Young Americans are largely disengaged from civic life, especially when considering traditional measures like face-to-face participation in neighborhood activities. However, an increasing number of the youth are technologically savvy, as evident in daily use of online forum and a wide–spectrum of electronic means including ipods, ipads, iphones, emails, video, virtual reality, the Internet facebooks, twitter, etc. This research investigates ways to harness youth's powerful online social networking into public voice, political activism, and community-based participation.

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# Becoming Citizens: Youth E-engagement in Civic and Public Policy

**University of Illinois at Chicago
Department of Urban Planning and Policy
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**July 2011** Final Report

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Executive Summary

Youth utilize powerful new technologies and social media in a variety of significant ways. This research investigates how new technologies and social networking platforms can potentially be used to connect youth to political and civic causes, increase youth's public voice, and encourage community-based participation among youth. Technologies and social media may be of particular importance to organizations working with youth as they can serve as a tool to re-engage youth, who on the whole, are less engaged in traditional forms of political and civic engagement than other cohorts.

This research undertook multiple inter-related but non-linear activities. The involvement of multiple researchers allowed for timely completion of the tasks summarized in the following three sections: literature review, field and empirical work, and digital application. Working in concert, the three sections shed light on current applications of technologies and social media, potential obstacles in their adoption, and benefits that may accrue be through their use.

First, a literature review explores changes in political participation patterns among youth, existing applications of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and

highlights potential advantages and disadvantages to their use. Internet use has long been the most useful source of political and issue based information for youth, surpassing traditional sources of information including television, newspapers, and personal conversations (Project Vote Smart 1999 in Carpini 2000, 346). This, coupled with the knowledge that youth are more likely to participate in online politics than in traditional politics points to online forms as an important way to counteract downward trends in youth political and civic engagement (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward, 2005 573). This report identifies several such cases exemplifying current applications of diverse technologies including email, text messaging, websites, social media, GIS, which engage youth in a variety of programs. While the outcomes of these programs vary, the case studies and research suggest that online and technology based forms of engagement are often effective, but organizations must be aware of the technology gap which may limit the engagement of low-income and minority youth.

To better understand the advantages and disadvantages of the electronic tools and ICTs, researchers interviewed representatives of seven youth-oriented organizations. These community-based organizations work with youth in a range of initiatives such as political education, after-school education, gang-free spaces, crime intervention and prevention, arts and media. The organizations represented in this study use new technologies and social media to varying degrees but all noted the fundamental importance of including new e-engagement techniques to better communicate with their youth constituents. Interviewees cautioned, however, that new forms of e-engagement should be coupled with face-to-face communication and other traditional means of interaction to ensure the quality and authenticity of the political and civic participation.

Adding to existing examples, the Urban Data Visualization Lab (UDVL) at the University of Illinois at Chicago constructed a 'game,' using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), to engage youth in real world political issues such as ward redistricting. The interactive model allows students to suggest new ward boundaries and then shows the impacts of their inputs such as shifts in population totals, demographic composition, and political strength. Focus group testing of the game led to constructive feedback which will make future versions of the game even more appealing and engaging for youth. Overall, the game symbolizes applications of new technologies, particularly GIS, and offers an exciting example of the potential for alternative media forms of engagement.

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Each section of this report advances existing research on youth political and civic engagement through new technologies and social media. In particular, interviews conducted as part of the research and presented within the report provide new case-study examples of the positive and negative outcomes of the application of e-engagement. Additionally, the game serves as a practical example of the digital applications for e-engagement.  Themes in the study overall suggest that youth participation in political and civic engagement maybe lacking in traditional forms, new technologies and social media provide a viable avenue to re-engage youth through a wide range of applications. However, these efforts must be undertaken carefully and technologies must be as applied as equitably as possible and be coupled with traditional, face-to-face interactions. Each section of the report expands on the potential for e-engagement and highlights potential avenues for future research.

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