

Future of the Business World: Sanjana Yeddula on Raising Gen Z's Political Awareness

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In September 2020, the [Wharton Global Youth Program](#) launched its first podcast series, Future of the Business World, which explores the motivations and creations of young entrepreneurs from around the world. The project was inspired by the program's Future of the Business World online course, [launched in the summer of 2020](#). Be sure to listen to our debut podcast episodes with [Rucha Mehendale](#) and Jakarta's [Jiro Noor](#). They're both fascinating innovators.

This month, our conversation fittingly focuses on Gen Z's civic engagement, particularly as it applies to the U.S. presidential election on November 3, 2020. In the past year Sanjana Yeddula, a high school senior from New Jersey, U.S., has created a product to help youth navigate the online news about political figures. Her team won recognition at this year's Diamond Challenge global high school entrepreneurship competition. Through the development of her digital product, Sanjana has collected insights about teenagers' political activities and what it might take to bring the next generation of voters more deeply into the political process.

Listen to the podcast at the top of this page or on iTunes! An edited transcript of our conversation appears below.



Wharton Global Youth Program: Hello! And welcome to *Future of the Business World*, a podcast that features young entrepreneurs sharing their successes, challenges, and unique perspectives. I'm Diana Drake with the Wharton Global Youth Program at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. At Wharton Global Youth, we work with lots of high school students through our summer programs, competitions, and online business journal. Honestly, they inspire us. Time and again, they tell us their stories of innovation and entrepreneurship. And they pitch their ideas with endless passion and creativity. So, we decided to bring some of those stories to you.

Today, I'd like to welcome Sanjana Yeddula to *Future of the Business World*. It's great to meet you. Sanjana is a high school senior from New Jersey in the U.S. About a year ago, she launched a product called PoliPro, a Google Chrome extension that helps people explore politics and better understand current events. As we navigate an energized election season in the U.S., I think it's a great time to discuss this topic. Sanjana, can you tell us more about PoliPro? How does it work?

Sanjana Yeddula: Like you said, PoliPro is a Google Chrome extension that I developed with some friends. We noted that a lot of teenagers our age aren't aware of what's happening in our country and not very engaged with our political discourse. When we began to ask around we noticed that it came down to two main factors: people weren't willing to put in as much time to read news articles and when they began to do so oftentimes it got really confusing. The goal of PoliPro is to ease these two obstacles without having people stray from their typical news sources. All you have to do is go to the Google Chrome store, download the PoliPro extension and after that you're good to go.

If you're on any article on the web, you can highlight an unknown figure or political figure and click the PoliPro icon in the corner of your browser. After that, a pop-up will come up right next to your article that provides further background on whatever you're reading. For instance, if you're reading about our current election and want to know more about Kamala Harris, you highlight her name and a picture of her with different icons that indicate her policies will pop up. You can hover over her picture to learn more about her or her different policies to get different information about who she is or what she stands for. It cuts down the time it takes to read the article because you don't have to go to another tab to learn more. And we're really committed to not delivering biased information, so all the information in the PoliPro database comes from unbiased sources. We're also aware of the potential dangers that condensed news poses, so we really stress to our users that PoliPro is meant to enhance your experience while reading the news and not replace it.

Wharton Global Youth: Help me understand how you built this. What goes into the back end for a product like this?

Sanjana: It definitely took a lot to build it. I can't say single-handedly that I built it. It took a lot of help from people on the team. When you're developing these kinds of extensions, you want to learn along the way. I'm not an expert coder, but the fun came in figuring out things as I went along. It took months and months, but after the final product was out there it was so worth it.

"A lot of my peers who are at that age to vote or can register don't do so because they feel their vote doesn't matter." — Sanjana Yeddula

Wharton Global Youth: You've said that "fake news" really motivated you to act entrepreneurially. What is fake news and how has it influenced your innovative spirit around civic engagement?

Sanjana: I see fake news as information that is not factual or credible. It attempts to lure readers in, especially young readers, with flashy headlines and images. A lot of news sources have gotten very good at this. It's not something that will be going away any time soon. Unfortunately that's how the media works these days, but for a lot of young people, sometimes the line between what's credible and what's not becomes blurred. It's really easy to fall into those traps. Everyone has been there at some point. With credible news sources, they usually have more heavy material that takes a

good amount of time to digest. In doing my research, I learned that there isn't much out there that can flag fake news. So our goal quickly became to create something that would give credible news sources the similar appeal that fake news sources have, such as convenience and time efficiency.

Wharton Global Youth: How do you define a credible news source? Can you give me some examples?

Sanjana: *The New York Times*, CNN, *The Washington Post*. Although these news sources do have some political bias, they are delivering you the right information. If you're looking for something that is not as partisan in our country, you could go to international news sources, such as the BBC.

Wharton Global Youth: Is this primarily a U.S.-based tool? Or does it work globally?

Sanjana: As of now, PoliPro is U.S.-based, but because we're available on the Google Chrome store, it does work globally. We have downloads in other countries such as India and Kenya, but our content is really based on American politics. Our next step is to figure out what countries we can build a strong customer base in. Although our mission was originally focused on America, as we've spoken to mentors and experts in the field we're really understanding how this extension can make a global impact as well.

Wharton Global Youth: Generation Z, which you're a part of, is the most diverse and digitally connected generation in the U.S. You guys were born after 1996, so you've endured a serious recession, a pandemic, a climate crisis, mass shootings, global unrest, police violence. That's heavy stuff. I read that some 24 million members of Gen Z will be eligible to vote this November. How has your generation's diversity as well as all that it has experienced helped to shape its political views?

Sanjana: Everything you're saying is very true. I feel like every generation has their fair share of catastrophes to live through. What really distinguishes Generation Z is the way we harness technology to talk about these issues. There are countless resources and platforms available at our fingertips for us to talk to people who have different backgrounds and political views. We really use our diversity as an asset to learn from each other and grow as individuals. Although there can definitely be downsides, having that table open for discussion has allowed me to step out of my bubble and learn about the world as other people see it.

Wharton Global Youth: You engage politically with your peers. What issues are on their minds and hearts? What do you identify as the most serious political issues for the future?

Sanjana: When I talk about the future of our country with my peers, what really riles up people lately has been race issues. We're happy to see how many people have come together through that. When we started hearing about George Floyd and what's happening in different parts of the country, despite the pandemic people were still willing to go out to protest. That speaks volumes about how our generation is going to react to bigger issues and how we can really take action on change. When you have people who are as young as we are and as old as it gets fighting for the same issue together, that's how change comes about. That's what I would identify as the biggest issue for our future, but the way people are reacting to it there's also a lot of hope going forward.

Wharton Global Youth: Do young voters feel the system is broken, which fuels their apathy around civic engagement?

Sanjana: I definitely feel that people feel that the system is broken. A lot of my peers who are at that age to vote or can register don't do so because they feel their vote doesn't matter. Especially in an election where there are a large portion of voters using mail-in ballots, a lot of young voters are expressing concerns about corruption. I would say the biggest factor that fuels apathy comes from the way that politics are dramatized in the media. People know more about our leader's public scandal than actual policies. That's really frightening. For example, if you take the recent Presidential

debate [on September 29], a lot of people were tuning in to see how the two candidates would bicker instead of actually focusing on the meat of the policies. This attitude toward politics deters people from being actively engaged.

Wharton Global Youth: How do you change that?

Sanjana: It comes down to how you want to live your future. Do you want your kids or your grandkids to grow up in a world where politics is essentially seen as a reality TV show, or do you want them to live in a safe democracy? When you think about the future, I think that's when people really start to mature and understand why these issues are important and why it's important to take politics seriously. It comes from the bottom up. I really believe that.

Wharton Global Youth: Can you share analytics on PoliPro's use? Are youth using it? In general, do you feel your classmates and peers are becoming more energized around political issues?

Sanjana: Since the launch [about a year ago], we have upwards of 300 downloads. Daily active users really range from day to day. We notice that during more politically active times, such as when the debates are getting closer, there are more active daily users. When I introduce the product to my friends and teachers, they all get very excited about it. They tell me how helpful it is and how much they're learning. It's heartwarming to hear that and it motivates us to think bigger. Currently, we're working with some schools to get PoliPro installed on school devices, but this process has been slowed down with COVID-19 impacting schools.

Wharton Global Youth: Can you share a story that illustrates this entrepreneurial journey for you? A moment when you felt like your product was making a true difference?

Sanjana: When my team and I wanted to take this to the next level, we entered an entrepreneurship contest that would bring us funding and also access to a lot of mentors. When we were there and talking to these big CEOs in Philadelphia, we noticed that adults were getting excited about this. We thought that we would be targeting a younger audience, but when we had adults who are professionals saying they could benefit from this and that it was helpful, it made our idea seem more real. We thought it was something we have to stick with and something we have to keep developing. It's really making a difference in people's lives.

Wharton Global Youth: What's been your biggest stumbling point?

Sanjana: Developing, for sure. There have been nights when I'm up trying to make one little feature work and I'll mess up [the code] and have to go back and start from the very beginning. When you're done with it and you make that one little feature work even if people notice it or not, it's such a fulfilling feeling. It makes you want to just keep learning more.

Wharton Global Youth: Will you be voting in the U.S. election this November?

Sanjana: Unfortunately, I will not be because I'm 17. I missed the cut by about five months. But I am registered to vote, so the next opportunity I have, I definitely will.

Wharton Global Youth: What lasting thoughts would you like to share with high school students about the importance of civic engagement?

Sanjana: I would say that we're all really in it for the same goal. Regardless, if you think your vote matters or it doesn't, there are so many different ways to get engaged, whether that is through campaigns or getting involved in your community. Voting is just one way. Knowing what is happening in our nation and understanding the root of these problems is how they get solved. Even if you feel as though your one voice doesn't matter, our voice in numbers is what

is going to make a difference in the long run.

Wharton Global Youth: One question I like to ask all of the entrepreneurs we interview on Future of the Business World is...If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?

Sanjana: That's definitely a really difficult one. In a very ideal world, I would make sure that everyone has access to basic needs, regardless of whether it is developed or developing countries. When people no longer have to worry about health care or getting access to basic needs and having food on the table it opens up new doors and creates that chain reaction of progress. As a global society, the less people have to worry about basic survival, the more we can focus on these bigger issues.

Wharton Global Youth: And let's wrap up with our lightning round. Answer these questions as quickly as you can.

What rally would you most like to attend?

Sanjana: Women's rights. I'm a huge advocate.

Wharton Global Youth: Business-related issue you would most like to see on the ballot?

Sanjana: Data protection. It's been very controversial lately with Tik Tok and Facebook.

Wharton Global Youth: One product or service that just makes you smile?

Sanjana: Those long-distance lamps that you can touch to let people know you're thinking of them.

Wharton Global Youth: A technology innovation that blows your mind?

Sanjana: Undoubtedly the versatility of artificial intelligence.

Wharton Global Youth: The business person would you most like to invite to lunch and why?

Sanjana: Donald Bren, because I'm fascinated by his real estate empire and I would love to learn about how he got started and any advice he has.

Sanjana, thanks so much for sharing your story with us on Future of the Business World!

Sanjana: Thank you so much for having me. This was great.