Imagined online communities: the digital disruption of traditional geographies of citizenship
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Abstract

This essay examines how the internet and digital media platforms are challenging traditional theories of citizenship as identification to the nation state. It responds to a body of literature asserting that notions of 'place' are potentially being replaced by a more conceptual mapping of citizenship (Wellman 2003, Hermes 2006, Glassman and Kang 2012, Tewksbury and Rittenburg 2012, Choi 2016). Through describing how the internet has disrupted traditional structures of information dissemination, this essay builds on Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities' to propose the notion of 'imagined online communities.' It engages with Choi's theory that online communities can be characterised as 'citizenships,' in order to define the differences between digital and traditional concepts of citizenship. Digital citizenship is then considered in terms of its potential for reinforcing supranational or 'global citizenship' identities; but also for accelerating polarisation within societies and exacerbating geographies of inequality. The conclusion is that 'place' still matters to the study of citizenship as, fundamentally, digital citizenships emerge through distinct political or socio-economic contexts.

In his famous phrase, 'Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains,' Rousseau (1762) defined the citizen as one that has exchanged individual will for participation in the 'social contract' – the laws that embody the will of a collective of citizens for their mutual preservation. Indeed, the modern concept of the citizen still relates to the relationship between an individual and a wider collective, within which citizens have the security of certain freedoms and rights in exchange for certain responsibilities. Wherever a citizen exists within a political, economic or cultural framework, it has also been assumed that he must exist within a geographic construct. Historically, citizenship has been defined in relation to place and, fundamentally, to the nation state (Anderson 1990). How else could citizenship be conceived or experienced, if not in terms of identification within the spatial borders which, throughout history, have been forged to regulate the defining citizenship ideologies of individual nations? This essay asks whether citizenships of 'networked individualism' are replacing 'cultural historical solidarity.' (Wellman et al 2003: 1). To what extent are spatial concepts of citizenship still relevant in the digital age? Through examining how online communities have the potential to evolve into 'digital citizenships' that may disrupt or supersede identifications to the state, this essay considers the validity of geographical perspectives for informing shifting concepts of citizenship.

Throughout history, nation states have been characterised by the methods and extent to which they control and disseminate information to their respective citizens. In the case of autocratic regimes, information flows have tended to be downward and didactic, in an attempt to reinforce state agendas and suppress dissent. However, even in the case of democratic states, government institutions have tended to maintain some degree of influence over the parameters of media reporting, as deemed appropriate to the 'social contract' between citizens and the state (eg. broadcasting regulations or privacy laws).

Clearly, any filtering of media is not limited to the political sphere; it has an embedded influence on the way in which a whole range of attitudes – social, consumer, ethical or otherwise – are shaped within and between citizenships over time. If, as this essay asserts, notions of citizenship are closely related to public opinion formation, then it is vital to understand where and how individuals form the opinions that constitute their respective citizen identities.

In the 1980s, Iyengar and Kinder (1988) were examining the link between the filtering of television news items and the distinctive character of American citizenship. By the following decade, Hartley had coined the term 'media citizenship' to describe how popular television culture had blurred the divide between the 'knowledge class' and ordinary citizens through creating 'mutual, reciprocal and interdependent sites of knowledge' (1996: 58-59). Since then, the internet has revolutionised the traditional systems by which news or other information can be filtered by governments, experts or journalists. Social media has caused an unprecedented shift in the modality through which citizens receive and engage with information. Increasingly news is disseminated horizontally, rather than vertically and, moreover, in a way that incites and takes shape through instant public engagement. Real-time witness videos of koalas fleeing Australian bushfires, or a child injured by a gas attack in Syria, have an immediate and profoundly emotional impact on citizens across the globe in an age when, in theory, anyone with a smartphone camera can become a news reporter. Now, as never before, the citizen forms opinions at the interface of multifarious and fluid information streams which facilitate an 'extension of mind' (Glassman and Kang, 2012: 679), with the result that citizenship is an increasingly sensitising concept (Hermes, 2006: 295). If the formation of public opinion is now happening at a level that largely escapes state influence and traditional media structures, this would suggest that a new methodology is required to understand the geographies of citizenship in the digital age.

Where Anderson (1990) once applied the term 'imagined communities' to describe the phenomena of national citizen identities, we can now see the limitless potential for 'imagined online communities' across the infinite range of human interests and experience. From virtual gaming worlds, to professional networking platforms such as Linkedin; from communities offering specific information or support, to the internet giants of Facebook, Instagram or Twitter – what all online communities have in common is that they fulfill the basic human need for communication and information exchange. Online communities offer the potential for transnational perspectives and, in this sense, are the tool of globalisation but, more than this, they enable a 'redistribution of influence from formal status to competence, commitment and enthusiasm.' (Grabner and Ibert 2014). We see evidence of this type of social-levelling and empowerment in the way Gen Z TikTok influencers are currently taking advantage of this platform's ubiquitous reach to engage millions of young people (who might not otherwise be politically-engaged) in debates in the run-up to the 2020 US election. Other communities, such as The Student Room, are examples of how intense user-engagement (including the ability to search back through threads or to cross-reference other users), shapes a fluid database of information; while anonymous user profiles encourage a more open style of exchange. I propose that it is possible to characterise online communities as:

- Emerging through a distinctive pattern or frequency of user-engagement
- Facilitating exchange of knowledge, ideas or support
- Organised by community-specific structures
- Reinforced through common terminologies / buzzwords / abbreviations
- Asserting boundaries for acceptable user discourse (eg. systems for reporting trolling)
- Enabling semi-public or anonymous profiles for users (eg. usernames, passwords)
- Promoting continuity of engagement (eg. the ability to cross-reference other users)

Essentially, online communities enable new paradigms for public opinion formation which are no longer defined or restricted by geo-spatial structures. But if spatial considerations are being replaced by a more conceptual mapping of cultural identities, what are the implications for geographic perspectives? More specifically – does the modality of cyberspace spell the 'end of geography' in informing concepts of citizenship, in favour of a 'contested terrain of competing online discourses?' (Warf, 2001: 3).

What is clear is that, in the digital age, the citizen forms opinions at the interface of a plethora of continually-evolving information streams. What is not so clear, however, is the extent to which this engagement in online communities is challenging national citizenship identities. This essay engages with this question by asserting a fundamental distinction between 'online communities' and 'online citizenships.' In both cases, information and active engagement are key – however, if 'users' are to be considered 'citizens,' there must also be evidence that they are participating in some form of 'social contract.' In fact, the traditional principles of citizenship can also provide a framework for interpreting the phenomenon of digital citizenship. A useful definition of the parallels between state and digital citizenship is provided by Choi, who perceptively argues that both are characterised by three main principles – ' being informed' 'active engagement' and 'social responsibility.' (2016: 21). I have devised the following chart to summarise how these principles apply to the two types of citizenship:

Principles of state versus digital citizenship:

	STATE CITIZENSHIP	DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP
INFORMATION	disseminated through hierarchical structures (government and media) degrees of censorship state-centric reinforced via education systems	peer-to-peer / lateral dissemination(largely) uncensored / immediate global (potential to go 'viral')
ENGAGEMENT	Compulsory public identity and accountability (passport, national insurance number, etc)Structured socio-economic hierarchies voting (democracies) or assumed loyalty to regime (autocracies) productivity (employment)	optional anonymous (user names)non-hierarchical global
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	national identification abide by state legislations / laws and 'social contracts' voting and tax participation state-focused	shifting identifications challenge, reinterpret or transform existing 'social contracts' protest / activism state-focused or global

This essay argues that when engagement within a digital community incites a shifting sense of 'social responsibility,' this is evidence that a 'digital citizenship' is emerging, with the potential for new 'social contracts' that are likely to be expressed offline, as well as online. But rather than developing as discrete phenomena, digital citizenship identities are interdependent with identities of the state – for the very reason that they often manifest as reactionary. The following examples show how digital citizenships have the potential to disrupt state citizenship identities, through inciting revolution or, alternatively, facilitating global citizenship identifications that supersede the boundaries of the nation state.

The Arab Spring, 2010-2012, provides a fascinating example of how an online-enabled, activist community can be defined as a citizenship in terms of the principles set out by Choi. There has been much debate as to the role of social media in this revolutionary struggle for democracy. For instance, while a major study of some three million Tweets tracked to this region during the unrest found that, 'spikes in online revolutionary conversations often preceded events on the ground.' (Howard,2011: 2); another study claimed that what sparked the protests was not social media itself, but the way it resonated in this specific geo-political context (Anderson 2011: 2), much like the effect of 'wind on fire' (Wolfsfeld 2013: 120). This essay argues that regardless of whether we see social media as inciting or reinforcing the events of the Arab Spring, what is more relevant is how it facilitated an 'informed' and 'actively engaged' digital citizenship, by virtue of the fact that they redefined 'social responsibility' as activism, whether online or on the ground via mass protests. Populist participation became the 'social contract' for a democratic citizenship. The first protests in Tunisia, uncensored and shared in real-time via mobile devices, reached across state borders, engendering a wave of unrest which eventually toppled the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Nowhere was the power of social media in establishing and connecting new and revolutionary citizenship identities more in evidence, than when, in 2011, the Egyptian government took the decision to cut off the internet. The Arab Spring is compelling evidence of how new citizenship identities can emerge online, with the potential to overturn previous notions of state citizenship.

In other cases, digital citizenships have manifested in ways that appear to transcend notions of state citizenship. The environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, has inspired a whole generation to take to social media to promote environmental causes. This phenomenon, dubbed as the 'Greta Effect,' showed us how Twitter is far more than a platform for interactive exchange. When online discourses begin to infiltrate the public consciousness in a way that alters offline citizen behaviours or values (eg. a shift towards more ethical consumer habits or participation in #Fridays4future strikes), this is evidence that notions of 'social responsibility' are shifting – in this case, implying new 'social contracts' for active global citizens in the face of impending environmental crisis. The uncensored immediacy of social media has enabled the world to feel interconnected through a deepening consciousness that what happens in one region today, will affect us all tomorrow. The concept of the 'global citizen' can, therefore, be defined as 'the dynamics of economic, cultural and ecological integration that are carrying human experience beyond its modernist phase of state / society relations.' (Falk 1993: 39). In this age of Twitter, it could be argued that citizenship identities are increasingly characterised by our online profiles, as the social

contracts required for active global citizenship may take precedence over notions of state citizenship.

However, the notion of global citizenship may also be facing a simultaneous backlash. Tewksbury and Rittenberg identify that a negative byproduct of online media forums is the fragmentation of knowledge and polarisation of opinion in contemporary democracies. (2015: 119-144). Arguably, we see evidence of this in the rise of nationalist, right-wing politics in the US, as notions of citizenship based on the 'America First' policies of Donald Trump seem increasingly out of touch with an irrepressible zeitgeist of online-enabled global citizens, whose voting patterns are more likely to be driven by ethical or global environmental concerns than domestic state interests. Despite the infinite potential of the internet to inform and connect us, there is an inherent paradox in that it also presents an opportunity for governments and / or citizens to self-select information to fit any given agenda. As such, online platforms may actually reduce rational discourse within societies as opinions become 'distorted, shrill and simplistic' (Noam 2002: 58) in an attempt to stand out in the multifarious online arena. As citizenship identifications increasingly take shape online, we can see the possible ramifications of accelerating ideological discord between the different citizen demographics that constitute a nation state.

The potential for online citizenships is further limited by what is known as the 'digital divide' – that within and between citizenships, there is uneven access to the internet and digital media due to patterns of economic inequality. This is Warf's point when he writes that, 'the internet creates and reflects a distinct spatial structure interlaced with, and often reinforcing, existing relations of wealth and power.' (Warf 2001: 3). In terms of global citizen identities, what is significant here, is that only certain demographics are in the socio-economic position to inform themselves on supranational issues, or to participate in a 'social contract' to make more ethical choices – whether this be the ability to buy Fairtrade foods or ethically-produced clothing; switch to electric cars; or install solar heating. We can see how the socio-economic inequalities inherent in the digital divide intersect with and exacerbate the issue of increasing ideological polarisation within societies and, moreover, how this can be extrapolated on a global level. Put another way, it is evident that, even where citizen identities are developed online, the focus of digital citizenships continues to be determined by political and socio-economic geographies.

In conclusion, it is clear that, in disrupting the way that information is disseminated between the state and citizens, the internet has transformed and expanded opportunities for public opinion formation and online / offline identities. Citizenship is still about where we identify, spatially; yet the impact of the internet on the filtering, flow and dissemination of information has challenged the presumed naturalness of citizen allegiances to the nation state. On occasions, online communities may develop the characteristics of citizenships. Recent years have witnessed many examples of the power of social media in enabling events 'on the ground' to go viral across the globe – the #MeToo or Black Lives Matter campaigns demonstrating how social media can engender shifting parameters for citizenship, both within and between nations. Wherever there is conflict between personal and state citizen identities, the 'social contract' that binds us to the state begins to loosen and we may turn to online forums to seek alternative connections or solutions through the

continuously expanding networks of cyberspace. However, this essay has also demonstrated that, in a world increasingly connected through digital media, it does not follow that geographical perspectives on citizenship are ceasing to be relevant. On the contrary, the digital divide that exists within and between nations implies new opportunities for geography in examining how an unequal access to the modality of the internet affects citizen identities across the globe. Moreover, the exciting challenge of research at the interface of 'place' and 'cyberspace' means that geography will have a vital role in informing state and international policy, through identifying shifts in economic, cultural or voting patterns in the context of a rapidly globalising world.

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