of teen gamers indicates that parents are generally willing to move on from mandating rule-based compliance to negotiating a rights-based approach that foregrounds reciprocal obligations as members of a shared household (Green & Haddon, 2015). Effectively, this is the move from Provision and Protection to Participation.

## **Discussion**

Never has it been as easy as it is now for young people to mobilise themselves and each other in support of what they see as important without the help of adult mediators and facilitators. Because digital devices allow young people to connect sources of knowledge, paths for active engagement and the presentation of opinions and demands, they can marshal their resources in ways were not previously possible. For pre-adolescent and younger teens, digital media often offers compelling experience of empowerment, autonomous self-directed activity, and agency. For this age group, the power sources they are most likely to clash with as they become more autonomous are parents, teachers, and other adult caregivers. Digital media becomes the site for power struggles, the quintessential forum for discussions around "who lets who use what, of moral judgements of the other's activities, of the expression of needs and desires, of justifications and conflict, of separateness and mutuality" (Livingstone, 1992, 113). At some point, which seems to be during high school, teens appear to develop a wider

vision that transports them from negotiating within the domesticity of the home to an engagement with the world at large. The very qualities that make them so frustrating for so many adults in their lives, their capacity to essentialise arguments around issues rather than pragmatics, mean that they often see things differently from the adults around them. Previously, taken piecemeal, one at a time, it was easier to ignore teens and they generally lacked the means to self-organise into a collective. Those days are over.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes a top-down framework through which nation states within the United Nations agree to a set of principles relating to their recognition of children's human rights. Now that children are increasingly self-organising, well before they are recognised as autonomous adults and voting citizens, they are claiming rights and a speaking position that could only have been dreamed of in 1989 when the convention was ratified. What is more, under-18s are increasingly using digital communication to connect with and mobilise large numbers of adults who find their clear-sighted identification of fairness, equity, authenticity and principle-based behaviour inspiring and motivating (Carrington, 2019). Although minors, these digital citizens are increasingly impatient of arguments that rely on the device of dividing the world into people under 18 and over 18. For example, if we were to have a broader discussion with younger teens around pornography (and such a discussion is about to take place under the auspices of an Australian Research Council-funded project), teens are more likely to want to talk about 'society's relationship with pornography', than about 'teens' relationship with pornography'. Certainly, this is the inference to be drawn from discussion of teens who talk about sexting in terms of why society makes it illegal for them to sext, but endorses the behaviour in older people (Albury et al., 2013).

The logical conclusion of what we see in terms of children's and young people's increasing voice around today's big issues, for example the climate emergency, is that

broader society will begin to accept that citizenship becomes evident in activities, rather than as a side effect of a birth certificate. Adults have much to learn from the areas around which they feel uncomfortable in relation to teen digital citizenship. Those friction points can be indicative of a genuine concern that young people lack the tools and perspectives to safely navigate the paths that they are travelling. Equally, however, contested rights can illuminate areas where teens have successfully identified inconsistencies, misinformation and inappropriate regulation on the part of their elders. As the empowering definition of digital citizenship says, on the International Society for Technology in Education website: “Digital citizenship is about much more than online safety — or a long list of don’ts. It’s also about the do’s that help create thoughtful, empathetic digital citizens who can wrestle with the important ethical questions at the intersection of technology and humanity” (ISTE, 2019). This version of digital citizenship has as much to offer adults as it does teens.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has advanced the discussion around how children and pre-adult teenagers are using their engagement with digital media to enact citizenship. It helps to explain the growing impact of under-18s on policy debates and upon the processes of political decision-making. Young people are inviting elders to engage with them in a range of discussions about complex, ethical issues and the implications of this are multi-faceted. There is a possibility that liberal democracies need to revisit binary bio-chronological markers of citizenship and revise these in terms of citizenship as a spectrum of rights and responsibilities that operate across, and develop through, the years from the early teens to the mid-20s.

To date, most of the discussion around emerging adults has examined the slow maturation of the human brain and the fact that some decision-making and other capacities are not fully functional for up to a decade after the normal attribution of adulthood. This

paper suggests that there may be aspects of young people's digital lives in which they may be at least as functional as their elders, and which enable them to make a contribution to the world in which they live, even a decade prior to the age-benchmark reserved for assigning voting rights. It is impossible to predict where a conversation around these matters might lead, but it is appropriate to acknowledge that such a conversation is worth having. In terms of the contribution that this paper has made to communications research practice, it suggests that children's and young people's views and opinions will increasingly impact upon broader aspects of civil society. Further, the friction points where adults consider children to have overstepped the mark, and to have failed to understand the implications of their actions or demands: these may be the very points at which adult society has most to learn from the underage digital citizens speaking out in our midst.

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