

[Sonia Livingstone](#)

Interactivity and participation on the Internet: young people's response to the civic sphere

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**Interactivity and participation on the internet:
A critical appraisal of the online invitation to young people**

Sonia Livingstone

Department of Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK
Tel. +44 (0)20 7955 7710
Fax +44 (0)20 7955 7248
Email s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk

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From mass to interactive media, from audiences to publics

The question of whether the new media have the potential to overcome young people's low levels of participation in the political process contrasts strongly with more traditional framings of the relation between mass media and participation. Typically the media have been held partly responsible for low participation rather than seen as offering a way forward. It is thus commonly claimed that 'media culture generally, with its emphasis on consumption and entertainment, has undercut the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy' (Dahlgren, 2003: 151; see also Putnam, 2000). This widespread suspicion of the mass media has a long history which is strongly if implicitly encoded in our present-day tendency to oppose mediated communication with face-to-face communication, judging the former as inferior by comparison. Cultural norms of authenticity, equality, trust and accountability are all grounded primarily in face-to-face communication and so are routinely questioned in relation to the mass media.

Two significant changes result in our present research agenda – one concerns political culture, the second concerns the communication environment. First, a growing body of argument is seeking to re-frame the domain to be labelled 'political'. For, if we can 'see beyond the formal political system' (Dahlgren, 2003: 164), including not just matters of party politics, ideological belief systems and voting but also civic and community issues, life politics and new social movements, then the view of the public as apathetic and ignorant about politics is challenged by evidence of a more lively, contested, and actively interested citizenry. Second, the communication environment is diversifying, specialising, globalising and becoming more interactive. The internet encompasses not simply one-to-many communication (characteristic of the mass media and, in turn, of mass society) nor just one-to-one communication (as in telephony and in face-to-face communication), but also the

communication from many to many characteristic of a network society (Castells, 2002), resulting in an expanded range of communicative possibilities (Morris and Ogan, 1996).

These two changes are strongly interlinked, with the internet being widely hailed as the technology to bring new, more participatory forms of civic and political engagement to the masses (Bentivegna, 2002; Coleman, 1999; 2003; Livingstone, in press-a). For while the media have proved only partially effective in informing citizens about political issues, they have proved far more effective in shaping identities, lifestyles and so, potentially, identity politics and lifestyle politics. Precisely because of its interactive mode of engagement and its heterarchical, even anarchic, network structure, repositioning the audience of mass communications as the citizens of cyberdemocracy, many are asking whether – unlike previous media – the internet may become less part of the problem than part of the solution. Can the internet facilitate greater transparency and reflexivity in the political process, the disintermediation of elite/ public communication by obviating the need for gatekeepers, virtual spaces for physically-dispersed citizens to deliberate amongst themselves, so enhancing public connection within and across communities? Whether we call this political participation or, more loosely perhaps, participation in the civic sphere, continues to be debated (Bennett, 1998; Dahlgren, 2003). The preceding question is whether such public or civic connections are occurring at all to any significant degree (Couldry in press; Livingstone, in press-b).

Young people and public participation – is the internet the answer?

“We know the computer, we’re the generation of computers.” (Focus group with 14-16 year olds, London, 2003)

The idea that, for democracy to work, ‘there must exist channels of communication providing for a free flow of information both amongst citizens and between representatives and voters’ (Coleman, 1999: 67), is driving internet-related policy in many countries. The UK Government has expressed as its goal not only a series of initiatives towards transparent government and civic participation but also the intention ‘... to enable all adults to have the ICT skills they need to learn effectively online, become active citizens in the information age and [...] contribute productively to the economy.’ (Office of the e-Envoy, 2004:11). Intriguingly, there appears to be a promising match between the style of deliberation afforded by the internet and that preferred by the very population segment – young people – who are most disengaged from traditional forms of political activity. The focus here on young people draws not only from the widespread concern that young people are indeed disengaged from the traditional political process but also from the growing optimism that quite the opposite holds for new forms of engagement and new forms of politics.¹

The productive coincidence between young people’s preferred style of political or civic engagement and the internet is stimulated by the growing evidence that the internet especially appeals to young people – it is ‘their’ medium, they are the early adopters, the most media-savvy, the pioneers in the cyber-age, leading rather than being led for once, reversing the generation gap and gaining confidence and expertise as a result. While this view is often overstated, for there is little solid evidence of a dramatic historical break from one generation to the next (notwithstanding the optimism of Kellner, 2002; Negroponete, 1995; Poster, 1997; Tapscott, 1997; and Turkle, 1995), the evidence does support the view that young people are particularly skilled and motivated in relation to the internet, making it a viable proposition to seek to encourage their participation through this means. Hence, it seems that the internet supports, and young people prefer to engage with, new civic or life-political issues, whether on a local or a global scale. Particularly, they respond to project-focused, pragmatic and low-obligation yet high profile activities, which are organised through forums characterised by open and spontaneous, ad hoc, low-commitment, self-reflexive and strategic communications within a flexibly-defined, peer-based network.

Three quarters of households with children in the UK now have domestic internet access, and 98% of 9-19 year olds have used in the internet – 92% at school, 75% at home, and 64% elsewhere (Livingstone and Bober, 2004). The ways in which the internet is becoming embedded in everyday life raises questions about access and inequalities, about the nature and quality of use, about the implications for young people’s social and educational

development and, ultimately, about the balance between the risks and opportunities posed by the internet for children and their families. On the one hand, children and young people are developing online competencies and literacies greater than their parents, proudly labelling themselves 'the internet generation'; on the other hand, they are the most vulnerable and potentially at risk from the dangers of inappropriate content and contact online (Livingstone, 2003). Further, despite the rhetoric, young people (and their parents and teachers) vary in confidence and competence when faced with the twin challenges of getting the best from the internet while also avoiding the problems it brings.

While families are investing resources in gaining access to and developing skills for using the internet, considerable commercial interests seek to target and expand the child and youth market, inviting young people to take up the online contents and services being developed. In the public sector too, there are hopes that the development of informational, civic and political contents and forums will stimulate young people's civic interests, political engagement and community values. How much are children and young people taking up some of these online opportunities? Are they responding to the range of 'invitations on offer to participate online'? Many suspect that, though the opportunities are considerable, they are to a great extent still untapped at present. While, sometimes understandably, much media attention, and hence public concern, is directing policy attention towards the task of minimising the dangers, it would seem timely also to direct increased attention to the challenge of maximising opportunities.

The research project *UK Children Go Online* (UKCGO) is investigating 9-19 year olds' use of the internet in the UK, comparing girls and boys of different ages, backgrounds etc, in order to ask how the internet may be transforming – or may itself be shaped by – family life, peer networks and learning, formal and informal. It combines qualitative interviews and observations with a major national face-to-face survey of children (N=1511, users and non-users) and their parents (N=906). The project is charting rapid increase in and diversity of forms and quality of access, and this diversity is also characteristic of emerging patterns of use (Livingstone and Bober, 2004). In this chapter, I draw out some of the project's findings as they relate to the broad issue of participation – social, civic and political – in order to ask whether young people's interest and expertise in the internet be harnessed so as to promote their participation? Or, are their various activities online not, after all, usefully characterised as peer, civic or political participation? My strategy is to triangulate three sources of data – the perspective of those who produce participatory websites for young people, a series of 14 focus group discussions with young people (see also Livingstone and Bober, 2003) together with their online discussions on our project message board, and the national survey of the activities of 9-19 year olds on the internet (see also Livingstone and Bober, 2004; for methodological details, see www.children-go-online.net).

From the perspective of the producers – grounds for optimism?

Giving youth 'their say'

'We want children and young people to feel that they can influence the services they receive. We want to see them contributing to and benefiting from their local communities. We want them to feel heard and valued and to be able to make a difference.' (John Denham, Minister for Young People, in Children and Young People's Unit, 2001: 1)

This quotation accords with the spirit of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, promoting participation, consultation and democratic opportunities for young people to learn about getting heard, having a voice and becoming active citizens. Indeed, a variety of both major and small, non-profit organisations are now initiating innovative and interesting opportunities for public or civic participation of one kind or another, with greater or more modest ambitions (e.g. the British Youth Council, Children's Express, Children's Rights Alliance for England, the United Kingdom Youth Parliament; see Children and Young People's Unit, 2001).

One result is 'an abundance of civic and political activity by and for youth' which 'invite young people to participate in a wide range of issues, including voting, voluntarism, racism and tolerance, social activism and, most recently, patriotism, terrorism and military conflict' (Montgomery et al, 2004: 2; for a critique, see Sundin, 1999). In the course of our research, we visited several organisations committed to using the internet to facilitate children and young people's participation in a range of ways by encouraging user-generated content, peer-to-peer communication, community-building, mediated public deliberation, and so forth.² In each case, we have met enthusiastic, dedicated and energetic adults committed to improving opportunities for children and young people and delighted to show us the facilities they provide or are developing.

The benefits of participation

Interestingly, 'participation' seems to mean several different things to these organisations. It seems widely anticipated that getting youth to participate on the internet as an end in itself (i.e. actively contributing to the medium rather than using it passively, as a receiver of content only) will lead to participation on and offline as a means to an end (i.e. social participation, empowerment and citizenship). In our interviews, we found that ideas of exactly how this might work were rather less clear. Indeed, the *Carnegie Young People Initiative* (Cutler and Taylor, 2003: 11) notes with some concern that:

'The benefits and impacts of children and young people's participation are not clearly identified... There is a need for a programme of work that more clearly identifies and quantifies the range of personal, social and economic benefits of children and young people gaining greater influence over decision-making.'

In a more positive vein, Montgomery et al (2004: 13-14) draw implicitly on a public sphere model to identify a range of potential benefits for young people. Thus, they argue that such websites provide young people 'with opportunities to hone a variety of civic skills, including the following:

- 'develop and articulate their thinking on issues of public concern
- 'share ideas with youth from different backgrounds, who may hold contrasting opinions
- 'build the habits of initiative, analysis, and independent thinking
- 'develop their own sense of being invested in civic issues and actively involved in the civic arena.'

However, as they too note, with some chagrin, 'youth civic websites open doors to access and participation in civic projects, but which young people utilize these opportunities, how, and with what effects over time, are topics that call for more systematic research' (p.13).

This lack of clarity about the success of such websites in achieving their goals is partly because budgets are generally tight, permitting little systematic market research. Hence, we found that organisations tend to rely on ad hoc contacts – what Montgomery et al call 'glimpses', or online traces, of the activities of real users – children who send in web material, those who visit on open days, phone calls from parents, hits to websites, queries to advisors etc. While it seems that some children are keen to participate, generous with their time, creative in their interests and just waiting for the opportunity to participate in their peer and wider community, it is possible, even likely, that these are a highly self-selected, probably privileged minority. This seems confirmed by the picture that emerges from our focus groups with children and teens, conducted in schools with a broad cross-section of the population.

Listening to young people – a gloomy prognosis?

"At the end of the day, you're going to look at what you're interested in. And if you haven't got an interest in politics, you're not going to get one from having the internet." (Lorie, 17, from Essex)

Despite the activities of the motivated minority, many children and young people rarely if ever find these interesting and creative websites. Rather, they stick to branded or commercial sites, following their favourite pop groups, football teams or television programmes instead of

checking out the Youth Parliament, the Childnet Academy or even the civic/ community options on the BBC site. The young people we interviewed in the focus groups were notably uninterested in or disillusioned by the possibility of political participation via the internet.

“Politics is boring”

Over and again, the conversation flagged when we switched from communicating with friends to the idea of communicating online in order to connect to the world of politics. Consequently, these were not always easy discussions, even though we attempted to draw on examples that might be expected to concern young people. Several times we found we had to ‘rescue’ the conversational flow of an otherwise lively focus group. Here is a group of 14-15 year old boys from Essex:³

Interviewer: And what about politics? Are any of you interested in politics?
Sean: No!
Ryan: Don’t be silly!

They seem more interested in being in touch with celebrities, as one 15 year old girl from London said:

Padma: Yeah. I get like a - sometimes, like, two weeks, every two weeks, I get personal mails from celebrities. My favourite celebrities. That’s ok!
[.....]
Interviewer: Ok, ok. But you don’t get in touch with politicians, or ...
[Laughter]
Padma: I’m not really interested in ... They all chat crap, so ...

And perhaps their interests are primarily local, rather than national or international:

“Why care about something going on miles away when you’ve got something going on in a hundred metres?” (Steve, 17 years, Manchester).

“No-one listens to us”

When Oliver (17, a middle class boy from Kent) commented with deliberate provocation on our message board, “I’m not in the least bit interested in politics, and think it extremely boring, no amount of games can disguise the content”, we had a chance to explore his reasons further. This revealed that young people (probably like adults) are not always internally consistent in their views. For him and others we talked to, the routine ways in which children are ignored in our society is a telling factor.

Interviewer: One of the things we were interested in was how kids got involved in the stop-the-war protest...
Oliver: Kids don’t see that they have a choice in the matter, it’s a ‘Grown up’ thing....Ask almost any child and they will tell you ‘War is bad’....The net just gives them a way to tell everyone and to share their ideas with each other.

Having said, first, that kids should not vote, he goes on to imply that kids do hold political views (anti-war), that the internet offers them a voice, but that no-one but other kids are listening, for the grown-ups have already decided. Young people not being listened to turns out to be a major theme in our focus groups also:

“I think the problem is how formal they are because they probably have a secretary typing it for them, if they’re Prime Minister or something like that. With the email, they won’t read it anyway.” (Mitch, 17 years, Essex)

We try to push beyond this, but their scepticism is strong, as stressed by this 17 year old from Essex:

- Interviewer: The other thing people say is that the internet makes things more democratic. Because now you could email your MP, or go on a political chat room...
- Hazel: Yeah, you can email him, but is he going to listen?

A comment posted on our message board from 15 year old Anne, also from Essex, again stresses the marginalisation of young people in society as a reason for their apparent political apathy:

Message no. 99

Posted by ANNE on Tuesday, November 11, 2003 5:55pm

Subject: Re: Email Tony Blair

Politics causes me to become frustrated because the Government has too much control over your lives, e.g. euthanasia being illegal. Anyway, I don't think young people are interested in politics due to the example set by the adults we are surrounded by, i.e. the poor turn out of voters and one of our teachers telling us they don't see the point in voting etc.

I have never written to, or emailed my local MP, or the PM [Prime Minister] because I do not think my letter/email will even be looked at. I am also put off by society's ageist attitude towards people of our age. An example would be a local cafe in town kicked my friends and I out because 2 out of the group of 5 of us had failed to purchase more than a drink. On another occasion my family and I went there, and only my mother ordered something, but no hostility was shown by the management. The behaviour of both groups were not at all dissimilar. Anyway, sorry to digress, but to sum, up young people's opinions are not at all valued, especially not by politicians.

As a recent BBC report observes (BBC, 2002: 4), the public (here, aged 18-44) finds it difficult to relate 'politics' to their everyday lives precisely because they can see no means of two-way dialogue with politicians; hence 'news and political broadcasting lacks a tier of entry points to engage or re-engage people'.

"Uncool websites", uncool politics

The aesthetics (and economics) of websites matters to a generation imbued with the values of commercial media. Several young people compared civic sites unfavourably to the glossy production standards of commercial sites, such as this group of 14-15 year olds from Essex:

- Interviewer: Do you ever go to any [name of their city] websites, any sites that are about what's happening in [city]?
- Ryan: They're so boring!
- Jim: Yeah, they're hyper-boring. You can tell they're so cheaply made as well.
- Sean: Yeah.
- Jim: Yeah, it's like the italic links with the boxes round them on cheap websites. It has things like that, it's just unbelievable.
- Sean: Yeah, there's no effort into the backgrounds. It's plain white! [...] They won't even spring for a picture, they'll just write Leisure World in the most plain black text!
- Ryan: Leisure World. What does it look like? I'm not telling you!

Even more problematic, however, is the sense that politics itself is 'uncool', offending against peer group norms. This works to constrain the expression of individual interests in a social context, even that of the focus group (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). This is evident in the inconsistencies within this lengthy extract in which one boy attempts to balance his own convictions with the group expectations. When we asked about the stop-the-war protests – supposedly widespread among young people in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War – Jim jumps in with enthusiasm but quickly backs down when Ryan expresses cynicism:

- Interviewer: One of the things I was thinking about was when they had the stop-the-war protests about six months ago before the war, and they said all these school kids went on strike.

Jim: Yeah, I went on strike! It was great! I was in the paper!
 Interviewer: Did you?
 Jim: Yeah.
 Ryan: Thing is, the only reason you go on strike is so you can miss school.
 Interviewer: That's what they said about you.
 Jim: We didn't actually go there, we were like 'yeah, we're going to go!' and then, 'nahh, we're not going to go, are we'. I just went on Saturdays. It was great fun.

Perhaps he hoped that getting into the newspaper would be 'cool', but Ryan repeats the cynical view widely expressed by the (right-wing) press, namely that the protesters had selfish rather than political motivations. To save face, Jim agrees – it was just for fun, no politics involved. But when Ryan pushes the political point, expressing a strong view against the protest, Jim seems muddled, saying that he supported the war initially but was now rethinking his position.

Interviewer: So you were protesting. You felt strongly against the war?
 Jim: I just wanted a bit of fun.
 Ryan: I think they should have gone to war.
 Jim: Yeah, I did agree with it, but it's getting a bit much now because they're still out there.

Feeling perhaps that the media are now with him, Jim pushes the point more clearly. Sean first agrees, noting the failure (at that point) to capture Sadaam Hussein, and then reminding us all of the point of the discussion – that young people's political action is futile and can only be ignored. Interestingly, Jim becomes defiant, now stating his view more clearly, though he perhaps risks his social standing in the process:

Jim: Why are they still out there? There's no point them actually being there.
 Sean: Well, they haven't actually caught anyone yet.
 Jim: There's no reason for them to be actually out there now.
 Sean: There wasn't any point in protesting anyway because they weren't going to bring back 250,000 troops because some school kids weren't going to school.
 Jim: I did support it, I just thought it would be a bit of fun, walk around with some strange hobos!

The interviewer tries to bring the discussion back to the internet, much discussed in the press as a mediator of anti-war protest planning, but in their case, at least, it seemed to play little part:

Interviewer: Was it organised through the internet? Did you keep in touch –how did you all know you were going to be in a certain place at a certain time?
 Sean: Phones.
 Jim: And mad like stickers all over town and stuff.
 Sean: Yeah.
 Jim: Posters and things.

Institutional structures matter

Not all are uninterested, in politics, raising the question of when and why some young people do get involved. We get a hint during this discussion, among inner-city teens (14-16 year old boys from London), when they suggest that their school (rather than the internet) played the key role in instigating action:

Interviewer: Because when they had all those stop-the-war protests, and lots of kids were involved weren't they? I don't know if there was anything here in school, or people protested or ...
 Elkan: All done in a non-uniform day.

Amir: We paid one pound.
Elkan: We all paid one pound, send money for ...
Prince: For the children of Iraq. So we paid a pound to ...
Elkan: Non-uniform.
Interviewer: And did the school organise that?
Prince: Yeah, the school did.

The other key institution in young people's lives, their family, also emerges as a key institution in encouraging participation. On our project message board, an individualised space, Milly (15, from Essex) expresses strong political interest, together with a frustration about her peers:

Message no. 77

Posted by MILLY on Wednesday, November 5, 2003 6:59pm

Subject: Re: Email Tony Blair

I really don't understand how people could have said that they aren't interested in politics! What about the 'Don't attack Iraq' rallies and marches. There was a massive under-18 turn out. What about the banning of live music without licensing! What about the massive probability that everyone in the UK will have ID cards within the next 5 years! What about national curfews for under 18s!

But when she expresses a similar interest in the focus group discussion, it becomes evident both that this interest stems from her father's expertise and that in the peer context her interest is expressed only with reluctance:

Interviewer: Tell me if you ever use the internet for being part of something bigger than you and your friends. Um, doing something in the community or getting involved in politics?
[Silence here much longer than before]
Milly: Hmm, my Dad like teaches politics at University, so I get interested in it. And it's just like looking up to see different people's views? Like, did you hear about that guy who was writing for Iraq.
Interviewer: Yes.
Milly: I didn't know that stuff.

When the interviewer focuses in on the internet, other girls join in. They are positive about the process of online participation, even if a little unclear about the goal:

Interviewer: OK. One thing I was thinking about whenever it was, sixth months ago, when they had stop-the-war protests, and they said lots of young people got involved, and when they did, they organized their protest through the internet.
Milly: You find out, like if you searched it, you would find out stuff in your area.
Kim: Also like when you send emails to people, you can also do it on MSN when the war was going on, there was like a, hmm, tribute to people in the war. There was like a little, what was it?
Claire: A ribbon?
Kim: And if you, you've just got to send it to as many people as you can, it sort of like goes round all your friends and their friends and ... loads of people sign up.
Milly: I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was like you know, to show respect to people, who died.
[Noises of agreement]
Interviewer: Right, right. The Iraqis who died, or the British soldiers, or anyone?
Milly: I think it depended who you were, what you thought of the war.

However, when the interviewer attempts to build on this discussion by drawing Shirley in, the rebuff is immediate. Interestingly, Kim – reading the shift among her peers - rapidly

backtracks, now denying any interest in politics and leaving Milly and her political background rather uncomfortably placed among her peers.

Interviewer: So it sounds like Milly, your family background gives you more of an 'in' on politics. Shirley, is politics important to you, or ...?
 Shirley: I don't get politics.
 Interviewer: Sorry?
 Shirley: I don't get politics.
 Interviewer: Right, ok. I think I've sat in more groups and heard people say, 'I'm just not interested in politics' and ...
 [Low-level mutters of agreement]
 Kim: Not interested in it. But on the war and stuff we'd watch that, and like I wish it wouldn't happen, but we'd still support our country. But we're not really into politics, like – they vote and stuff but ...

Varieties of participation – who does what and why?

Who is more typical of this generation, Milly or Shirley, Jim or Ryan? Are we right in surmising that Milly's background makes the difference? In turning to the findings from our survey of 9-19 year olds in the UK, the question is how many young people take part in online activities and why?

In what follows, we examine young people's take-up of a range of activities that might be considered 'participation', whether with peers or experts, whether for civic, political or personal reasons. Each of these activities invites from the individual user an active or creative contribution that directs or modifies the flow of events online and/or directs the user towards a civic or social enterprise larger than that of individual reception or exchange. Being restricted by the measures employed in the survey, the findings are analysed in terms of comparisons by age, gender and social class (here 'middle class' and 'working class' households are identified using the market research categories ABC1 and C2DE). The main survey findings are summarised in Table 1 (see also Livingstone, Bober and Helsper, 2004).

Table 1: Varieties of participation online, by demographics

	All	Boys	Girls	ABC1	C2DE	9-11 years	12-15 years	16-17 years	18-19 years
Peer-to peer communication									
Send/ receive email	72%	69%	75%	77%	65%	45%	71%	87%	92%
Use instant messaging	55%	53%	57%	59%	50%	18%	58%	72%	65%
Use chat rooms	21%	23%	20%	19%	24%	11%	23%	26%	26%
Peer-to peer connection									
Play online games	70%	75%	64%	68%	71%	78%	78%	61%	42%
Download music	45%	50%	39%	45%	45%	23%	47%	54%	61%
Visit sites of clubs you're a member of	19%	21%	16%	19%	19%	14%	17%	26%	22%
Visit personal homepages	14%	15%	15%	14%	14%	N/A	12%	19%	14%
Interactivity									
Breadth (0-8) of interaction with sites	1.49	1.44	1.56	1.64	1.32	0.87	1.50	1.89	1.92
Civic interests									

Seek information (not for school)	94%	94%	94%	95%	93%	89%	94%	96%	97%
Look for news online	26%	28%	22%	28%	22%	N/A	17%	34%	41%
Seek advice online	25%	26%	23%	26%	23%	N/A	21%	29%	32%
Breadth (0-5) of civic sites visited	1.0	0.90	1.11	1.17	0.79	N/A	0.78	1.24	1.34
Creativity									
Make a personal web page	34%	42%	26%	36%	32%	18%	39%	44%	32%

Base: 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=1,257), with the exception of 'seek advice online', 'look for news online' and 'look at other people's personal homepages', where the base is 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=975). Note: Comparisons in bold are statistically significant at least at $p < 0.05$.

Peer-to-peer

Email, chat and instant messaging are popular forms of socially interactive media, primarily used peer-to-peer to communicate with known rather than unknown others, serving to co-construct and potentially reconfigure social networks and relationships. Social class, gender and age all make a difference, with middle class, older girls tending to take part the most, with the exception of chat rooms.

Other online activities also connect peers, with game-playing (often though not always online) more common among boys than girls and less among older teens, while boys and the older teens also download music more often. Only one in five visits websites of clubs they belong to and fewer still are interested in visiting other people's homepages, suggesting a preference for professional over amateur websites, notwithstanding the supposed incentive of 'user-generated content' online.

Interactivity

Websites invite their users to interact with them in a range of ways, each of which asks the user to contribute something and, often, promises a response. Among 9-19 year olds, we found that 44% have completed a quiz online (more girls than boys), 25% have sent an email or SMS to a website (more older teens), 22% have voted online (more middle-class and older teens), 17% have sent in pictures or stories (more younger children), 17% have contributed to a message board (more middle class and older), 9% have offered advice to others (more older), 8% have filled in a form (more older) and 8% have signed a petition online (more middle-class and older).

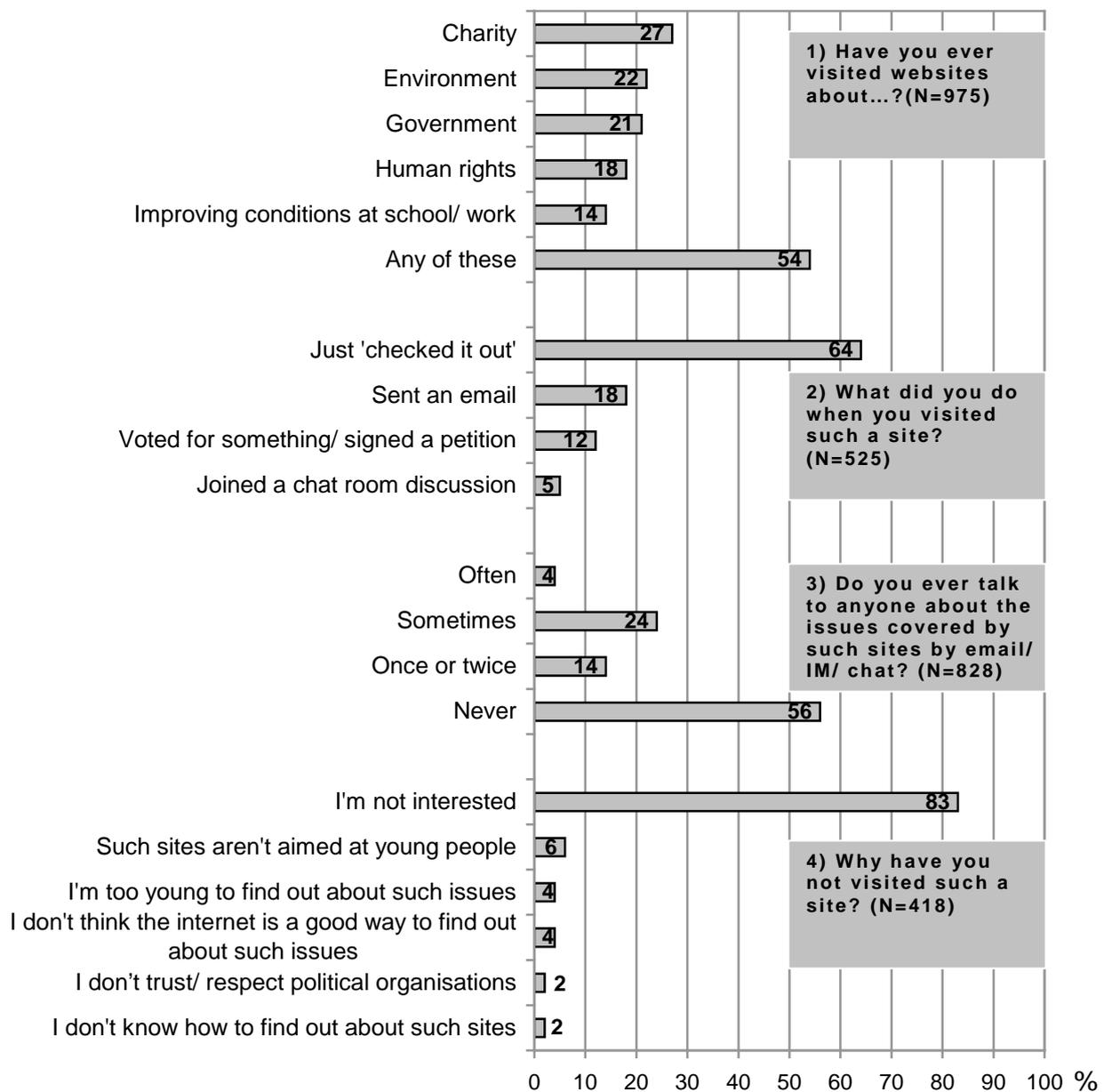
Overall, 70% report at least one form of interactive engagement with a website, suggesting a high level of interest and motivation. Yet, on average, young people have responded in just one or two ways out of the possible eight, suggesting that despite the many invitations to interact – to 'tell us what you think', 'email us your views', 'join our community', 'have your say' – take-up remains low (Table 1). Again we find demographic differences: middle class children interact with websites in more ways than do working class children, as do teenagers compared with younger children, suggesting the existence of a digital divide not (only) in terms of access but in the quality and depth of use.

Civic interests

While information uses of the internet are near-universal, much of this is entertainment- or leisure-related. One in four 12-19 year olds who go online at least once a week read the news online, with more boys, more middle class children and older teenagers doing so, and a similar proportion, especially older teens, have used the internet to get personal advice (e.g. for advice related to homework, health, sexual matters, drugs or money).

Most sites aimed at young people, as for the wider population, are commercially produced as part of a business strategy of e-commerce, branding or cross-media promotion. How often do young people visit sites designed to appeal to their public or civic interests? Avoiding the term 'politics' we asked 12-19 year olds about a range of civic and political sites (see Figure 1). Over half (54%) of 12-19 year olds who go online at least once a week have visited at least one such website. Again, the range of sites visited is lower than the overall reach: on average, only one of these kinds of sites (out of a possible six) is visited by each individual (Table 1). Girls and young middle class teenagers tend to visit a broader range of civic sites, and the breadth of civic sites visited also increases steadily with age. If these levels of participation are to be increased, further efforts – in design, in visibility, in communicating relevance, and in educational/ social support – will be needed.

Figure 1: Visiting civic websites – what, how or why not?



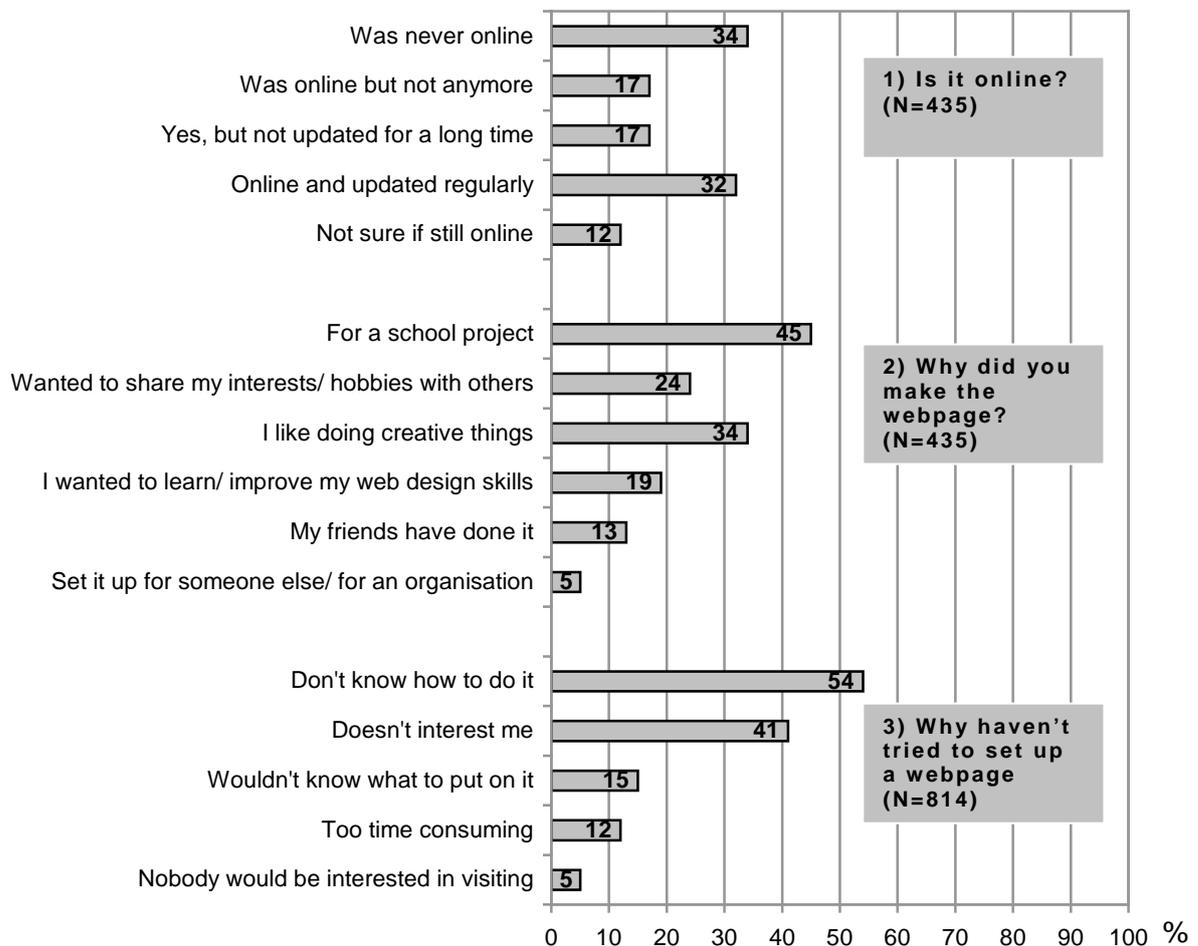
Base: 1) 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=975); 2) 12-19 year olds who have visited civic/ political sites(N=525); 3) 12-19 year olds who have used email/ IM/ chat (N=828); 4) 12-19 year olds who haven't visited civic/ political sites (N=418).

As Figure 1 also shows, it seems that for all but a minority, political and civic sites are mainly a source of information than an opportunity to become engaged, especially for younger children.⁴ When we asked email, IM and chat users if they discuss political or civic issues peer-to-peer on the internet, more than half (56%) say they never talk about these issues with anyone by email, IM or chat, though 14% have done so once or twice, 24% sometimes and 4% often.⁵ Looking at the reasons why many (42%) of teens never visit civic/ political sites, low levels of online political participation would appear to be due to a general lack of interest rather than to more specific problems, such as website design, trust or searching skills. Yet, it remains plausible that better designed websites could more effectively draw young people into political participation.

Creativity

Many hopes have been pinned on the new opportunities to become not only a receiver but also a producer of content. More than for any previous media, the internet makes it possible for anyone with a certain level of skills and technical resources, now fairly accessible if far from universal, to create their own content, for whatever purpose, and make it widely available on a hitherto unprecedented, even global scale. As Table 1 shows, one third of 9-19 year olds – more often boys and teens – have tried to set up their own webpage. Unlike for visiting civic sites, social grade makes little difference.⁶

Figure 2: Making webpages – how, why or why not?



Base:1)+2) 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week and who have tried to set up a webpage (N=435); 3) 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week and who have not tried to set up a webpage (N=814).

Figure 2 suggests that making and maintaining a webpage is not easy, and commonly young people's sites are not either currently online or updated regularly. The skills or literacy

required to maintain a webpage are, it seems, less widespread among young people than they would wish, given their initial interest in creating a webpage. While the reasons for making a webpage are varied, the most common reason is for a school project, pointing to the importance of institutional support in these (as in other) activities. As for the 65% of young people who don't have a webpage, the main reason given is not knowing how to set one up, again suggesting a literacy gap.⁷

Varieties of participators: towards a typology of young people online

Rather than simply dividing young people into those who participate more and those who participate less, a more complex explanation, based on demographic and internet use factors, is suggested if we are to understand what leads young people to take up opportunities to participate online in different ways. The 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly were grouped using cluster analysis, this suggesting distinct groups (or 'ideal types') of young internet users in relation to activities of interaction and participation (see Table 2).⁸

Table 2: Characteristics of the three groups of online participators

	Interactors	Civic-minded	Disengaged
Demographics			
Age	Av. 16 yrs	Av. 16 yrs	Av. 15 yrs
Gender	More male	More female	More male
Socioeconomic status	More ABC1	More ABC1	Less ABC1
Access			
Home access	Higher	Higher	Lower
Broadband access	Highest	Average	Lowest
Internet use			
Frequency of use	Highest	Average	Lowest
Average time online per day	Most	Average	Least
Years of internet use	Most	Average	Least
Self-efficacy/internet expertise	Higher	Lower	Lower
Number of sites visited last week	Highest	Average	Lowest
Number of online activities (out of 10)	Highest	Average	Lowest
Peer-to-peer communication			
Frequency of using email	Highest	Average	Lowest
Frequency of using Instant Messaging	Highest	Average	Lowest
Frequency of using chat	Highest	Lowest	Average
Peer-to-peer connection			
Play online games	Highest	Average	Lowest
Download music	Highest	Lowest	Average
Visit sites of clubs you're a member of	Average	Highest	Lowest
Visit others' personal homepages	Highest	Average	Lowest
Interactivity			
Breadth of interaction with web sites	Highest	Average	Lowest
Civic interests			
Seek information (not for school)	Average	Average	Average
Look for news online	Highest	Average	Lowest
Seek advice online	Most likely	Average	Least likely

Breadth of civic sites visited	Average	Highest	Lowest
Creativity			
Make a personal webpage	Highest	Average	Lowest

Base: 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly (N=975). All group comparisons are statistically significant at least at $p < 0.05$.

Interactors

These young people engage the most interactively with websites, and they are the most likely to make their own webpages. More often boys, and middle class, they are the most privileged in terms of domestic access, and they use the internet the most. Consequently, they have developed considerable online skills, permitting them to discover many advantages of the internet and so using it in a wide range of ways, apparently ready to take up new opportunities as offered. Yet interestingly, this range and depth of online engagement does not lead them especially to pursue civic interests online.

The civic-minded

While not especially likely to interact with websites generally or to make their own website, these young people visit a range of civic websites, especially charity and human rights-based sites. More often girls and middle class, these young people have adequate access to the internet and they make only average use of it. Consistent with their civic interests, they visit websites for clubs they belong to and are least likely to chat or download music. It seems unlikely that new online opportunities on the internet are drawing these young people into civic participation. Rather, having developed civic interests offline, they see the internet as one way of pursuing them, even though they do not consider themselves especially skilled online.

The disengaged

These young people are the least active in online participation, however measured, being much less likely to interact with sites, visit civic sites or make their own webpage. A little younger than the other groups, and from lower socio-economic status backgrounds, they are less likely to have home access or a broadband connection. The result is a less experienced, less expert group of internet users who, though they do go online at least once per week, make average use of the internet for information and music, visit few websites, communicate less online, and generally gain the least from the internet, especially in relation to its potential for participation. Being disengaged in terms of both access and use, these young people, it seems, are on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Conclusions

Although the internet is often used for rather aimless searches or chat with little consequence, this chapter has asked whether the internet can also offer young people new and different opportunities to interact and participate in society, this contrasting with the receipt of ready-made, professionally-produced, commercially-profitable information and entertainment content. In triangulating three sources of data regarding young people's response to the invitation to participate, a somewhat conflicting story has emerged. According to the producers of civic websites for youth, many young people are eagerly contributing to the sites, creatively engaging with the online invitation to join in, to have their say, to represent themselves. But from the focus groups with ordinary young people, a more negative view emerges of a generation bored with politics, critical of the online offer, instead interested in celebrity and conforming to peer norms. Perhaps our questioning to these young people was unsubtle, leading them to take the opportunity to reject the adult world of politics, all too often framed rhetorically as 'not for them', rather than telling us of their commitments, their values, their concerns (and in more individual discussions, a less alienated picture does emerge). Yet the peer group matters. If privately explored interests cannot be expressed in public, among peers, and acted upon collectively, there is little hope for increasing youth participation (see Eliasoph, 1998).

So, is youthful participation a majority or minority activity? The survey offers some resolution. Depending on which measure of participation one adopts (and this is far from settled since researchers continue to debate the very nature of 'participation'), anything between a small minority and a bare majority of children and young people can be said to respond positively to the invitation to participate on the internet. The rest, by implication, do not, claiming a lack of interest and a lack of knowledge. How young people are distributed across these categories, or activities, is largely a matter of demographics – gender, age and social class all play a strong, if not wholly determining, role, though as the cluster analysis suggests, access to and expertise in using the internet further affect the breadth of use. Does this mean that little can be done to enhance young people's online participation?

If we listen closely to the producers and the young people, their stories begin to converge. The producers stress 'being heard', and this is also a common feature of the design characteristics and interface of youth civic websites. Young people, it is claimed, have a right to express themselves, for their voices to become visible, and the online community is keen for their contribution. Producers are less clear, however, about the benefits of participation, shifting the ground from political action to the question of skills. Through engaging with these sites, it is suggested, young people can develop the skills and competences for participation, even though such engagement may not lead to any political or civic consequences. Implicitly, it seems, young people are positioned by these sites not as citizens but as citizens-in-waiting: such online participation, like education, prepares young people for the life to come. But consider the protest running through the focus group discussions: 'being heard', or 'having your say' does not seem to mean 'being listened to', they complain. It seems that young people consider the online invitation to be false – no adult is listening or responding, and decisions are taken elsewhere. Perhaps in consequence, it also seems that while these sites offer young people their 'right' to be heard, they generate little sense of any accompanying responsibility to participate.

If young people are to be positioned merely as citizens-in-waiting, it seems that there are other things they prefer to do with their time. The survey findings add a further twist, for they suggest a generation that is, even though marginalised as non-adults (Qvortrup, 1995), not entirely cynical. Rather, they are initially interested and willing, ready to try things out. In sizeable numbers, they visit civic websites, attempt to create content, respond to online invitations to interact. But they visit only one or two civic sites, and they don't take it further. If they can't get their website online, they give up. They send in their emails and votes but get little in return. One is tempted to suggest that it is those making the invitation, not those responding to it, that lack the motivation to participate. Further, since the online community remains less significant to young people than their offline community of peers, it is in that forum that the online offer is tested and rejected, as the dynamics of the focus group discussions reveal.

Only if the institutional structures (school, family, peers) that shape young people's daily lives support civic participation does it seem that young people feel enabled to engage with the civic or public sphere, on or offline. Historians of childhood argue not only that these institutional structures present a stratified array of opportunities and constraints that is, for the most part, beyond young people's control but also that traditional cues to participation and citizenship are becoming ever less in evidence (Kimberlee, 2002). It seems that, despite widespread optimism regarding online youth participation, we are led to agree that 'despite the recognition of children as persons in their own right, public policy and practice is marked by an intensification of control, regulation and surveillance around children, this impeding rather than facilitating the ability of organisations to encourage children's participation' (Prout, 2000: 304), not least because 'children's participation can threaten adult hegemony and established practice' (Hill and Tisdall, 1997: 36). But for those seeking a more optimistic conclusion, there is surely much more to be done that builds on young people's undoubted excitement over the internet, their growing expertise and their willingness to try things out, in terms of ensuring that opportunities for youth participation are more formally and structurally connected to adult spheres of political and civic decision making and action. In short, if children and young people do participate, who among those with power is going to listen?

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Endnotes

¹ See van Deth, et al (1999), Kimberlee (2002), Hill and Tisdall (1997), Norris (1999), Park et al (2002) and Prout (2000) on youth participation in general. See Angeles-Bautista (1999), Coleman (1999), Hall and Newbury (1999), Montgomery et al (2004), McNeill (1999) and Sundin (1999) on the civic potential of the internet.

² Such organisations include: Children's BBC (www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc), which encourages creating and disseminating material online and on television, sending feedback to television programmes, using story circles to engage disadvantaged and disengaged groups (e.g. disabled children), and so forth; Epal (www.epal.tv), a pilot Government project for 13-19 year olds in Greater Manchester to use 'digital technology to develop an online community of young people, support youth participation in public life, and deliver public services to young people in new ways'; and the Childnet Academy (www.childnetacademy.org, part of Childnet-International), which runs an annual award competition for websites made by children and young people that benefit other children worldwide.

³ All children interviewed have been given pseudonyms (see the project's research ethics policy, www.children-go-online.net).

⁴ In a multiple regression analysis seeking to predict which young people interact with these sites (in terms of demographic and internet use variables), only age was a significant predictor of interaction: older teens are more likely to interact with civic websites and not just visit them or look for information.

⁵ In a multiple regression analysis seeking to predict which young people discuss these issues on the internet (in terms of demographic and internet use variables), age and self-efficacy were significant predictors: older teens and those more confident of their online expertise are more likely to have discussed these issues with others on the internet.

⁶ However, experience of and confidence in using the internet does seem to encourage online content creation (Livingstone, Bober and Helsper, 2004).

⁷ This was an especially common response among the 9-11 year olds (69%), and interestingly, the youngest group was also the least likely to say that making a webpage does not interest them (28%, compared with 40-50% of the teens). These youngest children, then, have the biggest gap between motivation and skill, suggesting an 'unmet need' worthy of support.

⁸ A cluster analysis seeks to identify meaningfully homogenous subgroups of cases (here, individuals) in a population. The furthest neighbour technique was used (in SPSS 11.5); see Livingstone, Bober and Helsper (in prep.) for details.