



Digital idiocy in higher education or political participation by other means?

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Abstract

Denne artikel fremsætter et forslag til en analyse af betingelserne for politisk deltagelse. En forståelse af betingelserne for politisk deltagelse er afgørende i studier af hvorvidt digitalisering af universitetsuddannelser er hæmmende for dannelsen af borgerdyder (civic virtues), som flere peger på at det skulle være. Baseret på illustrative eksempler på politisk handling på campus peger artiklen på tre betingelser for borgerdyder: Et arkitektonisk aspekt, der kan hindre eller muliggøre politisk handlen, gennem *sit-ins*, barrikader og lignende; dernæst, et dyds-dannende aspekt, hvor former for kollektiv handlen kan fremelske dyder gennem former for sociale sanktioner og opmuntring af former for handling. Endelig, et informationsmæssigt aspekt, hvor strukturen af et fysisk campus kan forme og styrke vigtige informationsmæssige strukturer, der fx tillader fælles viden eller enklave-overvejelser. I modsætning til nyere forsøg på at imødegå et nedgangs-narrativ ved at foreslå en ændring i selve naturen af politisk deltagelse, afsluttes artiklen ved at vise hvordan de samme betingelser for, og aspekter af, borgerdyd kan identificeres såvel digitalt som i en campus kontekst.

Abstract

This paper proposes a set of conditions for political participation. An understanding of the conditions for political participation is required for studying the extent to which digitizing higher education is detrimental to civic virtues, as it has been widely suggested. On the background of illustrative examples of on-campus political action, the paper explicates three preconditions of civic virtue: Firstly, an architectural aspect that can bar or allow for political action, through sit-ins, barricades and the like. Secondly, a virtue-forming aspect, where forms of collective action can help foster virtues by encouraging or sanctioning certain kinds of action. Thirdly, an informational aspect, where the structure of brick-and-mortar campuses can shape and strengthen politically significant informational structures, allowing for both common knowledge and public signals (open spaces) and “closed curtains” enclave deliberations. In contrast with a range of recent attempts at resisting a decline narrative by suggesting a change in the nature of political participation, the paper concludes by using the three aspects to point to possibilities of identifying the *same* aspects of civic virtue online as can be found in a physical, campus setting.



1. Introduction

The ancient Greek “*idiōtēs*” was used about a person in so far as they did not participate in public, political life, which in turn was something widely valued by the Greeks. Today, the word “idiot” carries disparaging connotations. In everyday discourse, it is mostly applied to someone who acts in ways that suggest some kind of cognitive impairment, often combined with moral deficiency. Historically, education has widely been suggested to play a key role in countering idiocy in both the modern and ancient Greek sense (Converse, 1972). In a North-American context, the mechanisms by which political participation is enhanced through higher education have been suggested to be strengthening of individual cognitive abilities (Carpini & Keeter, 1996), organizational ability (Verba et al., 1995) and efficacy (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). In addition, Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996) suggest a networking mechanism related to educational attainment, whereby individuals who have gone through higher education are placed in networks that to a greater extent facilitate participation.

This paper takes as its outset the idea that digital education is strongly compatible with idiocy in the ancient sense. This is a sentiment that saw an early proponent with Resnick (2000) and in some ways is echoed by more general concerns about “slacktivism” (Penney, 2018; Rotman et al., 2011) and political lurking (Wilkins et al., 2019). In using the concept of “strong compatibility”, I am relying on Winner’s (1980) early and influential discussion of technological determinism. With the notion of compatibility, Winner offered a way of conceptualizing the relation between a given technology and a set of political values as something less strong – yet influential – than what is suggested by the concept of determinism.¹ The paper proposes an analysis of the preconditions for civic participation. On this basis, the paper allows for a theoretical articulation of the suggested strong compatibility between brick-and-mortar campuses and the virtue of political participation, and conversely, the weak compatibility between the civic virtue of participation and digital education. With its theoretical and conceptual aim, this paper does not set out to offer a case for or against digital education. This takes careful empirical work. Rather, it seeks to draw attention to, and clearly separate, different aspects of the charge of digital idiocy – lack of participation – based on conditions for the fostering of civic virtues as they have been exercised on campus grounds. Based on examples, geographically dispersed and loosely related to aspects of my own experience as a scholar, this paper points to three conditions: the avenue condition; the habit-forming condition and the informational condition.

A key facet to the argument is a contrast between digital education and education in physical space. In the latter, one typically finds the university campus, with its lecture theatres, different kinds of open spaces as well as possibilities of restricted access gatherings in class- and meeting rooms. The learning management system, videoconferencing platform and an ecology of social media (Fair, 2021) are typical sites of online education. The online emergency teaching during Covid-19 notwithstanding, one rarely finds any of these two forms of education in their pure form. Rather, there are hybrids of digital and on site education (Stommel, 2012), with an increasing focus on the integration of forms of digital communication in higher education.

I use “courage” and “participation” as examples of virtues, while acknowledging that any particular list of virtues faces the enumeration problem: As contexts and dispositions change, “new” virtues can be named and invented (Russell, 2009). Political participation and civic participation are not clearly demarcated concepts (Theocharis & van Deth, 2017), and several authors have called for greater conceptual clarity (e.g. Sairambay, 2020), particularly as a response to new, digital forms of participation. Concerning virtues more generally, Vallor (2016) has suggested a list of 12 technomoral virtues, of which honesty, justice, courage, civility, care and magnanimity seem of particular relevance to civic virtue. Generally, civic virtues are suggested to be required for citizenship in a political community. John Stuart Mill’s emphasised participation as being of key importance for the training and exercise of such virtues. To Mill, participation of the citizen in representative government is “*a means to their own mental education – a mode of strengthening their active faculties, exercising their*



judgment, and giving them a familiar knowledge of the subjects with which they are thus left to deal” (Mill, 1972, p. 179). Mill further suggested that political education can take people “*out of the narrow circle of personal and family selfishness, and accustom[e] them to the comprehension of joint interests, the management of joint concerns – habituating them to act from public or semi-public motives, and guide their conduct by aims which unite instead of isolating them from one another”* (ibid).

Mill’s concern was not the same as those of this paper. However, his wording echoes themes in virtue theory – active training and formation of habits – that we shall explore in the sections below and make up the theoretical background for two of the three proposed conditions for civic participation. Further, the virtue of participation shares with more recognized virtues (e.g. courage) the requirement that it is done for the right reason when appreciating the particular situation (the *ortos logos*, cf. Athanassoulis 2013, p. 70f), and requires judgment for steering clear of the two vices (Hursthouse, 2011). We have few contemporary words for the vices in our case. We might reserve “idiocy” (with its Greek sense) and student “slactivism” for not participating sufficiently, while having no widely used concept for participating too much – “zealotry” might serve us for now. Virtue-signalling would in most cases be an example of participating for the wrong kind of reasons. While not presenting a clearer definition presently, I suggest these features – judgment about a golden mean between two vices; carrying out an action for the right kind of reason, often after being trained to do so – suggest the virtue-theoretic construal of political participation.

2. The campus as a site for exercise of civic virtues

Below, I point to examples of the physical configurations of higher education playing a role in political participation. The cases are particular to my own experience as a student and particular knowledge as a scholar. As such, the examples are unlikely to exhaust the possibilities of campuses playing a role in political action. The examples serve as a background and reminder for pointing to three kinds of preconditions of civic virtue in the following sub-sections.

2.1 The Oregon Experiment

In the early seventies, the overall design of the University of Oregon campus, enshrined in the campus administration’s *Master Plan*, had become a point of contention. A major road cut through campus, allowing log trucks to become a hazard and nuisance to students as well as faculty. While the university had practiced *in loco parenting* before the 1960’s, the relinquishing of this approach to its student body during the sixties had given rise to increased political freedom, but also offered an avenue of consumerism. Further, the campus had become a site for recruitment of army personnel, much to the consternation of politically active students concerned about US involvement in wars. The on-campus Reserve Officer Training Corps headquarters had suffered defacing, bombing, and fires, ultimately leading to its removal from campus (Bryant, 1991). Moreover, buildings were at times designed with an emphasis on outward appearance. This would strengthen the possibilities of external funding, but quite likely at the expense of the multifarious needs and concerns that working scientists – and *inter alia*, their students – had (Coffin, 1992). In addition to riots and other forms of opposition, one response from students was to occupy administration buildings. A series of political events eventually led the administration to literally bury their master plan for the campus and engage with Ratcliff Architects and architect Christopher Alexander. The Oregon campus became a testbed for the use of design patterns, a participatory design method in architecture expounded in Alexander et al (1977). Alexander’s work was a direct inspiration for the creation of the first wiki (<http://wiki.c2.com>); it was hugely influential in object oriented programming (Gamma et al., 1996) and later, it has been employed in an educational approach, designs for learning (Goodyear, 2005; Laurillard, 2012).



In the Oregon buildings and their surroundings, one could see the different patterns in the pattern language being made specific to an academic context. For example, pattern #133, “Staircase as a stage”, became “The social stair”, where the stairs are a place for “informal interaction”, with the “aim to encourage the casual passing conversation to develop into something more serious” (Coffin, 1992, p. 42). The idea that there should be common areas near the hearth (pattern #29) of a house, became the “Department hearth... a single center for each department, a place to have a seminar or a discussion, to pick up mail, to get a cup of coffee or some supplies” (ibid). In a similar manner, the need for a couple’s realm (pattern #136) which should, at all costs be maintained as a separate realm from that of the children, became the “research realm”, which ought to enjoy similar privacy.

It matters not to my example that Alexander had quasi-political views of his own, reflected in his suggestion that “people can only have a genuine effect on local government when the units of local government are autonomous, self-governing, self-budgeting communities, which are small enough to create the possibility of an immediate link between the man in the street and his local officials and elected representatives” (Alexander et al., 1977, p. 71). Nor is it here important whether or not the approach to design was successful in achieving what it set out to do. Rather, I wish to emphasize that the design of the campus – with its varied places, spaces, buildings and roads – was the backdrop and stage for different kinds of struggles and modes of political participation. Both the design and the design process were effective training grounds for participation for lecturers and students alike.

2.2 Doors at the Roger Stevens building at Leeds campus.

Some of the architecture of the Oregon campus buildings were supposedly of a brutalist leaning. The same is the case with The Roger Stevens building at University of Leeds Campus. Designed by Barbican architects as part of their Leeds University master plan, the Grade II listed building was inaugurated two years after the Paris student revolts of 1968, and the building appears to be designed to counter avenues of student protest. For example, there is no vestibule or other arena for students to gather. Moreover, there are many small entrance doors rather than one big one, making coordinated actions – e.g. sudden acts of “invasion” – more challenging. The same goes for the lecture theatres. They have multiple small doors, opening up to seating rows where benches also are built in fixed concrete. This prevents the stacking of furniture into barricades that can be lit, as it had befallen campus furniture in Paris in 1968 (Feenberg & Freedman, 2001). Finally, the doors open outward, making the intuitive way to barricade them not an option.



Figure 1: *Roger Stevens Building* / John Davidson / [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)

It matters not to my example whether the architects or the university administration in fact had such intentions in mind when designing the building. University archives may or may not hold answers to such questions.

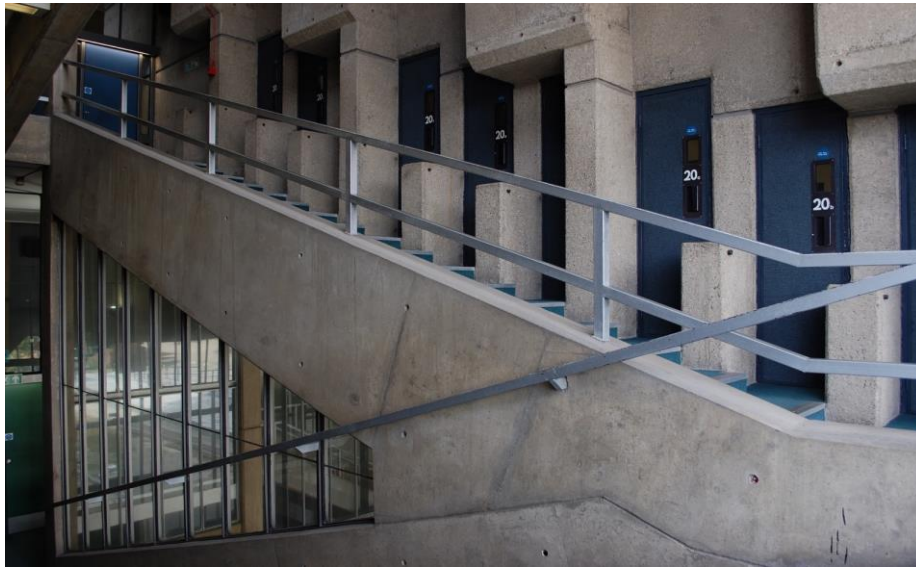


Figure 2: Stairs and entrance to lecture theatre in Roger Stevens Building - Anne Armstrong. (Flicker – CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

What matters is that the political qualities of the building can be present whether or not the university administration or the architects had them in mind and designed for them (cf. Winner, 1980) or the empirical matters of the particular case are misunderstood (cf. Woolgar & Cooper, 1999). My brief analysis of this site of higher education – a Leeds campus building and its lecture theatres – offers a plausible understanding of the building among lecturers and students: That the campus building is an avenue of certain modes of political participation and a range of possibilities of the exercise of civic virtues, and this was likely recognized and countered by the design.

2.3 Campus action: a global phenomenon

In more recent times, campuses in different corners of the world remain centres of political action. In 2019, a group of students from the humanities occupied the dean's office at the University of Copenhagen for several weeks, keeping him and other administration workers from carrying out some of their duties on campus. Students were protesting what they took to be deteriorating degree programmes and a lack of influence and inclusion in decision-making processes. In addition to the barricade, other political measures created high visibility, such as symbolic actions during a royal visit, and gaining access to the speaker's stage during a formal dinner (Pettersson, 2019).

Burundi in East Africa has seen turmoil and substantial repression of basic human rights for decades. In 2015, fuel was added to this with the incumbent seeking an unconstitutional third term; a former university lecturer himself, one of the first moves to quell protests was to shut down the campuses of the state university in the then-capital, Bujumbura. This was done by ordering accommodation facilities vacated, forcing students to leave for their often rural homes (Vision, 2015). The ongoing repression of human rights in Hong Kong, and the response from the police, also featured students on campuses using physical infrastructure to express their discontent. Students tried to initiate a general strike by interfering with railway tracks and roads, and the violent responses from the authorities were frequently aimed at the campuses of Hong Kong Universities. While the 1968 Paris revolt had slogans like "The walls have ears. Your ears have walls" (cited in Feenberg, 2001), Hong Kong students have had to



contend with a far wider range of informational challenges related to their protests, such as video surveillance and AI face recognition (Pang, 2021).

3. Civic virtue: its preconditions and a tale of decline.

“There is this assumption in theoretical and practical ethics that life unfolds on an empty stage, or at least the belief that, when it comes to doing the right thing, the props on the stage of life don’t matter much... Technological devices... channel the typical ways we behave” (Borgmann 2006, p. 11).

These examples, spanning three continents and almost 50 years, point to a seemingly universal phenomenon: campuses have great political significance as a site of political awareness as well as action, frequently going beyond established channels for seeking political influence, such as voting and party membership. “Politics” is a vague word, but we can at least make it slightly more precise by categorizing the concerns of the students: The importance of basic human rights (Burundi, Hong Kong); principles concerning distribution of different kinds of goods and their nature (such as education and security - Oregon and Copenhagen) and just war (Oregon).

I consider these to be examples of campuses offering an avenue of participation and civic courage, enacted in physical space, sometimes confronting, sometimes cooperating with different authorities. Virtues such as courage and participation is the presence of a disposition in an agent to both feel and act in the right way for the right reasons. This disposition often takes training to be firmly settled and reliable (Athanasoulis, 2013). The examples suggest that the designed, physical structure that a campus is, isn’t incidental to the fostering of civic virtue. Rather, it provides an avenue of carrying out actions: sitting down, standing with your back to a person in authority addressing you, hiding information, hanging a banner at a prominent building (thereby also making information public) and barricading or occupying it. As underscored by developments in virtue theory (e.g. Athanasoulis, 2014), the virtue of participation should be seen as at least as much a matter of practical training as, say, the imparting and understanding of rules and principles.

The emphasis on the spatial, infrastructural aspects of students’ political participation – one we shall analyse immediately below – lends itself to a narrative of a decline of civic virtue when higher education becomes increasingly digitalized. An early expression of this was offered by Resnick’s (2000) criticism of digital education devoid of brick, mortar and lawn campuses. Though couched in the dated parlance of the “virtual university” and without providing empirical evidence for his claims, his emphasis on habits of acting through training among students on campus informs both virtue theory and Resnick’s criticism of digital learning. He presents a decline narrative of digital education in suggesting that it does not offer the moral and civic component of brick-and-mortar higher education.

On the background of American (college) history, Resnick formulates his criticism in terms of a *goal* and ideal of traditional college education that has been overlooked, which in turn has led to a decline in the provision of the social good of civic participation. Relying on Horowitz (1987), Resnick suggests that being studious and acquiring transferable skills and knowledge for a future job were once of minor importance to the conception of higher education; rather, training in political participation was a key purpose. However, the challenge of digital idiocy does not hinge on this proposed *telos* of higher education, and his criticism will suffer to the extent that this goal of college education isn’t universally shared (Sørensen & Bengtson, 2019). Rather, I suggest that framing the campus as a focal thing (Barney, 2004; Borgmann, 1984; Higgs et al., 2000) preserves important insights of Resnick’s emphasis on the brick-and-mortar campus, without being committed to a conception of the goal of attending higher



education that might not be reflected universally. Key to Borgmann's notion of focal things and the practices they involve is that important opportunities for fostering virtues can be lost when one activity is replaced with another with the *same* goal, regardless of whether fostering the virtues was a goal of the activity. An increasingly digitized learning environment with the same goal as a more physical one might mean a loss of opportunities for moral training.

Borgmann's oft quoted example is the hearth (a focal thing) being replaced with central heating (a device). The two technologies have the same purpose (providing heat), but the former places morally significant demands on its users, among other things, by requiring and fostering a range of skills (gathering wood, cleaving it, keeping a fire going, having a thorough knowledge of surroundings, being aware of hazards when handling the firewood, fulfilling a certain duty as part of a larger, social unit etc.) and dispositions such as discipline and cooperation. What characterizes focal practices and things is their frequent requirement for bodily, social and intellectual engagement and the opportunity to get an orientation in one's environment. In contrast, under the heading of availability, the device is typically more efficient in providing the immediate good it is designed for.

Framing digital education as a device, in contrast with a focal thing (a brick-and-mortar campus) preserves two important aspects of Resnick's criticism: Firstly, the overall narrative of decline. Borgmann speaks of the device *paradigm* or *pattern* that leads us to emphasise efficiency and availability in technical solutions; however, as efficiency is valued, other important aspects might be ignored. Borgmann's characterizations of focal things and practices deserve quoting at length:

They are concrete, tangible and deep, admitting of no functional equivalents; they have a tradition, structure, and rhythm of their own. They are unprocurable and finally beyond our control. They engage us in the fullness of our capacities... A focal practice, generally, is the resolute and regular dedication to a focal thing. It sponsors discipline and skill which are exercised in a unity of achievement and enjoyment, of mind, body and the world, of myself and others, and in a social union. (Borgmann, 1984, p. 219)

The sense of loss, that stems from the pattern of devices replacing focal things, is clearly mirrored in Resnick's account. Resnick highlights the *in loco parentis* of historical college education in the US, and while also this parenting role has changed or been severely diminished over the decades, the idea of actively training subjects to become politically active has remained. This is the second aspect: Resnick's account underscores different kinds of social pressure as being one way of training the habits which can lead to social goods – in this case a disposition to act virtuously for the good of society through political participation.

In the following section, I shall survey different ways of responding to the challenge that digital learning conceived as a device poses for civic virtues such as participation and courage. For these purposes, and to further explore the main contribution of this article – an analysis of three kinds of preconditions for participation – I now summarize aspects of the perceived threat to civic virtues from digital education:

The avenue precondition: the physical space of the campus has traditionally been an avenue of exercise of civic virtues, allowing e.g. contestation of authorities or speaking publicly about contentious topics. One can act with civic courage when using force to block a building, thereby exposing yourself to bodily harm and suffering a possible short term, personal loss by not using your energy elsewhere, say, with a view to more directly furthering your prospects on the job market.

The habit-formation precondition: as argued by Resnick (2000), campuses have traditionally been a site of different forms of shared, and at times coerced or strongly encouraged social participation. In terms of technologies, this aspect is captured by the idea of a cumbersome and demanding focal thing that places demands on its users, who often have to work together to use the artefact. Contesting the presence of a controversial speaker is both more demanding, but also a realistic possibility, on a campus



when compared with the possibilities that zoom links and meetings offer. In terms of virtue theory, the coercive aspect is related to the notion of habits, which is particularly crucial in young people. Not yet fully formed, they are in different ways forced or persuaded to act in certain ways, in order to eventually create standing dispositions to feel good about carrying out, say, courageous or selfless acts for the right reasons. In addition to Borgmann's work in virtue theory, a more recent account of this challenge is Vallor's (2015) idea of moral deskilling associated with reliance on digital technologies and her subsequent attempt at a largely "digital" virtue theory (Vallor, 2016).

The informational precondition. Description of information practices often rely on comparisons with architectural forms, such as behind "closed doors" or "closed curtains", "ivory tower" and "public square". The latter is frequently mentioned as an architectural form that allows for equal access and common knowledge, which in turn is crucial for many aspects of social life, including those that involve coordinating collective action and making decisions about personal action. There is a substantial difference in the likely modes of action when comparing situations where everybody knows that X with situations where everybody knows that everybody knows X. Problems such as *The department store* (a husband and wife getting lost from one another while shopping) are more easily solved by the couple because they can rely on knowledge about one-another's preferences and more easily put themselves in each other's shoes, as it were (Lewis, 1969). While common knowledge is frequently taken to play a key role for the functioning of deliberative democracies, enclave deliberations – thinking among like-minded, carried out "behind closed curtains" – enjoy a more mixed reputation. Sunstein has repeatedly emphasized their role in political polarization (Sunstein, 2002, 2009), while others emphasize the importance of enclave deliberations for working out formulations of standpoints that might be subject to extremely strong criticism (historically, the movements for abolition of slavery or universal suffrage could serve as examples) or held among people in a disadvantaged position (Karpowitz et al., 2009). In addition to enclave and "town square" informational practices, spaces can be more or less suited for controlling public signals.²

Such signals are taken to play a role under rationally bounded reasoning about a decision, where one's own view is played off against the view that a public signal suggests. Public signals play a role in accounting for information cascades. These, in turn, are called upon to explain such phenomena in marketing and the behaviour of financial markets, where agents may end up acting irrationally, though engaging in rational forms of reasoning themselves (Hansen et al., 2013). Of course, this is not the only role of a public signal, and information cascades can undoubtedly play a role in more benign phenomena, also in politics. Finally, while not having a named architectural form associated with it, the description of the staircase suggests a design for serendipity (Sunstein, 2017), where information is come upon through fortunate happenstance.

These three preconditions are intended as analytical categories that may rarely surface individually but be intertwined in the preconditions for any case of political participation, whether primarily taking place digitally or on brick-and-mortar campuses. To wit, the just-war scholar Michael Walzer prefaces his classic *Just and Unjust Wars* (2015) with an account of how the avenue of his campus offered a strong public signal (widespread campus protests) which helped him partake in the protests (such as marches) and then *later* fully understand the kind of reasons he was offering against the American war effort and the full importance of doing so. This would allow him to not only act right, but for the right, explicit reasons – a key aspect of the fully virtuous agent (Athanasoulis, 2013; Tsai, 2016).

4. Responses to the challenge

As it was noted at the outset of this paper, when higher education becomes increasingly digital, some researchers are concerned about decreased political participation. One can identify three kinds of response to this concern: Firstly, there is the view that digital education and new media being employed



in academia and elsewhere have in fact led to a decline in the civic virtues associated with being a good citizen – a moral deskilling has taken place. That is the position that was held by Resnick. Secondly, one can argue conversely that there is no decline: new media has led to a change in behaviour, but what we in fact see are the same norms and virtues being acted out differently – we just need to know what to look for, when *not* looking for student gatherings on lawns and in lecture theatres, occupations of offices and defacement of buildings. Courage, care, justice and participation do not necessarily require sit-ins, blockades, and large crowds assembled on site. They are identifiable on sites of digital education, but their identification requires careful analysis as they are now found in a substantially changed context. Thirdly, one may suggest that not just the context, but the virtues themselves are subject to change, partially driven by new media in higher education. As an example of changes in virtue, consider contemporary and medieval views of humility and greed, or contemporary and homeric views of pacifism. Changes in the understanding and valuation of humility suggest that we are witnessing a change in virtues, and the third kind of response is that the civic virtues and models of citizenship are currently undergoing a similar, though far more rapid change. Indeed, a charge frequently brought against virtue theory is that it favours tradition and serves to “repress the ardours and enthusiasms of the young” (Russell, 1945, p. 188). According to those offering the third kind of response, regardless of the extent to which it is driven by, or merely reflected in, behaviour and habits related to the use of digital media, the nature of good citizenship is undergoing change, and *inter alia*, the associated virtues.

In a media scholarship review article, Kligler-Vilenchik (2017) resists the first decline narrative, and instead surveys varieties of the third kind of response. Locating a new paradigm across a range of media studies research, she sees “a shared argument about change in the nature of citizenship itself” with the emergence of “changing patterns of participation” (2017, p. 1888). Another way of conceptualizing this is “citizenship models”. These are normative ideas about what a citizen ought to do, and informs and motivates measurement of e.g. voter turnout and knowledge of politics. Different models emphasize different aspects: A representative liberal model focuses on voting, and the good citizen accordingly to this model means one that votes on an informed basis. A discursive model focuses on a well-functioning public sphere for deliberation. The one closest to what has loosely been identified at the outset of this paper, the participatory liberal theory, has the good citizen partake, often at grass-root level, in decision making that affects their own lives. Kligler-Vilenchik identifies a legacy-model of citizenship as the informed/dutiful citizen that votes, obeys the law and pays taxes and suggests that the decline narrative is accurate primarily on the background of this model, and not others.

After presenting a range of citizen-models that in different ways “value... self-expression, creativity, and direct action” (2017, p. 1891), several of which feature the term “participatory”, Kligler-Vilenchik concludes her survey with an emphasis on the importance of broadening “the purview of the civic modalities we consider possible” (2017, p. 1899). This is mirrored by Theocharis, who introduced the concept of digitally networked participation, which is defined as “a networked media-based personalized action that is carried out by individual citizens with the intent to display their own mobilization and activate their social networks in order to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of a social or political problem” (2015, p. 6).

Analytically, this leaves Kligler-Vilenchik’s survey and the studies it is based on with a conundrum: Do we say that we have to propose new models of citizenship as digital forms of participation emerge, through different media (response number 3); or do we, as Kligler-Vilenchik also suggests, simply need to look more carefully at what she calls civic modalities, something I take to be designation for different ways the same virtue or duty can express itself (response 2)? For example, one can be courageous on a battlefield and in romance; they are very different contexts, but different avenues (the first precondition) are used and different modalities of the same virtue can be identified. Pursuing this line of thought would allow for a variety of response number two. While Kligler-Vilenchik in her survey work remains content to express herself at a high level of abstractness about the role of “media” and “information” in different citizen models, I propose that my analysis of the conditions for civic participation makes greater room



for allowing responses of the second kind: once we analyse political participation with the tri-partite conditions in mind, we can not only identify the same civic virtues under new guises, but also seek to identify and create the conditions for the furthering of these virtues. Below, I use my conceptual apparatus for engaging with Kligler-Vilenchik's discussion of aspects of citizenship and participation:

The informational precondition. Without going into detail in her survey work, Kligler-Vilenchik mentions the open networks of blogs and websites. They form networks that can foster critical information sharing, which she considers crucial for civic participation. Sharing information is a crucial element that physical proximity allows for on a campus, so this aspect of the information challenge appears to be met by online education. To what extent the other informational forms that a campus allows for are replicated or indeed, surpassed, online is an empirical question. At least, it should be clear that informational structures other than "open and public" are crucial for on-campus, political activity. For example, the affordances of both Facebook and Whatsapp allow for closed groups.

The avenue precondition. This aspect seems largely overlooked by Kligler-Vilenchik. The challenge, as I have briefly outlined it, suggests that the avenues should be contestable in some way, like an administration building or a lecture hall. Simply put, something needs to be at stake or at risk, so that one can train and exercise the virtues of participation and courage. The notion of politically relevant online action may include avenues where a more direct confrontation is possible, e.g., by upsetting business models through obfuscation (Nissenbaum & Brunton, 2015), frustrating university administration through virtual learning environments, or carrying out attacks at the "façade" of companies or universities, such as website defacement attacks.

The habit-forming precondition. According to models described by Kligler-Vilenchik, this aspect appears absent. One might suspect that the information avenues pointed to above (blogs and websites) mainly help those who are already politically interested and motivated, though "lurking" may perform a function as legitimate peripheral participation. Moreover, the alternative models of citizenship emphasize self-expression and individualized approaches marked by freedom, unfettered by traditional, strongly cohesive social groups – those that can also exert benign social pressure. The closest to collective thought and action offered by the survey is emphasis on collective storytelling associated with DREAM activists and The Harry Potter Alliance (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017, p. 1894). One sees social pressure and collective action in other digital contexts such as MMORPGs, where game design does seem to allow for both sanctions and encouragement to observe norms widely considered fair (Christou, 2011). Something analogous would be needed for the digital aspects of higher education.

5. Conclusion and limitations

Should one seek to answer the question that is raised by the title of this paper – less or different political participation with digital education? – one can rely on the three preconditions for the formation and exercise of the virtue of political participation presented in this paper. Two of them – forming habits and having an avenue where one can exercise participation and other virtues – are rooted in virtue theory. The third aligns with the focus of much discussion of political participation and digital media: informational structures.

The paper has at least two limitations. First, having offered three kinds of preconditions, it has done so on the basis of a convenient and briefly described diet of examples, drawn on from the author's particular knowledge. While this is testimonial knowledge of influential and well-known political events on campus grounds, the three preconditions are not grounded in a systematic survey. Secondly, the taxonomy of preconditions has not been tested against further examples, and so, it has not had this opportunity to be revised, refined or more drastically changed (Simons, 2014). One could carry out this as political



events unfold, or rely on ethnographically oriented accounts of digital media and political participation, such as *Twitter and Tear Gas* (Tufekci, 2017)

By looking at preconditions for political participation and drawing on the relevant theoretical hinterland, the conditions could serve as the background of empirical studies. More than two decades ago, Resnick was clear in his pessimism: "...the flourishing of our civil society depends upon the disposition of a great number of people to participate in civic life" (2000, par. 23), and he found this strongly associated with campus based, university education. He admits to not entering the empirical questions associated with this claim, but nevertheless concludes that "because the students at a virtual university have no extracurricular life, they have no student political life" (200, par. 28). With the three categories of preconditions for political participation, this paper can be of service in developing empirically informed critiques of political participation in digitized, higher education. Importantly, in contrast with theoretical constructs that identify a special form of digital citizenship, the framework can identify preconditions that cut across the physical and digital spaces. Alternatively, the study can serve as a first, conceptual step in a value sensitive design process, where one seeks to identify, analyse and translate values into design requirements (Poel, 2013, Hansen, 2020b).

My categorization of preconditions for civic virtue and ensuing brief use of the framework on a Kligler-Vilenchik's survey article, suggests that the habit-forming precondition is one that is largely ignored, and indeed, may help theoretically bolster the intuition behind the use of expressions such as "slacktivism" to characterize online political participation. In contrast with the device of online learning, this paper has suggested that focal practices, and the demands they place as well as forms of persuasion and other habit-forming and habit-initiating tactics, play a key role in the formation of virtues in the individual.

Concerning the avenue challenge, I suggest the second line of response should inform empirical studies of digital, civic courage: Looking for digital analogues of comparable, "physical" action on campus phenomena. Challenging the sovereignty or administrative work of a nation state, or the appearance of a business or a university can increasingly be done digitally. In their toolbox for protest, Nissenbaum and Brunton (2015) draw on war analogies and speak of obfuscation as a weapon of the weak. Blockades, occupations, and defensive measures are increasingly used digitally, and one may quietly hope that they one day will be used for a good cause by students, gently coerced or encouraged to act on a digital platform, a virtual learning environment or a website near you.³



¹ Winner followed Mumford (1964) by using infrastructural technologies related to power and transport as examples. Mumford had suggested that decentral power sources like solar energy were more strongly compatible with democracy values, while e.g. nuclear energy had more authoritarian qualities, on account of its requirements for surveillance and centralization. See Hansen (2020a) for a systematic treatment of forms of technological determinism.

² It is hardly coincidental that Lee Felsenstein, co-creator of one of the earliest, publicly available network of computers (Isaacson, 2014), also took a keen interest in informational structures in a crowd. He recounts from his student years: “I began to pursue the question of what kind of information structure and technology would facilitate this process of person-to-person linkage outside of hierarchical structures... While working at Ampex I designed and prototyped a portable public-address amplifier (a “bull horn”, but one that used high-quality audio and thus did not sound loud) having line-level audio inputs as well as outputs so that several could be patched together to form a network – my vision was to enable a crowd to speak back to the authorities.” (Felsenstein, 2013).

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