

Searching for the Meaning of Youth Civic Engagement: Notes from the Field\*

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Young adults are routinely criticized for their lack of involvement in political life. News reports declare them to be uninterested in the news, ignorant of current events, and apathetic about the political process (Associated Press, 2000; Meinert, 2000). Their participation at the polls has reached record lows; their scores on tests of political knowledge remain anemic (MacPherson, 2000; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1989). Popular images suggest that today's under 30 generation has retreated into a privately-oriented, self-consuming lifestyle that has replaced national news with MTV and substituted political action with personal self-fulfillment.

Many young adults argue that such characterizations are wrong. They insist that today's youth are engaged in civic life, and point to increased rates of volunteerism among their age group as an example of this activism. Their patterns for action, they contend, do not fit stereotypical political behavior--they are focused on local projects instead of national causes; their activity is more informal; their means of acquiring information more web-based. The youngest members of this cohort are also quick to distinguish themselves not just from their Baby Boomer parents, but from their Generation X predecessors. (Howe and Strauss, 2000) Their unique generational approach, they say, causes them to be underestimated by most political observers, especially those in academia.

Who's right? Is there legitimacy in criticisms of today's youth, or are young people being given a bad rap? In order to find out, we have embarked on a large, multi-phase study of civic engagement in America that will fully explore both the overall state of civic health nationwide, and the distinct ways in which the different generations approach politics and public life. A key component of this study is the development of a set of indicators that will provide a reliable, replicable measurement of civic engagement. To ensure that our measures include an accurate picture of the youngest age cohorts, we began our research with a series of qualitative studies designed to explore the unique

political orientations and behavior of today's youth. We next built on the lessons from the qualitative work to develop a series of quantitative indicators, which we tested on various populations through telephone and Internet surveys. This paper reports on the first stage in that process: a qualitative search for the most comprehensive means to tap into the political world of young adults.

### *The Qualitative Approach*

If we are interested in moving beyond *what* a particular group thinks to understanding *why* and *how* members of this group approach a problem, we need to employ a methodology that allows for the exploration of these issues. Qualitative approaches provide for this deeper investigation. In a quantitative study (such as a telephone interview) the scope of the topic under investigation is set by the researcher prior to the interview. A qualitative methodology, in contrast, gives greater control to the respondent, which allows the researcher to listen for perspectives on issues and interpretations of questions that may not have been anticipated by earlier preparations.

One of the most common forms of qualitative research is the focus group discussion. Krueger (1988:18) defines a focus group as “a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment.” As guided conversations, focus groups allow the participants to discuss ideas in their own language, rather than forcing them to adjust to the framework of the researcher. Surveys, particularly questionnaires that consist of only closed-ended questions, are more likely than open-ended discussions to incorporate the biases of the researcher. Where surveys force respondents into a particular answer category, focus groups enable the researcher to develop classifications after initial discussions (Krueger, 1988; Brown, 1980). When participants are given greater control over the discussion of politics, for example, we can evaluate the language they use, the rationales they provide, and the examples they draw on to better understand their perspectives of the political world. Focus groups may not provide us with “hard”

numbers about the population under investigation, but this softer technique adds color and texture to earlier findings and lends insight into possible areas for further research.

Scholars in a wide range of fields have employed focus groups in their work (e.g., Sigel, 1996, Conover, Crewe and Searing, 1991, Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1989). It is used for exploratory research (for questionnaire development), explanatory research (after surveys to better understand respondents), and as a method unto itself (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1994).<sup>1</sup> Many scholars argue that focus groups are especially appropriate in the early stages of a research project that includes quantitative methodologies. When focus group discussions are used to create survey questions (as in this study) the final survey instrument can frame issues in the language and approach that is common among the population under investigation, which increases the validity of the questions themselves (Sigel, 1996).

Our qualitative methodology consisted of two phases: (1) convening panels of experts who work with youth in civic and political activities; and (2) conducting a series of focus groups with different age cohorts in four regions of the country.<sup>2</sup> The expert panelists served as an important precursor to the focus groups. We believed that talking with individuals who work closely with youth would prepare us for the focus groups, where we will be talking directly with young adults (and others). We sought these experts' impressions about the political attitudes and behavior of the younger generation, as well as their advice about how to approach this generation in terms of language. We conducted two full-day sessions consisting of approximately 10 experts each, including representatives from the two major political parties, labor union organizers, members of

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<sup>1</sup> For a full review of the utility of focus groups in social science research and an overview of different studies that employed focus group analysis, see Delli Carpini and Williams, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> As mentioned earlier, after completing the qualitative research, we conducted a series of quantitative experiments designed to test various survey questions for issues of reliability, validity, language, and social desirability.

religious groups, experts on service learning, community organizers, and individuals who have studied the political and non-political activities of young adults, among others.

The focus groups allowed us to talk directly to individuals of all age groups about politics and civic life, although the majority were conducted with members of the youngest two cohorts. We intentionally separated the youngest group (the 18-24 year old “Dot-com” generation) and their Generation X predecessors (25-34 year olds). The goal of these groups was to spur talk among the participants, allowing them to respond informally in an open-ended, guided fashion and removed from the constraints and limitations of a traditional survey. We conducted 11 groups in four different states (Illinois, North Carolina, New Jersey and California), stratified by age, education, and level of activism. Four groups were comprised of Dot-comers; three groups were GenXers.

#### *The Expert Panels*

Before reviewing the substance of the panel discussions, it is important to acknowledge that most of our experts do not work with typical young adults. The youth who belong to their organizations or have taken part in their projects represent a unique, highly-engaged part of the population, not the generation as a whole. We were aware of this—as were our panelists—at the outset, but we believed that their first-hand knowledge of these young adults was valuable for several reasons.

First, while the activities, interests and predispositions of activists may not accurately represent the whole generation, they still provided us valuable insight into the general character of the mass cadre. Outliers don’t define trends, but their political orientations and attitudes still tell us something about the population as a whole. Second, since one of our goals is to provide a better, more comprehensive measure of youth political engagement, the experts exposed us to the breadth of possible activity, and alerted us to the issues, concerns, and actions that we could pursue in our focus groups. Third, the youth participants in these organizations are consequential for the very reason

that they represent the activists of their generation—and capturing the unique approach of activists is one of our goals. These highly engaged young adults of today are the opinion leaders of the future. Understanding their political orientations as youth should provide us with information about their possible future behavior. Finally, because the panelists work closely (and often informally) with youth, we looked to them to help us frame issues in ways that would resonate with our focus group participants.

The two sessions were packed with reflections on young adults’ political attitudes and behavior, their orientations toward community and civic life, and their sense of generational identity. The discussions centered on the age group that the experts know best—the 18-24 year old Dot-com generation—rather than all young adults. These conversations created a picture of this generation (and its activists) that left us with a set of expectations for what we would hear during the next stage in our analysis.<sup>3</sup>

From the outset our panel participants drew clear distinctions between the 15-to-24-year-old age cohort and the older group of Generation Xers. Since the ensuing discussion focused on the younger cohort, which we have labeled the Dot-com generation, the following description largely reflects experts’ impressions of Dot-comers, not Gen Xers. Overall, their assessments were highly positive, defending the activism, volunteerism, and community orientation of today’s youth.<sup>4</sup>

In the political realm, our experts painted two competing pictures of young people’s attitudes and behavior. On the one hand, they described today’s youth as deeply alienated from traditional political institutions and practices. When young people think about politics, they conjure up images of “white guys in suits” who turn a deaf ear to their

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<sup>3</sup> For space considerations, we will summarize our findings here. A full description of the content is available upon request.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, we use the terms “generation” and “age cohort” interchangeably, although we realize that the cross-sectional nature of our data prevents us from conclusively determining if the differences we observe are a result of life cycle or generational effects.

concerns. Today's youth are highly unlikely to get involved in elections, parties, or governmental activities—what many described as “politics with a capital P.” On the other hand, these young people are involved in causes that are less overtly political. The panelists described a yearning among young adults to make a difference (“politics with a small p”) and noted a series of causes with which they are involved (ranging from child labor issues to Habitat for Humanity) . They spoke of collective efforts organized over the Internet, informal gatherings of friends, and consumer boycotts.

The youth described in these panels are avid volunteers, who are drawn to such efforts by their need to make a difference in society and their desire for social and economic justice. Their preference for alternative political activities may not be a conscious rejection of traditional practices, but it is a potent and highly rewarding draw.

Panelists also spoke of today's youth as yearning for a sense of community, and emphasized that their conceptions of community are not defined by geographic boundaries. While much of young activists' energy is directed toward improving conditions in their local communities, these Dot-comers see themselves as citizens of the world, who create communities over the Internet, either with others who share their world view, or among those with whom they share a racial, ethnic, or sexual identity. The experts also warned us to avoid words such as “citizen,” which some Dot-comers viewed as denoting exclusive legal status that precludes access to benefits for members of some communities, especially minority groups.

Finally, our panelists spoke of a strong generational identity among Dot-comers. This cohort, targeted by marketers since their birth, has a keen sense of their collective purchasing power and an even greater understanding of the overall demographic force of their numbers. This power, and the economic expansion of the 1990s, imbues them with an optimism that was generally absent when Gen Xers were the same age.

Following these discussions, we expected our focus groups to produce distinct impressions of Dot-comers and Gen Xers. Gen Xers might fit our traditional notions of alienated youth, but among Dot-comers, there would be signs of something different. We would find some Dot-comers sharing a generational identity, seeing themselves as citizens of the world, and feeling an implied responsibility to effect positive change. Others might tell stories about local community efforts and non-traditional political actions. Finally, we would find among this generation a bloc of youth who is highly connected to one another over the Internet, a key technological outlet that serves as a main source for learning about political events and organizing political life.

### *Focus Group Findings*

Our focus group discussions provided us with a unique opportunity to probe the actual members of the youth cohort about the issues and activities raised by our expert panelists. The rich array of conversations (with participants in all age groups) is too complex to be captured in full here. The description that follows is limited to the youngest generations and the ways in which the focus group findings compare to our earlier expectations.

Our criteria for recruiting focus group participants accounted for key characteristics related to political or social activism. We divided groups by participants' level of education; some were comprised entirely of those with at least some college education while other groups were filled by individuals with no college experience. All of the groups included both men and women; all contained minorities (Hispanics, Asians, or African Americans); and one group was composed entirely of African-Americans. We also segregated several groups by the level of political activism of the participants. For example, a group of 18-to-24 year olds in New Jersey included only individuals who were active in community and political organizations. In California, one set of focus groups divided Dot-comers and Gen Xers into "active" and "inactive" groups, based on their answers to questions concerning their record of having voted in recent

elections, the frequency of their political discussions, their past involvement in collective community problem solving, and their donations to churches or charities. A third California group combined active and inactive recruits. Finally, 10 of the 11 groups were recruited through random telephone calls in targeted geographical areas. (One activist group in New Jersey was recruited from respondents to previous surveys and from referrals from organizations.) We did not use lists of individuals who had volunteered for research efforts; participants were not able to self-select into the discussions. In short, while not representative in a statistical sense, focus group participants were recruited in a manner designed to maximize the likelihood that we would be speaking with youth who both resembled and were distinct from those familiar to the expert panelists and who reflected the variability in the larger population.

#### *Political Attitudes and Activities*

Our expert panelists described today's youth as deeply distrustful of traditional political institutions and politics. Our focus group sessions validated this impression, and provided us with a more nuanced understanding of these attitudes. All participants—young and old—were generally cynical about the political process. The youngest two cohorts are distinct from their elders (and similar to one another) in two ways. First, younger participants described politics in universally critical terms; older cohorts provided both positive and negative assessments. Second, unlike older generations, younger cohorts show no appreciation for the necessity of politics. Baby Boomers and Matures may be bothered by the way politics works today, but they recognize it as having an inherent value. Politics isn't something that young people are angry or frustrated about; it's irrelevant.

Relatedly, most of these young adults (both Dot-comers and Gen Xers) do not see political solutions to problems.<sup>5</sup> Although they can easily provide a list of

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<sup>5</sup> The exception to this are the traditionally active, who see very direct connections between national and local problems and political solutions.

national, state and local issues that need addressing, they seldom see political action—traditional or unconventional—as a mechanism for dealing with such concerns. This may be due in part to the highly individualistic prism through which younger generations view politics. It’s not a system. It’s about some other person.

In fact, as our expert panelists predicted, the definition of politics as “white guys in suits” who are corrupted by money resonated throughout our discussions with both Dot-comers and Gen Xers. Politics is seen largely as a game where the rich (or whites) protect their interests. This game is more like billiards than pool—it’s an upper class game with obscure rules that make it hard to win, and with few teachers, supporters, or players in the home neighborhood. Young adults are truly alienated from this boring, confusing game and cannot imagine how (or even if) it could be fixed.

Our experts had told us that although youth may abstain from traditional politics, they still opt to participate, but do so in unconventional ways. We found lots of support for their absence from conventional activities, but were frustrated in our attempts to uncover other behavior. Indeed, both the Xers and Dot-comers in our focus groups fit the typical picture of uninvolved, apathetic youth. We didn’t hear about a lot of political activity either formal or informal, traditional or unconventional.<sup>6</sup>

We spent a fair amount of time in these discussions probing participants about potential subterranean political activity (e.g., boycotts, protests, Internet-organized events) only to come up short. Questions designed to delve into these issues were often greeted with blank stares and moments of silence. Even when prompted with examples, young adults were unlikely to name any sort of activity. We were especially interested in determining if Dot-comers, who were described as highly aware of their power as

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<sup>6</sup> Again, the group of active Dot-comers did not fit this mold. However, even among this group, while the political activists were involved in numerous efforts, the volunteers generally eschewed any political action beyond voting.

consumers, had been involved in politically or socially motivated boycotts of goods and services. We found that although participants acknowledged not buying products or refusing to patronize various establishments, their motivations were often more personal (responding to bad service) than for political or social reasons.

### *Volunteering*

National surveys have documented a rise in volunteering among young adults (e.g., National Association of Secretaries of State 1999). Our expert panelists explained that this rush to give was due to Dot-comers interest in working on collective projects with their peers,<sup>7</sup> their focus on issues of social justice and their need have an impact on the world around them. Participants in our focus groups did not live up to these ideal types.

The “volunteering” described by young adults—especially Dot-comers—in our discussions seldom met a standard definition. Although some behavior was prototypical (e.g., dance instruction for the physically handicapped, Big Brother programs), some clearly defied conventional interpretations of volunteering. For example, a Chicago Dot-comer mentioned giving a friend a car ride as an example of his volunteering. One young woman suggested her sporadic willingness to talk to elderly customers in the coffee shop where she works amounted to legitimate volunteering.

Moreover, when young people in our group explained why they volunteered, many mentioned either school requirements or self-serving benefits. Some participants in our group had volunteered in the hopes of getting higher grades in a particular class, improving their chances of getting into college, or providing an entryway into a coveted job. In general, all participants responded to these motivations as perfectly valid.

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<sup>7</sup> Panelists often spoke of Dot-comers’ outward orientation and sociability. Gen Xers, by contrast, were described by our panelists as more individualistic and less likely to be involved in group projects.

Regardless of their motivations, all the volunteers in our groups had very practical assessments of the impact of their activities. They held few illusions that their volunteering would “solve” any problem beyond the individuals or events with which they were directly involved. Their work is not political; it’s not meant to replace traditional politics; it’s not designed to supplement policy work on a national scale. Many of our panelists had suggested that youth volunteering is often devoid of political intent. Our discussions bore that out.

Finally, we found little support for a youth commitment to collaborative group work—in or out of the volunteer realm. While the young adults we spoke with see the theoretical efficacy of collective action, they are not involved in a lot of group efforts.

#### *Community, Collectivity and Citizenship*

We had similar difficulties finding support for our expectation that young adults harbor a strong desire for community, a heightened sense of global connectedness, and a sincere belief that they share a collective responsibility for bettering society. Despite probing, these concepts rarely resonated. Even actions that might fit this bill on the surface crumbled under scrutiny. For example, a refusal to buy a product was usually undertaken as a mechanism for punishing poor customer service, not as a joint effort to influence corporate behavior on social issues. Those who did address a larger problem (e.g., turning off lights to conserve energy), chose to do so alone, not in connection with others.

We had expected our respondents to react sharply and negatively to the term “citizen.” Instead, we found it to be largely irrelevant. All participants (including minorities) were neither angered nor engaged by this concept. We did find, as the expert panelists predicted, that when young adults discuss notions of citizenship, their perspective is a highly passive one. The concept is largely defined in terms of obeying the law and looking after oneself and one’s family. From this perspective, being a good person makes one a good citizen.

### *Generational Identity*

Descriptions of the Dot-com generation abound with references to their strong sense of generational identity, their innovative means of communicating with each other, and their ability to use alternative technologies to find political information (Howe and Strauss 2000). We found little evidence of any sense of shared identity among either Xers or Dot-comers.<sup>8</sup> As for using the Web and other technological advancements (cell phones, pagers) to spur political activity or track down relevant information, our participants expressed little interest in action and little desire to stay informed about the political world. The Internet, like all media sources, is highly suspect. Even youth in the heart of Silicon Valley were no different from their counterparts in the south, midwest or northeast.

In sum, our focus group discussions confirmed some of our expectations, refuted others, and left some unresolved. We had hoped to find examples of subterranean political activity missed by traditional surveys, discover new ways of measuring collective engagement and global orientations, and gain a clearer understanding of the community, civic and generational identity of the youngest citizens. Unfortunately, our job is not that easy. Instead, what emerged from this second phase of our study is a renewed appreciation of the challenges inherent in many aspects of social science research, especially the transition from qualitative descriptions to quantitative measurements.

The focus groups allowed us to probe respondents for nuances and subtleties to better understand the nature of civic engagement, but left us with no knowledge of the extent to which such attitudes or behaviors can be found in the population at large. With quantitative measures, we will gain numerical precision. But as we move toward statistical documentation, our focus groups remind us to be cautious about the validity of

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<sup>8</sup> It is still prevalent among Boomers.

our findings. We are concerned now with refining our language so that we can feel confident that we understand what respondents really mean when they answer our questions.

### *Words Matter*

In this final section, we examine some ways in which our qualitative research challenged our notions of various words and describe the difficulties such lessons pose for anyone interested in conducting quantitative research on youth civic engagement.

- *Volunteer.* Our participants included a wide range of activities under the rubric of volunteering, many of which fall outside the boundaries of traditional definitions. Valid measures of volunteer behavior will want to consider providing respondents with a prescribed definition that purposefully excludes informal assistance to friends. With youth, researchers may be especially interested in determining if “volunteer” efforts were actually required activities. Probing for motivations behind volunteer activities (altruistic or self-interested) may also help illuminate the pathways to this form of civic participation.
- *Politics.* While our youth participants echoed the cynicism of their elders in response to our questions about politics, they differed in their overall approach to the political world. In general, politics remains off the radar screen of these younger cohorts; they see it as largely irrelevant to their daily lives. This is a subtle but significant difference that deserves careful attention in survey designs.

In addition, the general cultural disdain for politics may be so wide-spread that today’s youth (socialized by their cynical parents and a sensationalized media) may actually react differently to traditional pressures of social desirability. The younger participants in our discussions readily admitted their own political apathy, and were largely unapologetic about it. Survey researchers have traditionally worried about the tendency of respondents to over-report laudable civic behavior such as voting and volunteering. Surveys of youth may confront cohorts who face the opposite pressure: to avoid admitting to behavior that is largely regarded (especially by their peers) as a waste of time.

Relatedly, since there is relatively little trust in political actors and institutions (including the news media), disengagement may be viewed as a rational response. All of the messages that youth hear seem to suggest that it is irrational to be informed and engaged. These new pressures need to be understood and captured in any contemporary study of youth.

- *Citizenship.* Participants in our focus groups provided passive and largely negative interpretations of civic responsibilities (e.g., don't bother the neighbors; don't be a burden on society). These results do not necessarily mean that today's youth do not believe in the obligations of citizenship, but may simply reflect the fact that the concept, like politics, does not have broad resonance. Framing a question generally, as we did in our sessions, may not provide the stimulus needed to uncover more active and responsible norms. Respondents—especially youth—may need a discussion of citizenship to be placed within larger notions of democracy. For example, rather than asking “what are the responsibilities associated with being a citizen?” we might ask, “if being a citizen in a democracy brings with it rights such as freedom of speech, does it also hold certain obligations?”
- *Community.* Measuring the concept of community and tapping into related notions of world citizenship are especially fraught with difficulties. The young adults in our focus groups were not overwhelmingly globally-oriented, but neither were they exceedingly apathetic about the larger world. When asked to list issues or problems that needed addressing, some included close-to-home concerns (e.g., more parks for kids in the neighborhood), but others were truly global in nature (e.g., the disparity between advanced industrial and developing nations). There was no overarching sense of being a citizen of the world, but there was a widespread acceptance of diversity here and abroad. Creating measures of these general orientations will require multiple indicators that reflect the changes in the economic, political and social reality confronting youth today.
- *Issue Agenda.* Importantly, the problems cited by participants were not mere reflections of the issues typically highlighted by the news media, which suggests that young adults are gathering information about the political world from their own personal experience. It also indicates that youth have issues that engage them

and which could provide the raw material for action if organizers are able to develop a means for tapping into these concerns.

### *Conclusion*

We have focused our attention on the context and meaning of the words we use, but that is not the only lesson of our qualitative work. Our inability to uncover new avenues of political expression made us re-examine the traditional indicators commonly used by social scientists to measure political behavior such as voting, contacting, and protesting. Instead of asking new questions, however, we have been examining these measures for issues of exhaustiveness, reliability, recall, and memory, subjecting each to a series of experiments in cross-sectional and panel data. Our hope is that we can blend the best of traditional quantitative measures with insights from our qualitative analysis.

The very notion of a new generation requires scholars to record an alternative, or at least modified, framework for evaluating the political world. Sometimes changes between age cohorts are abrupt and distinct, which makes establishing the generational pedigree a relatively easy task. Other times, the differences are more gradual and subtle, requiring a difficult translation from abstraction to reality. Today's youngest cohorts fit the second bill, which means that studies of their civic engagement—and attempts to characterize their political world view—will need to capture both the traditional behavior and attitudes they have inherited, and the new interpretations, values and meanings that they assign to this legacy. We are attempting to do just that: to use both our qualitative analysis and our quantitative experiments to create an index of civic engagement that recognizes the continuity among generations while making room for the unique character of today's youth.

It is possible that further research will discover that the picture of young people as uninvolved and apathetic is an accurate one. It is also possible, however, that additional research will uncover avenues and mechanisms for engaging youth that tap into some of

the latent political predispositions described above. Alternatively, it is possible that what we face is not a problem of measurement, but activation. Our early work suggests that spontaneous, organic political activity is unlikely to emerge from younger generations. But it also suggests that effective mobilization techniques, reassurances that there is room at the table for a youth voice, and real world events may hold the promise of activating and engaging our next generation of adult citizens.

*Postscript*

Finally, while the impact of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks is still unclear, it is conceivable that young adults may react to these tragic events by becoming more engaged and active. National surveys following the events have indicated increased levels of trust in government among all age groups, including youth. Other studies have found youth expressing a greater willingness to vote as a result of the attacks (MTV/CBS 2001).

Despite these trends in public opinion, however, early evidence of behavioral change is not especially positive. For one, turnout in statewide elections in New Jersey and Virginia in November 2001 was lower than four years ago. Moreover, when we reconvened a group of youth participants from our Chicago focus groups in late November to discuss their reactions to the attacks, their less critical and more trusting views of government were largely limited to the prosecution of the war effort. They showed few signs of altering their propensity to vote, their participation in the community, or their willingness to volunteer.

The common thread in these two cases is the lack of explicit efforts by leaders to call the public to action. Neither the parties nor the candidates in either Virginia or New Jersey seriously attempted to rally the public with messages about the significance of the vote in a democratic society. And nationwide, Americans in general--and young people in particular--have been provided with little opportunity to re-engage. The public has given substantial contributions to hospitals, the Red Cross and other relief organizations, but after these needs were met, people were not asked to do anything other than travel and

shop. For real, long-lasting civic change to emerge from the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, all adults (young and old), may need clearer directions about their civic potential.

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