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Youth Internet Radio Network: Can we Innovate Democracy?

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Keywords

Youth participation; internet; streaming; content creation; creativity; innovation; open architecture; networks.

Abstract

The Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) explores the connection between media technologies and citizenship, building on work by Hartley and Tacchi on 'radiocracy' (radio, democracy & development)⁴. YIRN combines:

1. Content creation: Establishing a network of young content providers across urban, regional, remote and Indigenous locations;
2. Ethnographic Action Research: Researching how young people interact as both producers and consumers of new media content and technology;
3. Technology Innovation: Identifying how different 'communicative ecologies' within the network influence and learn from each other; and,
4. Enterprise development: Understanding how culture and creativity combined with new technologies can be a seedbed for innovation and enterprise.

Groups of young people across Queensland will be trained in how to produce content for a dedicated website - audio (music and speech), text (stories, reports, journals) and visuals (photographs, artworks). In addition, the network

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will allow groups of young people to interact with each other and with others (including Government) on topics and issues chosen by them - through forums, messaging services, message boards, blogs and emails.

This research project investigates important questions about new media and participation. If the new economy is a network economy, if the new raw materials are information and knowledge, and if the new workforce needs content creation skills, how will these young people set about using and developing the YIRN network? How do creativity, access, networks and connectivity work together - what are the results of ensuring access and training at this level to a diverse and dispersed set of groups of young people? How does this network work as a communication space: how will the young people interact with each other? And how will they communicate with Government and other agencies? When they are participating in an interactive network are they simultaneously being citizens? Would enterprises built around creative content be civic institutions?

This paper presents some of the challenges that face this research project as it seeks to discover how youth civic participation might be addressed through innovative Internet use by embracing practices that are often considered resistant and the domain of a 'subversive youth' (Hartley 1992, 21-42).

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Introduction

This paper discusses some of the issues that we are addressing as we develop the Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN). As such it is very much a 'work in progress' – YIRN itself is 'under construction' and we have recently begun working with the groups of young people who are taking part in the initial development of YIRN. We are negotiating appropriate hosting solutions for the hardware, and designing and adapting the software that will be used. Therefore, at this stage, this paper draws on a range of ideas that relate to the e-democracy *potential* of YIRN that we will be investigating through ethnographic and action research approaches⁵ as YIRN progresses.

YIRN is about more than e-democracy. YIRN is a new media project and as such it is about exploring relationships between 'ordinary' people and the media. It is also about exploring online and offline identities. Then again, it is about exploring what constitutes innovation and creativity when you bring together new streaming media technologies and young people. And it is about the possibilities and opportunities for enterprise development of those innovative and creative activities. We are exploring all of this and more through creating an application (a streaming network) that we have invited groups of young people to take part in. When they do we will adapt the application according to what our research suggests young people themselves are most interested in.

One of the layers of research and development associated with YIRN is in its potential to explore online youth engagement. Our approach to this is based on the idea that setting up an online youth engagement portal in and of itself would most likely attract only young people who are already 'engaged'. Because our interest is not restricted to youth engagement we are in a position to develop an online streaming application that responds to the interests and needs of young people without – initially – being overly concerned with engagement per se. What this will do, we feel, is provide us with an interesting environment in which to look at issues of public connection, civic feeling and behaviour, and notions of citizenship. Yet we will

⁵ We are using 'ethnographic action research'

see URL: <<http://cirac.qut.edu.au/ictpr/downloads/handbook.pdf>>

not be looking at that in isolation. We will be investigating this in the wider context of young people and their online activities, and how these relate to their offline lives. In other words, we will be developing rich understandings of young people and their everyday lives, and the role of new technologies in these. This paper presents our plans for exploring issues of youth engagement by setting out the wider project and how youth engagement can be addressed through this.

On-line Youth Engagement

Universal citizenship is central to our contemporary understanding of democratic government (Manning *et al*, in press), and as a ratified signatory to the Articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1997), the Australian federal government acknowledges that those under 18 years of age have the ability, and therefore the right, to be involved in decision-making. The Queensland Government has recognized this obligation to involve young people (aged between 12-25 years) in the development of state-government policy, programs and services through “The Queensland Youth Charter” (Office of Youth Affairs 2002).

In the year leading up to the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children (May 2002) nearly 40,000 young people between the ages of 9-18 in 72 countries were surveyed on various subjects including their expectations of government. The majority of respondents reported that they are deeply concerned about a range of economic, social and environmental issues. A more concerning finding however is their reported disenchantment with government and related institutions and subsequent disengagement from the democratic process (Bellamy 2002, 50-51). As put by 10-year-old Mingyu Liao from China in the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) *State of the World’s Children 2003* report, “We all had plenty to say, but the number one thing that all delegates were concerned about is that most leaders don’t listen” (Bellamy 2002, 1).

The recurring theme of these UN projects is that young people lack opportunities to voice their opinions and participate in decisions that affect their lives and they are cynical toward traditional politics, politicians, and conventional forms of political action.

Young people are not alone in their disenchantment with democratic processes. In almost every western country there is a collapse of confidence in traditional models of democratic governance (Coleman *et al* 2001, 4). In this international climate of civic concern, the internet's potential to connect citizens with their representatives and governments is a promise of hope for contemporary democracies. As Douglas Alexandar MP puts it, "The Internet has the potential to produce an information-rich world in which all citizens are able to communicate, educate and legislate in a way previously considered impossible" (Rushkoff 2003, 14). An "open source democracy" can be enabled by the new networked society to allow cooperative activity in an ongoing exploration and dialogue on governance issues and their impacts.

Professor Stephen Coleman, the world's first professor in e-democracy, in his report with John Gotze, "Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation", identifies key areas where new thinking is needed in the development of e-democracy. Their conclusions flow along these lines:

- Connecting citizens with their governments and representatives is a positive thing.
- Engagement can occur in varying degrees, with policy deliberation being the most desirable and difficult.
- Citizens want to participate in policy deliberation but government and citizens must be prepared for the work and responsibilities associated with it.
- There are issues and challenges for the design of appropriate technologies for on-line engagement, and those features relating to on-line sociability are most significant.

Of these findings, their last point resonates with interests in many other Internet-associated disciplines. As Arnold points out, 'social interaction is the 'killer application' of the Internet' (Arnold 2003) and many others have recognized that young people especially are driving it. Horrigan found that there is a trendsetting Technology Elite in the US of which one fifth are young people (average age of 22 years) (Horrigan 2003). In terms of the Australian population, 32.8% of all the people who used the internet in Queensland were between the age group 10-24 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001) and "persons aged 10-19 years were the most likely to use a computer at home" (Office of Economic and Statistical Research 2001). A further 56% of Australians under the age of 25 made use of a government web site in 2002 making them the second highest government online user group (Mellor *et al* 2002).

Technology and mass media saturation have had a clear impact on the Information Age Generations during their formative years; a significant differentiating factor notably expressed by D-Code in their benchmark work, *Chips and Pop* (Barnard 1998). Another key point made by that work however points out the intergenerational commonalities between teenagers, whether during the 1920's, 1960's or today. That is, 'they are rebellious, risk-takers, idealistic and easily adaptive'. If true, it is perhaps this factor that provides the greatest barrier to young people's participation in on-line engagement with governance. Young people, it seems, may be inherently resistant to institutions and authority.

This notion of inherent resistance appears to be supported by the (more conservatively expressed) findings reported in a recent UK Home Office report (Hine *et al* 2004, 3). The report describes the role of 'perceived unfairness' in young people's compliance or otherwise with rules, citing young people's concerns that different standards are apparently expected of them and those in authority. In this research young people demonstrated sophisticated reasoning in relation to compliance with rules, giving evidence that they tend to interrogate and judge situations for themselves before making a decision. Consider this in the context of typically scandalous or

otherwise negative portrayals of parliamentarians in the media and we begin to understand why young people might tend toward resistance, and indeed, rebellion. If young people are 'rebellious, risk-takers, idealistic' and less inclined to take what they are presented with as granted, trusting government and associated institutions becomes a very difficult challenge for them.

In conclusion the report finds that young people are willing to discuss their issues in order to expand their understanding of moral and justice questions, and practitioners are urged to create opportunities for young people to do so.

While the principles outlined by Coleman and Gotze, with their emphasis on mutual learning, connected citizenry, and shared responsibilities, offer a good start to on-line engagement with young people, the unique characteristics of young people provide a new set of issues to the challenge.

How then, might a cohort with a natural pre-disposition to resistance, be coerced into on-line engagement with governance? Can the energy that young people traditionally apply to rebellion and cynicism be channeled for productive influence and collaborative change? What can governments do to facilitate collaboration with young people? How can young people learn to trust in the processes of governance? Can open-source democracy connect the most cynical citizens with the most affluent institutions?

The Youth Internet Radio Network is a research project designed to explore these, and other, questions. In order to do so we are establishing an online network of young people. YIRN is designed to be responsive to the creative aspirations of young people, and taking an action research approach, we cannot describe in detail at this stage the network that will emerge, but we can describe our starting point and the process that we are following. It is built on both conceptual and technical foundations.

Online space = free space?

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that an essential foundation of the Information Society is that everyone has the right

to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media. The Declaration of Principles from the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in December 2003 reaffirms Article 19, along with the view that 'communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization'. As such, communication is essential to the 'Information Society' and 'no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers' (paragraph 4). Clear emphasis is placed on young people, women and poor communities. There is recognition of a need to look beyond the 'digital divide' debates, to find practical solutions to achieving 'digital solidarity'.

The internet has been touted as a great democratizing force in ways that echo the rhetoric that surrounded early radio (Spinelli 2000). In his introduction to *Future Active* Meikle (2002) demonstrates the similar paths the two technologies traveled along, with early development funded by military investment, its early take up amongst technological enthusiasts, and so on.

Community radio and community networks (networks enabled by new technologies) are still today surrounded by a degree of hyperbole. The technologies themselves are seen to hold the potential to encourage community building, empowerment, egalitarian levels of media access allowing everyone to have a voice, to be enabled to communicate with others and form connections not reliant on physical proximity or mobility. There are examples such as ham radio and WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) in the early development of these media, uses which persist but which have paled in significance as other (commercial) uses attract attention. Usage has become less focussed on empowerment and liberation as these media have become more established and at the same time they have predominantly taken on the one to many transmission model. Nevertheless the possibility of using these media differently remains. Community radio – especially long established forms such as in Australia and Canada – demonstrate this. There are a range of models of community radio which emphasise community ownership and participation in organisation and programme making. They are long

established 'third tiers' of radio, often described as 'alternative media' (see Price-Davies and Tacchi 2001).

Alternative media is not usually a description of alternative media per se, but of alternative uses of established media. Community radio in Australia easily fits within such a description, as does pirate radio in the UK, and as do many community based networks and other uses of the Internet. Couldry (2000) demonstrates that the social construction of symbolic media power can most clearly be seen when there is some form of contestation – or interaction, or alternative use...when 'ordinary worlds' come up against 'media worlds'. To put it another way, when ordinary people find (often marginal) ways of using or interacting with or through 'the media' their otherwise restricted power to do so is highlighted. Through YIRN we are interested in exploring two main issues:

- how do particular uses of new media technology reinforce and challenge other social processes and meanings? And,
- how do those involved in YIRN take part in these processes and what are their individual experiences?

We start from a broad definition of media power, following Couldry, of the concentration in media institutions of the symbolic power to 'construct reality'. This is a social process - such symbolic power is not naturally located within media institutions, it is negotiated, created and maintained through social processes. Like Couldry we will examine this through instances where 'ordinary people' have first hand experiences of media and take part both the construction of and contestation of its symbolic power. We are building, through YIRN, a particular example of what we might broadly call marginal media, alternative media, or even 'citizens' media' (Rodriquez 2001). In this way, it is an exploration of participation in the media – how certain individuals interact with YIRN and some of the effects and affects of this engagement.

Miekle (2002) distinguishes between two 'types' of 'interactivity' – 'interactive' and 'tactical'. His book is concerned with the political uses of the Internet. He makes an important distinction between interactive use which he defines as choosing between options prescribed for us - which apparently offers choices but in fact does not challenge the future and is not a sign of free use of media ('interactive' interactivity) - and alternative use which is truly uncovering and discovering new paths and new futures – the true 'open' Internet rather than 'closed' ('tactical' interactivity). He points out that it was the 'conversational dimension' of the Internet – discussion and debate which allowed for democratic creation and maintenance of virtual communities – that marked much of the early enthusiasm about the Internet's democratic potential (Miekle 2002, 33). It is this aspect of the Internet that runs through *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, where fluid conversations would happen on the net and the human voice would 'be rapidly rediscovered' (Levine *et al.* 2000, xxiii). This could be seen as a comment on the 'interactivity' of the Internet, but as Meikle points out, in addition to different 'types' of interactivity, there are different 'degrees' of interactivity (Meikle 2002, 30). Drawing on the work of Brian Eno, Meikle further distinguishes between 'interactive' and 'unfinished'. 'If the 'interactive' is about *consuming* media in (more or less) novel ways, the 'unfinished' is about people *making* new media for themselves' (Meikle 2002, 32).

The crucial difference is that while some 'interactive' websites offer choice, they are limited in that they work like jukeboxes and you can only choose between what you are offered while the 'unfinished' offers this choice but also the opportunity to create. Here Meikle draws on a concept of Tim Berners-Lee, where interactivity and creativity merge to offer the potential of 'intercreativity' – being creative with others (Meikle 2002, 32). This relates, of course, in large part to the early design of the world wide web where sharing was a key principle (and indeed main incentive/objective) and the ideas of stupid networks and intelligent ends/applications became established along with the notions of open and closed systems. We can see, for example in the work of Lawrence Lessig, how these early ideas are presented now, in the face of what some see as threats to the openness of the Internet and its ability to provide a space for creativity and innovation – what Lessig (2001) calls an 'innovation commons'.

Andrew Barry agrees with Poster that uses of the ideas of 'interactivity' can 'float and be applied in countless contexts having little to do with telecommunications' (Poster quoted in Barry 2001, 129), but suggests that 'in relation to discussions of scientific and technological citizenship, interactivity can have a remarkable significance, drawing together concerns both with, for example, public "participation", "active citizenship" and "empowerment" and with more specific questions and anxieties about the proper way to bridge the gulf between popular culture and the esoteric worlds of technical expertise' (Barry 2001, 129). The idea of using new technologies for 'engaging' or 'connecting' communities is also clearly visible in political debate and Government initiatives⁶. Barry calls interactivity a 'phenomenon' that is 'more than a particular technological form... Today, interactivity has come to be a dominant model of how objects can be used to produce subjects. In an interactive model, subjects are not disciplined, they are *allowed*' (Barry 2001, 129).

⁶ See the e-democracy unit webpage, at the Department of the Premier and Cabinet URL: <<http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au>> for a Queensland example, and URL: <www.dfes.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/> for UK example.

Sterne (2003) demonstrates through his history of sound reproduction technologies that technological possibilities depend not so much on the available technological knowledge, but the social and cultural desire to implement it. *The Audible Past* is a history of 'the *possibility* of sound reproduction' that 'examines the social and cultural conditions that gave rise to sound reproduction and, in turn, how these technologies crystallized and combined larger cultural currents' (Sterne 2003, 2). In his account, the technologies of sound reproduction are themselves 'artefacts of vast transformations in the fundamental nature of sound... Capitalism, rationalism, science, colonialism, and a host of other factors... all affected constructs and practices of sound, hearing and listening' in the nineteenth century and beyond (Sterne 2003, 2). The Internet can be seen to be a technology associated with the development of networks, the 'new economy', and globalisation. In Sterne's account sound reproduction technologies came about when they did, not because the technological possibilities were not available before, but because the social and cultural worlds in which these possibilities existed made them, at a certain point in time, desirable and meaningful. It also made them commodifiable. The same can be seen in the development of other technologies such as the internet.

The internet is often presented as something that encourages egalitarian and democratic practices but is seen to have taken a wrong turn as it has, like radio before it, become more to do with commercialisable potentials. There are conflicting views about the ability of the Internet to resist corporate monopolization or government control (Mansell 1999). Lessig (2001) predicts the future of the Internet as a controlled one that will rework and undermine the 'innovation commons' that it has shown it can create. Others have predicted that the Internet will always resist regulation - for example, that Internet radio will ultimately result in the end of 'format radio' (Donow and Miles 1999). The commercialisable potential of new media is not seen by the YIRN project as something 'bad' to be avoided. Rather, enterprise development and the nurturing of commercially viable creative practices would provide a positive outcome. But in order to create a space for enterprise development, we are seeking to provide an environment that

allows for innovation and creativity to flourish. Many of the arguments against commercialization position it as anti-democratic and monopolistic – but as Lessig also argues, nurturing an innovation commons (and this is done through protecting what we might call ‘free spaces’) is not intrinsically non commercial, but at the same time not overly controlled and restrictive or prescriptive. The tension between protecting creative spaces and generating income to sustain services can be seen in the experience of community radio in Australia and elsewhere. There is concern, for example, in both Australia and Canada - which both have well established community radio sectors – that commercial pressures make some stations sound more like commercial stations than community stations (Price Davies and Tacchi 2001, 10-26). Critics fear that as these radio services move away from their original purpose to serve local communities of interest, to competing for mainstream audiences, their ability to feed innovative ideas and talent into the mainstream is lessened.

There is often an implicit notion that the commodification and control of the internet can and should be resisted because it (the internet) is itself a force for good. Castells (2001, 197) argues that internet radio is thriving because it satisfies an interest in local events – allowing people ‘the freedom to bypass the global culture’ to satisfy the needs of ‘local identity’. As such it is a ‘global network of local communication’ (Castells 2001, 197). Earlier work on innovation and creativity and online streaming technologies (Tacchi 2003) suggests that in order to give creativity and innovation (and this might well be extended to participation) the best chance to thrive it is necessary to create and protect online and offline ‘spaces of freedom’⁷. In order to allow the longer term sustainability of innovative and creative activities, commercial models must be explored. YIRN will explore which models suit such spaces and activities.

⁷ As Slater (2002) points out, there is some confusion of political, economic and social concepts of freedom in relation to online and offline identity. For some, commercial freedom, circulating goods without payment or pricing, and freedom as the absence of censorship are all part of the same freedom whilst for others they are quite different and sometimes contradictory things.

At a point in time when the internet is widely diffused in Western societies and research has begun to provide empirical evidence and analysis of 'patterns of sociability arising from the use of the internet' public debate is still oversimplistic and ideological (Castells 2001, 117). Research shows that 'the uses of the internet are, overwhelmingly, instrumental, and closely connected to the work, family, and everyday life of internet users' (Castells 2001, 118). Cyberspace, as a separate 'place' does not exist other than in relationship to the lived realities of people (see Miller and Slater 2000). Setting up a 'portal' for political engagement, and hoping that otherwise disengaged young people will interact with government in this space is less likely to achieve results than allowing young people to set up sites that relate to their everyday lives and concerns, and as a bi-product, allows for explorations of citizenship and participation. Coleman emphasises the importance of self representation in online environments – and the importance of paying attention to affect rather than effect – as a way of allowing people to become empowered as citizens.

One of the key questions for the YIRN project, as the title of this paper states, is *can we innovate democracy* using new technology? We begin developing the YIRN project with a few premises, key amongst them for this discussion, that we need to create a 'space for freedom' in order to facilitate innovation and creativity (or intercreativity) that has relevance to the lived realities of the young people involved. It is from there that opportunities for youth engagement will be explored – inviting young people to participate and become engaged from the comfort of their own 'cyber-reality'.

YIRN 'under construction'

We are developing a basic interface for YIRN for early online interactions with the young people taking part. It is basic in the sense that it will be easily navigable with limited functionality in its early stage, but open in its architecture so that additional functionality can be introduced. Very much like Lessig's description of end to end architecture where the centre is simple and it is at the ends that the intelligence is applied – we will be working with young people to add their intelligence and shape the network and its activities. A complex backend of hardware and a content management system with streaming capabilities will come into play as the activities on the network make them relevant. Technically, we will be ready to respond to the network as it grows into a streaming internet radio network.

We are beginning with 10 groups of young people (up to 200 individuals) from a broad social, geographical and cultural spread across Queensland. These groups are from a range of local institutions - including local government youth and community groups, independent youth and media groups and schools – so that activities within them will be locally coordinated and will respond to local needs. In this way the network will begin with a diverse pool of young people contributing to the network's growth and design. Research will be conducted through online and face-to-face interaction with the network of young people, local researchers will be trained in each site and YIRN researchers and designers will interact with users as they deliver content creation training workshops. There is a fine balance to be achieved between opening up the network for greater participation, and controlling it in order to pay attention to the fine detail of a limited number of young people's activities and lives. Given the arguments set out above, this protected space is considered to be more likely to lead to creativity and innovation than an unprotected one, with higher chances of establishing a 'brand', a presence, and thus an audience and wider user base in the future.

There are also important considerations around copyright as we begin with what we consider to be multimedia and internet-relevant classifications of content rather than more traditional and static ones such as 'video' 'music' and 'photography'. We are exploring three 'types' of content:

- *Found* – already existing content such as a music track mp3. We can follow what happens to this content, how is it used, how is it altered, represented and so on.
- *Self-forming* – content formed through interactions such as email, blogs and chat – the kinds of content creation that make websites dynamic.
- *Creative* – original content created by participants – this might be 'clean' content, or might use found or self-forming samples.

The legal issues surrounding these types of content are complex and it will be necessary to ensure participants have at least a basic understanding of copyright law in this regard. YIRN seeks to fully explore licensing options and is working with licensing bodies in order to investigate an agreement that allows the kinds of flows and exchanges that participants in the network want. A Creative Commons⁸ license for the original 'clean' 'self forming' content young people produce through the network will be available as a default option.

Content creation training will provide YIRN researchers with an important way of interacting with young people and getting to know the content providers and their localities. Through the workshops young people will learn about the possibilities (and restrictions) of new technology and through their experimentation they will be shaping the content of the website and the development of the network. The initial content creation workshops use the digital story⁹ method.

⁸ URL: <www.creativecommons.org>

⁹ URL: <www.photobus.co.uk>

Once the network has been established and is active there are many ways in which the project will develop. In relation to youth engagement we are collaborating with an Office of Youth Affairs project – the *online communities of interest project* (OCI). Where there is a clear ‘community of interest’ emerging within the network, young people will be provided with a suite of on-line communication and community building tools and encouraged to develop their own network based on their own interests. This will happen even if these interests are seen as irrelevant to government interests. Through virtual ethnography, social network analysis and action research, that project will work to discover and develop tools, systems, protocols and processes by which government and young people can embark on a mutual learning journey. Ultimately the projects (YIRN and OCI) are exploring the potential of this kind of use of new technologies for the development of trust, appreciation, and collaboration in governance.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that approaches to engaging young people on-line in government decision-making can be made more effective by strategically linking conventional approaches to e-democracy and on-line community engagement with a program that recognizes young people’s inherent desire for subversion and resistance. It has further argued that creating ‘spaces of freedom’ which are based on an open architecture approach, but nevertheless implements controls in order to protect that space, are most likely to lead to healthy, creative online activity.

Can we innovate democracy? We are not yet sure, but we are exploring some of the possibilities.

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