

Exploring the Use of Online Platforms to Increase Youth Participation In The Non-Profit Sector

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Abstract - Young people today are highly politically motivated. And yet, their political participation rates have remained low. Young people are less likely to vote. When compared to older populations, they are less likely to volunteer or be involved in nonprofits. Our research shows that young people face significant hurdles in their impact journeys. A lack of direction on where to get started, pessimism, and a lack of faith in the government are among the most regularly mentioned hurdles. We propose the creation of a platform that provides today's youth with an avenue for social change, an action-oriented way of reading the news, and a list of nonprofits they can work with. We deployed the platform to over 3,000 high school students across the globe. A significant majority of our participants reported the platform to be helpful. We make the case for creating more such platforms to better engage the youth.

keywords - political participation, online platform, news, journalism, non-profits

I. INTRODUCTION

In comparison to the youth of the past, young people today are highly politically motivated.

The 2021 Harvard Youth Poll found that young Americans today are significantly more likely to be politically engaged than they were a decade ago. In 2020, 37% of young Americans considered themselves to be politically active, versus just 24% of young Americans in 2009 [1].

According to a landmark 2018 study by the Pew Research Center, young people of ages 18 to 29 are more likely to participate in political discussions online than older adults. Young people are also more motivated by a variety of issues. In 10 of the 14 countries the study was conducted, 18- to 29-year-olds were significantly more likely than people 50 and older to say that they would take political action on issues such as freedom of speech, police misconduct, government corruption and discrimination. [2]

These numbers reinforce the understanding we have today that 18- to 29-year-olds are highly politically aware and engaged. A 2020 UNICEF study found that the assumption that youth online activism is irrelevant to 'real', offline political participation is wrong. Research finds that youth who engage in digital participatory politics are much more likely to engage in institutional politics such as voting [3]. Motivated by these findings, and the political climate of 2020-21, we were inspired to create Project Involve, a technology platform built to improve and further elevate youth participation in politics and the social sector.

Despite the large number of young people on political channels in digital platforms, political participation among the youth has still remained low. This is where an interesting cognitive dissonance emerges. It is clearly evident that today's youth have an interest in politics and current events, but they are still largely unable to act on those interests.

In the European Union, voter turnout for young people aged 18 to 24 is nearly 20 percentage points lower than the voting population as a whole. In the United States, young peoples' trust in government institutions has declined significantly from 2010 (29 percent) to 2014 (20 percent) [3]. A 2018 study on the nonprofit workspace found that over 80% of all nonprofit volunteers and workers in America were above the age of 30 [4]. In our own study, we found that young students often struggle with knowing where to begin their impact journeys. Other reasons include lack of avenues for the youth today to convert their passion about politics into action, confusion on which nonprofit to work for, a sense of pessimism reinforced by reading the daily news and a lack of faith in the government. More than half of Americans say that news causes them stress, anxiety, fatigue and sleep loss. Research has consistently shown the psychological impact of reading negative news [5]. In our own study, 85% of our interviewees (ages 16-18) said that they sometimes avoided reading the news, because it is often depressing, and stressful.

As researchers of this paper, we noticed that our target demographic was incredibly interested in creating social impact, but were often unable to act on their interests in 'real', impactful ways. We also observed a need to make the news reading experience less depressing and more actionable. Young people today are the most politically-engaged demographic in society. And yet, they are less likely to vote. They are less likely to be involved in nonprofits or volunteer than older populations. As mentioned above, our research shows that this contrast occurs due to a multitude of reasons including a lack of direction on where to get started, a sense of pessimism, a lack of faith in civil society among others.

We built Project Involve to tackle every single one of these concerns, providing the youth today with an avenue for social change, a clear list of nonprofits they can work on (which are linked to their interests and the news), and an action-oriented

way of reading the news. When someone joins Project Involve, they begin by selecting how much time they have (5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes or more).

Based on their choice, we show them appropriately summarized news outlines (sourced from NPR and BBC) which are categorized into different news sections (including Politics, Education, Health, Climate Change, Art and Culture, Science and Sports). Our AI analyses the news link, and recommends a nonprofit that is working on tackling the issue the news is about. For example, an article about the threats faced by American wildlife will link the readers to work with the national conservation organization, "Defenders of Wildlife".

The researchers also partnered with 25 diverse, global nonprofit organizations to curate special opportunities for young students and young adults. Organizations include Feeding America, Give Well, Girls Who Code, The Hunger Project, Doctors Without Borders among others. We also created individual nonprofit pages for each partner organization, which features ways to volunteer and support the nonprofit, along with a brief description of their work.

We did our first pilot with 10 users and a second pilot with 50 users, before launching Project Involve to the general public. The feedback has been highly positive, with users especially noting how easy the platform makes it to volunteer at a nonprofit, and how it makes reading the news feel more fun and actionable. In the last 3 months, over 2100 people have used the platform. Our users reported spending significantly more time reading the news, and volunteering at non-profit organizations. Our non-profit partners also reported a significant increase in youth interest and participation.

We strongly believe that Project Involve and this research paper are the first step in dramatically improving the youth participation rates in our civil society. The youth today are highly politically motivated, and with Project Involve, we hope to channel that motivation into action.

II. PRIOR WORK

There has been some interesting work in using digital tools to better engage today's young populations in the philanthropic sector. 48% of young people discover nonprofits via social media, and over 45% of young adults have heard of #GivingTuesday, an initiative that marks the Tuesday after Thanksgiving in the United States as a day for generosity [6]. While this is encouraging news, the same study reports that only 4.35% of the respondents said that they will make a donation on Giving Tuesday. Even while using digital tools, converting online participation to action is difficult.

At one point, Causes.com (a website which detailed important causes and ways to support them) had 200 million users. Platform usage waned slowly, as people struggled to engage meaningfully with partner non-profits. Brigade (another civic-tech app) featured a ballot guide, which was used by over 250,000 people in the 2016 election, leading to 5 million "Get Out The Vote" messages being sent, but the startup shut down a few years later, due to a lack of returning users [7].

More recently, Countable lets people view summaries of upcoming legislation, contact their representatives about their opinion and track the officials' votes. Countable reports that their platform has been used to complete over 35 million civic actions [7].

It is clear that there is a huge need and desire for civic technologies that allow young adults to better engage with today's politics. However, most companies in the space struggle with user retention and helping users build meaningful bonds with partner non-profits.

At Project Involve, we believe that by interfacing a daily habit (such as reading the news) with an occasional habit (such as donating time/money to a non-profit), we make the former more enjoyable and the latter more regular. Users can come to Project Involve every day to read the news, and discover new ways that they can help our non-profits.

III. METHODOLOGY

We created a platform that connects interested young students with relevant non-profits. It strives to allow students not only to become more aware of the happenings of the world, but to also become actively engaged through involvement with commendable nonprofits that support a variety of causes.

The first page of the website gives the user an idea of what to expect when they use the website. When the user moves on to the next page (i.e the homepage), they see three buttons: News, How Can I Help, and About Us. On clicking the 'News' button, the user can read actionable news. On clicking the 'How Can I Help' button, the user is directed to a page with profiles of our partner non-profit organizations. Finally, on clicking the 'About Us' button, the user can get information about Project Involve and its goals.

In order to resolve the struggle that students face with a lack of time to read the news, Project Involve allows users to choose the time that they have to spend on the news, and in turn gives them summaries of the daily news. The news is sourced from topic specific RSS feeds from NPR and BBC's public APIs. The length of these summaries is reflective of the time that the user has chosen and the stories update daily. In addition to simply bringing awareness, Involve also seeks to make reading the news a more engaging activity by connecting each article to partner nonprofits that fall in the same category as the article. Not only does this create a more engaging experience, it also gives students an avenue to direct the negative feelings of anger and sadness they feel when they read the news towards action and helps them make a positive impact. When a user empathizes with an article summary they read about, they can click the 'Help Now' button that is available under each and every article summary to explore organizations and different opportunities for involvement in the same category.

If a student is not looking to read the news and simply wants to explore the opportunities available, they may click on the 'How Can I help' button on the home page instead of the 'News' button. This takes them to a page where they are presented with all of the platform's partner organizations. The student can see the name of each organization as well as an image that represents it. When they click on an organization, they see the organization's designated page. On this page, they find a mission statement or summary about the nonprofit, as well as the opportunities they have to offer. We have made sure that for each presented opportunity, very specific information about age restrictions, time commitment, skill requirements, etc. is

provided so that the nonprofit is able to get the types of students who will put in the effort that is needed and so that the students know exactly what to expect when they involve themselves in such opportunities.

When I launched the platform in the last week of June 2021, I started by personally reaching out to friends and acquaintances. I wrote emails to several schools and organizations, and reached out to professionals who would likely be interested in the platform. In the last 2 months, Project Involve has been featured in prominent local newspapers and has been used 46,000 times by over 3,000 unique users.

For example, if a user has read an article regarding issues to do with Health, clicking the ‘Help Now’ button will take them to a page with information and opportunities from all partner organizations that do work in the Health sector. Project Involve is currently partnered with 25 (and growing) nonprofit organizations that represent diverse causes.

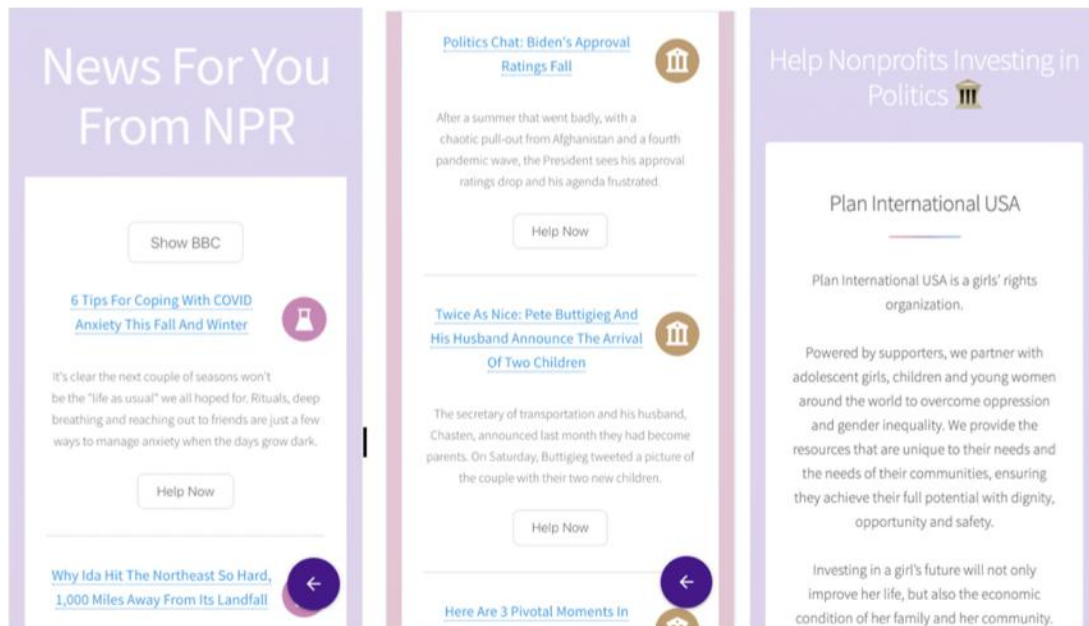


Figure 1: Screenshots showing the news page from the Project Involve app, with the “Help Now” button

IV. PILOT AND QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK

We conducted detailed interviews with 20 high-school students, who were regularly using Project Involve. Of these students, half identified as men, and half as women. All students were under the age of 18 and varied in levels of political participation and political values. After using the platform, all 20 participants reported that they found the platform to be immensely useful and convenient. With the permission of the participants, we recorded the interviews, and presented them as an unofficial conversation, to keep our participants at ease. Both during and after the interviews, I took detailed notes of their feedback. Most user feedback can be divided into 3 categories:

Praise for Level of Convenience

Our participants felt a feeling of convenience while using the platform. For example, one of our participants felt that Project Involve was solving a need that they didn’t know they had.

“My experience was excellent. The whole app is so convenient, and it genuinely solves a need I didn’t even know I have. Every morning, instead of checking news on CNN, I just open the Involve app, and read the news, and compulsively, check the nonprofits I can volunteer at”

: P12, female, 17, student

“It was really organized and easy to use. I was able to navigate through the website on my own and found myself going through it in between meals and whenever I found a couple of minutes of spare time.”

: P10, male, 16, student

“Everything was super convenient and well organized. Everything was self-explanatory and It made me excited to explore and learn more.”

: P4, female, 15, student

Increased Likelihood of Becoming Involved with a Nonprofit

Some of our interviewees (N=6) were already involved or associated with a nonprofit before Project Involve. After 4 days of using Project Involve, every single interviewed participant felt that Project Involve increased the likelihood of them becoming involved with a nonprofit organization on the platform.

“Involve would definitely make it more likely for me to volunteer at a nonprofit. The biggest thing is that I don’t know where to start. Looking at the specific categories and articles on the website helps narrow it down to nonprofits I would like to help.”

: P3, female, 16, student

“The platform made opportunities more accessible. I was definitely more aware of different opportunities around me so I was more excited and interested about the idea of working with a nonprofit.”

: P15, male, 17, student

“I think that my experience in the last few days has definitely made me more inclined towards actually getting involved with a nonprofit. I think just the way that everything is presented really helped me organize my interests in my mind and think about the type of nonprofit I would want to work with.”

: P1 male, 16, student

An Appreciation for the News

After using Project Involve, each participant expressed a change in the way they consumed the news in a positive way. They felt that it was much more straightforward and easier to navigate through.

“Getting the news on Involve is definitely more straightforward than other ways I have gotten the news in the past because even if the articles are long, I have the option to choose to spend 5-10 minutes on the news. Overall, it was a much better experience than I am used to.”

: P2, female, 15, student

“Using the platform definitely changed the way I consumed the news because normally, when you look at the news it is just a large amount of information being thrown at you. However, Involve allows you to get a headline or summary and choose if you would like to read further which I found to be very helpful.”

: P3, male, 16, student

“I loved that I was able to read news from different categories that were very clearly presented because I can choose what I want to spend my time on based on my interest. I will definitely be using Involve for news more often. Generally, time is definitely a big issue but when you are on a website that caters to your availability, it makes you more likely to want to learn.”

: P18, female, 16, student

V. CONCLUSION

In the last 2 months, Project Involve has been used by over 3,000 unique people. Users have expressed appreciation of the convenience of the platform which emphasizes the impact technology can have in connecting students to the real world. They also expressed an increased likelihood of becoming involved with nonprofits in the future in addition to an appreciation for the way that the news on the platform catered to their time and needs.

I strongly believe that Project Involve’s popularity proves that tech platforms, like Involve, can be used to better engage today’s youth in social and political movements. Efforts need to be made in making news more actionable. We need to enable young students to more directly join incredible nonprofits. I also believe that the philanthropic sector can do a better job in engaging young people in their organizations. I was delighted by my interactions with our partner organizations, and every single one of them was helpful, and went out of their way to support Project Involve.

I hope to expand Project Involve to every high school in the United States and also begin to reach students in different countries as well. The ultimate goal is to give students an avenue to direct the negative feelings they feel everyday while reading the news to action and also connect with nonprofit organizations to help the remarkable causes that they work towards.

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