

THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT CIVIC CONTENT CREATORS ON YOUTUBE AND THEIR ROLE IN SHAPING PUBLIC DISCOURSE AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the increasing influence of independent civic content creators on Youtube and their role in shaping public discourse among youth. As the usage of traditional media has decreased within the younger audience, independent creators have emerged in the scene as key actors discussing political, social and civic issues for information dissemination and opinion formation. This paper uses a mix of qualitative (content analysis) and quantitative research (survey) to analyze how these creators impact the civic and political attitude amongst the youth. The findings suggest that content creators play a huge role in shaping public discourse by leveraging authenticity, relatability, and interactive communication. It also highlights the potential benefits as well as the challenges caused by this shift, such as increased civic engagement along with the risk of misinformation. Furthermore it highlights the thematic analysis, stylistic techniques, and narrative strategies deployed by these youtubers to influence the youth. The results of the survey signify that youth perceives these civic content creators as more credible and accessible than the traditional media. The research findings contribute to the current debates on youth civic empowerment, political communication and media literacy. It adds to the knowledge of how digital media is reshaping the terrain of civic education and public engagement among young people.

Keywords: youtube, civic content creators, digital media, youtubers, changing public discourse, traditional media, political communication, ideology, content creators

Introduction

Traditional media was once considered the primary source of news and civic information which is now being bypassed by the youth in favour of more accessible and interactive digital platforms. In today's world the nature of public discourse and information consumption has undergone a tremendous change, which is mostly evident among the younger audiences. Of these platforms, YouTube has become a leading space not only for entertainment but also for socio-political discussion and participation. This has created a new class of opinion leaders—individual civic content creators—who, through their own channels, are influencing how young people think about and engage with political and civic issues. These creators often tend to work outside the boundaries of institutional journalism, but they have significant influence over their viewers' opinions, attitudes, and even actions. They deeply build content around personal narratives, directly interacting with the audience, and presenting a sense of authenticity which strongly appeals to younger viewers. Their influence spans over a broad range of issues, from policy debates to elections, social justice movements, and community engagement. Due to the mistrust in mainstream media and growing appetite for transparent and relatable voices, the youth are turning to these digital creators not just for information, but for guidance on how to navigate civic life.

This phenomenon raises critical questions about the changing dynamics of media influence and civic participation. Who are these civic content creators, and how do they construct their narratives? What stylistic techniques and communicative strategies do they use to build trust and credibility? More importantly, how do their messages affect the civic attitudes, political opinions, and participatory behaviors of the youth who follow them? These are some of the central inquiries this paper seeks to address. This phenomenon is forcing us to ask some serious questions regarding the evolving media influence and civic engagement dynamics. Who are these civic content producers, and how do they build their narratives? How do they employ stylistic moves and communicative strategies in order to establish credibility and trust? More importantly, how do their messages shape the civic orientations, political views, and participatory actions of the young people who are following them? These are some of the core questions this paper attempts to answer.

The research uses a mixed-methods approach to examine the influence of autonomous civic content producers on youth public discourse. By integrating qualitative content analysis of videos from some YouTube creators with a quantitative survey among respondents among young people, the research analyzes the narratives used by the creators and the reception and perception of their content among audiences. The dual emphasis enables more profound insight into the influence of the creators, not just in what they produce but also in how they engage audiences and influence their behavior. The article also situates this new trend within larger discussions about

youth civic empowerment, political communication, and media literacy. It assesses both the empowering potential of these new digital voices—specifically in the development of civic awareness and engagement—and the inherent challenges, including the dissemination of misinformation, echo chambers, and lack of editorial accountability. The study adds to ongoing debate about how digital platforms are transforming the landscape of civic education, public debate, and democratic participation. Ultimately, this study seeks to underscore the central role that independent YouTube creators have come to play in defining the civic and political culture for a generation raised increasingly online.

Review of Literature

Ahlers, D. (2006) - This article challenges the idea that traditional media is collapsing due to online news. While some shift has occurred, only 12% of U.S. adults have fully switched to online news, with another 22% partially shifting. However, most adults continue relying on traditional media. Online news often complements rather than replaces offline sources. Advertising trends show continued support for traditional outlets. The study concludes that while digital media presents challenges, predictions about the end of traditional media are overstated and not backed by significant behavioral or economic shifts.

Sidlow, F. M. (2008) - This study explores how digital convergence has reshaped news consumption among young people aged 16–30. Survey results highlight the growing role of social networks as news sources and the decline of traditional outlets, especially newspapers. Despite this shift, young people still value news for its civic relevance. Cost-free content strongly appeals to them, and men consume more news than women. News engagement increases with age. The research concludes that young people are redefining both how they consume news and what news means to them.

Godwin, N. (2023) - The study investigates news consumption patterns in today's high-choice media landscape shaped by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Applying Uses and Gratification Theory, it finds that individuals now develop “news repertoires” — combining multiple sources rather than relying on a single platform. While new media consumption has increased, traditional media remains relevant for providing credible information. The research emphasizes that news consumption is no longer monolithic but characterized by diverse and personalized behaviors in a media environment rich with choice.

Hao, X., Wen, N., & George, C. (2014) - This study surveyed Singaporean university students to examine how different news platforms affect civic and political engagement. Traditional media consumption showed little impact on participation or political knowledge. However, news from the Internet and social networks significantly correlated with both online and offline engagement and increased political knowledge. Print and online news consumption also contributed to political awareness. The findings suggest that digital platforms are more influential than traditional ones in shaping young people's civic and political behaviors.

Holton, A. E., Coddington, M., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2013) - This study examines attitudes toward citizen journalism versus professional journalism among U.S. adults. It finds that consumers of citizen journalism have favorable views of it, but they don't strongly identify with traditional journalistic values. General news consumption, however, correlates with support for professional standards. Interestingly, creating citizen content has little influence on these attitudes. The findings highlight a divide between consumer perceptions of credibility and adherence to journalistic norms, raising questions about evolving expectations of news in the digital age.

Riedl, M., Schwemmer, C., Ziewiecki, S., & Ross, L. M. (2021) - This article explores the growing role of political influencers who blend activism with product promotion on platforms like Instagram. Through qualitative observation, the authors show how influencers simplify political communication while maintaining an authentic, relatable image. While this trend can enhance political engagement and awareness, it also risks spreading radical views or misinformation. The study emphasizes the dual nature of political influencers and calls for more empirical research to understand their impact on digital political discourse and audience perceptions.

Andelić, A. (2021) - This research investigates whether Serbian influencers on social media serve as information sources for mainstream online news outlets. A content analysis of major newspapers and a web survey reveal that influencers' posts are commonly used in soft news articles. Although only a small number of respondents actively follow such content, the media is attracting new audiences through influencer-related stories. The study underscores the growing relevance of influencer content in traditional journalism and highlights its role in media pluralism.

Rinaudo, B. (2023) - Focusing on Generation Z students at the University of Mississippi, this study explores where young people get political news and how it affects engagement. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z primarily uses social media for political information. This shift demands new strategies from political campaigns seeking to

connect with young voters. The study highlights the importance of social platforms in shaping political awareness and participation, suggesting that mastering digital engagement is key to influencing this emerging voting demographic.

Peer, L., & Ksiazek, T. B. (2011) - This content analysis of 882 YouTube news videos assesses whether online video journalism follows traditional norms. Most videos maintain traditional production quality but diverge from content standards like source verification and fairness. These deviations, especially in repurposed broadcast content, correlate with higher viewership. The study suggests that audiences value less rigid, more accessible content, potentially signaling the emergence of new journalistic norms tailored to digital platforms. It raises questions about how online practices may redefine journalism's future.

Lewis, R. (2020) - Using a case study of three political YouTubers, this article examines how micro-celebrity practices shape political discourse online. These influencers use authenticity and relatability to build trust, positioning themselves as more credible than mainstream media and opposing progressive politics. By rejecting "social justice" narratives and adopting a reactionary stance, they redefine participatory culture not as progressive but as a platform for alternative ideologies. The study complicates assumptions about online political engagement, revealing how digital fame can reinforce conservative agendas.

Research Methodology

This research uses a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand how individual civic content creators on YouTube shape public discourse among Indian youth.

Type of Research

The research is exploratory and descriptive in nature. It seeks to record the prevailing trends in digital civic engagement while investigating how content creators influence youth attitudes and conduct.

Research Design

A convergent parallel design was employed, with the qualitative and quantitative data both collected at the same time. Qualitative entailed content analysis of some of the YouTube creators, whereas the quantitative component was a structured survey of the youth respondents.

Sample Size

The survey was done with 100 respondents between the ages of 16 and 30 from different educational and geographical backgrounds.

Sampling Method

The research employed non-probability purposive sampling to reach out to youth who view YouTube content about political, social, or civic concerns.

Data Analysis

Part 1: Content Analysis

This qualitative content analysis lays focus on one of the top three influential Indian YouTubers known for making civic and political content: Dhruv Rathee, Nitish Rajput, and Unfiltered by Samdish. The analysis aims to cover their thematic focus, stylistic techniques, engagement patterns, and narrative strategies across a sample of 5–7 of their recent videos from their respective channels.

1. Dhruv Rathee

- **Themes:** Government policy analysis, misinformation debunking, international affairs, environment, economy are the common themes spotted in his videos.
- **Tone:** Analytical, fact-based and critical.
- **Narrative Style:** The creator uses structured storytelling with background, introductions, evidence, counterpoints, and conclusions. Often includes infographics, charts, and references.
- **Visual Elements:** Clean, professional edits; uses screenshots, green screen graphics, and research-based visuals.

- **Engagement Techniques:** Community tab polls, Q&A sessions, and clear calls to action (like voter awareness or fact-checking).

Observations:

1. Appeals to youth due to clarity and logic-based arguments.
2. Frequently references data and official reports to increase credibility.
3. Maintains neutrality in tone, even while criticizing policies or public figures.

2. Nitish Rajput

- **Themes:** The themes revolve around social reforms, government schemes, Indian history, civic neglect and education system.
- **Tone:** Maintains a tone that is narrative, emotional and storytelling-based.
- **Narrative Style:** Begins with real-life examples or stories, then expands into issue-based commentary. The creator uses relatable, conversational Hindi.
- **Visual Elements:** The edits are simple, often in one-take formats with supporting visuals or headlines.
- **Engagement Techniques:** Comments from subscribers are highlighted in videos; creator occasionally uses “what do you think?” to initiate a discussion in the comments section.

Observations:

1. Builds emotional connection with viewers through personal storytelling.
2. Focuses more on awareness than opinion-molding.
3. Avoids excessive political alignment, increasing relatability across audience segments.

3. Unfiltered by Samdish

- **Themes:** Usually there is no specific theme but the content revolves around ground reporting, cultural commentary, political interviews and talking about grassroots issues.
- **Tone:** Immersive, humorous and very raw.
- **Narrative Style:** The videos are in a Long-form format, interviews are unscripted with a "human touch." Episodes follow the reporter’s journey—informal yet deeply engaging.
- **Visual Elements:** Documentary-style cinematography; handheld camera use, minimal cuts, ambient sounds for realism.
- **Engagement Techniques:** Uses direct community interaction (on-ground interviews) and presents both sides of issues.

Observations:

1. Builds trust through transparency and real-time reactions.
2. Strong on-ground presence differentiates it from studio-based content.
3. Shows youth how politics affects real people, improving empathy and civic interest.

Part 2: Survey

The survey was conducted among **100 respondents aged 16–30** using closed-ended questions. The objective was to understand how civic YouTubers influence youth behavior and attitudes.

Table 1: Demographics		
Variable	Categories	% of Respondents
Age	16–18	10%

	19–21	30%
	22–24	40%
	25–30	20%
Gender	Male	55%
	Female	43%
	Non-binary / Third gender	2%
Educational Background	School (10th–12th)	10%
	Undergraduate student	60%
	Postgraduate student	25%
	Other	5%
Follows Civic Issues in India	Yes	56%
	Occasionally	30%
	No	14%

Table 2: YouTube Engagement with Civic Content

Questions	Response Options	% of Respondents
How often do you watch civic/political content on YouTube?	Daily	24%
	Several times a week	42%
	Once a week	15%
	Rarely	12%
	Never	7%
Do you find civic YouTubers more trustworthy than traditional media?	Strongly agree	23%
	Agree	51%
	Neutral	15%
	Disagree	7%
	Strongly disagree	4%
Have YouTubers influenced your civic/political opinion?	Yes, frequently	28%
	Yes, occasionally	58%
	Rarely	9%
	Never	5%
Why do you follow civic content creators?	Authentic and relatable	36%
	Simpler explanations	29%
	Cover topics ignored by mainstream media	22%

	I don't follow them	10%
	Other	3%
Do they encourage civic/political engagement?	Strongly agree	20%
	Agree	48%
	Neutral	18%
	Disagree	10%
	Strongly disagree	4%
Do you verify information before forming/sharing opinions?	Always	12%
	Often	30%
	Sometimes	38%
	Rarely	15%
	Never	5%

Data Interpretation

1. Age Distribution

The majority of respondents (70%) fall within the 19–24 age range, representing late teens and early twenties—typically college or early-career individuals. This age group is highly active on digital platforms and forms the core audience for civic content creators. Their developmental stage aligns with increased political and civic awareness, explaining their high content engagement.

2. Gender and Education

- A relatively balanced gender ratio was observed, with 55% male and 43% female respondents, and 2% identifying as non-binary/third gender.
- The educational background reveals that 60% are undergraduate students and 25% are postgraduates, suggesting a relatively well-educated group with access to digital media and potential for critical thinking. Their education levels likely impact how they interpret and engage with civic content online.

3. Interest in Civic Issues

- A majority (56%) actively follow civic issues in India, with another 30% following occasionally. Only 14% showed disinterest.
- This indicates a relatively aware and politically conscious youth demographic, which is essential for evaluating the influence of civic content creators.

4. YouTube Viewing Frequency

- 66% of respondents watch civic/political YouTube content daily or several times a week, showing high engagement.
- Only 7% never consume such content, confirming that YouTube is a significant platform for civic information among the youth.

5. Trust in Civic Content Creators vs. Traditional Media

- 74% (Agree + Strongly Agree) of youth find civic YouTubers more trustworthy than traditional media.
- This clearly reflects a trust deficit in conventional news and a shift toward independent digital voices perceived as more transparent, relatable, and less influenced by corporate or political bias.

6. Influence on Opinions

- A striking 86% (frequent + occasional) admit that civic YouTubers have influenced their views on political or social matters.
- This confirms that these creators not only inform but also shape public discourse and youth perspectives on civic issues.

7. Motivations for Following Civic Content Creators

- 36% follow them for authenticity and relatability, and 29% for simple, clear explanations of complex issues.
- 22% appreciate coverage of topics ignored by mainstream media, reinforcing the idea that these creators fill crucial content gaps in traditional reporting.

8. Encouragement of Civic Participation

- 68% (Agree + Strongly Agree) believe these YouTubers promote civic or political engagement.
- This suggests their influence extends beyond passive viewership and into active citizenship—including voting, activism, or discussions.

9. Fact-Checking Behavior

- Only 12% always verify content, with 30% doing so often and 38% sometimes.
- Alarming, 20% rarely or never verify what they watch before forming or sharing opinions.
- This shows a potential risk of misinformation, underlining the urgent need for digital and media literacy to help youth become critical consumers of civic content.

Findings

1. **High Engagement with Civic YouTube Content:** A major percentage (66%) watch civic or political content on YouTube several times a week or daily, that indicates strong digital engagement.
2. **YouTubers Viewed as More Trustworthy than Traditional Media:** 74% of participants have a strong agreement on the topic that independent civic content creators are more credible as compared to the traditional news outlets.
3. **Significant Influence on Youth Opinions:** Majority responses 86% indicate that YouTube creators have a huge influence on their political, civic, or social opinions.
4. **Relatability and Simplicity Drive Viewership:** Civic content creators are widely followed by the youth primarily because of their authentic and relatable tone (36%) and the way they simplify complex issues (29%).
5. **Promotion of Civic Engagement:** About 68% of responses indicate that these YouTubers highly encourage civic participation, including voting, awareness campaigns, and social activism.
6. **Lack of Consistent Fact-Checking:** Despite the fan following, 42% often or always verify content before forming any opinion, rest 20% rarely or never do which represents a major gap in media literacy.

Conclusion

The research strongly indicates that individual civic content creators on YouTube are extremely influential in forming public discourse among young Indians. These content creators have established strong credibility by providing content that is relatable, visually appealing, and easy to comprehend. As mainstream media loses attraction amongst youth, YouTube creators have become alternative influential voices who shape awareness, opinions, and actions.

Yet, the research also identifies issues with fact-checking and critical reception of content. As the creators effectively encourage civic action, the fact that this is not consistently done by viewers indicates the necessity for digital media literacy education.

Therefore, we can say that civic content creators are not just influencers but civic educators and opinion leaders. Their increasing influence represents a significant shift in how the youth get their information and engage in

democracy. Through proper guidance and digital education we can enhance their positive impact and reduce potential risks related to misinformation.

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