

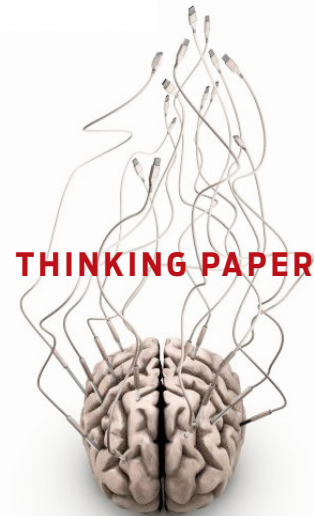
An update on Social Citizens

Digital fluency and social change, at any age

By ALLISON FINE | Social Citizens^{BETA} is a paper commissioned by The Case Foundation in early 2008 to help bring attention to the ways that young people are using new, social media to affect social change. The notion of young people as “Social Citizens” comes from the intersection of several elements: the 70 million plus Millennials or Gen Y (15-29 year olds) who are the largest living generation and having a quiet but profound impact on society, the panoply of social media tools in which they are fluent, and a culture, as I wrote in the paper, that is marinating in social causes. This combination results in an enormous number of idealistic, passionate, active, digitally fluent Social Citizens who are changing the world one Tweet, one ping, one Facebook update, and one political campaign at a time.

One euphoric election and catastrophic recession later, where do Social Citizens stand today? One interesting trend is that more of us, meaning the millions of adults older than 30 (and yes, still living and breathing!) are behaving more like Millennials. Oh, they’re not watching Gossip Girls, but they are learning how to use tools like Twitter and Facebook. According to the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life study *Generations Online in 2009*, “larger percentages of older generations are online now than in the past, and they are doing more activities online. . .” And the fastest growing cohort of new Internet users? Adults over seventy-five years old!

Social Citizens began as a term to describe young people affecting social change; based on the increased digital fluency of larger swaths of the population. It now describes a way to participate in social change regardless of one’s age. Everyone is increasingly uploading photos and downloading television programs, watching videos on YouTube, connecting with cousins on Facebook, and reading newspapers and magazines online. But they are also donating to causes, walking for cancer or

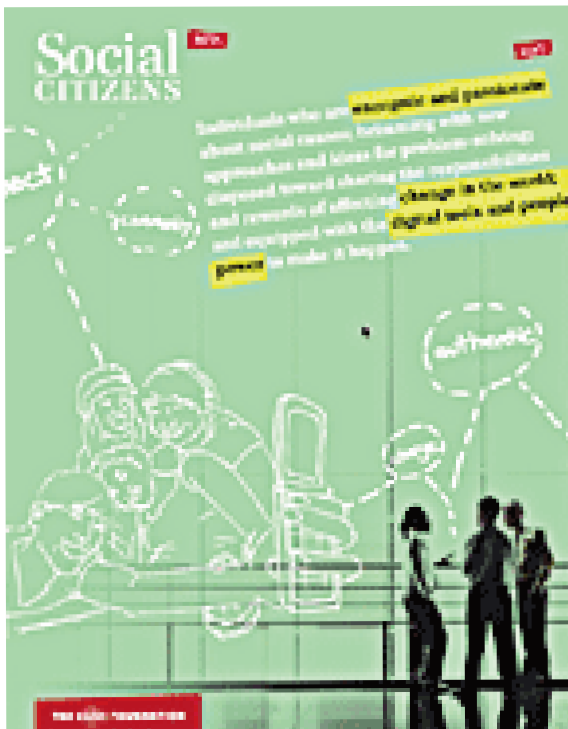


SOCIAL CHANGE
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autism, passing along information about causes and organizing local fundraising. As a result, more causes are getting more support from more people than ever before.

One of the defining characteristics of Social Citizens is their energetic commitment to social and political causes one campaign at a time, but not necessarily over time. A recent example of this is Twestival, a one

day event organized entirely on Twitter by volunteers. On February 12, 2009 Twestival parties were held in 175 cities around the world to raise money for charity:water. All of the events were organized by volunteers and all of the money goes directly to the cause without any cost for organizing this worldwide event that raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. That's Social Citizens at scale!



Many Millennials were fervently involved in the presidential election last year (and many weren't, of course, that's what happens when your cohort is over 70 million people). More than a million more young people voted in 2008 than did in 2006. However, moving forward it is very difficult to imagine that young people will be more interested in tracking earmarks in federal legislation than participating in local parties to support clean water around the world.

The Social Citizens^{BETA} report

But there is a dark lining to these silver clouds. First, the recession has stripped away the patina of economic ease that many Millennials had experienced. When even non-subsistence fast food jobs aren't available, when parents aren't able to help anymore and credit isn't available for college or car loans, then social change efforts are going to take a backseat for a far larger slice of the Millennials. Many companies are pulling back from their corporate responsibility commitments first, not because these efforts are expensive, but, according to Tom Watson, the author of CauseWired, because "their boards often don't get it, because it may look to outsiders that they're not 'taking care of business.'"

At this early stage it appears that the Obama campaign is significantly different from the Obama Administration for many people. One concern that was expressed in the paper was whether Social Citizens

would extend their new and increasing interest in politics into government and governing. The early signs support the views in the paper that Social Citizens would be unlikely to be attracted to the messy, never-ending scrum of governing

The paper had the word “beta” in the title for a reason; there continues to be more questions than answers about Social Citizens and what they mean for how we address social problems. For instance, how do we assess the value of the networks that are created during intense social change campaigns? And can these networks be powered – and then repowered – from campaign to campaign, or do they need to be created from scratch again? And how can nonprofit organizations organize themselves to fill the “service gap” identified by Porter/Novelli that revealed that 70 percent of Americans care deeply about a small number of causes, from protecting the environment to fighting poverty, and improving schools, but that less than 20 percent of them had done anything to better those causes in the past year? In other words, where and how do institutional leadership and individualized campaigns intersect?

Allison Fine is a successful social entrepreneur and writer dedicated to helping grassroots organizations and activists successfully implement social change efforts.



Author Allison Fine

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<http://www.allisonfine.com>



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