Examining the Role of Information in the Civic Engagement of Youth

Alieda Blandford
Dalhousie University
Halifax, Canada
Alieda.Blandford@dal.ca

Dominique Taylor
Dalhousie University
Halifax, Canada
Dominique.Taylor@dal.ca

Mike Smit
Dalhousie University
Halifax, Canada
Mike.Smit@dal.ca

ABSTRACT

Despite the decline in youth participation in traditional politics over time, engagement in alternative forms of civic engagement is increasing. Existing research focuses on disenfranchised youth; in this paper, we describe an initial exploration of the role of information in initial and ongoing civic engagement. In this pilot study, we conducted a focus group with six teenagers (15-17 years old) recognized by their teachers and peers for being highly engaged in their schools and/or communities, in order to understand the self-described motivations, influences, and information behaviors of an important demographic which has not been widely studied in existing literature: youth who are highly engaged, but not yet eligible to vote in democratic elections. The participants were from six different provinces in Canada, and included a mix of rural, suburban, and urban youth. Participant responses suggested that their information environment, including the availability of information about civic affairs and opportunities to become directly involved, played a role in their socialization as engaged citizens. Moreover, they indicated that the effect of their information environment on their own civic engagement was cumulative over time: the more an issue appeared, the more likely they were to engage with it. Based on this focus group discussion, we suggest a set of interpretations that describe the role of information environments, the cumulative impact of civic information, and the levels of information consumption used by youth. While these theories will require additional data to confirm or reject, we expect that our observations will help inform efforts to engage youth in civic society.

Keywords
Civic engagement; information seeking; youth engagement; information behavior

INTRODUCTION
The decline of youth participation in traditional politics is a demonstratively long-term trend that is present in advanced democracies worldwide (see Blais & Loewen, 2011;

Edwards, 2007; Henn & Foard, 2014; Mann, Abbas, Burton, Gauder, Jones & Lafleur, 2009). Research to date has examined the democratic and civic "disenfranchisement" of youth, focusing on the perceived trend of democratic apathy and low voter turnout among young adults (see Adsett, 2003; Blais & Loewen, 2011; Edwards, 2007; Howe, 2010; Mann et al., 2009; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003). However, we know youth are more likely to participate in alternate, non-traditional political activities, such as demonstrating, boycotting, and volunteering, than are older citizens (Mann et al., 2009; Turcotte, Anthony, Anderson, Hilderman, Loat, Philips et al., 2013). While informed citizens tend to be more engaged politically (Delli Carpini, 2005; Cohen & Chaffee, 2010; Hochschild, 2008; O'Neill, 2004; Wells & Dudash, 2007), youth today also access, retrieve, and disseminate information differently than previous generations (Freelon, Wells, & Bennett, 2013, p.416).

In this paper, we examine the question of how youth become and remain civically engaged, and what role data and information play in their initial and ongoing engagement. Our work in general is guided by three central research objectives:

- To examine what levels and types of involvement civically engaged youth perceive to constitute civic engagement;

- To explore the factors which impact the degree to which youth in our study are civically engaged;

- To identify the nature and type of information sources that civically engaged youth identify as supporting an encouraging their civic engagement.

The civically engaged youth we are interested in better understanding have not been widely studied in existing literature. We therefore started with a small-scale, qualitative study to help identify and define potential theories to further explore in the next phase of research. In this initial exploratory pilot study, we conducted a focus group with 6 high school students from 6 different provinces in Canada, each recognized by their teachers and peers for being highly engaged in their schools and/or communities. Based on participant responses, we suggest theories for further exploration, including the role of

information environments and who helps to create these environments, the cumulative impact of information relevant to civic engagement, and the approach of youth to information consumption, particularly politically-relevant information consumption.

In the remainder of the paper, we present a brief overview of literature from both the civic engagement literature and the information seeking literature. We describe our methodology in more detail, then present our results. We describe our emerging theories about the role of information in civic engagement of youth, and finally conclude with a description of the next steps for this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evidence suggests that political socialization and civic engagement are behaviours gained in adolescence (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008; Cohen & Chaffee, 2012; Mann et al., 2009). Education is the number one correlate among voting populations (Blais & Loewen, 2011), but it should be noted that, in terms of the non-traditional civic engagement prevalent among younger cohorts, education is less influential than other social influences including parents, mentors, peer networks, and mass media, all of which can inform young adults about the world around them (Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Gordon, 2008; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Henn & Foard, 2014; Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006; Soule & Nairne, 2009; Wells & Dudash, 2007). A decrease in passive mass media consumption by youth, combined with an increase in the use of participatory media, suggests that younger cohorts are using information differently than previous generations (Freelon, Wells, & Bennett, 2013, p.416), and that the role of peers, parents, and mentors in constructing an information environment is increasing in importance.

The term "civic engagement" is broadly defined. The high level of youth participation in non-voting political activities implies that any discussion of civic engagement among youth should include and validate this type of civic action. This allows a more complex picture to emerge, in which youth can be seen as civically engaged, rather than as merely disenfranchised or apathetic citizens (Henn & Foard, 2014; Mann et al., 2009; Milan, 2005). Henn and Foard (2014) report "contrary to the common stereotype of a politically apathetic generation, young people are interested in politics, and do have faith in the democratic process" (p. 373). While the perspectives of disenfranchised youth are covered in the literature, few have directly examined the factors at play in youth who choose to engage through these alternative means.

Researchers generally agree that informed citizens are more engaged politically (Delli Carpini, 2005; Cohen & Chaffee, 2010; Hochschild, 2008; O'Neill, 2004; Wells & Dudash, 2007). Delli Carpini (2005) suggests that "democracy becomes more responsive and responsible the more informed, and the more equitably informed, is its citizenry"

(p. 5). Cohen and Chaffee (2012) argue that "multiple types of civic knowledge are important for civic engagement" (p. 2), including current events knowledge, local political knowledge, and civic literacy (Elections Canada, 2011). That being said, research shows that encounters with misinformation or conflicting information can lead youth to disengage from civic affairs (Wells & Dudash, 2007; Hochschild, 2008). Moreover, not all accurate information is necessarily or accurately interpreted as relevant (Hochschild, 2008). In this sense, access to information is neither necessary nor sufficient in guaranteeing the civic engagement of youth.

A large body of research to date has examined the democratic and civic (dis)engagement of youth, focusing in particular on the growing trend of low voter turnout among this age group (Adsett, 2003; Blais & Loewen, 2011; Edwards, 2007; Howe, 2010; Mann et al., 2009; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003). While much of the existing research does not necessarily approach voting as the sole means of civic engagement, voting is widely considered to be one of the most fundamental processes to democracy (Cohen & Chaffee, 2012, p. 2), and the right to vote is believed to be "the basis of all freedoms, all other rights, and is thus a citizen's number one duty" (Quéniart, 2008, p. 218).

A large body of research seeks to explain the trend of youth 'disenfranchisement' within the traditional democratic process. For instance, declining voter turnout has been described as a "cohort problem," wherein younger generations are steadily voting less than their predecessors did at the same age (Adsett, 2003, p. 248). According to Blais and Loewen (2011), "[i]n the 1960s, about 70% of the members of a new cohort would vote in the first election in which they were eligible to participate; by 2004 it was only slightly over 30%" (p. 12). Other period effects, including a difference in political era and a shift in electorate demographics, may help to explain this trend. For example, Adsett (2003) argues that youth have a reduced sense of social capital in the political arena today. As the population ages, youth account for a declining share of the electorate, and at the same time the government has reduced its support for "issues that interest young adults, such as post secondary education, equality and human rights" (Milan, 2005, p.3). This demographic shift leads Adsett to argue that "young adults today feel marginalized from mainstream political discourse" (in Milan, 2005, p.3). However, there are many other possible explanations for low voter turnout among youth, including a lack of political education (Bishop & Low, 2004), a lack of interest (Blais & Loewen, 2011; Mann et al., 2009; Pammett & DeLuc, 2003), or barriers to accessibility (Mann et al., 2009).

It has been suggested that many youth are not voting because they have found "more meaningful activities with which to engage" (Blais & Loewen, 2011, p. 9; see also Mann et al., 2009; Quéniart, 2008). Along these lines, a number of activities and dispositions have been identified as relevant to civic engagement in addition to traditional

electoral participation, including, but not limited to, volunteering, political attentiveness, communicating political/societal issues, donating, boycotting, singing a petition, demonstrating, or contacting elected officials (Gauthier, 2003; Mann et al. 2009; Milan, 2005; O'Neill, 2007; Turcotte, Anthony, Anderson, Hilderman, Loat, Philips, et al. (2013). Interestingly, youth are equally or more likely to participate in these kinds of non-traditional political activities than are older citizens, although a lower percentage vote and interact with politicians (Turcotte et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2009; Milan, 2005; O'Neill, 2007). For instance, Milan (2005) found that the "rate of participation in non-voting political activities [of adults in their twenties] was comparable to that of adults ages 30 to 64 and exceeded that of seniors, who have the highest voter participation of all age groups" (p. 6). Milan (2005) also notes that engaging in community- oriented activities (e.g., belonging to sports teams, clubs, or community groups) is positively associated with an increase in non-traditional political engagement, but not with voting (p. 4). On the other hand, Blais and Loewen (2011) found that those who participate in non-traditional political activities are actually more likely to vote (p. 9).

Evidence suggests that political socialization and civic engagement are behaviours gained in adolescence (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008; Cohen & Chaffee, 2012; Mann et al., 2009). Education is the number one correlate among voting populations (Blais & Loewen, 2011), but it should be noted that, in terms of the non-traditional civic engagement of youth, education is less influential than other social influences including parents, mentors, peer networks, and mass media (Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Gordon, 2008; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Henn & Foard, 2014; Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006; Soule & Nairne, 2009; Wells & Dudash, 2007), all of which can inform young adults about the world around them. As Wells and Dudash found in their 2007 study, adolescents "gain a great deal of their political knowledge through their political talk with others" (p. 1282).

METHODOLOGY
This initial pilot study aimed to achieve a better understanding of the motivations, influences, and information behaviors among highly engaged youth. We conducted a focus group with six teenagers (15-17 years old) identified as highly engaged in their schools and communities, but below the voting age in Canada. The participants were from different provinces in Canada, and included a mix of rural, suburban, and urban youth. The focus group took place in Halifax, Nova Scotia, during a summer program the students were attending. They had known each other for three weeks at the time of the focus group. This project was reviewed and approved by Dalhousie University's Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board.

We provided our definition of civic engagement ("involvement in your neighbourhood, city, province, country, and/or global community"), then asked questions in three major categories: what does it take to be civically engaged and how do you engage in your school and community; how do you seek and share information related to your civic engagement; and how do you use, understand, and evaluate civically-relevant information. The format of the focus group questions guides us through exploring participants' current levels of engagement, to the role that information plays in their civic interest and engagement, and finally to what information, if any, they would wish to access more easily.

96 minutes of audio was captured and transcribed, then independently examined by each of the three authors. Using grounded theory, a thematic content analysis was performed focusing on themes relevant to the participants' civic development before the age of majority.

RESULTS
Generally, participants had a fairly broad perception of what constituted civic engagement for them, including involvement in school clubs, volunteer work, and community service. "Being informed" was also mentioned as a type of civic engagement:

> I think doing stuff is a really important thing, but even just being   informed, as a youth. A lot of youth don't know what's going on, so just being informed about what's happening in your community, or province, city, globally… being informed   helps you to be more engaged, because you can talk to your friends and that might do something.

In addition to "being informed", most participants highlighted the importance of "caring about" or "being interested in" civic affairs. For instance, Participant 1 defined civic engagement as "actually caring about what's going on in your community," and Participant 2 agreed with this. Participant 5 mentioned the importance of participating, "feeling connected", or "even just being interested" in one's community. This participant linked a sense of caring about an issue to the tendency to "delve into that issue and learn more about it".

Influences
Participants identified a number of external factors that influenced both their civic development and their overall level of civic engagement. The development of civically-engaged, everyday communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), in which participants were engaged in collective learning with peers and mentors, seems to have had a positive effect on their level of engagement with civic affairs.

Generally, participants identified their peers, families, and schools as playing a major role in their civic development, and several attributed their civic interest to the initial

encouragement of their parents. As Participant 3 pointed out, "The way you're raised influences how you think of things, and what you think of as the social norms of what you should do". Participant 4 agreed, stating:

It's not just the youth itself [responsible for their level of civic engagement], it's also what they're brought up in. […] It's a lot about what happens at the home. Even around the dinner table: you hear about it, you look more into it, you get interested, you talk to your friend about it.

Similarly, Participant 1 described how, after he was "pushed" by his parents to volunteer, he "got more engaged with the community" and began "to make friends who enjoyed being civically engaged, and then, basically, it took off from there".

A network of peers interested in community and civic engagement was viewed as important by participants. Participant 1 stated, "I think being civically engaged within your community has to do with the people you surround yourself with". Participant 2 agreed, saying, "It's a lot to do with who you hang out with, 'cause if they're motivated to be civically involved, then you're motivated". Participant 3 highlighted the importance of having conversations with like-minded peers, pointing out that debate clubs and other student groups give youth "the opportunity to engage in conversation with a group of people" their own age. Witnessing peers become involved in their community was influential for her, she said, as it made her want to get involved herself.

Opportunities to become involved in extracurricular student groups, such as debate clubs or student governance, were also mentioned frequently as the basis for becoming informed and engaged in civic affairs. Participants mentioned the transition from these types of organized school activities to the development of further leadership and volunteer work. For Participant 6, this development occurred after she had "the opportunity to be School Captain in grade seven". She then began to inform herself about civic affairs through debate class, and, once she had identified local issues of importance to her, she recognized her own agency to affect change. "If there was a problem I saw," she explained, "it was immediately like, 'well, I could change this.'" Her concern for the disadvantaged and elderly in her community prompted her to recruit a group of peers to visit local seniors homes. After that, she explained, "it snowballed to where I got involved with starting a lot of initiatives".

Throughout the focus group discussion, participants described a cumulative "snowball effect" in relation to their own civic engagement. Participants reported that their level of engagement grew over time, as did their interest in civic affairs; their increased interest led them to notice or seek out further political or civic information, which led to further engagement. As mentioned, many participants began by striving to fulfill their parents' expectations, but reported that they soon they made social connections with like-minded peers, gained social trust in their communities, and joined school programs which encouraged participation and discussion. As Participant 3 stated, "It's kind of a snowball effect, like you start one thing and it just keeps building over and over […] More opportunities just keep presenting themselves".

The Information Environment
Participants repeatedly described cases in which they "stumbled" upon information about social issues and civic affairs in their everyday environments, and this type of serendipitous or incidental information discovery often triggered interest in various civic issues. Participant 5 said that she often discovered civic information while "sitting down for dinner" with her family: "we'll watch the six o'clock news on my local TV station," she said, and "that will spark [my] interest on what's happening locally". Similarly, Participant 4 described his discovery of municipal politics while reading free local newspapers to pass the time while waiting for the bus. This participant also described overhearing local issues on the radio as he got ready in the morning, and later mentioned noticing the news on television while at work. Incidental information discovery also occurred while participants were monitoring social media: "I'll be sitting on Tumblr scrolling through," Participant 5 said, "and there will be something that sparks like, 'what's that about?' and I'll Google it". Participant 4 agreed: "you find some news on Facebook or something, and they give you a little niblet and then you're like, 'okay, that is actually interesting.' Then you Google it, try to find out more about it".

According to participants, discovering information about civic issues often triggered further information-seeking, as well as information-sharing, and other, more active means of civic participation, such as volunteering or writing letters to political representatives. Participant 5 created a feminist group within her school after reading material about gender inequality: "I was getting really fed up with the situation," she said. "I read more and more [about feminism]" until "I eventually [decided to] start up a school group to raise awareness". Similarly, Participant 6 decided to write letters to representatives in Parliament after she encountered information about the Enbridge pipeline. "I got so riled up after I read everything about it that I wrote a really long letter and sent it off to [my Member of Parliament], and [Prime Minister] Stephen Harper… basically anyone I could think of to send it to."

These examples underline the importance of information discovery to youths' civic engagement. "When I've looked into these [issues]," Participant 4 explained, "I find things that get me… not angry, but annoyed. […It's] one of those things where you learn about it and you say, 'No, I want to change it.' You want to get more and more involved and make it the way you think it should be." These examples, combined with previous examples including the influence

of everyday communities of practice, illustrate the importance of a rich information environment in triggering civic interest, political efficacy, and the ongoing civic engagement of youth.

Information Preferences

Participants expressed a clear preference for concise, visually structured information presented online and on mobile-friendly platforms, and identified the Internet, including social media, as their most frequent source of information. The participants were generally confident that any information they wanted about a given topic could be found online.

Participant 4 explained the advantages of using a mobile phone app for accessing the news: "I have the BBC app on my phone. So having that at your fingertips, scrolling through and figuring out all the updates: it's there and it's easy to figure out what's going on," she said. Participant 6 agreed that, in her opinion, youth preferred to scroll through short-form news articles on their smart phones rather than consume news on traditional media such as television, radio, or newspapers. Participants also used their smart phones in other contexts; for example, Participant 5 stated that she has received SMS messages encouraging her to participate in civic actions. Interestingly, participants stated that they did not frequently use Twitter as a tool for information acquisition or sharing; instead, they preferred distilled information sources that populated in their Facebook newsfeeds or e-mail inboxes, such as Upworthy, ThinkProgress, and The Skimm. Reddit was also a popular choice for participants as a source of news.

Participants expressed ambivalence at the notion sharing information related to civic engagement with their peers in certain contexts.

> I think that often it's hard to find the context to bring it up. [. . .] There isn't really an opportunity where you're walking down the hallway and you're like, "Oh, child soldiers," right? That doesn't really happen.

On the other hand, one participant suggested that she would appreciate opportunities to discuss such issues in a structured context (i.e., in class): "If there were more opportunities to have discussions about these kinds of issues in school, I think a lot of people would really appreciate that". Participant 3 felt that youth would be more likely to share information if they knew that their peers shared an interest in civic affairs or social justice.

This reluctance to share information is in spite of the belief that information is important to engagement. The same participant suggested one barrier to civic engagement in youth is that "a lot of youth don't know what's going on". On the other hand, he described the way in which filtering, reading, and weighing multiple perspectives, which he felt was necessary in order to become informed, was hard work: "a lot of people don't care enough to do that or don't have time to do that".

The group agreed that youth often want to blend in with their peers, so being noticeably engaged could create tension: they acknowledge it elicits approvals from parents and teachers, but are concerned about their peers' perspectives: "It's just trying to balance civic engagement without disrupting your friends and your social life… you want to be cool… It's hard to figure out when to bring up stuff that [other youth will] connect with. I just won't know [if they're interested] until they bring it up, or I've already brought it up and they've said yes."

When they do choose to share information, social media is a preferred platform, and information that is both fast and entertaining was preferred. Participants expressed a reluctance to share long articles via social media. Several participants stated that they preferred to share information that was "short and concise" (Participant 2), because "most people might not read" an entire article (Participant 1). Similarly, Participant 6 stated, "When I share things on Facebook it's mostly infographics because they are very short to look at". Participant 4 agreed, stating, "Facebook, social media, it's the little infographics that just – you can scroll down and read it for a second. Keep scrolling. Now you have it in the back of your mind". Explaining their preference for consuming and sharing concise, visually structured information, both Participant 2 and Participant 4 stated that if someone becomes interested in a topic, he or she will investigate it further. In this way, information sharing can be seen as a way to inspire interest in civic affairs by informing others of an issue's most salient points, rather than providing a comprehensive or detailed overview.

Information Overload

In line with their preference for short, concise, and visually structured information, participants demonstrated weariness regarding the abundance of information on any given topic. Participant 6 described how having access to a copious supply of information can increase the level of difficulty in understanding an issue: "it makes it hard when there's so much information out there," she said. "Where do you start? Where do you stop, and when do you stop? [. . .] I find it really challenging when I'm trying to do specific research, to find exactly what I'm looking for". Along these lines, Participant 3 stated that one needed to avoid being "overwhelmed with everything at once" in order to understand an issue.

Participant 4 felt that an overabundance of information was a positive thing, because more aspects of a topic can be covered, more points of view can be addressed, and the information needs of more people can be satisfied. However, he pointed out that, due to the proliferation of similar information from different sources, it can be difficult to locate or identify new information or alternative perspectives on a given issue. This participant felt that the "organization of information" was problematic in this

sense, and that the presentation or structure of information needed to "compensate" for this abundance in some way.

Given their concern with the overabundance of information, it is no surprise that participants show a preference for acquiring distilled information from resources that are concise. Four of the six participants also describe a preference for "skimming," and "scanning" information sources as a necessary strategy in response to the abundance of information online.

Veracity and Bias

Interestingly, participants expected their information sources to be biased, but argued that this was not problematic, as long as multiple perspectives on a given issue were available to them. On the other hand, participants were highly concerned about the *veracity* of information. They agreed unanimously that, as long as the information was accurate, the bias underlying the presentation of that information was unimportant. Participants expressed a preference for reliable sources of information, such as news sources and statistics. To explain this, Participant 4 pointed to the ease with which misinformation can be created and disseminated:

> I find it hard, especially when a lot of our information is from social media – it's really easy to fake or alter. So it's really hard to tell. For me it's really annoying because for most people that read it, they see an amazing fact, but now what? There's nothing to back up; nothing to prove it.

This participant suggested that youth who are not civically engaged often "don't know what's going on" in the world, and attributed this to the difficulty in sorting through, verifying, and evaluating multiple sources of information. Most people, he argued, "don't care enough or don't have the time to do that".

Desired Information

When asked what kind of information they would like to see about civic topics, the participants came up with several ideas. Participant 6 mentioned that she would like to see "What kinds of things [the government is] currently talking about. [. . .] like what bills are currently being debated," arguing that this information would give citizens the opportunity to write letters to their representatives in parliament. Participant 1 agreed, adding that he would also like to know the government's "views and their plans to do something about an issue". Along these lines, Participant 4 suggested that informative heuristics, such as a summary of industry, political, and nonprofit supporters or lobbyists on both sides of an issue, would be helpful in order to help youth grapple with complex political ideas.

Asked about whether they had ever used government websites to find information, the participants agreed that it was easier to use Google. For instance, Participant 1 pointed out that if he wanted "to search certain statistics stuff [. . .] it's harder to do it on the actual Stats Canada website. It's easier to search on Google for it and find the Stats Canada website [from there]". Many participants agreed with this statement; for example participant 4 stated that he would begin a search for information on Google because "government site[s are] just harder to use. It's harder to find stuff". For Participant 5, Wikipedia was a more succinct source of information than government websites.

Along these lines, all of the participants agreed that currently, government websites were not user-friendly places to look for or discover information about government issues. Participant 2, 3, and 6 agreed that they would not use government websites if they could help it. Stats Canada is "a spreadsheet with numbers on it," Participant 6 said. "I've got more interesting things to read". Participant 4 agreed with these sentiments, saying, "I don't really care about the population of Canada. [. . .] I don't care about the car crashes right now. I want to know about what's happening in Israel or what the mayors are promising the cities. [. . .] not just random data facts that we can monitor."

When asked what government websites could do to improve, Participant 6 explained that government websites were "really ugly". She said she would "read it more if there were infographics, or if the website was easier to search around". Participant 3 agreed, saying government websites should be "easier to maneuver" and "more appealing to the eye".

DISCUSSION

Based on these results, and building on existing literature, we propose two theories that we suggest help understand the role of information in civic engagement. These theories will be further explored in future studies.

Information skimming, information dabbling, and information diving

From participants' descriptions of their information behaviours, we identified three levels of engagement with civically-relevant information, which we refer to as information skimming, information dabbling, and information diving.

Information skimming was the most common kind of engagement with information. Participants' clear preference was for convenient, mobile-friendly applications which allowed them to scan or scroll through article titles and images until something sparked their interest (*infinite scroll*, in web development terms). In other words, participants preferred web applications which support browsing behaviours (see Chang and Rice, 1993) and serendipitous discovery of information (see Erdelez, 1997; Erdelez, 1999). These findings reflect current best practices for web design, and suggest that any development of web or mobile applications that aim to increase civic engagement among youth should take emerging preferences for mobile access, infinite scroll, and social sharing into account.

While participants referred to many types of media through which they discovered information, including television, word-of-mouth, newspapers, and radio, the main source of information discovery among all participants was the Internet, with social media being particularly important for the discovery of civically-relevant information.

Information dabbling is information consumption that stays mostly on the surface of an issue, but does involve looking more closely at a few resources. When participants became interested in an issue beyond simply reading one article linked in social media, they described using various sources (search engines, news articles, Wikipedia) to learn more about the issue. Participants expressed a preference for short, concise articles, and visually structured information, including infographics. They identified videos as being a slow way of communicating information that was less appealing than short text documents and infographics. Participants expressed reluctance to do in-depth examination of an issue; for example, participants reported a need for clear, straightforward, summative information about political issues and government processes, including current debates in Parliament.

Information diving refers to the practice of thoroughly investigating an issue. As one participant put it, they "open fifty different tabs and look at every single one". Participants reported undertaking this only rarely, and when a participant mentioned accessing raw data directly from the source, other participants reacted with skepticism. When they do undertake this level of investigation, participants reported struggling with the amount of information available and its lack of organization, and how it is "harder to actually find information once a story explodes". Participants expressed frustration that the "first ten percent of every issue" is covered in depth but the remaining 90% is difficult to locate.

This theory is reminiscent of Heinström's (2005) "fast surfing, broad scanning, and deep diving" model, which suggests an inherent preference for information-seeking patterns based on personality type. Our participants were generally characterized by "exhaustive and flexible information seeking in a wide range of sources," as well as a tendency to "come across useful information incidentally" (Heinström, 2005, p. 241), which may indicate broad-scanning tendencies. The skimming/dabbling/diving view is primarily driven by context and information need or interest; participants engaged in all three behaviours (skimming, dabbling, and diving) along a continuum depending on their level of interest in the topic. Given Heinström's conclusions, we theorize that personality types influence the transition between these behaviors, serving as a catalyst rather than a determinant.

Political efficacy and the information environment
Participants' descriptions of their own civic engagement reflect modern empirical work in the political science field, which demonstrates that the political efficacy of youth is shaped by social learning experiences "in families, schools, extracurricular activities, and communities" (Beaumont, 2010, 531). We theorize there is a connection from the availability of political and civic information through parents, teachers, peers, and various media to civic interest; and from civic interest to further information-seeking and civic engagement, which can be catalyzed by parents or teachers but eventually becomes self-perpetuating. It is important to note that we would suggest the converse is true as well, that these everyday communities of practice can have a limiting or diminishing impact on civic engagement when parents, teachers, peers, and other influencers are not supportive of civic interest.

We suggest that the availability of information about civic affairs and opportunities to become directly involved can lead youth to become civically engaged. A youth's information environment plays an important role in their socialization as engaged citizens. Focus group participants indicated that the effect of their information environment on their own civic engagement was cumulative over time: the more an issue appeared, the more likely they were to engage with it. Moreover, they described searching for further information, sharing information with others, or engaging in active participation (such as volunteering, creating school groups, or contacting elected officials) after encountering information in their everyday environments, such as in their homes or on social media. We know that the decision to engage with society or even with information is a complex, multi-variate problem; our focus would be assessing whether a given information environment is primarily a catalyst, primarily an inhibitor, or neutral.

CONCLUSION
We have completed an initial exploratory study of how six civically engaged youth interact with information, and based on the explanations our subjects provided and a brief review of the literature, suggested a set of theories about the role of information in their civic engagement.

We must be cautious of these theories and apparent connections, as they are based on a single small focus group. They are consistent with existing literature and with our observations of civic engagement, but will require additional data to confirm or reject. It is our hope that these observations from previously under-studied civically engaged youth will help inform efforts to engage youth in civic society and in traditional expressions of civic engagement like voting. Our most important suggestion, the potential correlation between civic engagement and the availability of good information, suggests the importance of Open Information: using Open Data to create information about our communities and governments that is easy to use, easy to access, and easy to understand.

The next stage of this research will attempt to verify the theories we have proposed for the demographic of civically engaged youth. We will design a survey instrument to gather quantitative data sampled from a broader population.

We also intend to further develop our theories. For example, while we suggest the information environment and "everyday community of practice" is what starts the cumulative effect of increased civic engagement, what participants called the "snowball effect", and that peers are what sustains the accumulation, it is clear that for some youth the snowball effect never starts or never achieves sufficient mass; the factors that determine the presence or absence of the snowball effect would be of great interest. If further study confirms our categorization of information skimming, dabbling, or diving is present in other populations, it would be valuable to explore the role information presentation plays in the decision to skim, dabble, or dive, and how youth transition between those states.

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