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Abstract

This paper takes as its focus discourses about young people, intercultural citizenship, voice and participation on a range of youth civic websites surveyed during the project CivicWeb. This was a three-year, seven-country European Commission funded study of young people, the internet and civic participation. Specifically, it calls upon evidence from qualitative case studies of three contemporary civic websites in Britain, the *UK Youth Parliament*, *European Youth Portal* and *MuslimYouth.Net*, including textual analysis as well as interviews with key producers and young users of these and other civic sites. In light of current debates around the best means of engaging young people in civic activities on and offline, the paper seeks to answer questions about the potential benefits and dangers of producers' pedagogic styles, ideological perspectives and normative choices in relation to young people's civic motivation and efficacy. Finally the paper looks at the match or disjuncture between the sites' missions for youth citizenship and the actual young people who respond to the sites' address and ethos and asks how more civic producers can move towards a situated, motivating and inclusive model of communication on and offline.

Keywords: Civic websites, civic producers, young people, inter-cultural communication, participation, inclusion.

The context

Against a backdrop of continued anxiety about young people's engagement with civil society (Galston, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002) and an evident decline in their formal political participation through voting (Delli Carpini, 2000; Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2005), there has been in recent years a burgeoning of civic content aimed at youth on the internet. The producers of this content include, political parties, local and national government, charities, non-governmental organisations, religious and political organisations as well as non-formal citizen education sites, information portals and pan-European websites. In a legitimate effort to question sweeping claims about apathy and civic disengagement on the part of young people, research approaches to civic websites have tended to focus on design and content (Gerodimos, 2008; Bachen et al., 2009; Bruszt, Vedres & Stark, 2005; Macintosh et al., 2003; Montgomery et al., 2004; Raynes-Goldie & Walker 2008) and on specific users of particular sites (Bennett & Xenos, 2004; Livingstone, Bober and Helsper, 2004; Olsson, 2008). The perspectives of such studies are varied, and offer optimistic, pessimistic and more realistic evaluations of the internet's potential as a civic motivator. Macintosh et al. (2003, p. 43), for instance, examine action taken to address what they call 'young people's apathy to the democratic process and politics in general, by considering possibilities for using information and communication technology to engage young people'; Bachen et al., on the other hand examine what they conceive of as the failure of civic web designers to utilise appropriate models of active pedagogy and information literacy in online civic environments. There has, however, been far less attention paid to how conceptions of technology and young people influence the production of such sites.

In fact, other than the European project Civicweb, (Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation; www.civicweb.eu, funded by the European Commission, Framework 6), on whose findings this paper is based, only work by Stephen Coleman (cf. 2008) consistently addresses the impact of website producers' complex and contradictory beliefs (about how society should best be governed, about rights, equality, justice and more) on websites' invitations to citizenship and participation. Indeed, discussions of civic producers' ideological frameworks in relation to citizenship and young people, their social concerns and financial constraints remain largely anecdotal and decontextualised. This being the case, a number of questions about language, inclusion and exclusion were tackled by the semi-structured interviews with civic producers conducted for CivicWeb: How do the producers of online civic content conceptualise young people, civic inclusion and voice? How do such conceptions feed into or become implicated in the engagement strategies of the website? And what makes some organisations successful at addressing issues of intercultural citizenship across socioeconomic boundaries, while others implicitly accept that they are only appealing to a narrow spectrum of middle-class and/or highly educated, civically engaged young people? To answer these questions, this paper draws on two intersecting qualitative sets of data from CivicWeb: one involving textual analysis of a range of UK youth civic websites, covering issues of content, pedagogy and language; the other involving an in-depth qualitative study of the producers of a sample of civic websites.

Methodology and Design

The conception of civic action and the civic sphere employed by the Civicweb project was deliberately wide-ranging. It included the websites of rightwing groups; evangelical and culturally-oriented religious organisations; countryside lobbies; those advocating anorexia and bulimia or supporting people with these conditions; a host of socially conscious, information, advice, peace and social action sites; anarchist youth sites; animal liberation sites and those advocating direct action against fascists or military corporations. While the remit of the project was to reflect the views of the full spectrum of producers, with a couple of notable exceptions, those who chose to respond positively to the request for interviews fall somewhere in-between the ends of the spectrum. Design, pedagogy, language and address on sites of at either end of the political spectrum are addressed textually in project reports, but less frequently in relation to producers.

As evidenced by our survey of websites (CivicWeb, deliverable 6, 2007), the promotion of civic and intercultural communication is a priority for a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations led by, with and/or for young people. Sitting firmly within a paradigm that views all young people as having an affinity for new technologies (Tapscott, 2008; Valaitis 2005), some of these websites aim to tap the potential of digital media and especially of web 2.0 features such as video uploads, file sharing, podcasts, forums and incipient social networking tools as new means for civic engagement (Civicweb, deliverable 6, 2007). Other sites rely on what might be termed new forms of political participation such as 'ethical consumerism' to appeal to young audiences. But the meanings of intercultural communication and civic participation are themselves not clearly delineated or

defined things. They need to be interpreted in relation to the producers' intentions and the pedagogy and the political, cultural, economic and social content of the sites. Here I focus specifically on websites that explicitly state their aim to give young people spaces online to explore and consolidate civic identities and intercultural relationships.

Producer sample

Producers of civic websites in this study do not all come from the same backgrounds or occupy the same positions in their organisation. Some were paid and some voluntary; some part-time and en route to other jobs; others full time and working on several projects at once; some were more knowledgeable about the parent organisations' activities and worldview and less interested in web content; some were primarily but not solely in charge of web content and development; others had more to do with marketing or training activities and yet others were the organisations' fund-raisers and liaised with young people. Within the broader sample of sites selected for the project, this paper discusses two websites that use the language of youth empowerment within more traditional civic organizations (*UK Youth Parliament*; *European Youth Portal*), and one that has grown out of specific historical and political circumstances(*MuslimYouth.net*) to give a qualitative snapshot of the field. The producers who spoke to us were representing civic organisations with public media reputations. As representatives they were constrained at points to speak in certain ways that befitted their organisations, and as a researcher I was at pains to respect this. All producers were offered the chance to read the transcripts of their interviews; and had editorial control over what remained in the quotable sections.

Textual Analysis

Among the questions and themes addressed in the systematic thematic, discursive and multimodal comparison of the three websites under consideration are the following:

- Address: How are the sites' users addressed, both verbally, visually and technologically? What assumptions are made about the characteristics (needs, interests, cultural orientations) of young people in particular? To what extent, and how, is the site teaching, selling, or engaging the user in a dialogue about democracy?

- Representation: In what ways does the site frame and convey the political issues with which it is concerned – in particular in relation to notions of empowerment and democracy? How are these ideas invoked in the specific act of using online tools? How is the civic status of the websites' mission established and legitimated?

Finally, I analyse the construction, and potentially unintended production of conceptual variations in the concepts of 'youth', 'inclusion' and 'voice' as embodied in these sites' affordances and address.

The 3 cases

Case 1: The European Youth Portal

This site proclaims itself '[a] gateway to citizenship and mobility for young people in Europe!' The word 'gateway' suggests that by stepping through young people will have access to a pre-existing civic identity that is waiting to be claimed. It was developed in response to the European Commission's 2001 White Paper *A new impetus for European Youth* and launched at a press conference in Brussels on 26 May 2004. At the present date, it has thus had six years to grow and change from its initial policy-driven form to become something more organic and in tune with actual European young people. The portal has institutional funding from the Commission, and a diverse range of officers working on each different Eurodesk site for each country. The Portal offers European and national information which the team think will be of interest to young people who are living, learning and working in Europe. The fact that those learning and working in Europe are included suggests that the site at least attempts to face the fact that many of the young people in Europe might not be citizens of the countries they reside in, and might have travelled from other parts of the globe to work or study, or fleeing conflict. The portal aims to provide information on 8 core themes, covering 31 countries; and at the time of our study it was available in 24 languages. This analysis is based on the English version as it stood in 2008-9 at which point one of its key functions was a wish to allow young people to have their views heard on a range of topics to do with education, the economy and other aspects of civic life – through online discussion forums; they are also encouraged to ask and have and their questions answered through the Eurodesk Network.

The homepage is heavily text-based, with information organised neatly in three columns. The immediate use of 'you' and 'your' in the sentence 'Your future, your say! Tell politicians what young Europeans need!' reinforces the overt desire of the site producers to hear directly from young people. Indeed, according to the producer interviewed, rather than talking merely to policymakers, educators or youth groups, as other youth sections of European websites might do, the youth portal wishes to address young people across Europe, especially those who already or potentially think of themselves as citizens not just of their individual countries, but of Europe. While this might seem like an almost impossible number of people to cater for and address, in actual fact, according to the producer interviewed in 2008, it is only a really small minority of young people, particularly those with a specific interest in civic and political unity in the EU or who are aspiring politicians or policymakers, who actually make use of the opportunities for participation and contribution offered by the comment boxes, e-mail option and the forums on the site. Although there is a wide range of issues addressed from economic and military questions to those of immigration and education that might potentially generate debate, the very lack of specificity in terms of these themes, and the fact that there is little immediate or local linking in terms of their significance, means that many young people apparently do not see these topics as being of relevance to themselves. Another problematic aspect of the site is the formal tone of some of the well meaning rhetoric. Questions such as 'Tell us what

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Intercultural dialogue means to you?' and 'What do you feel about inter-religious dialogue?' are unintentionally aimed at not just a highly literate and educated minority but at a further section within this minority who recognise and respond to such formal and policy speak.

Attempting to model inter-cultural best practice, the site appeared to offer opportunities for young people to dialogue with each other in the forums and the 'tell us your story' section. However, if one looks for the kinds of voices evident on the English version, there is almost nothing available. Those stories posted about education or work in the EU (at present just two in number) are by young Italian women, are rather brief and formally written, and have zero comments since 2007. This in itself is disheartening for other readers, for site moderators and for anyone thinking of posting content. The producer with overall responsibility for content on the site in 2008-9 was openly aware of this problem and attributed it to a fundamental difficulty faced by the site. In her view, young people find the site too complex, too text-heavy and also lacking in a sense of fun or entertainment. They might visit the site seeking a specific piece of information, find this information and then leave. In response to the under-utilized forums, and to the problematic nature of hoping to attract generalised youth via highly topic- or region-specific questions, the site has now undergone a rebuild to exclude all forum-based user-generated content. Although young people wishing to do so are still directed to forums on other European Youth networks such as *Generation Europe*, the portal itself now no longer invites such participation.

Case 2: Muslim Youth.net

This site was started in 2002 and grew out of the *Muslim Youth Helpline* which was initiated in 2001 by a single young person, Mohammad Syed Mamdani. Concern at rising levels of aggression from police and White youth across the UK in the wake of September 11 2001 meant that the site was popular from the outset. *Muslim Youth.Net* (henceforward *MuslimYouth*) is now an independent charity run by trustees, a dedicated youth team and around seventy diverse young volunteers working between three and eight hours a week on the site and the helpline. A team of half a dozen young part-time and full-time paid staff update content on the site, run off-line projects and look after its day-to-day functioning. This is funded by grant applications to local charitable trusts and to official bodies – for instance, the department for education, in the government, which funds it under civic education schemes – as well as the national lottery's Camelot foundation.

Volunteers hail from different communities of Asian, African, American and European descent, from Sunni, Shia and Sufi backgrounds and are of different ages and genders. A selection of volunteers interviewed in 2009 confirmed producers' comments about ethos and address. The site's offline work includes the telephone *Helpline* and outreach programmes encouraging voting in UK national and local elections and one aiming to support and educate young Muslim prisoners and their families about the challenges of community reintegration after imprisonment. Online activities include a large array of relatively busy forums, with topical political, social and cultural issues debated within them.

According to the producers interviewed in 2007, the site already had two 2900 registered regular users and several thousand unique visitors, a number which has grown since and spikes during particular international or national events that cast a focus on Muslims and Islam. The most active participants in the forums have each posted several thousand times since the forums were launched.

MuslimYouth.Net states that it aims to provide young people who identify as Muslim in the UK with information about contemporary social issues and the potential for engaging in social support and debate both within and outside their communities. Interviews with the producers and volunteers of this site suggest that children as young as eleven years old, read, contribute to and moderate content. This lends the site an interesting heterogeneity of language. The website's editorialised spaces show different strategies in attempting to inform and engage the young people they target. The strategy for motivating young people to return to the site involves getting them to write about their personal, civic and cultural concerns in articles that are published on the site. The forums are 'self-moderated' by the heaviest users: young people, broadly of Muslim heritage, but with a diverse set of beliefs and attitudes towards religion, identity, politics and civil society. Acknowledging and respecting difference and diversity is a means to foster intercultural communication. The tone of the editorialised areas on the website is serious but conversational, deliberately highlighting the socio-political and cultural differences between young users of the site. Take, for instance, this explanation of the site's swearing policy:

> Why are swear words used in some of the articles?
>
> Many young people, including Muslim youth, use swear words to express their feelings and emotions. Whilst we do not tolerate personal insults, abuse or graphic language, we are committed to removing barriers and censorship which restrict young people from expressing themselves and convey distorted, 'palatable' images of social problems. (http://www.muslimyouth.net/aboutus.php, 20 March 2008)

The fact that swearwords and text language is allowed on the site means that when reading some of the posts the 'voices' of the writers may be felt more clearly than they are on sites with a parent organisation's identity to protect. Yet, interestingly, despite clear differences of opinion, there is usually little flaming evident. The statement about swearing which is quoted, appears via its vocabulary – 'barriers', 'palatable' – to be intended for an audience of adults, even potential funders, rather than only young users. While this epitomises the site's concern with safeguarding the rights of its users, rather than showcasing their adult civicness, there is always a danger in feeling that one has to explain one's reasons to adult civic authorities.

Case 3: UK Youth Parliament

UKYP is the website of the UK *Youth Parliament*, which aims to raise debates and campaign on issues (for instance, such as tuition fees, bus fares and representations of young people in the media) that appear relevant to young people in the UK. The website, although

running a number of forums, some embedded videos and UKYP TV, is text-heavy, with a fairly high level of literacy demanded by many of the editorial postings. Ideologically too – in terms of the editorial orientation and belief about, for instance, action and rights in the social, cultural, political and economic spheres - the site appears to cater for those already involved or interested in governmental and parliamentary politics. It thus serves a kind of apprenticeship function in relation to traditional politics, both online and offline. Explicitly, however, the site addresses itself to all young people in the UK – a wide and unspecified demographic:

> The UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) enables young people to use their energy and passion to change the world for the better. Run by young people for young people, UKYP gives the young people of the UK, between the age of 11 and 18 a voice, which is heard and listened to by local and national government, providers of services for young people and other agencies who have an interest in the views and needs of young people.

Notably, this claim does not explain what 'being heard' might mean in practical terms. The forums again claim to offer a chance for any young person to share their views on political and civic issues.

> 'Got an issue you feel passionate about? Want to get something off your chest? Want to meet other likeminded young people? Then the UKYP online forums are the perfect place for you….Culture, education, health, international matters, law and society, entertainment, philosophy – whatever your issue, you will find other young people to debate with.' (10 July, 2010; http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk)

The majority of views and opinions expressed in forums generally appear to represent those from more educated and/or affluent backgrounds. This is particularly notable in relation to discussions of social issues such as education, the power of schools, censorship, benefits and rights, where, despite some interestingly polarised political debate, and a number of compassionate or angry postings, a very small number of the participants in the hundreds of threads analysed demonstrate insider knowledge of social deprivation. 'Excluded' youth do not appear to contribute at all. As the producer interviewed points out, there are organisational reasons why this website attracts a certain demographic.

> **TL:** With the forum it's kind of been a bit of a stop start process. What makes it particularly difficult, obviously with us, with a youth organisation you just have to be so careful in terms of, on the one hand, child protection but then also with our organisation as well because we're involved in politics if you like, you will get young people who are very, very passionate and that can require a fair bit of moderation in terms of young people not getting carried away and getting so passionate that it ends up in a kind of slanging match and it can always kind of end up provoking those kinds of reactions – so we're going to have to be very careful doing that. We've had (a forum) on the website for a year and it's kind of just taken a gentle approach to it so we haven't necessarily done a load of promotion of that forum up

> to now but we are going to experiment with something in the next two months…Basically we're holding an event at the House of Lords […] and at that House of Lords event they will be deciding what our campaigns will be for the year ahead. [**Tom Lodziak, *UK Youth Parliament***]

Here we can see that whatever other channels of communication are on offer, be they forums or offline events, the organisation exists partly to further young people's understanding of the value of what politicians do and of the processes whereby they, the citizens, elect the people who govern them. In this process, inevitably, it seems, the more 'passionate' young people, with agendas and strong politics of their own, have to curb their manner and their aims to retain the broader goals, while others are not really being addressed at all.

For organisations such as *UK Youth Parliament*, there is a precarious balance to be maintained between having adequate funding and actually being able to pursue independent sociopolitical or cultural goals and pathways:

> **TL:** Our core funding comes from the government, from the department for Children Schools and Families […] It's kind of always negotiated every year. The core funding doesn't go very far so we've always had to look elsewhere and we've got a sponsorship deal with British Telecom and for an engineering company called MWH and then we go to other pots as well so a few things like the Youth Charity (V) we got some funding from there and funding from all kinds of places which we have to do just to keep it going. What we're trying to do … is to go back to the department of *Children Schools and Families* and to actually try to get a big increase from the funding which they give us as we kind of feel the work which we're doing is so in line with what their objectives are...
>
> **SB**: Do you need to give report backs and feedback to them? Do they demand statistics, number of users?
>
> **TL**: Yes, absolutely! […]
>
> **SB**: So it's not no-strings attached funding?
>
> **TL**: No, not at all. [**Tom Lodziak, *UKYP***]

This exchange makes it clear that funding is absolutely key in some organisations to the type of experience provided for young people on their websites; it might also be crucial to the sets of beliefs and actions encouraged by the site and thus influence the type of youth citizenship supported. Viewed side-by-side, the overall mission and ethos of the UK Youth Parliament and its funding context, form an almost insurmountable barrier to engagement for disenchanted, sceptical or disenfranchised young people with low literacy, motivation or no existing interest in formal political structures.

Discussion

Conceptualisations of young people are linked to the ways in which a diversity of organisations try to address them. In the past few decades, as discussed in our UK report on the production of civic websites (Banaji 2009a) discussions of young people have taken place within a shifting complex of discourses. Some of these have circulated in the public and private sector, within NGOs, amongst policy makers, educators and academics, many of which employ the rhetoric of 'youth empowerment' (Cargo et al, 2003) and 'youth voice' (Mitra, 2003; Matthews and Limb, 1998). 'Youth voice' is generally used to refer to the communication, by children and young people to the adult world in general and their communities in particular, of their perspectives, ideas and experiences with a view to having these taken seriously in various decision making processes. Youth voice has connotations of agency, participation, and even power within the public sphere – which is imagined as a place where people need to speak and ideally should be given the space to do so; for some it has the assumption that youth as a group can also speak on behalf of and/or represent each other better than adults do. The word 'empowerment' has a similar but more varied use and history in relation to those perceived to be under-represented and 'downtrodden' groups such as women, ethnic minorities and the poor in general. It is used to connote the giving of opportunities and skills necessary for confident participation and intervention in the public sphere, be this of school, family, community or government or simply to indicate that someone has gained more control over their own life circumstances. It does, however, carry with it other connotations of the giving of 'power' by those who hold it, to those who do not, and it is in this context that the term can seem most inadequate when used in the youth citizenship field. The reasons for the use of these terms is different in different contexts; for instance, some employ it to resist another ubiquitous discourse, which is that of young people as apathetic, dysfunctional, violent or criminal; its use within commercial rhetoric can be seen as stemming from an entirely different set of motivations, partly to do with capitalising on the idea of agency and self-confidence with a view to having young people perceived as consumers. One serious consequence of these underlying motivations and overt rhetorics is a series of mixed messages and unrealistic claims to give voice to groups of people with differing and even conflicting interests (Bessant 2004; Vromen, 2008; Olsson and Miegel, 2010). This further disenfranchises many young people by making it seem that they had an opportunity to conduct a dialogue for change with those in power but were too apathetic or cynical to engage. Likewise, the absence of concomitant efforts to link voice with serious listening by those in power, to distinguish between the needs and wants of different sections of young people when they do speak, or to give them space in ongoing political and policy changes undermines even the most worthy efforts. We are thus returned to pre-existing prejudices and stereotypes of young people en masse.

Amongst producers in the UK sample, definitions of young people varied broadly along a spectrum. At one end were those producers who accepted some of the current discourse about young people as the 'disconnected generation'. These producers generally wished to remedy what they saw as a problematic situation in terms of young people's lack of inclusion in society and sometimes their self-exclusion from traditional political life via the

opening up of channels of communication between traditional political elites and young people. Into this category fall the producers of *UK Youth Parliament* and *The European Youth Portal* as well as other organisations such as *Catch 21* and *HeadsUp*. Explicitly these producers suggest that young people should and can be trained to participate in parliamentary democracy. Implicitly their websites suggest that once this training has taken place young people will be able to make their 'voices' heard within existing political and civic structures.

Even producers within more activist and/or campaigning organisations feel that there need to be more opportunities for young people to get the training and the skills necessary for making their 'voices' heard in the public sphere:

> **JW**: *Youth Voice* [now TAGD] is … based on article 12 of the convention on the rights of the child … which is all about participation and trying to get young people involved in what we do but also involve them in decision making in the organization. [**Jessica Wright, *Unicef Youth Voice***].

Other producers view young people as an internally differentiated group, who are frequently mis-defined by the ways in which adult institutions expect citizens to behave, or feel about youth. Mustafa Kurtuldu, David Floyd and Mark Brown of ***Social Spider*** (Producer Interview with SB) critique the term 'young people' as being almost as unspecific as the term 'people', containing a multitude of classes, ethnic identifications, orientations to health and mental health, gender difference and other personally and socially orientated relationships to politics and activism.

Additionally, some civic producers discuss young people as an enthusiastic but neglected group of citizens, with an inclination to political discussion and action equal to that of adults:

> **MB**: It's embarrassing, the low level of respect [young people] expect from adults in the community. So if you actually treat them with a level of respect I find them no more difficult to engage or have serious political or social conversations than any other group - actually I find them easier because […] they're enthusiastic, they're unused to people taking their views and opinions seriously, they're used to people challenging their views and opinions, they are used to being told they are *wrong*, they are not used to people saying 'actually I don't disagree' or 'I disagree with you, I don't like what you are saying, but lets keep chatting'. They are not used to that. So when they see it, they tend to respond very well. **[Malcolm Ball, *B-Involved*]**

Crucially, in the case of more than half the producers interviewed, I was told that the content of these sites is aimed additionally or even equally at actual and potential funders, educators, and adult stakeholders. Such stakeholders have their own strategic, pedagogic and ideological expectations, frequently necessitating the provision of text-based information on the activities, mission, success and ethos of the organisation rather than its weaknesses, conflicts, questions and challenges. This means that more government-identified and institutional organisations are least enthusiastic and most anxious about

loosely moderated forums, user-videos or blog-style content where such tensions inevitably surface. Additionally, funders demand that civic sites are seen to be addressing the widest possible youth demographic; as long as the mission states that all young people are welcome, little is done to ensure that the ethos, culture, language and mode-of-address on the site are widened to include more than the default youth demographic with whom many adult civic producers appear to be familiar and comfortable.

Some producers were open about their dissatisfaction that they are managing to reach mainly an already engaged section of young people from a specific class-base:

> **BB:** If we're honest, [the amount of writing on the site] does limit the demographic of our website because think about the kinds of people who are going to come to a well intentioned Oxfam site – they're probably middle-class kids, they're probably White kids, two thirds of them are young women, they're quite idealistic about the world, and that would be our core audience up to now I would say. [**Ben Beaumont, *Generation Why* (since 2009, incorporated in the main Oxfam website)]**

Problematically, for several, even acknowledging this weakness in their generalised youth strategy does not mean that they are closer to the kind of inclusivity that is their mission's aim.

For others, their audience is delineated by a specific point of identification, such as religion or ethnicity, but the subset being addressed within that is fairly broad because the idea is one of dialogue between different sections of that community, especially its youth:

> **SB:** I notice you have a fairly inclusive and broad notion of Muslim youth… Was there a discussion saying "we are going to appeal to this kind of audience" or...?
>
> **AS:** There was not really a discussion… I think it is because our volunteers are so diverse – we take people from year 7 [aged 11] and we have people who are 27 who are still working here… **[Adela Suliman, *Muslim Youth.net*]**

Interestingly, the diversity of *MuslimYouth* comes about as a manifestation of users and volunteers' diverse identifications rather than because of a carefully formulated organisational philosophy. In the case of the *European Youth Portal*'s English version, instead of giving the impression of Europe as a vibrant and exciting place, as, potentially, the websites of commercial youth orientated organisations such as MTV appear able to do, the deserted forums (now removed) and sparse, formulaic 'stories' (still existing) give a rather dismal feel that is in stark and unintentionally ironic contrast to the formal enthusiasm of the address and the optimistic invitations in the editorialised areas of the site. This reinforces succinctly that many aspects of websites' development and metamorphosis are not planned by producers but contingent on circumstances, such as who takes up the offer of the organisation or institutional constraints on the producer team.

Given the situation discussed by Henn, Weinstein & Wring (2002) and by Coleman and Rowe (2005) which suggests that many young people are not so much apathetic or

disconnected from the civic sphere as they are 'informed sceptics' about the ways in which their political representatives act on their behalf, a situation where a youth civic website is using language and mode-of-address to speak at once to two or more constituencies with potentially conflicting interests is deeply problematic. The expressed intention on the sites discussed of involving and of giving 'voice' to young people in general cannot thus be taken at face value, but has to be seen as a rhetorical strategy that benefits the organisation first, and then very specific groups of young people while potentially reinforcing the conditions of exclusion experienced by other groups of young people. Civic organisations seem to address this situation in different ways as the foregoing discussion and the particular case studies suggest. The UK Youth Parliament models itself on existing formal political processes. Simply changing its age demographic from older adults to young people does nothing to alter the underlying ideologies – taken here to mean the site's orientations towards economic, social and cultural systems and people's roles and relationships therein - and pedagogic principles. This is in no way to dismiss the value of the work undertaken or to undermine the commitment of the many young people who do contribute. It is simply a reminder that online civic initiatives cannot be seen as inclusive or inter-cultural merely because they declare themselves to be so. The European Youth Portal's response to the difficult issue of generating debate and discussion on broad, de-contextualised socio-political issues from highly specific groups of young people has been to shut down the possibilities for user-generated content and point to existing online avenues for debate which also appeal to middle-class, cosmopolitan and educated youth.

So, what can be learnt from the one case considered which does manage to attract a slightly wider social demographic to its forums? While *Muslim Youth.net* remains frequently conservative or equivocal on individual rights in the domain of sexuality and religion, this ethos emerges somewhat haphazardly from the young people contributing rather than being thrust upon them by the format and overarching worldview of the producers. The site's editorial comments focus explicitly on topics that might be perceived as barriers to participation by the users – such as racism, ultra-religious diktats, imprisonment, Islamophobia, homophobia, class, digital/media literacy and language issues. By acknowledging cultural difference and calling for intercultural dialogue, questioning and critique, the site speaks to very specific young people rather than to a generalized young person, only recognizable to the middle-class youth on whom they are modeled. By framing self-definitions of social identity as implicitly important civic and intercultural work in itself, rather than for what it can convey to those in power, the site currently side-steps some of the dilemmas into which fellow organizations are drawn. Whether or not this can be maintained, alongside funding, is an important issue.

It is therefore always pertinent to ask whose voices are expressed in online civic spaces, and which of those voices carry most administrative and formal weight in relation to on- and offline power structures. Barriers to 'access' are far more complex than issues of hardware and broadband (Warschauer, 2004; Lee, 2008), although these too might prove stumbling blocks. These barriers encompass lack of general skills, low information literacy and motivation arising from negative experiences with authority and educational institutions; homelessness; incarceration; a one-size-fits all attitude by internet service providers to

issues such as language and disability; rigid restrictions placed by school districts on surfing at school or college; anxieties by particular groups of parents about the risks of new media; fear of surveillance; and negative stereotypes about those who are frequently online. Such issues were cited openly by 'marginalised' groups of young people on the project CivicWeb as reasons for their lack of interest in going online, even where physical access was possible (Banaji 2009b). As other work in the field of online deliberation and youth participation indicates (Albrecht, 2001; Cassel, Feriman and Tversky, 2006) building civic leadership skills and identifying those who already possess them, are often themes of civic organizations. And leadership, like any (civic) activity involving an outlay of financial or social capital (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009), is by its very definition, not equally open to all young people.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion indicates that civic organisations' websites need to be analysed and understood less in the nature of finished texts and more as changing and unreliable expressions of complex social processes or circumstances, negotiations and developments. Imbalances in power, under- or misrepresentation experienced by many young people in formal political structures are not eliminated by organisations operating online. On the contrary, issues of power and domination which arise in relation to language, culture and communication, as well as to skills, knowledge and cultural capital on civic websites lead to similar patterns of disadvantage and alienation for young people online as are experienced offline. Some are marginalised, some are frightened; some are silenced, while some do not even step upto the doorstep. Invitations to 'participate', engage in 'intercultural dialogue' and 'be heard' offered to young people by web producers, however well-meaning, civic and socially altruistic, have to be evaluated in the context of the action, discussion and change that really takes place. And here, sharp disparities are apparent, particularly with regard to social class.

In relation to the vicious circle of audience appeal, several of the UK and European producers interviewed for CivicWeb expressed unease with the fact that the young people they were reaching were only the 'tip of the iceberg' or in other words 'the usual suspects'. They were not reaching those on the fringes of society, those who are really disenfranchised by virtue of their class, race or social status as single parents, drug addicts, asylum seekers, school drop outs and homeless or unemployed youth. Indeed, some suggested that in order to communicate with such youth, and to get such young people to communicate with people from other ethnicities, communities or nations, websites and social networks do not provide a quick fix; they may, in fact, be deepening the participation divide by giving the already active more access to public space and more practice at developing institutional, intercultural civic skills. This, however, was a minority view. The majority felt that any additional points of contact with any young people are always good things, but that offline means as well as old media coverage would bring 'excluded' youth closer to civic organisations and thus to 'being heard' and 'empowerment'. It is evident from this latter view that citizen 'empowerment' and civic 'voice' are not seen as

incompatible with brief and episodic consultations carried out through institutions modelling themselves on traditional political structures and governed by elite norms of communication. This view has already been soundly criticised by Sherry Arnstein as 'window-dressing' leading to 'fake participation' and allowing power-holders to show 'evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving "those [young] people"' (1969, 219). It might be argued that the motives of non-affiliated non-governmental youth websites are far from being so cynical: however, their funding models make them especially vulnerable to the pressures from traditional political elites.

An unintentional irony identifiable in the case-studies discussed in this paper relates to a disjuncture between rhetorical aims and demographic appeal. The more specifically a website binds its civic mission to a particular group or subset of young people, to their political concerns and contexts, the more it appears able to be able to appeal to divers demographics within that group, de facto creating an intercultural community. The more generalised and explicitly 'inclusive' the rhetorical construction of young people and the political/civic goal of the organisation on a civic website, however, the less the organisation appears to be able to motivate or even make contact with young people from deprived and disadvantaged backgrounds, or from ethnic, sexual, political and other minorities. This irony is also reflected in assumptions about young people and digital technologies evinced by site producers – where civic sites are technically ambitious without also being attuned to a range of young people, particularly those with little online skill, literacy or digital literacy, the websites again unintentionally exclude a swathe of young users (Banaji, 2011). Both these exclusionary mistakes (or devices, depending how cynical one wishes to be) are easily avoidable, should the will to change things exist; this can be done via thoughtful and straightforward information and debate, that acknowledges conflicts (between cultures and demographic groups), and diversities of interest amongst young people and older adults. We do not all come from the same place; one size does not fit all. Finally, however, the very goals and aspirations of numerous youth civic websites in relation to youth citizenship, intercultural communication and politics form a more lasting barrier for many young people's participation (Banaji, 2009b). Intercultural communication is needed even between members within faith and ethnic communities, not just across racial divides. Further, we do not all desire the same type of world, or agree on the means to achieve change. Our goals and needs are not easy to assimilate in a single achievable, altruistic, multicultural global manifesto let alone in a mediated, contested and contextual democratic praxis. This applies equally to all generations, and is an issue that those of us interested in social and political change must continue to struggle to address.

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