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### Digital citizenship? Narrative exchange and the changing terms of civic culture

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## Digital citizenship? Narrative exchange and the changing terms of civic culture

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This article explores the possibilities for new forms of ‘digital citizenship’ currently emerging through digitally supported processes of narrative exchange. Using Dahlgren’s (Dahlgren, P. 2003. “Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu.” In *Media and the Restyling of Politics*, edited by J. Corner, and D. Pels, 151–170. London: Sage; Dahlgren, P. 2009. *Media and Political Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.) circuit of ‘civic culture’ as a model for exploring the interlinking preconditions for new acts of citizenship, we discuss the contrasting outcomes of research at three fieldwork sites in the North of England – educational (a sixth form college), civil society (a community reporters’ network) and social (a local club). Each site provided clear evidence of the elements of Dahlgren’s circuit (some depending on the intensive use of digital infrastructure, others predating it), but there were also breaks in the circuit that constrained its effectiveness. A crucial factor in each case for building a lasting circuit of civic culture (and an effective base for new forms of digital citizenship) is the role that digital infrastructure can play in extending the scale of interactions beyond the purely local.

**Keywords:** digital citizenship; civic culture; circuit; narrative exchange; digital storytelling; communities of practice

### Introduction

This article explores the possibilities for ‘digital citizenship’ emerging through digitally supported processes of narrative exchange (storytelling, narrative, story archiving and commentary). Given the uncertainties about the practical scope and extent of citizenship in late modernity (Bennett 1998; Turner 2001), it is unhelpful to approach ‘digital citizenship’ simply by asking what digital tools can add to stereotypical acts of citizenship (voting, joining a party, reading a manifesto). It is more helpful to ask how digital infrastructures can support a wider ‘civic culture’ (Dahlgren 2003, 2009). This means being open both to new ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin 2008) that might emerge from such a civic culture *and* to a wider set of processes that constitute civic culture’s starting-points. This article concentrates particularly on the latter.

Digital media and digital infrastructures provide the means to *recognise* people in new ways as active narrators of their individual lives and the issues they share with others. Such recognition matters within a view of democracy as social cooperation where citizens need to be recognised for having ‘capabilities [that] are of constitutive value to a concrete community’ (Honneth 2007, 139). While Almond and Verba’s original and much-criticised

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concept of ‘civic culture’ (Pateman 1989 on Almond and Verba 1963) was tied to a conventional and limited account of what being a citizen involves, Dahlgren’s (2003, 2009) recent rethinking of ‘civic culture’ as a ‘circuit’ provides a multidimensional model of civic culture’s components. This more flexible approach enables insights into how ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998) for the building of citizenship can emerge in the digital age.

We apply Dahlgren’s model to three streams of action research conducted in the North of England.<sup>1</sup> Our primary aim was to explore the social conditions and digital platforms required for new processes of narrative exchange and knowledge production (compare Bennett, Wells, and Rank 2009). We worked in a variety of institutional settings – educational (a sixth form college), civil society (a community reporters’ network), social (a local club) – shaped by large-scale factors: state regulation of education, the decline of arts and community funding, rapid changes in the creative digital sector and harsh cuts in state support to poor sections of the population. Our entry point at each site was the principle of digital storytelling as a tool for enabling and deepening mutual recognition (Lambert 2006; Thumim 2009).

By exploring for each case study the ‘breaks’ in the circuit of civic culture, we uncover a differentiated account of the constraints and opportunities affecting new forms of civic culture. The result is to provide some contextual answers to the question what *a culture (or cultures) of citizenship* would look like (Couldry 2006), and so cast new light on pessimistic large-scale accounts of the relation between ‘the digital’ and democratisation (Hindman 2008; Morozov 2011). Our argument has implications beyond the application of Dahlgren’s particular model of civic culture: for, if attention to digital resources and practices can help us understand what sustains *elements* within that model, it can contribute also to our understanding of the elements of civic and public cultures more generally, under a range of historical circumstances. Nor are the implications of our argument confined to the understanding of digital processes, although that is our emphasis: we worked in a range of rich settings whose resources went far beyond the digital; it is only through being embedded in such wider life-contexts that digital resources make a difference.

### Conceptual and methodological background

We propose ‘*digital citizenship*’ as a heuristic concept for examining how uses of digital infrastructures – understood, following Star and Ruhleder (1996), not simply as a set of technical tools but as constituted through social relations and practices – contribute to broader civic culture. Our understanding of such uses is focussed on narrative exchange viewed through the lens of ‘digital storytelling’ (Lundby 2008).

### *Rethinking civic culture*

A decade ago Peter Dahlgren argued that:

civic culture points to those features of the socio-cultural world – dispositions, practices, processes – that constitute *pre-conditions* for people’s actual participation in the public sphere, in civil and political society ... civic culture is an analytic construct that seeks to identify the *possibilities* of people acting in the role of citizens. (Dahlgren 2003, 154–155, added emphasis)

Dahlgren sought to avoid Almond and Verba’s assumption that ‘civic culture’ is an unproblematic bundle of features that are ‘just there’, approaching civic culture through a ‘constructionist and materialist’ approach (Dahlgren 2009, 104) based on close attention to what people do and think.

More specifically, Dahlgren offered in 2003 a model of civic culture involving a ‘circuit’ of six interlocking processes (values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities, discussion). By 2009, ‘affinity’ had become ‘trust’ – that is, ‘a sense of “we-ness” around specific issues or ideologies that involve like-mindedness’ (Dahlgren 2009, 112–114) – while ‘discussion’ had become ‘spaces’ for meeting, talking and acting together (114–116). Dahlgren’s model assumes no simple relation between the imagining of civic life and its practice. This multidimensional approach also characterizes Plummer’s (2003, 81–82) identification of five ‘generic processes’ through which Habermas’ (1989) well-known concept of the public sphere can be actualised: imagining/empathising; vocalising; investing identities through narrative; creating social worlds and communities of support; and creating a culture of public problems. Dahlgren and Plummer take forward previous normative accounts of civic engagement by grasping the *interrelated* dimensions of how a stable civic culture can, over time, be created. This is particularly helpful in thinking about the various contributions of *digital* resources to civic culture and ultimately citizenship. This overlaps with older trends in political communications research, particularly the ‘constructionist’ approach (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Gamson 1992; Barnhurst 1998) which examines ‘the subtle interaction between what the mass media convey and how people *come to understand* about the world beyond their immediate life space’ (Neuman, Just, and Kriegler 1992, xv, added emphasis). Practices of digital storytelling, conceived broadly, are a good way into understanding that interaction.

### **Digital storytelling**

The leading exponent of digital storytelling is Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley ([www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)). Lambert (2006) describes digital storytelling as not just an expansion of digital literacy but a greater faculty for listening to others’ stories (16, 95) that contrasts explicitly with normal one-way practice of consuming mass media. The aim of digital storytelling is to produce ‘conversational media’ (Lambert 2006, 17). Lambert has a sharp sense of lack of recognition (Honneth 2007) such conversational media can help redress: ‘we can live better as celebrated contributors, we can easily die from our perceived lack of significance to others, to our community, to our society’ (2006, 3).

‘Storycatching’ is Lambert’s proposed mechanism whereby, through meetings of ‘storycircles’ in particular communities, people catch stories which otherwise would not be exchanged. The aim is partly political: ‘to engage us in listening to each other’s stories with respect and then perhaps we can sort out new solutions . . . by reframing our diverse connections to the big story’ (Lambert 2006, xx–xxi); ‘storycatching will become central to planning and decision making, the foundation upon which the best choices can be made’ (xxi). While we leave to a separate article the details of how we applied digital storytelling techniques in our fieldwork settings, our fieldwork provided rich material for thinking about civic culture. That fieldwork focussed on an underlying question: what would a *digital* storycircle look like? What combination of resources, infrastructural and cultural, can in the era of digital media support narrative production and narrative exchange? How can such practices of ‘giving an account of oneself’ (Butler 2005; Cavarero 2000; Ricoeur 1992) contribute to the understanding of civic culture and citizenship? We discuss the question of a ‘digital storycircle’ in a separate article, concentrating here on what we learnt from our fieldwork about the practical forms that a circuit of civic culture can take.

Our fieldwork, including the three case studies reported here, was developed through processes of participatory action research, whereby our research team built open

collaborations with partners focussed on exploring and facilitating processes of narrative exchange through digital infrastructures. As a result, we did not use formal sampling, and allowed our range of methods to evolve in line with the development of each collaboration. As a result, our data have a demographic specificity linked to each case study context.<sup>2</sup>

### Digital pathways to civic culture?

We have selected three case studies to illustrate contrasting, if partial, instantiations of Dahlgren's circuit of civic culture.

#### *Local community club*

Our first case study was a youth club run by volunteers for boys and girls aged 12–16. Salford Lads Club (SLC) is situated in a previously densely populated industrial working class neighbourhood near a thriving dockyard. Over 50 years, the demolition of workers housing followed by industrial decline and the docks' closure has dramatically impacted on the area.<sup>3</sup> SLC was established in 1903 by local businessmen concerned to improve recreational and educational opportunities for young working class men. Rooted originally in philanthropy, SLC predates the British welfare state and remains independently funded, relying on volunteers ('officers'), many of whom are former club members. SLC is one of the few buildings in the local area more than 30 years old, and one of the few surviving membership organisations. Beginning in June 2011, our 12-month collaboration with SLC involved practical support for digitising its photographic, film and document collections, engaging with these digital materials through storytelling and video editing workshops, and developing skills for the updating the club's website and enhancing its public profile. These interventions enabled us to ask how a range of digital technologies could be incorporated into the club's practices so as to enhance already emerging processes of narrative exchange.

The formation of civic *identity* has been an explicit aim of SLC since its foundation, embodied in the Club's motto (prominently on display inside its building) of commitment to 'brightening young lives and making good citizens'. This focus on the *making* of citizens was not unusual in late nineteenth and early twentieth century youth movements (Mills 2013). What is striking is that far from being regarded today as an archaic survival, the motto is the object of *ongoing reflection* in interviews by individuals of all ages associated with the club.

Reflection on the club's commitment to the welfare of its members and activities through which civic identity becomes meaningful (Dahlgren 2009, 65) drew on lived experience of young people in the locality. Aidan,<sup>4</sup> a 19-year old volunteer at the club, remarks:

Basically, this area is high in crime, a lot of drug issues, anti-social behaviour is quite a big issue, and the young people are growing up to see this happen on their doorstep pretty much day in, day out. [...] Like the motto says, "To brighten young lives and make better [good] citizens" and that is actually what we do, through the activities we do, the way we treat the young people, we're there to stop them from going into crime, into drugs etcetera. We're there to give them something to do and to give them a lot more opportunities than they'd have in normal life. So if it wasn't for the club I wouldn't like to think what this estate would be like.

SLC has evolved a rich repertoire of collective *practices* for fostering social and communicative skills and intergenerational relationships. Group practices that build

self-esteem, social cooperation and reciprocity (including an annual camping trip started in 1903 and still continuing) are seen as strengthening the club's identity.

Camp is very good at giving kids confidence, helping them come out of their shell and with the activities we do, we pretty much encourage them to socialise [...] They've spent a full week with the Officers and Junior Officers, they come back with like more respect for them because... some of them might say all we do is shout at them at the club, but when we're at camp they see that we're just normal people. (Aidan)

Digital technologies for facilitating the recording, editing, display and circulation of members and volunteers' stories augmented these practices. Our initial storytelling workshop involved participants ranging in age from 12 to 80. We were aware that social interactions at the club were uniquely intergenerational and based on considerable mutual respect. The workshop provided an occasion for listening across the generations, so consolidating and extending that *trust*:

It was interesting to listen to the stories of the young lads. But that's the club, which is from ten to eighty two. So everything that we do is basically group based, so to sit there with the young lads as well as the older ones is just the norm for the club. But it's interesting to hear their perspective [...] sometimes, their take on things is obviously different to ours. [...] You don't really know what's going through [the young people's] minds and what they've got out of it. You see them having a laugh and a joke but you don't know what bits have actually stuck in their mind until you hear the stories, and you might think oh, I wouldn't have thought of that. So it's quite interesting to get their perspective on things I think. (Jim, senior officer)

Our series of workshops dedicated to editing and video production stimulated younger participants to critically reflect on existing practices for documenting the club's activities and traditions, and to develop new narrative skills.

Turning to *spaces*, the club is a vital space for intergenerational interaction, mentoring and informal learning. Connecting the present to the past, SLC's building is a locus of memory (Connerton 2009) that stands out against the prevailing dislocation from history in the much redeveloped built environment that surrounds it. Digital technologies have been deployed in exhibitions designed to enhance the aura of the building and stimulate discussion. SLC's interest in extending their presence to online spaces has concentrated on promoting the club's values. Younger club members have identified the potential for social media platforms to extend the club's reach and revive connections with former members who have moved away. Seventeen-year old Jason remarked:

What we've tried to do is it just shows that we're trying to keep this place running and keep it going and get people to donate and stuff and a lot of people do visit our website and a lot of people will be going on the videos and also be going on the pictures and then when it pops up about donate, people will just do it just because they have seen their face on that screen and they're thinking, "Just because we don't come to club no more, just because we're old now, the Lads' Club is not forgetting us," and it's just like the Lads' Club heart, you're in the Lads' Club heart really and we're not forgetting about you.

This use of online spaces provides an opportunity to affirm SLC's values, including intergenerational care: 'it's telling people that there [are] people out there who care about other people and people are trying to help you' (Jason).

Our fieldwork found many examples of practices of *knowledge* generation. Historically, the Club functioned as a night school and library for young men of working age, a hub for informal learning at a time when educational opportunity within working class communities was highly restricted. Digital technologies have facilitated a more intimate relationship with the club's archive which in turn has led to significant acts of mutual recognition across generations. Younger officers in their late teens described the



impact of seeing digitised footage showing about older officers, men now in their sixties and seventies, when they were young men. Coupled with the contemporary stories that individual participants told, this provided an important opportunity for reflection on the *accumulated* experience of older officers and the club's enduring traditions of cooperation:

They've been there themselves, so they know exactly what to do. I'm not being funny but they're not all qualified youth workers, but they do just as good of a job because they've been there and they've seen how it's done properly, and then they just grew up into that, that's what it is. (Aidan)

And it does show us kids what camp was like and how people like John and Frank [senior officers] and everyone like that have made it better for us so without their hard work it wouldn't be better for us. (Jason)

These insights in turn yielded a deeper awareness of how it was collective effort that accounted for the club's persistence over time, so pointing to the very core of civic practice:

I just think they've done it for me when I was a kid . . . they made my club night and my camp and stuff special, they made it fun, so why can't I do it for other kids and make it fun for them because they've helped me? And then previous people who I've helped will also do it for the younger generation and it will just make the club better and it will keep it going because if you didn't have people who've changed because of the club, the club would go, the club wouldn't carry on because obviously the younger ones now are getting older and we need more kids to come in and take our role and take our part because some people just leave and stuff like that. (Jason)

The digitisation of the club's records and collections and the incorporation of those archives into an on-going process of narrative exchange have helped to deepen awareness of the club's traditions and values of care and solidarity. Our research gave us access to collective processes of identity formation, and mutual trust and recognition (Honneth 2007), that extended beyond the digital. Towards the end of our fieldwork, we helped SLC develop timeline and map-based online visualisations of the digital stories they had created with us. Coupled with a more coordinated social media presence, these online developments responded to younger members' interests in promoting the Club and its civic practices, but it is too early to know the consequences of this. The circuit (only in part digital) of civic culture that we observed at SLC did not explicitly connect with the formal political process or formal 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2008), but in broader ways was profoundly political, opposing the individualistic rhetoric of aspiration that has driven urban development agendas and through the memory work, knowledge generation and mutual recognition, creating value around a vital but neglected history of working-class civic agency.

### ***Community reporters' network***

Our second case study by contrast illustrates how elements of a *new* civic culture may emerge from practices relating to digital media. We carried out action research with a network of community reporters between August 2011 and April 2013. This network revolves around a training and accreditation programme offered by a social enterprise based in the North of England. The organisation seeks to support people 'to have a voice' and 'describe their own reality', with a view to raising community voice. Reporters all around Britain belong to the network and are supported by their local agencies. The central organisation provides a networked context for these local groups through an online platform which publishes community reporter content.

Community reporting is a form of narrative exchange, and our fieldwork involved reviewing the digital infrastructure for such exchange. Drawing on 12 in-depth interviews,



and participant observation in meetings and workshops, with community reporters, we consider the signs of civic culture emerging through such processes of narrative exchange. We found that certain elements of Dahlgren's model were present and indicated the potential for civic culture, but that this potential was blocked, particularly because of the lack of adequate spaces of discussion.

### *Practices and values of storytelling*

The community reporters' network made extensive use of digital media devices (digital cameras, mobile phones) to sustain a *practice* of producing stories about their local communities, with a dedicated website as a dissemination platform. The stories produced during our study were mainly around social housing and the allocation and use of allotments and other public spaces, conceived as 'issues' of common concern (Dewey 1946). Community reporters perceived their role as creating a platform for life stories and experiences of exclusion to be heard. In Martha's account, this was seen as a matter of solidarity:

Any stories that affect people [...] stories in terms of disability, human rights stories, anything that affects people and harms them, we need to cover and report about.

The basic act of gathering, registering and exchanging stories through digital media has led to new ways of local citizens recognising each other not just as people, but as citizens who take common action.

The act of community reporting was also a way of expressing identification with and commitment to a geographical community:

For me it's an opportunity to share with other people the passion I have for my community, to get the word out there, spread the word that other people can do this easily whether it's just finding a story or doing some research, it doesn't have to be any camera work or anything like that. It's just to show that everybody can do it and it is a really good thing to do in the community. (Hannah)

'Being able to tell those real grassroots stories in a professional way', as Helen put it, carried the aspiration, however modest, to enter political agendas. As Beth noted, 'I'd like to think that eventually these stories get sourced to wider, higher up, in inverted commas if you like, people'.

While this practice of mutual story-telling had the potential to be mobilised within a wider circuit of civic culture, this potential was *inhibited* by a requirement, set by the social enterprise, *not* to produce 'political' stories. Community reporters, who often affirmed their sense of community reporting as inherently political, found themselves in a public space which 'avoided politics' (Eliasoph 1998):

And it's not political with a capital "P" but it's probably political with a small "p" I think, even though we're not meant to be political, but I think everything that's community engagement based is political with a small "p" and it's about empowering people. (Jessi)

This restriction was not accidental: it derived from the social enterprise's interpretation of its short-term funding context as depending on such a non-political stance. Community reporters actively appropriated civic knowledge (Dahlgren 2009, 108–110) by moderating what stories could be told on the website. However, by avoiding the formally 'political', they paradoxically blocked the wider circuit of civic culture.

Yet, when we turn to other elements in Dahlgren's circuit, the picture becomes less negative. Community reporters, by being embedded in their own communities, were able to build relationships of trust. Trust was formed in particular through listening attentively to other people's worries (Dreher 2009; O'Donnell 2009). As Hannah noted when

describing her reporting: ‘you get to know the people that you’re doing the reports about, you get to meet them, get to know their interests and what they are about’.

Satisfying the need of their communities to be heard and recognised meant that community reporters did not feel the pressure to attract larger audiences. This focus on building close trusting relationships within local communities through exchanging digital stories was also the social enterprise’s aim. As its chief executive commented, with reference to a story published on its blog:

[This] is the principle of community reporting, which is to challenge perceptions and for people to describe their own realities [...] I think it was a reinforcement to the local communities to say, to local community residents, to say that this is an alternative approach [to their self-presentation] [...] we understand where you’re coming from, and this is an alternative view.

It is interesting that even an organisation that disavowed the explicitly political significance of its practice understood itself as contributing to a wider civic practice.

The exchange of local voices fostered, according to our interviewed reporters, what Dahlgren (2009) calls communities of ‘we-ness’: communities expressing civic commonality and embodying group loyalty, based on the learning of shared skills. Belonging to the network of community reporters also linked to a set of shared *values*. The importance community reporters placed on training *together* and in sharing tips about the use of digital media devices involved a collective rather than individualistic vision and it intersected with their sense of why technical skills mattered for a wider *identity*:

The thing that I like when I’m training, is that you’re part of something larger than just that project, it’s all the movement, and I think that gives it more credibility, and I think it makes you feel like you’re more a part of something. You’re not just, “Oh I’ve just been trained on a flip camera.” It’s got this ethos and underlying principles behind it, and it’s a positive movement as well. It’s not just, “Oh let’s put it on YouTube,” or wherever and it gets lost with all the other junk, it’s on a site dedicated for that. (Jessi)

Meeting physically in training workshops complemented any limits to digital connectivity and enabled reporters to recognise each other as part of something larger:

We go on locations, we arrange to go out on meets, photo shoots, teaching each other about equipment, getting ideas of what else we could do, what we think is needed, what people need help with. (Lynda)

[Joining the community reporters’ network] was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made, because I made so many friends. And I mean *beyond friends* if that makes sense, people who are there for me, that have been supportive and ... I only have to click my fingers and it’s there, the help is there. (Georgia, added emphasis)

Friends ‘beyond friends’ is a vivid way of expressing solidarity, a sustainable ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998). Acquiring skills in this context contributes to the development of civic identities more broadly than in traditional conceptualisations of citizenship, because it derives from a *continuous* process of mutual recognition, not an occasional decontextualised activity (like voting) (Coleman 2013, 3), that can generate *new* acts of citizenship in a novel setting.

### *Spaces and infrastructures of exchange*

Although some processes in the community reporter network resonate with Dahlgren’s model of civic culture (practices, identity, values, trust), the lack of an adequate digital infrastructure meant that wider *spaces* and processes of exchange were not yet developed. Community reporters were willing to provide mutual support and recognition to one

another through the website, for example on technical matters. But they identified the need for an online discussion forum which could become a wider space of commentary, critique and connection:

The forum would be a brilliant idea [...] It'll draw people closer. I know all these different community reporters in different areas [...], but that's all you ever hear from them, but if the forum's up there, you'll hear more and you'll see more. People can post videos or just do a link from YouTube or wherever they've put their stuff, and then people can critique it. (David)

During our fieldwork, the website underwent a process of re-invention, acknowledging the need of community reporters to be visible not only to one another, but to wider audiences too. The redesign created a new requirement on community reporters to learn the skill of commenting on each other's new stories and adding tags to their posts. A website relaunch, introducing additional functionalities of community tagging and content curation, aimed to cultivate an environment of discussion and mutual support. With various adjustments to the architecture of the website and its framing and interpretation (curation), we attempted to facilitate online the social cooperation present in these reporters' offline networks. It remains to be seen whether this challenge will be taken up now as our fieldwork is complete: in encouraging these digital developments, we were already stretching the basic activity of 'digital storytelling' practice (the making of short digital films in workshop conditions) much further into the building online of effective contexts for further narrative exchange and commentary. Unless, however, such contexts can be built, the lack of a wider culture of online discussion noticed during our fieldwork will continue to break the circuit of civic culture and its potential benefits for broader *knowledge* production.

The case of community reporting manifests how the beginnings of a circuit of civic culture can emerge around practices of sharing stories and skills, in which digital resources are central. Practices of producing news stories and associated networks of trust and shared identity can be seen, as Dahlgren suggests, as mutually supporting elements of digital citizenship. However, the potential for engaging in discussion beyond the immediate interests of the local reporter group was hindered by the organisation's initially limited digital infrastructure. Digital citizenship, as an identity within a wider civic or political culture, is only possible when connections can regularly be drawn between otherwise isolated communities. Any such dispersed community of practice (Wenger 1998) needs stable web resources that allow citizens' contributions to be acknowledged as such, and so provide the basis for wider exchanges of knowledge. In this sense, our second case study illustrates both the promise of digital practice for building civic culture and the challenge of doing so on scales that go much beyond the very local.

### ***Local sixth-form college***

Our final case study is based on action research conducted with a sixth-form college (PCSF:<sup>5</sup> summer 2011 to winter 2013). Our research sought to facilitate sustained processes of narrative exchange, identifying social contexts and digital infrastructures that might support the long-term development of civic culture within an educational context. While 'digital citizenship' is the subject of a growing education literature, this has focused predominantly on teaching digital literacy and competency within the curriculum (Berson and Berson 2003; Coleman 2008; Ribble and Bailey 2007; Richards 2012). Our objective was broader: to develop with the college processes of narrative exchange that might support knowledge production and mutual recognition among staff and students, conceiving *both* as citizens with a contribution to make to 'matters of common concern' (Benhabib 1996, 68).

PCSF had a stated commitment to values of citizenship and civic culture, combined with openness to using digital platforms to support student voice. Yet, the college's normal educational practice (before our project started) militated against teachers and students (let alone PCSF's wider community) doing things together *as citizens*. Routine teaching practices segregated teachers from students, leaving few shared spaces for dialogue beyond the regulated space–time of the curriculum. This tended to undermine trust and affinity between students and teachers, resulting in divergent, not common, identities. In addition, an instrumental conception of learning in the college curriculum made difficult more open and shared uses of knowledge, let alone shared values. All of Dahlgren's interlocking dimensions of civic culture seemed to be blocked in various ways, preventing students from identifying themselves (and being identified by others) as citizens.<sup>6</sup> But it would be misleading to stop at this despairing judgement.

*From official values to habits of recognition?*

Civic values were explicitly acknowledged and promoted by the college at the institution level, with its mission of harnessing 'community pride, citizenship, loyalty and enterprise'. Staff were generally open to using digital technologies and recognised their potential for stimulating non-instrumental forms of narrative exchange; however, these values did not yet, as Dahlgren (2003) argues they must, have anchorings in everyday life. During our fieldwork, we encountered various instances of disjuncture between 'official' institutional values and students' everyday experience.

One occasion was a Twitter event connected to a college radio station launch, during which students were encouraged to tweet comments. While this was conceived as an opportunity for students to 'have a say', they read the event primarily in terms of a 'promotional logic' (Wernick 1991):

Researcher: What do you think they [the college] were trying to do with Twitter?

Student 1: Promote the radio station.

Student 2: And the college as well coz like there's people who we were tweeting in who could have friends who aren't in college who might come to college next year and they could think like 'I'm going to that college and this is what they're doing'. (Student focus group)

These students' apparent inability to comprehend the Twitter event in terms other than promotion makes sense given an absence of shared spaces for dialogue beyond the classroom and curriculum: students lacked familiarity with the idea that such dialogue might be encouraged. While PCSF did have mechanisms for encouraging student feedback, these tended to be focused on teaching and learning, not stimulating more civic-minded dialogue:

The sorts of dialogues we have [...] immediately you think [of] the student forum which meets regularly but that's often about the facilities, about things that they're having issues with rather than having a dialogue. (Sally, college leader)

Moreover, at the beginning of our fieldwork, efforts to open up spaces for dialogue *around* the curriculum rarely used digital technologies. One reason was the absence of open-ended *time* within the coordinated space–time of the curriculum:

Perhaps our worst enemy is time. Obviously, we're under a lot of pressure... I'm looking at these [social media tools] and thinking, yeah, great, I could do this but I know that when I walk out of here I'm going to go and do the paperwork I've got to do for Monday and the paperwork I've got to do today and I'm not going to look at it today because I can't and am I going to look at it over the weekend? No... (Chris, teacher)

An intensely regulated curriculum also impacted on students' time for experimentation with digital technologies:

two students [...] voted to digitize all the artwork from the original body of work and upload that and tweet some information [...] but they've not had a chance because they're all doing portfolio information [...] for interviews after Christmas, so that's sort of taken over. (Chris)

Yet, despite these constraints, there were attempts to construct wider spaces of exchange where teachers and students might interact in a less hierarchical learning situation. Perhaps the best example emerged around a departmental Twitter account set up in December 2011. Operated by a core of four enthusiastic teachers, this was conceived as a means to generate community within the department. As one teacher explained, the relative success of this digitally mediated space was attributable to its frequency of use and the character of the communication that occurred within it:

As teachers, we're on it quite a lot and we don't only tweet [...] we start off debates and get [students] to tweet or repost stuff from the Guardian for discussion. We also share other things, like, you know, very rarely but we do share things like going to see a certain movie or you know, just generic things that give a bit of a different view on ... we're not just, you know, we haven't been just teachers for our whole lives (laughs). You know, it creates a bit of a community and they do the same as well and they respect it for what it is and they use it to find out information and things. But I think it's because it's so active. All the teachers in [the department] have access to the account and there's about four of us who tweet about four times a day. (Robert, teacher)

Spaces for dialogue, as conceived by Dahlgren, are inextricably linked to the embedding of routinised, 'taken-for-granted' *practices* conducive to civic culture. As our fieldwork progressed, we found that special events which departed from the routine curriculum worked well in enabling students and staff to embrace different ways of 'doing things'.

It proved challenging, however, to embed practices conducive to digital citizenship in a more routinised way within the college. One reason was the obstacles to developing bonds of *trust and affinity* among staff and students within a highly regulated institutional context. While digital platforms offer much in the way of 'proto-agency' (that is the assemblage of processes, resources and circumstances that, together, are preconditions for sustained new forms of agency: see Clark et al., [forthcoming](#)) and the potential to develop new kinds of relationships, teacher–student trust tended in our early fieldwork to be undermined by the difficulty of transcending professional roles and wider anxieties about public–private boundaries:

It's often referred to as a safeguarding issue, that there's potential for problem and, at the moment, I haven't followed any students back [on Twitter]. Students are following me but I'm not following them and I'm going to leave it that way. (Jean, teacher)

Most of my social media accounts are private and I wouldn't want my education to become part of it. (Student, survey response)

Such concerns remained prominent throughout our fieldwork. We did, however, find some instances where teachers and students were able to overcome them. The department Twitter account illustrated how trust and affinity can be generated through social media platforms. According to teachers, its success was related to the fact that personal communications happened on a *public* platform:

Robert: One of the reasons why I think we get a lot of followers is because we do share things which as a teacher, there has to be a professional divide between personal and work, and that's a divide that has to be kept, but it's also quite a grey area, but because all of us are signed into the Twitter feeds, and because there's that accountability, you do feel that you're able to share a holiday pic, or, 'Look what happened to me today!'

Lisa: And they *love* that.

Robert: [...] it's something personal that you're sharing, but it's the ability to be able to share it that's safe. It's completely public, it's completely accountable [...] they no longer see you as the teacher that's going to tell you what to do –

There were also signs of trust emerging at the institutional level. At the beginning of our research, lack of trust meant students were barred from accessing the college Wi-Fi network and from using mobile phones and social media in class. As our fieldwork progressed, we saw a shift in attitudes among college leaders and teaching staff, resulting in the opening up of the Wi-Fi network and most teachers positively embracing mobile phone use in classrooms.

They've fought for so long to confiscate phones because they're a nuisance and now they're using them for learning and it's working really well and they can trust the students are using them for the right reasons because the activities that they use them for are really engaging and stimulating. (Leanne, college leader)

As long as [name of teacher] trusts you as in, you're not going on like, I don't know, YouTube on your phone, watching some daft video, I think she accepts that sometimes it's just easier to go on your phone. (Matthew, student focus group)

Though sanctioned use of mobile phones for (formal) learning is itself not *sufficient* for developing a digitally supported civic culture, relations of trust like those we see emerging here are surely a *necessary* precondition and have the *potential* to support wider processes of knowledge production.

### *New knowledge practices?*

What relationship to *knowledge* is needed for a circuit of civic culture? A 'skills gap' was identified as an obstacle early on in our fieldwork. Staff complained that lack of familiarity with digital tools prevented them from using these effectively; a notable minority of students had similar difficulties. Any notion of digital citizenship, however, must include more than just technical skills: knowledge in Dahlgren's model involves people's ability to make sense of what circulates in the public sphere and understand the world they live in (cf. Eubank 2011).

A different challenge involves channelling students' existing uses of digital technologies towards potentially civic purposes. A survey we conducted at PCSF in autumn 2012 ( $n = 889$ ) of students' access to, use and perceptions of social media and mobile phones found that a majority used social media daily, including Facebook (82%), YouTube (75%) and Twitter (55%). Although the most common uses of such platforms were everyday 'social' activities (chat and instant messaging: 94% reported doing this daily), our survey found many students *did* use social media for potentially civic purposes. In addition, 54% reported using social media to find information about current events or politics, 38% to discuss current events and politics, 77% to find information relating to personal interests, 49% to join online groups relating to personal interests and 51% to discuss personal interests. Although this cannot tell us much about the *quality* of students' communication, it clarifies the practical starting point from which any further circuit of civic culture in this educational context can build.

Towards the end of our fieldwork, we found evidence of PCSF beginning to experiment with processes of learning beyond the strict confines of curricular space–time. Such practices began to acknowledge forms of agency not present in traditional learning situations, with staff recognising that students are *already* knowledgeable (e.g. about their locality and its history, their own stake in economic and political developments) in ways



that are not always recognised in formal learning. As discussed in more detail elsewhere (Clark et al., [forthcoming](#)), we found examples of that, in embryonic form, when, outside the normal school time-schedule, teachers began to retweet themes and links tweeted by students for discussion, for example about gender inequalities in China:

StudentTwitterID: [@DeptTwitterID](#) china women inequalities  
<http://t.co/5kjjU1Rc>

DeptTwitterID: RT [@StudentTwitterID](#): [@DeptTwitterID](#) china women inequalities  
<http://t.co/5kjjU1Rc>

DeptTwitterID: [@StudentTwitterID](#) brilliant article on gender inequalities in China.  
 Some great concepts and facts to bring into essays

Interesting here is not only students taking the initiative outside a formal teaching situation to share this information, but the teacher's recognition of students as knowledge sources. While still linked primarily to the agenda set by the curriculum, such digitally supported practices *may* contain the kernel of more dialogical forms of learning with potential for contributing to a wider circuit of civic culture.

Whether such small-scale practices of recognition can be 'scaled up' at institutional level is unclear at this stage. This links to the final element of Dahlgren's model: *identities* – people's sense of themselves as citizens. Within the context of the college, it is still questionable whether students identify themselves, or are identified by others, in such terms. Young people face a wider lack of recognition as citizens and hence difficulty in developing new public-facing identities in heavily policed digital spaces. Although opportunities for students to develop early professional identities (including through digital media), which the college *was* supporting, may prove an indirect route into such a broader civic identity, the block to recognising civic identities in young people is overdetermined (see Boyd (2008) on the USA) and so difficult to overcome even in an educational context of sustained digital support.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have approached digital citizenship indirectly via Dahlgren's model of the elements that, if linked together, create a civic culture: that is, the cultural preconditions for practices of citizenship. We have explored through three contrasting case studies, each conducted in distinct demographic settings, what digital infrastructures can contribute to a civic culture, so defined.

At SLC, the strengths of a pre-existing civic culture emerged from our fieldwork on digital storytelling. Trust and shared practices of identity formation and knowledge generation were strongly present, and enhanced through practices of digital storytelling that implicitly carried a political charge, although the long-term consequences of an enhanced online infrastructure are still emerging. In our community reporters' network, the practice of digital storytelling itself helped stimulate many of the elements of Dahlgren's model, even if constrained by a wider stipulation to remain 'non-political', but a more robust online infrastructure was needed if a circuit of civic culture was to be developed on a larger scale. It was in the sixth-form college that, in spite of some initial resistances and obstacles, evidence emerged of teachers and students recognising each other as participants in a digitally enabled circuit of civic culture, albeit one at an early stage of formation.

A common theme from our case studies is the need for the elements of Dahlgren's circuit of civic culture to be consistently articulated together into stable practices that extend beyond the purely local. In a country where so little power is devolved to local



levels (Conover, Crewe, and Shearing 1991), the sustaining of civic culture on wider scales is essential if new forms (or acts) of citizenship are to be recognised as having validity. In all our case studies, the strongest examples of ‘digital citizenship’ were those in which digital connections were supplemented by ‘offline’ social practices. That said, digital resources are crucial to sustaining a circuit of civic culture on larger scales. In the community reporters’ network, this wider articulation was blocked (and the circuit of civic culture broken) by the absence of a sustained culture of online discussion; in the college, this was beginning to emerge across boundaries of curriculum and classroom, but depended for its full realisation on students being consistently recognised *as* citizens within and beyond the settings of formal learning.

The developments we have reported here are striking for their overlaps and parallels, even if they are incomplete in some respects. But at a time of fast change in digital interfaces and profound uncertainty about the acts that make up ‘citizenship’, it is exactly these early signs of new forms of digital citizenship and their basis in a circuit of civic culture that must be closely tracked.

## Notes

1. The research reported here was conducted as part of Storycircle, a core project within the FIRM research consortium funded by the RCUK Digital Economy Programme: see <http://firm-innovation.net> and <http://storycircle.co.uk>.
2. In detail: SLC, although it today admits girls, is overwhelmingly a male environment (both ‘lads’ and the officers, whose age ranges from teens to 90s), and so our detailed interviews were all with males ( $N=8$ ); organisers and reporters within the community reporters network we studied were of mixed gender and age, as was our formal interview sample ( $N = 12$ , eight women, four men, aged between 20 and 63); PCSF is a mixed-gender sixth-form college where we supplemented our mainly qualitative fieldwork with an online survey on mobile phone use ( $N = 889$ ). All these settings (with the exception of two networked community reporters from Brighton) were strongly working-class, including some areas of severe poverty.
3. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010, the area in which SLC is situated is among the 1.2% most deprived areas in England.
4. This and subsequent names are changed to preserve anonymity.
5. Code name used to preserve anonymity.
6. We discuss in detail elsewhere (Clark et al., [forthcoming](#)) the multiple factors constraining the working through of digital citizenship in the heavily regulated setting of a UK educational institution.

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