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Distributed Creativity as Political Expression: Youth Responses to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election in Online Affinity Networks

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In this article, we employ the lens of distributed creativity to explore how youth use online creativity to express themselves politically and engage in political dialogue with peers. We examine youth participation around the 2016 U.S. presidential election results on three online affinity networks representing different creative genres (games, fan fiction, and collaborative multimedia production). By qualitatively analyzing 1,116 creative artifacts and 14,202 associated responses posted in the two weeks following the election, we find that youth use online creativity to (re)claim agency towards the political process, provide peers with social support or distraction, and (re)imagine the political. Implications for youth and media, online participation, and political communication are discussed, thus further theorizing the connections between creativity and political expression.

Keywords: Youth, Creativity, Online Participation, Participatory Culture, Participatory Politics, Political Expression, Election, Citizenship.

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In both online and offline contexts, creativity—generally defined as the process that leads to original and effective products (Runco & Jaeger, 2012)—means more than the individualized production of ideas. Despite the legacy of individualism in conceptualizing creativity (see Hanchett-Hanson, 2015), increasingly research shows that creative participation functions as communication, sociality and self-expression (Glaveanu, 2014; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Stern, 2008). Within this sociocultural view, creativity is framed as a social, dialogical, and cultural process, where creators act in relation to others, using the symbolic and material means of culture. Here, we employ this perspective—known as the distributed model of creativity (Glaveanu, 2014)—to analyze how young people used online creative participation to express political stances and communicate with peers around the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

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Creativity can serve as a powerful outlet for political expression; indeed, as the history of artistic practice illustrates, some of the most salient political statements across time and place have taken the form of creative artifacts. With the development and proliferation of online platforms that facilitate widespread creative participation, much of this activity now takes place online, where barriers to entry are lower and creators can reach relevant audiences and form social connections (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2006). Youth are particularly active in these online spaces (Ito et al., 2009; Ito et al., in press). On such platforms, they develop their civic identity and express their political stances, through traditional expression forms, but also through creative digital artifacts like memes, artwork, or video blogs (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, in press; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016).

The potential of online creativity to function as a form of political expression was illustrated in a very potent manner in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This was a heightened time for heated political discourse all around the United States, occurring in everyday conversations, in classrooms, in mainstream and on social media. But political discourse was also occurring in surprising places: in online spaces centered on self-expression, sociality, and (usually) not electoral politics, where participants employed creative modes of expression, including the production of games, artwork, fan fiction and more, to engage with politics. Taking this context as a valuable opportunity for empirical and theoretical inquiry, the aim of this article is to examine how youth use online creativity as a way to express themselves politically and to engage in political dialogue with peers. We consider this phenomenon through the lens of distributed creativity (Glaveanu, 2012, 2014), which posits creativity—including individual creative participation—as a fundamentally social and communicative process, resting on the interrelation between creators, audiences and artifacts.

Our focus is on online sites that are not politically oriented, but rather are outlets for creative expression. Ito et al. (in press) dub these as online affinity networks: niche and interest-centered online communities where young people can communicate and collaborate around shared affinities. Here, we examine how online affinity networks facilitate a range of youth participatory practices around the election, which include not only posting creative, multimodal content in a variety of genres, but also commenting on and remixing others' work.

We do so through an in-depth qualitative content analysis of three cases, representing different genres of online creativity: Scratch (games and animations), Archive of Our Own (AO3) (fan fiction), and hitRECord (collaborative multimedia production and remix). As our time frame, we choose the two weeks (8–22 November 2016) immediately following the 2016 U.S. election in which Donald Trump was elected as the 45th U.S. President. In each of our three case studies, we analyze all election-related material in this two-week period, identifying three emergent forms of creative expression: (re)claiming agency towards the political process, providing social support or a distraction from politics, and (re)imagining the

political. Based on this in-depth empirical endeavor, we posit online distributed creativity as a significant, emerging form of youth political expression, thus making theoretical contributions pertinent to various literatures in the field of communication, including youth and media, online participation, and political communication.

Youth creative participation online and distributed creativity

Recent decades have seen growing attention to youth creative participation online, as the internet has facilitated greater and wider participation (Ito et al., 2009; Ito et al., in press; Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2015). Of particular relevance here is the notion of participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2006), defined as a context in which barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement are relatively low, where members feel a strong sense of support to create and share content, and feel that their contributions are valued. More recently, Jenkins et al. (2015) referred to participatory culture as one where individuals and groups "have the capacity to express [themselves] through a broad range of different forms and practices" (p. 2), a capacity which we examine by looking closely at different modes of creative expression.

Youth engage in online creative production for different reasons: to self-reflect, to experiment with creative authorship or to develop technical skills (Stern, 2008). However, beyond these inwardly focused rewards, one of the central aspects of—and motivations for—youth participation in these spaces is a social one. Youth is a time when peers and friends are the most valued comparison group (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996). Participating in like-minded interest communities, such as fandoms, where specific norms of social behavior are co-created (Baym, 2010) provides youth with a sense of community (Kligler-Vilenchik, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, & Tokuhama, 2012), and sharing their creations online gives them social validation from peer audiences (Stern, 2008). Online affinity networks are, thus, a space for youth to work through social dynamics and pursue self-development (boyd, 2015; Ito et al., 2009).

Our perspective builds on this work and, embracing a sociocultural view of creativity (Glaveanu, 2014; Gruber, 2005), stresses online creative production as a distributed phenomenon, taking place at the intersection between creators, their audiences, and cultural artifacts. The distributed nature of creativity occurs primarily along three dimensions: social, material, and temporal (Glaveanu, 2014). Creativity is characterized by a strong collective nature, even when the creator acts alone (the social dimension); it is shaped by action distributed across both people and artifacts (the material dimension); and it occurs in the present, but connects to the past and to a projected future (the temporal dimension).

The distributed creativity perspective includes a strong focus on the material dimension of creativity and the ways in which affordances can enable, but also constrain, creative action. Gibson (1986, p. 127) initially defined the affordances of an environment as "what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill." Building on this notion, Glaveanu (2012) suggests an affordance-focused view

of creativity that redefines it "as the process of perceiving, exploiting, and 'generating' novel affordances during socially and materially situated activities" (p. 196). Thus, creativity as a distributed phenomenon not only uses affordances, but takes them up in unexpected ways, generating new uses—which is, in itself, a creative act.

This materially aware and socioculturally-based theory of creativity is invaluable when applied to the online environment. As Harrison and Barthel (2009) have aptly noted, what is novel about the online environment is "the now-widespread recognition and acknowledgement that users actively apply the affordances of new technologies in the service of their own creative and instrumental objectives" (p. 161). Although creative expression, including purely text-based forms, has always been multimodal, new media has broadened the possibilities to engage with content (Jewitt, 2005). The participatory web is characterized by "an especially personal expressive and aesthetic component" (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p. 175). In comparing online and offline creativity—within the specific context of participatory art—we find that, on the one hand, the mainstreaming of new media tools shapes the actors, places, times, processes and motives of creative action. Yet at the same time, the basic processes of creativity remain the same, while being expanded, enhanced and diversified in the online context (Literat & Glaveanu, 2016).

Much of the work described until now pertains to "online" or "digital" contexts, yet what we mean by these terms is constantly in flux. Increasingly, the web is becoming platformized (Helmond, 2015), and many young people's participation online occurs chiefly through the large mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. At the same time, there remains an important role for online affinity networks (Ito et al., in press): niche, interest-centered sites that revolve around creative participation. The affordances of online affinity networks enable people to organize around interests and modes of expression, and find an audience of interested others. While some online affinity networks build upon mainstream social media platforms, many—like our case studies—occur on sites that enable specialized forms of content production, sharing, remixing and community building. Online affinity networks have also been examined for their civic potential (Ito et al., in press), an aim we pursue here.

Youth political expression and socialization in online spaces

Our view of political socialization is one that stresses the role of youth as active participants in their own socialization (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). If Lee, Shah, and McLeod (2012) posit family, school, media and peers as the four key agents of socialization in public life, we see participation in online affinity networks as incorporating the roles of both media and peers. Lee et al. highlight why peer-groups are key for youth socialization: peers can expose young people to different ideas, values and experiences, thus encouraging their civic reflection. Nowadays, much of this political socialization occurs online. A key effort examining how young people engage in new forms of civic and political engagement online has been through the lens of "participatory politics," defined as "interactive, peer-based acts through

which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern" (Cohen & Kahne, 2012, p. vi; Kahne, Middaugh & Allen, 2015). Participatory politics is enacted "bottom-up," through citizens' everyday participation.

Participatory politics operates with a wide definition of the political, including civic participation. In this article, we focus more specifically on engagement with electoral politics. Indeed, one of the strengths of participatory politics for young people is the ability to connect to the sphere of electoral politics—often perceived as distant, dirty, or imbued with negative connotations of divisiveness or corruption—through spheres young people are passionate and positive towards, such as popular culture (see Jenkins et al., 2016). Non-political online spaces offer the opportunity to experiment with political expression tangentially, as well as to achieve cross-cutting exposure (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Moreover, these spaces enable youth to engage with politics through the modes of expression and topics of interest most salient to them.

Such connections are part of emergent conceptions of citizenship, which are more self-expressive in nature. Bennett, Freelon, and Wells (2010) consider the model of the self-actualizing citizen, where citizenship takes the form of self-actualization through social expression, and where personal interests are shared through loosely tied networks. For the self-actualizing citizen, civic action can be expressed through "creative civic expression" (p. 398), including online (e.g., writing blogs, creating political videos). Such self-expressive acts can be seen by the self-actualizing citizen as more meaningful than voting.

Importantly, while many scholars have been debating changing models of citizenship (see Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017, for a review), not much attention has been paid to the connections between online creativity and political expression, particularly in regard to youth. A notable exception is the literature on online memes, which have been considered as a creative form of political expression (e.g., Shifman, 2013). Another recent connection between the spheres of creativity and politics is the concept of the "civic imagination," defined as "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems" (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 29). The idea is that, in order to change the world, one must be able to imagine what a better world would look like.

The question guiding this inquiry is thus, how do young people use online creativity, as a quintessentially distributed phenomenon, to express themselves politically and to engage in political dialogue with peers around the 2016 U.S. presidential election results? Moreover, to further connect the realms of online creativity and political expression we ask, how do different creative genres and affordances shape different kinds of political discourses?

Method

To examine these questions, we conducted an in-depth qualitative content analysis of three case studies of online affinity networks that afford creative expression: Scratch, a

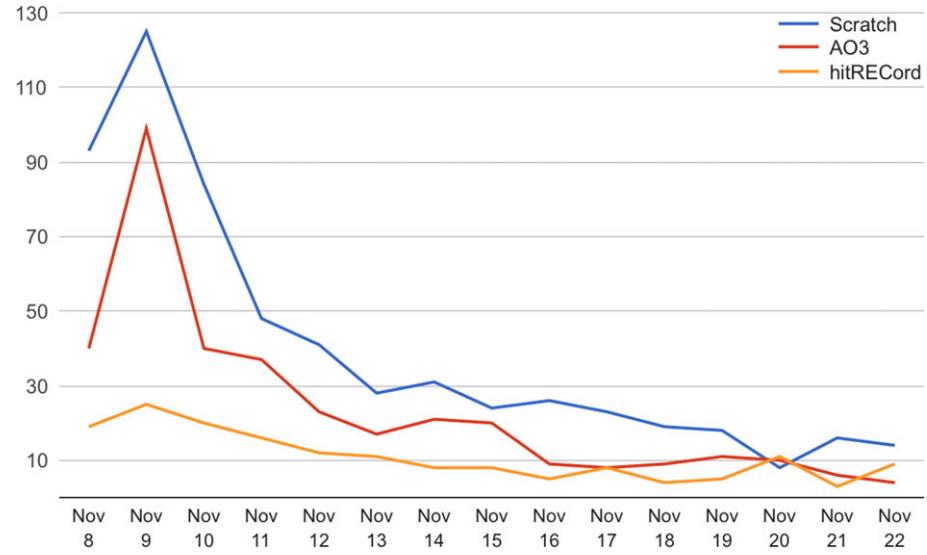

Figure 1 Number of election-related artifacts posted by date and by case study.

site for programming games and animations; AO3, a site for writing and sharing fan fiction; and hitRECord, a collaborative production site that affords creating and remixing audio, video, images and text. Viewing cases as theoretical constructs (Ragin, 1992), we see these sites as non-political online affinity networks that facilitate youth creative expression. We explicitly chose sites not devoted to politics, though in our time frame—the two weeks after the 2016 U.S. election—these sites included a high volume of election-related content (see Figure 1).

"Youth" is a category that is socially constructed, historically varied, and contested (Ito et al., 2009). Accordingly, age boundaries for this category vary across the literature. We choose to follow the approach of Ito et al. in their seminal *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out*, which, like our work, examines youth digital participation. Ito et al. include in their study youth from ages 12 to 30, while loosely differentiating between "kids" (under 13), "teenagers" (13–18) and "young adults" (19–30) (see Ito et al., 2009, pp. 6–8). Elsewhere, "young adults" often span up to age 34. Although in our dataset users do not usually indicate their precise ages, we know that users of these sites generally include a predominance of youth across these categories, as well as a minority of older adults. In the following, we document this site by site.

Scratch, a project of the MIT Media Lab, is open to users from age eight. According to the site's official statistics (https://scratch.mit.edu/statistics/), the modal age for new Scratchers is 13. Of 1.8 million new users who registered on Scratch, 39% are under 13 and 44% are 13–18, making Scratch participants the youngest users of our three case studies. Another 10% are 19–29, while new scratchers age 35 and above comprise only 6.6% of users.

AO3 and hitRECord are available for users over the age of 13. As we show below, the vast majority of users on these sites are young people, yet these two sites are not as explicitly youth-focused as Scratch. The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), which runs AO3, does not collect users' ages, but referred us to an informal census from 2013 with over 10,000 responses (centrumlumina, 2013). According to this census, 20% of AO3 users are under 18, and 62% are 19–29. Altogether, 91% of respondents are under 34. This age trend is echoed by data from Alexa.com (2017), an Amazon subsidiary which provides online traffic data and analytics. Alexa data shows that, in relation to the general internet population, 18- to 24-year-olds are "greatly overrepresented" on AO3, while the 25–34 bracket is "similar to the general internet population." Users 35 and above are "underrepresented" to "greatly underrepresented."

hitRECord describes itself as an "open collaborative production company." It is owned by actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt, and highlights the potential for artists to make a profit from their products. hitRECord staff did not respond to our queries about user demographics. However, according to Alexa.com, 18- to 24-year-olds are "greatly overrepresented" on hitRECord, while the 25–34 bracket is "above average." Age categories of 35 and above are "underrepresented" to "greatly underrepresented" on hitRECord. These stats are quite similar to those for AO3, with a somewhat higher proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds on hitRECord. Thus, we are able to conclude that these three sites are predominantly used by young people, though we acknowledge the participation and contribution of older adults, particularly on AO3 and hitRECord.

The three cases differ in the modalities of creative expression they afford. On Scratch, we see interactive computer games and animations of varying levels of complexity. On AO3, the main creative expression genres are fan fiction stories, with a focus on text-based narrative. hitRECord affords easy production of multimedia content with the aim of collaboration, and there we see text posts, vlogs, animation, music and more. This variance helps us address our question about how different creative genres and affordances shape different political discourses.

For ethical reasons, we only chose sites that are public, and all data we analyzed were freely accessible.[1] At the same time, we take additional precautions to anonymize participants, as we deal with a youth demographic. We thus change usernames in quotes and examples, while making an effort to maintain the original username's meaning, context or style. Finally, we make minor changes to wording of titles and direct quotes, so that they are not searchable.

In terms of our time frame, we focused on election-related content uploaded to these sites during the two weeks from Election Day (8–22 November). According to the "Young American Tracking Poll" (Bladt, 2017), for young people (aged 13–25) the time period after the 2016 election was marked by heightened political involvement. This poll found a "significant increase in young people's civic engagement" *since* the election of Donald Trump. For example, 37% posted their "own thoughts or comments on political or social issues online" after the election, while only 13% did so before the election; 17% participated in an organized protest after the election

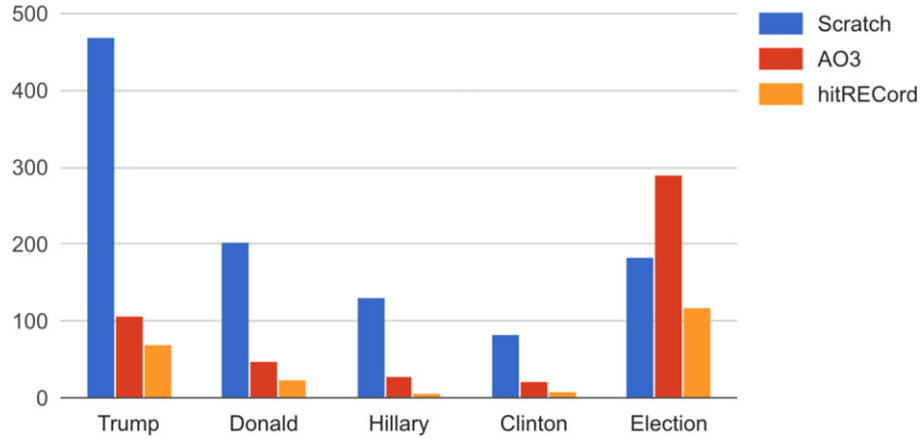

Figure 2 Keyword popularity per case study.

Table 1 Artifacts and comments by case study

Case study	# of artifacts	# of comments	Average comments per artifact
Scratch	598	9775	16.3
AO3	354	3882	11
hitRECord	164	545	3.3

(many of these occurred in the first few days post-election, see Park, 2016), while only 8% did so before. Thus, the time period immediately following the election was a pertinent empirical context for studying the intersection of creativity and political expression online.

To create our corpus, we searched the three sites during those two weeks using the terms: election(s), Trump, Donald, Clinton, Hillary. Taken together, these search terms yielded a corpus of 1,116 items (see Figure 2 for a breakdown, by search word and by site)[2] and 14,202 comments posted on them (see Table 1 for a breakdown of artifacts and comments by case study).

Our analytic approach involved several steps. We began by analyzing each case on its own. To examine creativity as a distributed phenomenon, our analysis emphasized the relations between original artifacts and their responses, treating them in dialogue with each other. Thus, for each item in our corpus, we looked both at the artifact itself and the responses to it, which included textual comments but also multimodal responses, such as reaction videos or remixes. We read/viewed/played the artifacts and comments, taking copious notes on key characteristics. We looked both at content (what was said) and form (how it was said). Much of the expression on these sites reflects affinities to fan interests and content worlds (e.g., anime, superheroes, science fiction), so we sought to understand each artifact in relation to its specific context.

After taking notes on each artifact on its own, our next step of analysis, inspired by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), involved identifying and naming recurring concepts, such as "the wall with Mexico," "social support," or "imagining the election through the eyes of fictional characters." We first conducted our analysis per site, to capture the ways in which these cases differ in their creative affordances. We analyzed each case according to three key questions: *what?* (what were the main topics and concerns raised?), *why?* (what were the key aims participants expressed?), and *how?* (which affordances and creative genres were used?). In the next stage of analysis, to compare and contrast across cases, we coalesced interrelated concepts from the different cases into a cross-case analysis of three emergent forms of creative expression. In the discussion section, we consider the implications of our findings for different areas of communication research. We begin with descriptive results, showcasing our corpus and the kind of content we found and analyzed.

Descriptive results

Table 1 details the number of artifacts and comments per case study. On Scratch, the two-week period (8–22 November) included 598 election-related artifacts, mostly simple games and animations, with a total of 9,775 comments. Key issues of concern were intolerance toward minorities, particularly focusing on the wall with Mexico. Scratchers—the youngest of our users—also expressed concern about the possibility of a nuclear war, or World War III. Though the majority opposed Trump, we found a large contingent of Trump supporters here, significantly more than our other cases. Many also expressed a dislike of both candidates.

On AO3, there were 354 election-related stories posted in our time frame, with a total of 3,882 comments. The vast majority were fan fiction (stories written by fans, based on characters and plotlines found in popular culture texts). Participants on AO3 were strongly opposed to Trump and distressed by the election results, although a few Trump supporters expressed differing views in comments. Key themes in stories and comments were implications for racial, religious and sexual minorities, particularly LGBTQ rights.

hitRECord was the smallest of our case studies, yet it was valuable due to its focus on multiple modes of creativity, and on collaboration. Election-related content in our time frame consisted of 165 unique artifacts, which yielded a total of 545 comments. Almost all artifacts expressed opposition to Trump, disappointment, worry or concern around the election results. Key issues of concern were LGBTQ rights, feminism/women's rights, racism, and hate speech.

Figure 1 presents the number of creative artifacts posted on each day within our time frame. In all three cases, election-related content peaks on 9 November, as election results became known, with a steep decline after 10 November. Figure 2 indicates the number of times each of our five keywords appeared on the sites. We see Donald Trump (referred to usually by last name, "Trump") clearly taking up the center of attention with 923 mentions, whereas Hillary Clinton (referred to usually

by first name, "Hillary") receives significantly less attention with 279 mentions. As opposed to Scratch users' focus on the candidates as personas, AO3 and hitRECord users focus more on the "election" itself.

Findings: three forms of creative expression

We identify three forms of creative expression that were found across the cases. For each of these forms, we focus on the site where it was most salient, while more briefly describing its manifestation on the other sites. The first form of expression exemplifies the kinds of political content found on these sites, showing how users deploy the creative affordances that are particular to each site. The second form delves into the social function of creative expression and considers the socio-emotional context of the processes under study. The third form of expression is more future-oriented, focusing on the imagining of collective futures.

(Re)claiming agency towards the political process

(Re)claiming agency referred to using creative affordances in a way that positions the participants as active agents vis-à-vis the political process. Simply using the term *reclaiming* would assume that participants originally possessed agency. However, many of our younger participants are limited in their ability to participate politically, i.e., through voting, and may be in fact *claiming* agency—thus our use of (re)claim. Indeed, this form of expression was most salient among our youngest participants, on Scratch, expressed through games, although it was also at play in AO3 in the form of fan fiction, and on hitRECord, using multiple modalities.

More than on the other sites, young users on Scratch were preoccupied with Donald Trump as a persona (see Figure 2). This included numerous pro-Trump artifacts, such as ones celebrating his win (see Figure 3). Trump supporters on

Figure 3 A celebratory animation posted by Scratch user jadka on 9 November.

Scratch—the largest proportion of pro-Trump voices compared to our other cases, but still overall a minority on the site—often justified their stance on the basis of personal identification ("I like Trump because his personality reflects my personality"), along with a lack of trust towards the opponent ("Hillary wouldn't have any idea what to do if there was a WW3.")

Scratchers' focus on Trump was also illustrated by the popularity of games in which he is the protagonist, or the avatar you play with. Many of these games seem to mock Trump: they revolve around making him dance, "do the dab," or generally appear silly. But in other games, users help Trump-as-avatar fulfill his political mission, which usually involves winning the election or building the wall with Mexico, while avoiding obstacles. Game descriptions include:

> Avoid the Mexicans, Taco's, Hillary and the Rest of the World, otherwise America will not be great again. (fence92, 11 November)
> Collect Red States to increase your score (number of Delegates), but if you collect Blue States that count will drop. (wickedMaster, 14 November)
> Use the arrow keys – left and right – to move. Avoid the donkeys and the Clinton heads. Collect elephants – once your meter is full, collect the White Houses! Beware of crates that fall down, these are scandals. There are good and bad scandals (marked by booing or cheering) so it's a gamble if you collect them. (trexcrawler, 17 November)

In these political mission-oriented games, we see an indirect affiliation with Trump—an attempt to help him succeed (in the game world)—that we have not seen on the other sites. But more than that, we get a glimpse into these youths' understanding of, quite literally, the "rules of the game" of politics. That is, by creating a literal game with rules and instructions, they actively experiment with or express their nuanced understanding of how elections (and democracy) work.

For youth not of voting age, elections may underscore their own lack of political agency. But the interactive nature of games allowed participants to claim an active role, at least in the game world. This may explain the popularity of voting games on Scratch, particularly on 8 and 9 November, where players could vote between Clinton and Trump (or, in one case, Trump and a potato), sometimes also displaying the distribution of votes. Comments on these games often focused on game mechanics, particularly whether it was possible to rig the game and vote multiple times. We can think of this phenomenon through the game studies concept of the "magic circle," which sees the game space as "an artifice for providing the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations. In short, a game is a safe way to experience reality" (Crawford, 1982, p. 12). Thus, as most Scratch users cannot vote in real life, they play out this process virtually (and with little consequences) on the site.

A particularly salient way of claiming agency included games in which players must physically assault Trump's avatar in order to advance or score points: for instance, punch Trump in the face or hit him with an axe. In these simple games,

youth are imbued with symbolic power vis-à-vis the president-elect. In the most popular of these games, user digi07 (19 November) took the online game created by a Swedish ad agency where participants aggravate Trump by blowing a trumpet into his hair, and made a Scratch version, counting the number of times Scratch users blew the trumpet (similarly to the original). Receiving over 2,780 comments, this game significantly struck a chord with Scratch users.

(Re)claiming agency and exerting symbolic power also showed up in our other cases, among older youth, and using different modes of expression. For instance, on the fan fiction website AO3, many election-related stories feature characters humiliating, assaulting, or assassinating the president-elect. In these stories, the active agent is not the author themselves, but rather fictional characters, often superheroes. Like avatars, these fictional characters function as extensions of the authors, and allow them to (re)claim agency and exert (super)power. Captain America is the most popular protagonist in this regard: our corpus includes five different stories about Captain America assaulting Trump or his supporters.

On AO3, a somewhat unorthodox way for participants to (re)claim agency was through writing erotic fiction. Erotica between fictional characters, including slash (same sex erotica) is a pervasive genre in fan fiction. On AO3, much erotic fiction used the characters and content worlds of politics. Donald Trump was a protagonist in many of these texts, and was sexually paired, for instance, with Hillary Clinton, Vladimir Putin, Mike Pence, Bernie Sanders, Doctor Strange, and even internet horror meme Slenderman. Much of this erotic fiction was humorous in form ("'AH, GET ME HIGHER THAN YOUR WALL!' [Clinton] said [to Trump] screaming in pleasure"), but for some AO3 users, writing erotic fiction meant (re)claiming agency more literally. As the following creators explicitly stated in author notes, writing gay erotica was a way for them to make a subversive political statement:

> Probably this is the most extensive sex stuff I've ever written, and most of it was thought up and written as a way to cope with the election and the shit going down right now. Because there's nothing that makes me happier than two boys representing everything trump and pence hate having hot sex. (SideHonor, author note)
>
> DONALD TRUMP GOT ELECTED JUST NOW SO I'M MAKING EVERYTHING!! GAY!!!!!!! A small protest, because I can't go to actual protests here. (sewingbright, author note)

Sewingbright's comment addresses the relations between protesting through creative expression, versus participating in "actual protests." These relations were manifested in a different way on hitRECord, where some participants used the site to showcase their participation in real-life protests. Especially interesting here was hitRECord user WayfaringGal. A month before the election, WayfaringGal started "Project: Rebel," which explores the meanings of being a rebel. Two days after the election, she posted a variety of media from her participation in anti-Trump protests to "Project: Rebel," including video footage from the protest entitled "Get out

to the streets (not my president)" and a still photograph featuring a protester in an anonymous mask, entitled "resistance." In addition, she posted drawings of a cat on a hot pink background captioned "Pussy grabs back" as "an image representing rebellion." Through the various genres, she experimented with different meanings of rebellion (and political agency), ranging from real-life protest to protest through creative expression.

Providing social support or a distraction from politics

In our corpus, particularly on hitRECord and AO3, the majority of youth voices were anti-Trump. On both of these sites we saw significant sadness, anger, concern, and fear around the implications and potential consequences of the election. Given these emotions, a recurrent aim found in our data was using creativity to provide emotional support to others in light of the election results, or to distract oneself and others from politics. These aims appeared on all sites, but were most salient on the fan fiction website AO3:

> FOR EVERYONE WHO'S FEARING FOR THEIR LIVES AND SCARED: my babies, I know it's terrifying (…) I live in a town that totally adores Trump. If I didn't have outlets like these… I'd be really shaken up. (Cap2, author note)

Online communities are known to be spaces where strong social connections are forged, and where certain norms of social engagement are constructed and enforced (Baym, 2010). On AO3, warm, supportive comments from readers to authors are the social norm. We see commenters repeatedly thanking story writers for posting stories that bring them comfort, and writers usually take the time to reply to these comments one by one, with messages of thanks and encouragement. Here, the creative genre of the narrative story helps create a strong sense of social connection between the author and reader, even on first contact, that is then leveraged for social support in the face of the election results. An example is the following reader-author exchange around a story about Trump supporters' homophobia (10 November):

> Just wanted to say thank you for posting this. I'm still in shock over the election results… This story really really struck a cord with me (…) I don't know you, but I love you and please take care. (TitteringScribble, reader comment)
> Thank you… I hope you're taking care as well. Stay strong, and continue to love the people around you (…) I hope it helps. (PrismaticKitty, author reply)

AO3 participants mentioned that receiving supportive comments and reactions helped them to overcome an anxiety around expressing themselves politically, and feel more hopeful about humanity in general. In the author note on their story, DeltaTango writes:

> it TRULY makes me feel good to see everyone's wonderful and positive comments. I know people don't usually talk about real politics on AO3. Reading this was the first time I felt nervous about opening comments (…) Couldn't have been more

> proud… This election kind of shook my belief that "basically, people are good", and this story and comments made me feel hopeful again.

We saw similar uses of creative artifacts of various modalities to offer social support to fellow community members on all three sites, illustrating the social nature of distributed creativity. For example, on hitRECord, user JuliaG (10 November) posted a drawing of a young woman with a determined expression, entitled "Grounding Message After the Election." She wrote:

> Ladies – I'm with you. People of color – with you. LGBTQ – with you. Military folks tired of war – with you. Everyone – with you. Don't start hating. That's how we get to these messes to begin with. Find a safe place for your tears. Find productive ways to stoke the fire.

Also on hitRECord, BeckieBow (15 November) drew a man holding up a rainbow with the caption "the rainbow will prevail." In the description, she wrote:

> So many people are hurt and/or shocked by the results of the Presidential election in the US. One of those is Martin, a beautiful gay latinx, [3] who always smiles for everyone else. I made this to make him smile some more.

On Scratch, social support was provided more in comments than through games, though one interesting artifact offered social support through the rational conveying of information: an interactive slideshow in which user HockeyFan proposed to answer questions about the Trump Presidency (11 November). The description reads: "If you're still terrified about the election and what will happen with Trump's inauguration next year, I'll try to sort out the chaos for you so that perhaps you'll be a bit better off staying here." In the comments, concerned participants ask questions like "do you think he will outlaw gay marriage?" and "will I be deported?"

Social support is more easily provided when participants agree politically. However, on both Scratch and AO3 we also saw discussion between supporters of both candidates. Debates often ended in an agreement to disagree (e.g., to Spark's question on Scratch: "why is this chain getting into a big political war?," wishwish9 responds "O.K., let's stop arguing") or even appreciation across ideological lines (e.g., on AO3, Molecule replies to an anti-Trump story with "Cute. I'm a Trump supporter myself, but this little piece of rationality is needed right now.")

Social support around the election results was also provided in a different way: by using creative expression as a way to distract oneself and others from politics. In our corpus, this distraction is explicit: as we used election-related keywords, our data only includes instances in which participants directly framed their artifacts as providing distraction from the election, in either the title, description or author notes. This happened very frequently on AO3, such as in JustLucy's comment on her election-related story (10 November):

> It's fan fiction's version of hot cocoa (…) if you'd add a shot of vodka, we'd be all set.

Creativity as distraction was provided not only as social support to others, but also as a way for creators to get their own minds off politics. AO3 writers mention working on their stories, including collaboratively, as a form of escapism: "this heartbreaking work of geniality came out of three hours of co-authoring a google doc while trying to avoid the election results" (16 November). Similarly, hitRECord users also discussed creating or consuming art as a distraction from politics. VeryLively posted a drawing of flowers entitled "flowers of the apocalypse" (10 November), and in the description wrote "…or my attempt to calm myself after the 2016 Presidential Election." FinalCard issued a challenge to musicians to contribute to a collaboratively produced song (12 November). In the project's update video, he talks about the comfort he found in working on the contributions he received: "it's been wonderful to have this lovely and comforting music to put on repeat after the quite emotional week here in the U.S."

(Re)imagining the political

(Re)imagining the political takes on two different meanings in our corpus. The first pertains to an active use of the imagination, fiction, or popular culture to make sense of politics and the election. The second includes imagining alternative political scenarios, that is, the future we'd like to see, or the future we're worried about. Our framing of both these aspects of reimagining the political builds on and contributes to the concept of the civic imagination (Jenkins et al., 2016) as the process of collectively imagining a better future.

Collaboratively imagining alternative conceptions of democracy was most salient on hitRECord, the collaborative production site. What distinguishes the hitRECord case from the other cases is the focus on and extent of collaborative creation. On hitRECord, our study period saw the launch of an ambitious collaborative animation project (8 November, see Figure 4). This five-episode series was produced entirely on hitRECord in one and a half months. The plot follows the candidacy of "John 8," the first humanoid, or "synthetic American," to run for U.S. president. The series discusses themes such as the characteristics required of a president, overcoming prejudice and discrimination, loss of faith in the democratic process, the role of algorithms in politics, and more. Exemplifying distributed creativity, the series' credits include over 100 users, in roles such as writing, voice-acting and animation. Some took on large roles, while others made small contributions, like creating an election map for a scene's background.

While contributors and commenters to the project mostly focused on technical aspects or simply expressed joy in seeing themselves included, the comments also served to discuss connections to the "IRL" (in real life) election. For some users, the series prompted imagining alternative conceptions about democracy, politics and political candidates. When John 8 captures public affection by recalling a difficult war memory, Bubz_Barone comments:

Figure 4 Screenshot of USAI—Episode 1, collaboratively produced on hitRECord.

> Living in a time when being nasty and hateful can easily dominate the media's attention, to see what it could look like to win hearts and minds with compassion and kindness is a very welcome visual. Things like this are why I love hitRECord!

At the same time, the collaboratively produced series painted a complex picture of American politics. John 8, the synthetic candidate, promised extreme populism: algorithmically determining what the public wants, and delivering exactly that. hitRECord viewers sympathized with the handsome "synth," but some raised concerns about this ultimate populism:

> Moonshine Studio: haha I like John! But i'm a bit concerned with his last message.. What if the majority of people want to bomb another country? Will John do it?? scary stuff.

At the end of the series, John 8 loses to incumbent president Marcia Washington, who represents politics as usual, but, as a black female president, also presents a progressive ideal. hitRECord members used the series to reflect on the real-life election:

> Inacosta84: Maybe it's bc of my personal views with our latest election in the States, but I'm thinking maybe a robot is actually a better representation of the people (as scary as that sentence sounds). Maybe a robot would actually eliminate a divided nation.
> TedTheToast: This insane year specifically made me more aware of politics and realize how much I did emotionally care for this country (…) The ending was

> strongly bittersweet (though tasting more bitter than the sweet per recent turn of IRL events).

Beyond this particularly ambitious collaborative project, one of hitRECord's main affordances for creative political expression involved the use of "creative challenges" issued by hitRECord staff or by regular users. Out of the 165 contributions in our hitRECord corpus, over a third (59) were responses to creative challenges. In the two weeks following the election results, we often saw users responding to challenges that are oriented towards fiction and fantasy, and infusing them with political meaning. A prominent example included the challenge "Write a poem, story or article starting with the title 'Mission to Mars.'" Our corpus showed six different examples of responses to this non-political writing challenge with political overtones. Feereesuns (14 November), who responded to the challenge by producing a song, writes, "It's been a struggle to respond artistically to this election. This prompt was just what I needed." The result is an upbeat 2-minute audio song, with lyrics including the following verse:

> Well I woke up today to some terrible news/ There's an Orange Lord out scaring the Jews/ He's giving the whole world battle scars/ So let's all go on a Mission to Mars.

Making active use of imagination, fiction, or popular culture to make sense of politics was also salient on AO3. As a site for stories built around fandom, participants on AO3 relied heavily on popular culture and their beloved fictional characters to process election results. The narratives of 46 stories revolved around favorite characters reacting to the announcement of the election results, in addition to many others which imagined how fictional protagonists would have voted, or how they would have engaged in protests or interacted with Trump or Clinton:

> If only Cap [Captain America] were real, he'd protest what's happening because he stands against racism, bigotry, and everything else horrible that Trump supports. I suppose we'll have to carry Captain America's legacy and fight for what's right, won't we? (clingyemotions, reader comment)

Readers mentioned wishing that fictional characters (here, a tough female protagonist in the movie *The Martian*) could protect them from the implications of real life politics:

> I wish Annie was real. A former classmate of mine got heckled in Times Square for wearing a hijab yesterday. I'm just frozen in the horrified shock mode still. (12fev)
> Hi friend—not to barge in and shout but Annie is real!! Annie is me and you and every other woman who woke up and got her crying done and then got to work. This is real. This is us. (quietmanatee, reader comment, in reply)

A second aspect of reimagining the political involves imagining alternative political scenarios, the future we would like to see or would have wished for. On AO3, for example, many narratives imagined an alternative reality in which Hillary Clinton won the election. Author blownaway (12 November) writes in the description of her story:

Figure 5 Posted by glidin4ever on 9 November.

> Hillary Clinton won the 2016 Election in a landslide. She overcame it all and became the first female president (…) In real life, Donald Trump may have won, but in this small corner of AO3, Hillary Clinton is the 45th President.

On Scratch, participants used games and animations to imagine not alternative realities, but rather potential future consequences of the election. Many of these are dire, revolving around the wall with Mexico, nuclear war, and declining relations with Russia. An example combining these themes is "what will happen now that Donald trump got elected :-(" (see Figure 5). In this animation, a family is evacuated from their U.S. home because of a nuclear emergency ("Kids, get in the car!"), but when they try to escape, they are blocked by a giant wall, presumably at the border with Mexico ("Wait a second, why is there a wall?"). As their path is blocked by the wall, a missile falls over the car and there is a huge explosion. The final scene reads: "And then we all died and america was taken over by Vladimier [*sic*] Putin." Examples such as this one prompt us to think of the way the civic imagination involves not only imagining hopeful scenarios of the political future we'd like to see, but also fearful imaginations of a dystopian future.

Discussion

This article examined how youth use online creativity to express themselves politically and to engage in political dialogue with peers in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election, with an eye to how different creative genres and affordances shape different kinds of political discourses. We identified three emergent forms of creative expression: (re)claiming agency towards the political process, providing social support or distracting from politics, and (re)imagining the political. Table 2 presents a summary of our empirical findings and ties them back to the paradigm of

Table 2 The three aspects of distributed creativity (Glaveanu, 2014) as manifested in our findings

	Key feature of creativity	Manifestation in our findings
Social	Creativity is characterized by a collective nature	- Creativity as basis for political discussion - Online creativity functions as social support - Social norms differ by site
Material	Creativity is shaped by action distributed across both people and artifacts	- The kinds of political discourse enabled are shaped by site affordances, but in interaction with the community ethos and norms
Temporal	Creativity occurs in the present but connects to the past and a projected future	- Civic imagination expressed through creative participation—includes not only imagining a "better world" but also imagining dark or dystopian futures

distributed creativity, by outlining how, within our empirical context, creativity was distributed across three lines—social, material and temporal (Glaveanu, 2014).

Moving beyond the specificities of our case studies, this research offers significant implications for scholars working across broad areas of communication research—principally, youth and media, online participation, and political communication—and we hope that our work is a further step towards strengthening dialogues across these areas. In the following, we discuss five key implications that emerged from this work.

First, our research illustrates the importance of non-political online affinity networks as a significant locus for political expression and discussion. When political communication research examines election-related content and practices online, it is mostly in spaces explicitly devoted to electoral politics, such as candidates' websites or, more recently, candidates' digital media spaces (e.g., Penney, 2017). Yet at a time when many youth are disenchanted with traditional politics (Bennett et al., 2010), examining online spaces devoted to the election or to politics would have given us a limited and biased window: that of youth who are highly politically interested and motivated. Online affinity networks, on the other hand, enable a variety of young people to experiment peripherally with political expression, engaging with politics through the modes of expression and topics that are most salient to them. At the same time, we need to acknowledge the challenges of affinity networks as sites for youth political expression, especially since content on these sites usually isn't moderated (Scratch is an exception), and—as the analysis shows—can enable the spread of misinformation or exacerbation of fear.

A second implication from our research pertains to the role of affordances for creative political expression (Glaveanu, 2012; Harrison & Barthel, 2009). Our analysis shows that the affordances of different sites—which indeed facilitate personal expressive production (Harrison & Barthel, 2009)—significantly, but not exclusively, shape the forms of political discourse available to participants. Importantly,

we found that the role of affordances plays out *in interaction* with each community's ethos and norms, as co-constructed by participants. These findings echo previous scholarship stressing the significance of social norms in online communities (e.g., Baym, 2010; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2012; Ito et al., in press), but also carry implications for the design and moderation of youth-centered sites. If these sites are, as we claim, the locus for significant political expression, attention to social and technological affordances is crucial in terms of shaping forms of political expression that are conducive towards democracy.

Third, the election-related content we studied stresses the importance of creative and social aspects of political expression and discussion, particularly for youth. In the ideal described by Habermas (1989, p. 27), political debate is impersonal and rational, based on "people's public use of their reason." The political expression we find through distributed creativity is, instead, deeply personal, extremely social, emotionally loaded, and infused with imagination and popular culture. For our participants, creative production served as *the basis* around which political discussions occurred, and it was the social connections they established that enabled them to work through politics. To encourage youth political socialization, we should strive to better understand the forms of political expression that resonate with young people, and find ways to support these. To do so, we need to heed the calls to more strongly connect the study of culture with that of political communication (e.g., Dahlgren, 2006; Delli Carpini, 2013). A potent connection between the fields is the concept of the civic imagination, as "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems," with a focus on what "a better world" would look like (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 29). This concept was pertinent for our data, often manifested through reliance on popular culture, but the context of the 2016 election also brought to light new aspects: Young people's civic imagination is not only about "a better world," but also includes dark or dystopian futures, marked by fear and concern. Future work may consider the pervasiveness of this phenomenon and its political ramifications.

Fourth, our findings connect to bodies of work around changing forms and norms of civic and political participation (Bennett et al., 2010; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017), particularly through participatory politics (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Kahne et al., 2015). Political expression through distributed creativity—that is personal, self-expressive, and creative—is emblematic of emergent conceptions of citizenship, in which self-expression can be seen as a more meaningful political act than voting (Bennett et al., 2010). Indeed, youth have distinct ways to participate and express themselves politically (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2016). Understanding these proclivities and forms of participation is crucial, because the stakes are high: the time period of youth is crucial in terms of political socialization, shaping habits and views that persist into adult life (Youniss et al., 1997). Our analysis showed not only critique, but cynicism towards politics—an attitude that is of concern for democracy.

The time-period we studied, post-election 2016, was a unique one, marked by high political involvement, including for young people (Bladt, 2017). This is in itself an important finding for research on electoral politics: significant political

participation happens not only during campaigning, the time-period usually studied (e.g., Hendricks & Schill, 2015; Penney, 2017), but, at least in this election cycle, it occurred *after* the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president. In addition to political expression online, as we examined here, this time period saw a large rise in acts of participatory politics, such as signing petitions, joining organized protests, and mobilizing others (Bladt, 2017)—a trend that seems to be continuing into the Trump presidency: 15% of Americans have attended a political event or protest since the election (Pew Research Center, 2017). While our data showed connections between online creative expression and other forms of protest or dissidence, this relationship should be further examined in future empirical research.

Karpf, Kreiss, Kleis Nielsen, and Powers (2015) argue that we are facing an era of "rapid and often profound change" in the political realm—a claim that rings particularly true in the current political moment—and call for further inquiry of "citizens' political practices and media habits with close examination of the everyday contexts of political action, socialization, and media use related to public affairs" (p. 1901). To make sense of emergent forms of political expression and participation, scholarship must take up such calls, and combine insights from political communication with those derived from areas such as youth and media and online participation. Only then can we understand if, when, and how—to use the language of participatory politics (Cohen & Kahne, 2012, p. vi)—creative political expression (*voice*) can be channeled towards effective political *influence*.

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Notes

1 This study was considered by the ethics committee of the first author's institution as not human subjects research.
2 On Scratch, we only counted and analyzed unique artifacts; we did not include remixes which merely reproduced existing works without significantly altering them.
3 The gender-neutral alternative for Latino/Latina.

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