



The Ballot or the Blog Post: Creating a Political Self through, and in Spite of, Social Media¹

Winston C. Thompson, New York University

Introduction

My students' desks increasingly feature a laptop instead of a notebook. Their hands slyly press the keypads of their mobile phones instead of passing notes during lectures. They increasingly organize group projects online and discuss their shared work through omnipresent text boxes while simultaneously pouring over each other's most recently posted pictures and updated declarations. Their world seems, in some meaningful ways, rather unlike the one in which I dwelt as a student. Their patterns of communication and their exposure to one another and the wider world gives me pause as I wonder how they make sense of themselves in relation to the practices of this new world, and what role, if any, I ought to play as educator in that negotiation.

More fundamentally, you might join me in wondering how social media acts upon its participants as they act through it. How does this new, evolving, and increasingly pervasive form of communication and community shape our students' attitudes towards practices of communication and community in their futures as political actors? How ought educators respond to this new world; can we lead our students into a culture of practice that seems, in many significant ways, alien to us?

In the following speculation I would like to employ two potentially laudatory and critical frameworks, building upon the work of both John Stuart Mill and Hannah Arendt, to map the contours of a possible avenue of response to the aforementioned questions via the assertion that the essence of those social media sites and services—paired with their corresponding method(s) of engagement—may be well understood as rooted in a novel culture of sharing. Investigating this push to share allows educators to consider their practice in the face of a new feature of our world, finding themselves and their students in a moment of uncertainty which challenges and reinforces one of the central aims of our common project: the preparation and shaping of future political actors.²

The Culture of Sharing

Sharing is a familiar cornerstone of the emerging digital social age. The milieu encourages its participants to share pictures and stories from their lives, share their feelings, their moods, their interests, their convictions, hopes, disappointments, and much more. They are invit-

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² A wonderfully entry into this and related conversations may be found in Eamon Callan's *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (1997).

ed in perpetuity to “like,” “retweet,” or “reblog” and by so doing are urged to share their experience of the content shared by others and, in some sense, to share their experience of the act of content-sharing itself. Social media etiquette dictates that one “friend,” “follow,” or “subscribe” to the communication flows of those who have expressed similar interest in one’s own streams of information, as the culture of social media sharing assumes and perhaps attempts to assert some standard of reciprocity or mutuality.

The rise of this culture of sharing is evidenced in novel dilemmas and fresh social realities, the ramifications of which researchers are only beginning to sketch.³ Legal scholars, political scientists, and sociologists have devoted energy towards inquiries into the nature of these exchanges, their effects on human subjects, and the consequences for the social and political structures in which these subjects live (Farrell, 2012; Levmore & Nussbaum, 2011; Turkle, 2011). Those generative projects tend to work through a variety of issues related to identity or politics, but few inquire into the manner in which one’s civic or political identity is formed through social media’s new patterns of sharing. That is to say, though this process of sharing may have valuable effects upon political structures, we may do well to pause in consideration of its effects upon the political subject. Presented plainly: how does social media sharing shape its potentially political participants?

To be clear, one may find that social media bears upon many aspects of a person’s identity. Further still, we might find that social media sharing and internet engagement affects multiple components of one’s political identity ranging from political party affiliation, to campaign contributions, to individual voting choices, and so forth. While these questions are certainly worthy of careful consideration, we would do well to limit present considerations to a particular aspect of political identity, that is, the formation of one’s civic identity as a political actor. In this sense we not at present concerned with the formation of the particular content of one’s political attitudes (see above) or their impulses towards specific political action in support or protest of some or another issue. That aspect of social media’s effects have been discussed elsewhere and are worthy fodder for debates of pedagogy and subject matter. Rather, our present concern will be the less-often explored subject of the ways in which one comes to know oneself as involved in—both affected by and affecting—political processes.

A fruitful analysis of this very particular type of sharing resists polemic conclusions. Attempts may be made to fit the entirety of these new standards of communication into some familiar structure(s) with easily applied labels of “positive or negative,” “constructive or destructive.” I find myself inclined to exercise caution in conclusively assessing and suggesting the manner in which socially mediated sharing shapes the political selves of its contributors. If social media sites and services have extended the citizen’s local *freedom of speech* to a more universal *power to publish*, we must ask how that shift has affected and might be expected to shape the emergence of the political actor in newly-created contexts. In adopting this focus, I argue that polarized perspectives on these unfolding norms lose the rich insights, expressed both as caution and commendation, provided by a more nuanced approach. How can we make sense of this new moment without producing simple vilifying or vindicating evaluations but instead engage in authentic and open inquiry?

³ The existence of Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) reminds us that while this digital medium is new, the questions it occasions emerge in similar previous moments of innovation .

Conceptual Foundations

Before analyzing the patterns and processes of the social media sharing described above, a note should be made. Though social media sharing may have direct effects upon persons of all ages, we stand to observe the crux of our central question by restricting conceptual analysis to those social media users who are widely recognized as young people. This decision is based in the understanding that—as an emerging form of communication—social media will most directly affect the political identity formation of young people for whom its patterns are more likely to be essential, rather than additional, components of their social and political world. Membership in this category spans the years from very young children of the present day to their recently young, and similarly “social,” collegiate compatriots. Of course, in specific cases this will vary, but the claim that the proliferation of social media has particularly deep effects upon those who have not known (or long known) a world without it should not be contentious.

The contemporary world of social media sharing is often praised by its supporters for its improvements to the speed and scope of communications (Bennett, 2007). The usual core argument asserts that a society in which unrestricted communication happens quickly and across vast space is one better equipped and more likely to realize the goals of democracy. Whether or not they are mistaken, social media advocates claim that their processes of sharing bring about the conditions for a robust democracy. The structure of that position as a potentially convincing account of democratic practices is perhaps well explored through “On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion” in John Stuart Mill’s classic *On Liberty* (1859). That trenchant text outlines a collection of practices that seems to mirror the very best elements of social media patterns. Whether it provides a fully descriptive and satisfying account for educators is another matter entirely.

Mill leads his readers to identify the value of resisting conformity in democratic states. Through his analysis Mill recommends a number of rights or liberties that citizens should possess so as to best realize that goal. In his remarks on the utility of the free thought and discussion, he identifies four responses to criticisms of this proposed freedom and, by so doing, offers the same number of proposals regarding the manner in which free and unbridled speech will improve a society. Central to his responses and observation is his recognition of human fallibility. He claims that this fallibility should lead citizens to embrace liberty of discussion.

Though his arguments are political, given their basis in strong recommendation of a political structure and scheme of rights available to all, he is not explicitly making a normative argument about free *political* discussions in particular. Though he is assuming some objectivity in his infallibility arguments related to the pursuit of truth, it should be no far stretch to assume that he would extend his observations to the realm of political opinions which, even if they can lay no claim to truth or falsity, may still enjoy some status as “more or less practical,” “more or less coherent,” “more or less in line with shared moral intuitions,” and so forth. Taken from this perspective, one can read Mill’s recommendations as they apply, *inter alia*, to political discussions.

If Mill’s general argument is interpreted as political in the second sense, he can be read as recommending that societies benefit from the free articulation of political opinions. This reading of Mill casts the first of his aforementioned responses as a reply to the following critical pronouncement: those members of a community who believe themselves to have the best political opinions thereby possess some correlate duty to silence the opinions of others. Mill counters this critique by stating that

[c]omplete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies [political opinions] for purposes of action [...] [the] only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. (Mill, 1869/1978, p.18)

In this, Mill asserts that claims are justified by their exposure to contrary positions. So long as divergent opinions exist, one's exposure to them is valued for their ability to challenge the political opinions held by the political actor. If utilized towards these ends, social media sharing might suggest promise for a steady stream of potentially disputed opinions and an arena in which political actors can sift through the least desirable political opinions in favor of the "best" or most desirable.

The second critique that Mill encounters in this reading is the notion that some political opinions are best held by the masses even if they would be abandoned under dialogical scrutiny. Under the proposed reading Mill distances himself from this claim by asserting that the value of a political opinion resides in its acceptability in the face of contrary opinions. Furthermore, even if some Platonic noble lie were necessary for social cohesion or political expediency, that opinion would still need to be defended against other possible candidates for its role in society. The free exchange of political ideas might benefit from social media tools if they in fact allow those ideas to be shared and thus brought into sharp conflict with one another.

The third and fourth addressed critiques are related through Mill's response. Mill's hypothetical critics might claim that potentially valued political opinions should be formally suppressed, as their ability to overcome that sanctioned barrier would further prove their desirability. We might think here of some system under which presently unpopular but useful political ideas would resist the robust structures of censorship which keep the populace from being overwhelmed by vacuous, half-baked, or otherwise weak political notions. The individuals who put forward these unpopular social and political opinions will be chastised and/or curbed, an approach noted for being far better than more severe forms of punishments (i.e.: being put to death). Mill responds to both these critiques by observing that punishing those who put forward valuable political opinions would lead to the reduced probability that individuals would pursue unorthodox political positions. Moreover, punishment would be unfair treatment for those individuals who have done their communities a great service when they have indeed put forth promising political ideas. Under this reading Mill also notes that there is no reason to believe that good political opinions would always (or even, usually) overcome severe structures of sanitization. Thus, Mill's remarks offer support to stable structures that allow for the free exchange of ideas. In the contemporary moment we might be tempted to perceive social media ecosystems, which allow the Internet and other networks to be harnessed towards the goals of unrestricted communication, as the partial and potential realization of Mill's aims.

To be sure, social media services extend the available opportunities for many of these goals. The conversations that become possible across these services may well lead to an open exchange of political ideas and, through these processes, encourage political actors to engage with a variety of otherwise unencountered perspectives. Taken in sum we might imagine that the users of social media services are promoting a more open and classically liberal landscape of political discussion.

But let us recall our earlier claimed focus upon the relatively young who have been shaped by new patterns and practices of sharing.

The children who use social media services are being socialized into a liberal political landscape of the sort that we have just identified through Mill. This may suggest a greater likelihood that they will be involved in this political expanse later in life. It may also imply their likely involvement in that world at present. From Facebook status messages about the intersection of sexuality, religion, and the law; to twitter tweets about popular court cases and legal decisions in the news; down to blog posts about boycotts and protests—young people are involved (to varying degrees) with these political issues through social media. But even if they are not involved in political content, their very engagement with social media indicates that they are involved in political structures and patterns of behavior. By this, I mean to call attention to the practice of “public declaration” and wish to assert that, as a pattern of practice in and through social media, it is a rather recent social development for children.⁴

In fact, Mill’s argument for liberty famously excluded some people(s) from its statement. He writes that

[i]t is perhaps hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those [...] must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury.” (Mill, 1869/1978, p. 9)

I am inclined to interpret Mill’s caution as founded in some concern for the development of the immature person, a protection of the potential of the person becoming and yet to be. Mill seems worried that this freedom of political participation extended to children or young people may potentially do them some significant disservice, as they may not yet be ready to handle the responsibilities that it entails. Exempting extraordinary individuals and predictable degrees of maturity in the category of young people under consideration, if this reading is accepted Mill’s position here coheres rather nicely with Hannah Arendt’s now-classic caution against the private space of childhood becoming too closely intertwined with the public sphere of politics.

In “The Crisis in Education” Arendt carefully identifies “natality” or “newness” as the essence of education (1961/2006, p.171). Building upon an interpretation of the U.S. as a country of immigrants, she draws a connection between the initiations of new citizens into a country with the initiations of new individual actors (young people) into our shared world. This process finds educators authorized to treat students so as to properly preserve their natal energy. She wishes to maintain that sense of the educator’s authority in this model as a product of the educator’s responsibility for that existing shared world (Arendt, 1961/2006, p. 186). This authority rests upon an acknowledged responsibility for the fragile world and the implied intention to guide young people through their education in a manner that both preserves the natality of the student in the face of that world and protects the world from the unfocused energy of that natality, allowing the two to properly meet one another in a process that allows for the continual or repeated renewal of the social world.

For Arendt, educational experiences belong in neither the realm of the political nor that of the private; rather, it seems that they usher children from the private into a political context. These young people, through their educational experiences, become political in that they join

⁴ Of course I mean to say that the particulars of these patterns are rather recent developments for contemporary western, liberal democratic societies. And I identify children as distinct from “adults” of the same age in the pre-modern west or in other cultures.

“with [their] equals in assuming the effort of persuasion and running the risk of failure” (Arendt, 1961/2006, p.173). For this reason, politics necessarily involves education, as education is the means by which people become equals and are thus able to engage with one another in the political sphere.

Through Arendt’s framework, one can ask revealing questions of the patterns of social media sharing; specifically, one might pose an inquiry into the ways in which these patterns usher children into a shared world. For what *sort* of political engagement do these experiences prepare children?

The previously-mentioned freedom that Mill describes is, of course, similar in kind but rather different in form to that of the world of social media. Ideas can be exchanged and explored at a rate of rapidity without many of the constraints found in antiquated and analog methods of informational sharing. Interestingly, while Mill excludes children from the contest of ideas that he delineates, minors are among the most productive of social media networkers (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Their engagement may lead to an earlier (as compared to recent previous generations) awareness of some of the details of world in which they live, but may also overexpose them—to both their detriment and that of the world’s political structures according to Arendt’s (1961/2006) keen insights into the necessity of a safe, non-political childhood. Attempting to carve a conceptual space in which to pose questions of the growing omnipresence of social media services and usage, the remainder of this chapter employs these readings of Mill and Arendt to analyze the present and potential patterns of initiation into identities of political action.

Invitation or Obligation

That social media sharing may offer an invitation for our society to communicate in new ways is no unique insight. This invitation, with the accompanying expectations, can become an obligation or a compulsion if the patterns of sharing that it encourages are left unchecked. This potential might be best explored through an appeal to a tense duality. On this note, we shall explore the idea that the nascent political identity of the “social media child” enjoys and is equally constrained by the dual aspirations towards anonymity and celebrity. On this topic I analyze the benefits and detriments of distant and/or unknown interlocutors as found in many forms of digital sharing. In this, I also lay a foundation for an explanation of the significance of the conceptual space for an individual’s multiple identities as one’s personas might collapse or expand through patterns of sharing in and through social media. Before proceeding, one should note that the analysis offered is, of course, built upon the notion that social media encourages previously unknown patterns of and attitudes towards the intrinsic value of sharing.

Anonymity

Among the most noteworthy features of social media sharing (perhaps second only to the relative speed of its transactions) is the “distance” that it can insert between a “speaker’s” identity and an audience.⁵ A packet of information can be shared under a presumed identity or passed along with identifiers stripped from the parcel. For purposes virtuous and vicious one might communicate with a large congregation without that through knowing basic facts of that person’s

⁵ As memorably expressed in the early 1990’s political cartoon “On the Internet Nobody Knows You’re a Dog” (Steiner, 1993).

identity and/or general information about their fellow devotees. While the written word may have created this phenomenon and Gutenberg's printing press extended it, social media may represent the next "large leap" in communications as the power to publish becomes increasingly more personal. As young people participate in this process one wonders how this anonymity shapes their forming political identities.

One readily connects this anonymity to its quite literally liberating effects on the child's abilities of critical thought and debate. As Mill describes, the ability to share ideas without fear of persecution should lead to greater likelihood that individuals grow comfortable and confident in sharing those ideas. The anonymity afforded by social media sharing allows children to "speak up" and criticize ideas, dominant narratives, and to be taken seriously as equals in a political context, engaged in the messy business of democratic dialogue. Children may become more secure in their ability to offer opinions as those opinions are taken seriously in the social media forum. In this way, anonymity creates more confident political actors, as children are not necessarily discounted by virtue of their age and, as such, have greater experience as political participants engaged in discussions of the most valued courses of action for their society.

That this anonymity also holds the possibility for incivility should come as no surprise to anyone who has spent much time reading Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, or Youtube comments, among many other sources.⁶ Anonymity can shield people from the repercussions of their utterances. As such it can lead to inconsideration, as one is unfettered in public expression of opinions without traditional methods of accountability to temper such outbursts. One might imagine a child who, having come into political maturity through years of, for example, racist and homophobic public speech, comes to seek and readily find public outlets for politically unpopular opinions, giving voice to (and to some extent legitimizing) those for others. Of course, this does not imply that the struggle with unpopular opinions of this sort is a new phenomenon caused by social media, but rather that this anonymity allows many politically active agents to remain distanced from the conventional forms of acceptable and considerate language while still reaching a wide audience. Whether this, as a pattern of opportunity, will result in positive outcomes (e.g.: direct discussion of hate speech in a context that will permit the sort of disclosure often needed to combat irrational prejudice) or negative consequences (e.g.: a resurgence in prejudicial attitudes and arguments) remains to be seen, though Mill would assert that the former would likely be the case given enough liberty to be pursued.

Interwoven through both of these points—critical thinking and incivility—is a third that deserves mention. Given this anonymity, children can become engaged in dialogue as adults. They can act as mature political actors with the entailed powers and responsibilities. Mill seems to caution that children are not adequately prepared for this sort of dialogue—perhaps they will contaminate the rigor of the exchange? Though she might agree with that point, Arendt's analysis offers another assessment. Namely, that process might contaminate the child. The ideas that a thirteen-year-old student brings to a blog discussion on universal healthcare might affect the course of that dialogue, but the student might also be affected by that discourse. Arendt cautions that the natal energy (the sense of newness in ways of being in and approaches to the world) might be sacrificed in such moments of exposure. Premature exposure to political participation might create a jaded first-time voter or a disengaged, exhausted young citizen. It might extinguish the essence of a political actor before that actor has fully formed and had opportunity to formally act.

⁶ I do not mean to imply that children as the sole authors of these uncivil messages.

Celebrity

Continuing on the subject of Arendtian overexposure, shifting from anonymity we might consider the notion that social media services also contain the seeds of celebrity. Of the two ways in which celebrity might be immediately discussed in relation to social media sharing and political identity formation, the first coheres more readily to Arendt's analysis of overexposure.

Patterns of social media sharing encourage that one share and share often. In the event that one attaches definite identifiers to one's stream of shared content, one loses one's ability to hide. In this statement, I wish to identify "the ability to hide" as the important developmental process that allows one to take some distance from portions of oneself as one selects which will be the essential or incidental components of one's identity. One decides by increments which decisions are central to one's being and which choices are somewhat isolated moments of test or inquiry into the nature of that being. In vignette, we might imagine the following: a young student's indiscretion immortalized on Youtube complicates future job applications/interviews; a pre-teen's series of digitally crowd-sourced questions about marijuana usage leads to stern censure in her conservatively religious small town; a re-posted exchange between two classmates in the comment section of a Tumblr blog outs one of the two as the only gay student at their school; etc...

Social media encourages people to share publicly, which may be fine for adults more often than it is safe for children. Arendtian analysis posits that children require some safe space to explore ideas and actions, to test their powers and themselves before revealing the same to the world. Social media sharing complicates that process by potentially exposing children to an environment that is more critical than it is caring and constructive. To the extent that the child is in a formative moment in which she is negotiating either her identity or her assessments of that identity, these sorts of public exhibitions might publicly commit the child to an identity and thus freeze the child in that decisive instant, stunting her growth or instead diverting it.

The encouraged patterns of sharing in and through social media require that participating children enter the public sphere as actors declaring and divulging their experiences and opinions. Aside from the sorts of direct external political consequences outlined above, we might also consider the internal consequences of those patterns of communication. Posed more specifically, we might ask what effect these patterns of sharing might have on one's attitudes towards, and habits of, sharing.

On this topic I draw a distinction between two types of sharing. On one hand, we might characterize careful, intentional, and thoughtful "articulations" as distinct from less rigorous "vocalizations." Political articulations might take the form of action that Arendt wishes to pursue; namely, a break from uninspired convention by way of revealing ourselves in a public space in the service of freedom.

Social media encourages sharing in such a way that one shares publicly while comparing one's rates of shared content alongside that of others. Participants brag about their growing number of twitter followers, the wealth of "likes" attached to their posts, and so forth. This system may well encourage quantity of shared information and the scope of its recipients more than it does the quality of those communications. In addition, the patterns of sharing may encourage social monologue that appears dialogical but is instead a series of instances of individuals vocalizing their political thoughts and opinions to a world audience. As children participate in this system of sharing, we might draw some ready conclusions regarding their expected emerging atti-

tude towards public statements. That is, social media children are being encouraged (and feel entitled) to share *often* rather than to share *well*.

At the expense of political articulations, vocalizations of the sort described above might encourage one to find that public discourse (political protests and the like) takes the form of a diary entry rather than a potential policy statement, a stream of personal and emotive disclosures rather than directed and intentional political statements. Political actors may then feel justified in expressing their major and minor frustrations rather than engage the difficult work of pursuing solutions with their fellows. In this way, social media sharing might build for children a pattern that recognizes vocalizations as the default public expression, thus weakening (if not completely dissolving) a practice of considered articulation and political dialogue as essential to democratic exchange.

The distinction between vocalizations and articulations serves to highlight one of the key ways in which social media transforms the landscape of communication available to and expected by political actors. Though the potential move towards vocalization at the expense of articulation might weaken the quality of discourse, we would do well to remember that social media might also expand the scope of participation in political discussions by finding more voices heard. To the extent that one finds Mill's arguments about liberal modes of communication persuasive, social media sharing encourages children to grow into participatory political agents, contributing often, even if not always "well."

Costs

One would be remiss if one failed to underscore the popular promise that social media allows its participants to organize around global topics, sharing diverse perspectives and plans across great distance. As recent political protests around the globe seem to prove, social media can serve as a tool for physical meetings and protests, organizing political action in novel and efficient ways. Its effect on the formation of the political ideas that animate the events it is so useful in organizing remains unknown. Did the mechanisms of social media cause or give birth to the ideas of revolt that populate the timeline of the so-called "Arab Spring" or "Occupy" movements, or did those mechanisms merely organize events related to already popular but unshared ideas or initiatives? Related to this distinction, one might further question the patterns of political engagement that emerge given the ease with which one can participate politically. Strangers miles away can organize group action; pressing a button can digitally sign a petition; and, boycotts can take place without any physical presence from the protestors. The costs to political action have changed and, whether this change strengthens or weakens political actors, it requires our collective attention.

Might the quality of one's political convictions decrease when one is able participate in many protests simultaneously with little chance of (legal or other) repercussion? Would children facing the full force of water hoses give voice to their dissatisfactions at the same rate as those who quietly post the same on their blogs? In comparing the two political actors in both environments might we expect one to hold her beliefs more deeply than the other? Posed differently, perhaps the ease of engagement may lend itself to more shallow engagements with particular causes. This idea may well be dangerously close to the one refuted by Mill's response to the third criticism of the liberty of thought and discussion. The question of whether social media primarily gives voice, enriches discussions, or weakens political engagement has no easy answer. Whatever the case, young people participating in online protests, signing petitions, and so forth, are

behaving as political actors and, as such, may come to expect that political acts of protestation should be similarly accessible over the course of their lives. As a result, these children may expect the formal right to protest and pursue its practice even at high cost in their maturity. That is to say, having had earlier experiences and expectations of the act of sharing as protest, one may become committed to safeguarding the continuity of that performance even when its protection requires significant personal sacrifice.

On the subject of children as participants in online or digitally mediated forms of political activity, we return to Arendt's recommendation that we introduce the child to the wider world in measured and careful ways. That the child can participate in political activity without barriers and at reduced cost may encourage a shortened period of political gestation. This is to say, children will be unleashed upon the delicate shared world without an appropriate amount of time in the sheltered and quiet space of childhood. Rather than transitioning into full adulthood, they might occupy some paradoxical identity as both child and political actor. If this is indeed the case, this process might create citizens who lack the socially expected necessary characteristics of responsible citizenship with and for their assumed peers.

Conclusion

The preceding has been an exploration of a few of the ways in which social media sharing can shape political actors as understood via Mill and Arendt. The exploration resists easy answers of support or simple stricture. Still, even with that nuanced appreciation, the question remains: what ought we do with this speculation?

Mill would surely have us exclude children from the free exchange of ideas. He would temper their exposure to these ideas on the grounds that doing so would “[protect] them against their own actions and external injury” (Mill, 1869/1978, p. 9). Mill also alludes to the length to which we might legitimately go in the service of cultivating beings who can make use of the sorts of freedoms he suggests.⁷ Perhaps we might find some way to cultivate the habits that prepare children for the schedule of impulses present through social media, allowing children to take advantage of and enjoy some subset of the liberties that it allows?

Social media's invitation to share need not become a compulsion. Taken as an invitation, we might imagine children interacting with social media as an avenue by which they can disclose small or safe portions of themselves to the public. We might help the child resist the move towards the compulsion to share through Arendt's analysis of the educator's authority. Arendt reminds us that we do not owe political sovereignty to the child as political equal (Arendt, 1961/2006, p. 119). The child's desires demand no political safeguarding and his rights are not identical to our own. Instead, we (as educators) hold a responsibility in relation to the child and his educational and formative experiences in and for the world.

By speculatively exploring some features of the factors involved, I have attempted to render the discussion of children, social media, and political identity both more clear and complex. Hopefully, by identifying the formative political ramifications of social media participation, we are better able to engage with these patterns in informed and pedagogically strategic ways, asking questions that push us to the answers that serve our students and our world well. Arendt (1961/2006) reminds us that the educator's authority stems from accepting responsibility for the world into which the child is being initiated. She writes:

⁷ Of course, on this note he is speaking of “backward” societies, but as he equates these with children the point seems appropriate here.

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token to save it from that ruin, which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. An education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their choice of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (p. 196)

This responsibility enables the educator to see herself as protector of the world from the child, as well as protector of the child from the world she has created. Social media might allow children to occupy the “safe” liminal space that Arendt identifies as “education,” aiding the transition between the private sphere and the public space of appearances. In light of its potential, social media might allow children a sheltered ground in which to test their political abilities and identities without exposure to the harsh lights of the outside world. If this is to be the case, educators must take responsibility for social media and the vistas that it creates. Social media sharing is now a part of our common world. Many of our students are experiencing a significant portion of their social lives through handheld and desktop screens. To ignore the impact of these gadgets and the social media sharing that they allow is to quite literally leave these children to their own devices in favor of a more narrow focus upon traditional factors in the processes of identity formation. This neglect refuses responsibility for this aspect of the world and thus undermines our educational authority and other aspects of it.

In order to create citizens capable of fully enjoying the liberties that Mill describes, we must follow Arendt’s provocation to safeguard children from the possibilities of political malformation and endorse the habits and patterns of sharing that slowly and carefully bring children into the world of political action.

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Winston C. Thompson works in philosophy of education with an emphasis on topics of ethics and social/political philosophy. His research on educational equity and fairness focuses upon the demands of justice in liberal contexts, with his recent work investigating the underlying ethical issues relevant to policy discussions around higher educational access in the United States. He is interested in the creation and cultivation of self-respect through educational experiences and has articulated the moral necessity of the recognition of human dignity in the design of educational systems. He is currently considering the role of autonomy across cultures and the limitations of western political and moral philosophy. Thompson has presented and published his work internationally and taught at Hofstra University as well as Teachers College, Columbia University, where he earned his Ph.D.