Dick Flacks

Interest began in student experience and youth as a stage of life while in graduate school. This connects with Flack’s interest in full democracy.

How can humans be nurtured to be participatory in democracy? We tend to focus individually, on ourselves and our personal lives. We do this at the expense of being involved in the big picture.

How do we get people to engage in both personal and public life? Students and young people have a long history of challenging the status quo. We can trace this back to student revolutions in the mid 19th Century. To understand social change we have to make an effort to understand the role of young people as a collective force.

One of those moments happened worldwide in the 1960s. But youth and student movements have limitations too. We need to expand beyond just talking about social movements as well. We need to talk about technology and communication. There’s more here than just direct action. Young people lead cultural change.

In recent years Flacks has been working on a UC system wide survey online to understand student life and participation. Between 50 and 60K students have responded in the last survey. The size of the survey allows you to study small groups of students and many different types of student participation. One of the things that came out of this were some findings about where students get their information.

Less than 20% sometimes read a newspaper. 60-70% get their news online. A lot of students simply don’t follow the news at all.

There’s a “willed cluelessness” that a lot of students engage in, they make a choice not to follow because they find the news disturbing. People feel more powerful to move forward with knowing less.

Flacks uses the internet and technology, he’s not against it, he’s just trying to understand the upsides and downsides of it.

While a lot of students were very involved during the last election cycle, a lot of people also didn’t concern themselves with it.

The question is what can be done to engage people and to challenge cluelessness.

Q & A Portion:

Q: Does technology like iPods have macro-sociological effects on how people participate and are aware of their surroundings?

A: It can be startling to an older person to see people disconnected like that. When are you here and when are you somewhere else? Does the technology let you escape into other realms? It’s a positive in getting through boring moments, or with reconnecting with people on your phone after the loneliness of class. On the negative side people create their own individual space without being attuned to the needs and interests of others. Are people less likely to reach out and communicate with people different from you? The radio used to be a thing where everybody was listening to the same stations. If people have their own personalized soundtrack, we’re not sure how much people are sharing. Does this lead to more discovery or discussion? Are you connecting to people globally? It’s a change, and it’s a question to think about.
Politically, the protests that have occurred over the Iraq war were mobilized over the Internet. That’s happening all over the world. Twitter allows for rapid instant communication. This is very important in China, and this technology really challenges dictatorships. On the other hand, if you set up your own media sphere that’s unique to you might not even be getting the messages that say it’s time to take notice. You might not know that your tuition is going up and the classes offered are going down. Technology can also let you be selective and tune a lot of things out because they seem boring.

You can’t do that with the newspaper. The newspaper industry is about to collapse. Of course, everything you can get in newspapers you can get online. You can get the whole archive of the NY Times online. Google monitors 4500 different news sources. And Google goes back in time too. People have access in a way they haven’t before with traditional newspapers. But, the problem is that hard copy newspapers are the source of all the stuff that’s online. How do we pay for journalism with online distribution? If those newspapers go away, nobody knows how to pay reporters to go around and cover the news throughout the world. Journalism is reaching us in new ways, but nobody knows how we’re going to pay for it. Will you pay for it? Do you actually look at ads on your screen?

Q: Doesn’t radio homogenize groups though in terms of music?

A: Yeah, that’s the contradiction. There’s a value to shared taste, shared appreciation. Shared consumer ship.

Q: Back in the 60s there was a draft. Were people politically involved because of the draft?

A: Sure I was very active in opposing the draft. It was a form of involuntary servitude. It seemed to be an archaic institution. So the paradox in your hypothesis is that having freed people from the draft we’ve freed people from having to worry about going to war. I do agree that should a draft be reinstated there would be a tremendous outburst of resistance. But look, in 2003 Bush launched an effort to invade Iraq. In the months leading up to that there were demonstrations across the planet. In February 2003 people all across the planet marched against the war. It was the biggest protest in human history. What I noticed in SB was that very little of that crowd were students. Interestingly, the dissent against this war during this war was higher than in Vietnam, but publically, once the war started, the visible protesting was much less.

Q: So if it was the draft then weren’t people self-interested?

A: Sure, there’s an activist minority that is solely interested in social change. Some of it definitely came from self-interest. In the 60s the grades you got in class partially determined if people got drafted or not. You were probably ready to protest if you heard that this was going to happen.

Q: Regardless of news consumption by youth, it seems like activism seems like a hard sell because the issues we would be protesting against are the same issues our predecessors were. There seems like there’s a lack of progress from the 60s. Is there a notion that those old protests didn’t accomplish anything?

A: This is a way to rationalize non-involvement, and we all have a lot of them. In the 60s people who didn’t have the right to vote were being drafted when they turned 18. If you say war, yeah, we have not succeeded in abolishing the notion of war. In the current wars the protest movement is coming from the soldiers who are fighting it. Supporting the troops doesn’t mean supporting the war because a lot of the people who went over with enthusiasm and came back with a new outlook based on what the war was about and wasn’t about. If the war grows in Afghanistan we’re going to see some more of the involvement. I think the real problem for people is that sometimes you see an issue that
deserves challenge but you don’t see an effective way to change that issue. With the new administration we’re hearing that change has to come from all of us, not just the president. People are being invited to express themselves and organize. There’s an increasing tempo to doing things online. Some people say it’s all BS, some say it really matters. We need to figure out what online protest is able to accomplish. How do we build onto that online activity? Moveon.org pioneered the idea of using email and the internet to get people to sign petitions and letters and organize. It’s effective in a certain way because 4 million people are involved and 5% respond you have got a couple hundred thousand people.

Q: Talking about the news and going online, is there a way that globally there are so many people interested in blogging and the happenings in their own country, is possible for the people to become the press and open up their own visions?

A: That’s participatory democracy. Talking Points Memo does this. Their readers send things in. I still think that journalism takes some training, reporting is a craft with a code of ethics. What we want from journalism is comprehensive and fair reporting, not just what someone thinks. How do you get people trained that way? And what about really tough stories that require full-time investigative involvement? It’s not hard to give your opinion on an event or to review a movie or performance; it’s great to have more democracy with those things. Who will do the deep digging to uncover big sites of power? The problem is that as Jefferson said, power does corrupt. People do try to take advantage of their position. We might need full-time people to be scrutinizing them. Can voluntary journalism do that without financing, I’m not sure. Maybe there will be a subscriber fee like with iTunes and music? This is right on the cusp of becoming a serious question. One thing people need to do is to update the curriculum to teach people how to actively use the web and get good information. Let’s get this out for discussion. If you’re not learning how to find out what’s happening in the world what purpose is the theory that you’re learning in your classes?

Many people say the learn things through word of mouth. It’s an important way for the news to be conveyed, but it’s not always reliable. The Daily Show, even though it’s fake news, does a great job of showing how people in power contradict themselves. They do deep satirical stuff about how the way the news works.

Q: You noted that students that come from working class or low income families are more involved. Do you think these people are best suited to promote change because of their situations and the effect on them?

A: In the 60s the leading edge of protest were African American students who challenged segregation in the South. Their protests inspired mostly white students in the North who decided they had a responsibility to support these students who were risking their lives. The civil rights cause became inspiring to privileged students of that era. They weren’t acting out of self-interest. In the 60s we got in the habit of studying students who questioned their own privilege and committed themselves to a more equal form of life (in terms of their careers and values and choices). Some of their parents said “we made money, which should free you to make more choices in your life.” Today, the activism is lead by students of color and working class students. We found that the people who were the big activists also tended to work more in paying jobs. If you don’t have any debt and you don’t have to have a job you’re also going to be among the least active people on the campus. There seems to be a correlation between having free-time and choice because of privilege and not participating. The economy and access to higher education are issues these people are taking up. Having more inclusive admissions policies. It’s not that white students haven’t been involved, but the leadership has come from the minority and work class side. First generation students.