NEW MEDIA, NEW CITIZENS

THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF
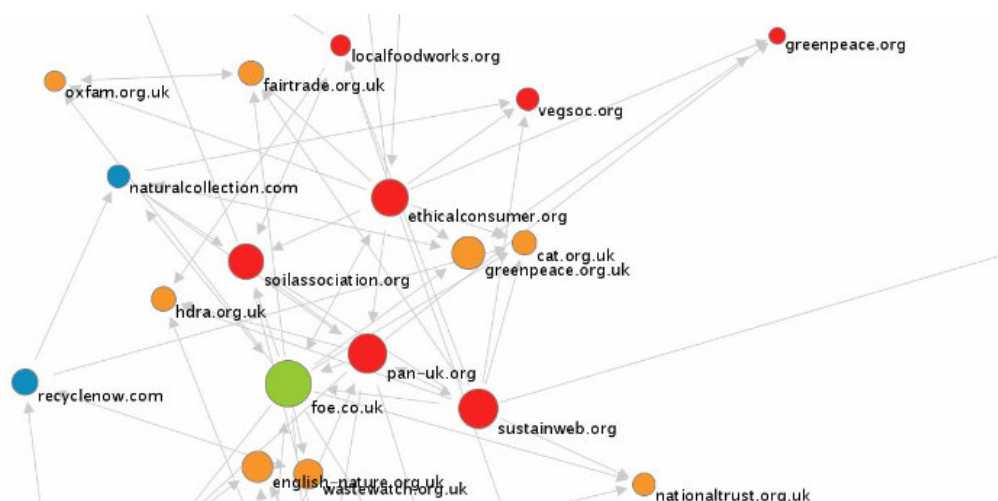# ONLINE YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

The increasingly salient role of new media in young people's lives has led to a debate about the potential of the internet as a means of political communication and youth participation. While a growing body of scholarship has engaged with the issue, there is lack of empirical research linking young people's civic motivations to their internet uses, and in particular to their evaluations, as users, of UK civic websites. This thesis brings together the study of youth civic engagement and the practice of user experience in order to explore the civic factors and website elements that motivate young people to participate via the internet. Employing a large survey and a qualitative study of a purposively sampled community of young citizens and internet users, the research explores youth civic needs and how these translate into specific uses of the web. Furthermore, a comprehensive content analysis of twenty civic websites is juxtaposed with a user experience study, in order to facilitate a dialogue between the online text and the users.

The core argument of this study is that young people are willing to engage with public affairs via civic websites as long as a series of "terms and conditions" are met that would make this engagement meaningful to them. These include the existence of visible benefits or outcomes from the participation process and the relevance of the issue to the individual's lifeworld. It is argued that the preconditions set by these young people constitute a coherent paradigm of an essentially consumerist approach to civic engagement; a mode of online political communication that is based around convenience, personalisation and emotional engagement. However, a feeling of civic loneliness was also manifest in the participants' narratives and there were strong indications that any sense of alienation should not be attributed to apathy, but to a fundamental scepticism about the ability of the individual to make a difference at the social level. The evidence suggests that, while technology has a role in providing users with accessible and effective online tools, the root cause of the problem may be in the social structures of the civic culture, and particularly in the mechanisms of political socialisation that facilitate civic motivation. Hence, the study reaffirms the importance of the affective, symbolic and political dimensions of participation and argues that these need to be integrated along with traditional (technological and psychological) elements of user experience in order to achieve *civic usability*.

New Media, New Citizens: The Terms and Conditions of Online Youth Civic Engagement

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In addition to being an academic adventure, this has also been, inevitably, a personal journey lasting almost a quarter of my life. While my passion for exploring the questions and issues discussed in this thesis never faded, I would be lying if I claimed that there weren't times when I thought I would never be able to complete this project. The fact that you are now reading these lines is due to the faith, support and patience of my parents, family and friends in Greece, Spain and the UK, who, I believe, are keeping a (very) long list of things that we will do together "after I finish the PhD". Anthony, thank you for everything; I'm looking forward to discussing the Big Bang Theory and various other natural phenomena with you, but one thing is certain for me: Einstein was wrong – the universe will keep expanding for ever.

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> *To my international law tutor at Panteion University, Prof. G. Tsaltas*

Author's Declaration

The work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of Bournemouth University. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text. No part of this work has been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

The following publications and presentations have been based, solely or partly, upon this study's data or earlier drafts of the thesis' chapters.

Journal articles:

Gerodimos, R. (2008), "Mobilising Young Citizens in the UK: a content analysis of youth and issue websites", *Information, Communication & Society*, 11: 7, pp. 964 – 988

Gerodimos, R. (2006), "Democracy and the Internet: Access, Engagement and Deliberation", *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics,* 3: 6, pp. 26-31

Book chapters:

Gerodimos, R. and J. Ward (2007), "Rethinking Online Youth Civic Engagement: Reflections on Web Content Analysis" in B. Loader (ed), *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media,* London: Routledge

Conference papers:

(2010), "Online Youth Civic Attitudes and the Limits of Civic Consumerism: the Emerging Challenge to the Internet's Democratic Potential", *Networking Democracy: New Media Innovations in Participatory Politics,* Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania, June 2010

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(2008), "How to Mobilise Young People: Recommendations for NGOs and Civic Organisations", *58th Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association (PSA)*, University of Swansea, April 2008

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(2005), "Democracy Reloaded: Generation Y and Online Civic Engagement", presented at the *6th annual international conference of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR),* University of Illinois - Chicago, 5 – 9 October 2005

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(2004), "Democracy and the Internet: Access, Engagement and Deliberation", *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Politics and Information Systems: Technologies and Applications (PISTA 2004)*, 21 - 25 July, Orlando, Florida, USA, pp. 103 – 108

(2004), "Social Movements and Online Civic Engagement", *2nd International Conference 'Imaging Social Movements'*, Edge Hill College, 1 - 3 July 2004, Edge Hill College, Ormskirk, UK

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Introduction

Context to the Study

A narrative of civic apathy and political disengagement has become increasingly prevalent in the UK, amongst other liberal democracies. Whether it be low electoral turnout, declining party membership, mistrust in government or contempt for politicians, it has been argued that contemporary democratic systems are facing a long-term crisis of participation (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004). The root causes and symptoms of this phenomenon have occupied social scientists for the last few decades. A range of structural, communicative and cultural factors have been nominated as culprits for this crisis: post-war welfare and increased mobility; globalisation, privatisation and the withdrawal of the state; the decline of traditional social cleavages, which polarised and mobilised the mass public; media segmentation and the rise of the 24/7 news cycle; the emergence of a celebrity culture and the triumph of scandal and personality over the substance of policies.

The media and particularly television have featured prominently in these discussions on the state of democracy and political participation. This is due to the media's dual historical role as a public sphere, i.e. as the natural space within which contemporary political interaction takes place, and as a "fourth estate", i.e. as a watchdog of those in power. As democratic legitimacy rests on the sensitive balance – or social contract – between the government and the citizens, the ways and means of *political communication* (especially in its literal, and possibly healthier, definition) are of particular interest. The term "democratic deficit" has been used to describe a structural, but also communicative, distance between the public and increasingly remote power networks.

Ironically, despite this sense of disconnection between leaders and citizens – or perhaps because of it – the practice of political communication has become increasingly professionalised through the use of public relations experts and media consultants especially during election campaigns, although it could be argued that this intensification of political messages can lead to a vicious circle of cynicism (e.g. Jamieson and Waldman 2003). The weakening of traditional carriers of moral authority and agents of socialisation in the context of late modernity is accompanied by the rise of issue politics, an emphasis on individual identity, the fusion between political discourse and popular culture and the increased complexity of public policy.

All these shifts are creating significant challenges for civic engagement and democratic sustainability; this is particularly true for younger people who are becoming socialised in considerably different social, cultural and technological environments to the ones that previous generations grew up in and within which they shaped the institutions and processes of contemporary politics. As democracy is not a static phenomenon, the ways and means through which it is realised have to be constantly re-negotiated and redefined. The series of challenges created or accelerated by globalisation, such as climate change and poverty, may require a different paradigm of governance as well as a different mode of civic engagement. At the same time, our understanding of what is

political has been changing in order to acknowledge the role of the symbolic, affective and consumerist dimensions of civic participation (e.g. Corner and Pels 2003, Richards 2007). Therefore, the challenge is not just limited to the practice of politics – it extends to our understanding and theorisation of it.

Given the afore-mentioned role of the media in the process of political communication and the increasingly embedded role of the web in youth everyday life, the potential of the internet as a facilitator of youth engagement has been the subject of a growing body of scholarship (e.g. Dahlgren 2009). The internet's unique properties not just for more symmetrical and interactive communication (as opposed to previous media), but also as a means of actual participation (through donations, petitions etc) make it a potentially ideal tool for youth empowerment. Coupled with a broader conceptualisation of civic action – to include activities as diverse as ethical consumption and taking part in charity concerts – two broad questions have emerged: whether the internet has become the driver of a different paradigm of political communication and participation, one which is more fluid, flexible and inclusive (without necessarily avoiding questions of legitimacy, accountability and political impact); and whether the medium is facilitating the participation of citizens, especially young people, that would not normally consider engaging with "offline" or traditional politics (e.g. Loader 2007a). Having moved beyond the grand utopias and dystopias of the 1990s regarding the likely effect of the internet on democracy, this study will be engaging with interesting questions that have arisen since, regarding the social, cultural, technological or other factors facilitating or impeding the civic use of the web by young people.

Aims of the Study and Original Contribution to Knowledge

The field of online youth civic engagement has recently incorporated a number of important contributions across the spectrum of production, content and use. The European-wide project CivicWeb produced valuable evidence regarding the production and content of civic websites (e.g. Banaji 2008b), as well as a survey of young people's internet uses. Partly based on that data, as well as on a comprehensive web content analysis, Ward (2008) explored the narratives of producers, websites and young people in electoral and non-electoral contexts with particular reference to the emergence of a consumerist approach to citizenship. Coleman and Rowe (2005) brought forward important insights into emerging practices of youth internet use. A series of studies has looked at how young people use the internet focusing especially on whether politically active users constitute a distinct demographic or whether the internet has a genuinely important role in facilitating engagement (e.g. Livingstone, Couldry and Markham 2007, Mesch and Coleman 2007, de Vreese 2007). Another set of studies examined the content of political (Xenos and Lance Bennett 2007) and voluntary organisations' websites (Burt and Taylor 2008, Kenix 2007).

However, there is still a lack of research directly linking young people's civic needs and motivations not only to their internet uses in general, but also to specific civic websites. In particular, there are no known studies featuring qualitative civic site evaluations by young users. Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson and Kurpius (2008) is the only known published

scholarly study that has attempted to link a user-oriented media theory (Uses and Gratifications) to the issue of civic engagement; they then applied that framework to an examination of civic sites' usability with the view to encouraging citizens to participate in politics via the net. Coleman et al. found "no literature that discussed usability testing of websites for non-commercial sites such as those of news organizations, governments, candidates, non-profits or NGOs" (2008: 187) and reiterate that "there is no research that examines which features of a website actually enhance or impede civic engagement" (2008: 180).

Hence, the present thesis aims to address this gap by bringing together the elements of youth civic motivations, internet uses *and* user experience and link those to broader concepts such as political communication and socialisation and to the context of the afore-mentioned socio-cultural shifts such as civic consumerism. The presentation of the empirical findings takes place in four steps corresponding to the study's four research objectives. The first two parts of the primary research consist of an in-depth exploration of young people's civic needs and how these translate into patterns of internet use and expectations from civic websites. The discussion draws on a large survey and a follow-up qualitative study of the student community at Bournemouth University's Media School. This community was purposively sampled due to its particular characteristics (such as high internet literacy), which make it a useful case study of a digitally active but politically ambivalent youth demographic. While the limitations of the sample (single community, gender balance) should be acknowledged, the purpose of this exploratory investigation is to identify important patterns and narratives, rather than project the findings onto the general population.

Furthermore, while Coleman et al. carried out an experimental design using case studies from the United States, the latter two parts of our study involve a juxtaposition of a comprehensive content analysis of UK civic websites with users' own evaluations and responses to that material. By combining the theory of youth engagement with the practice of user experience, the broader purpose of this endeavour is to contribute to the development of the field of *civic usability*. The concept of usability is commonly used in human-computer interaction [HCI] (e.g. Hornbaek 2006) and can be defined as "the effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction with which specified users can achieve goals in their particular environments" (ISO 9241 1998: 2). The practice of usability has evolved considerably in the user experience industry through the dissemination of standards (e.g. Nielsen and Tahir 2001, Nielsen and Loranger 2006) and the employment of sophisticated techniques such as agile software design and eye-tracking (e.g. Tzanidou, Petre, Minocha and Grayson 2005).

However, studies of online political communication have indicated that the civic web is lagging far behind in terms of industry standards and user awareness; the commercial sector has received the bulk of the industry's attention, while research tends to focus on the technological and psychological aspects of human-computer interaction. Therefore, this thesis will be emphasising the political and sociological factors of user experience, such as the needs that drive youth civic use of the web or the elements of civic websites that have the potential to facilitate (or, indeed, impede) an effective and enjoyable *civic* experience on the web.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 introduces the debate on youth civic engagement, looking at the benefits and facilitators of political participation, as well as the evidence for/against the thesis that we are currently facing a crisis of youth apathy. Based on a review of the scholarly literature, the chapter outlines a provisional research agenda around young people's civic motivations and political socialisation. This is followed by **Chapter 2**, which examines the role of the internet as a potential means of political communication and youth civic empowerment. Moving beyond the traditional divide between utopian and dystopian narratives regarding the role of technology in democracy, the discussion focuses on the increasing integration of the internet in youth everyday life and the ensuing challenges and opportunities for civic communication. The chapter reviews the recent studies on the civic uses of the internet and argues for an approach that combines the theory of civic motivations with the practice of user experience. Having further refined the research agenda, **Chapter 3** outlines the empirical study's research objectives, design, methodological approach and data collection/analysis processes. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the project, particular emphasis is placed on elucidating the potential strengths and synergies, as well as on acknowledging the potential weaknesses and limitations, of the approach adopted here.

The presentation and discussion of the study's primary findings commences in **Chapter 4**, which explores the participants' attitudes towards traditional and emerging forms of participation and interest in a range of issues, as well as the main motivating and de-motivating factors emerging through young people's own civic narratives. These findings are used as the broad canvas upon which a more detailed analysis of the participants' internet uses and motivations are examined in **Chapter 5**. In addition to exploring broad patterns of youth internet use, the discussion focuses on the intersection between civic motivations and online behaviour and renders the participants' civic needs into specific user expectations of web content, design and interactivity. The implications and challenges posed for civic organisations by the outlined patterns of youth internet use are also considered.

Chapter 6 presents a comparative evaluation of 20 civic (youth and NGO) websites based on an in-depth content analysis, which allows for a comparison between existing online civic material and the participants' civic needs and user preferences. The chapter engages in an assessment of the sites vis-à-vis various usability and accessibility standards, while also evaluating the extent to which these sites make the most of the medium's potential for a more interactive mode of civic communication. Having established users' online and civic motivations, as well as the practices of civic websites, **Chapter 7** reports on the findings of the user experience study in which the study's participants evaluated four of these sampled websites. This allows for a dialectical approach between the online civic text and the users, as well as for a comparison of the participants' expectations (registered before the site visits) to their actual post-visit impressions. Finally, **Chapter 8** brings together the main strands of the primary research, summarises the key findings, considers the implications of the observed patterns of online youth civic engagement and reflects on the broader themes that are particularly pertinent to this investigation.

Chapter 1

Young People and Civic Engagement

"The fundamental questions that have to be answered in the affirmative for an individual to become active in the body politic are, *'Can I make a difference? And do I care to make a positive difference?'...*

[Families, beliefs and education should enable] a young person to answer these questions, *'Yes. Everything I do has an impact on other people. I can make a positive or negative difference. I choose to make a positive difference'.*"

(Stoneman 2002: 222)

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the debate on the civic engagement of young people in Britain today. The chapter starts with a brief definition of the benefits and elements of civic participation, looking particularly at the critical role of younger generations. The main elements and facilitators of political engagement are then examined. Having outlined the causes and effects of civic participation, we summarise and present the evidence in favour and against the argument that we are currently facing a crisis of youth apathy and disengagement; particular reference is made to the ambiguous role of the media in the process of engagement.

An increasingly salient distinction has arisen out of the debate on apathy between the formal political process and alternative practices of engagement. The chapter identifies certain open questions and contradictions in existing research and puts forward a provisional research agenda regarding young people's political socialisation, civic attitudes and motivations.

1.1 The Importance and Benefits of Political Participation

The participation of citizens in politics has been a constitutive element of democracy since ancient Athens, albeit – even then – not without the exclusion of certain social groups. Political participation is central not only to the concept of democracy ("rule by the people") but also to its sustainable operation: a fair and effective democracy "cannot survive without the participation of its citizens" (Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss 2002: 266; Galston 2001). However, we have never witnessed the existence of a "perfect" democracy. Democracy is not a fixed state, but a fluid one, very much dependent on the continuing re-affirmation of the role of citizens in the political system.

In terms of contemporary political theory and practice, the role of civic engagement has traditionally been highlighted by proponents of participatory democracy (Barber 1984, Pateman 1970) – the school of thought that emphasises the role that ordinary citizens can play in the running of the polity. This model can be distinguished from indirect democracy (based on representation and more limited citizen involvement) as well as direct one (in which all decisions are made within smaller self-contained systems, such as the city-state) combining elements of both (Held 1989).

Political participation is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary liberal democracies, which are based on representation, as well as economic and social liberalism. The complexity and size of contemporary polities, along with the multiplicity of human activities and networks, means that citizens may choose *not* to engage. Yet, representative democracy - when not complemented by the active participation of its citizens - can breed lethargy, inaction, alienation and ultimately disempowerment amongst the public (Barber 1998).

It has been argued that civic engagement is not inherently altruistic and may include ideological appeals or actions that are not necessarily benevolent (e.g. support for extremism). Banaji (2008a) puts forward a potent critique of the assumptions embedded in dominant and institutional discourses on civic engagement, arguing that apathy and

disengagement may actually be better alternatives than action that legitimises authoritarianism. Yet, there is then the danger of treating extremism as an uncontrollable, independent variable, a decontextualised phenomenon that, as it were, exists in a vacuum and cannot be accommodated within the representative institutions of liberal democracies; whereas extremism could be considered to be the outcome or symptom of the lack of systemic and altruistic civic education. While the discussion on the normative assumptions of the prescriptive approach is important, for the purposes of this study we choose to accept that civic participation, within democratic norms, is by default not only desirable or essential, but the actual point of democracy.

Furthermore, it has been shown that widespread and inclusive democratic participation contributes to law abidance, social peace, integration, cohesion and welfare (see Elster 1998). Maintaining inclusive and interactive channels of public communication can enhance the quality and effectiveness of public policy, ensuring that public administration is based on the widest possible consensus (Habermas 1998) and that it is more successful, especially in times of crises and natural disasters (Gerodimos 2004). Moreover, as more citizens engage with the political process, recruitment to government and political parties will be enhanced and reflect society more accurately (Nye, Zelikow and King 1997). It is widely accepted that our leaders, elected representatives and civil servants should reflect and represent the diverse constituencies of society.

Thus, civic engagement can directly or indirectly contribute to national and social well-being, but it also has benefits for the individual involved. Interaction with other citizens can make the participant more sensitive to other people's interests and viewpoints (Barber 1998). Getting involved with common affairs has also shown to increase one's confidence in their ability to make a difference, i.e. their sense of efficacy, as well as promote social solidarity (although the direct correlation between the two is contested, see Segall 2005).

1.2 The Role of Youth Participation

According to a classic but still relevant definition:

> "youth participation [is] involving youth in responsible, challenging action, that meets genuine needs, with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequences extend to others, i.e. outside or beyond the youth participants themselves" (National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1975: 25 cited in Camino and Zeldin 2002: 214).

If public participation in politics is important for moral and practical reasons, youth participation in particular is vital: it constitutes an investment for a healthy democracy based on solid foundations and helps strengthen our society and prepare youth to be good citizens in the future. Stoneman (2002: 226) makes the point that "we desperately need the energy and intelligence of youth plugged into action that will improve society now".

Young people can bring a fresh, new perspective that is closer to their lifeworld and more relevant to their problems and concerns. It should be stressed that "democracy is very much alive. It remains an historical accomplishment, continuously needing to be regenerated. We cannot take it for granted or assume that it will live its own life" (Dahlgren 1995: 2). Thus, the duty falls upon the present leaders and citizens to inspire young people about the value of democracy and equip them with the knowledge, skills and tools necessary to develop and nurture it. As with democracy, participation itself is not static or fixed concept. While its principles remain the same, its expressions, applications and processes are in constant motion. Democratic theory and practice has to accommodate changes in the formation and execution of power and ensure that it is still relevant for the new generations of citizens for whom established processes and institutions of democracy may appear more distant.

It would be useful at this stage to delineate the age group that this study will be focusing on as well as some of its alleged traits. The discussion that follows will refer to teenagers, adolescents and young adults ranging from the ages of 11 to 25, although the main empirical part of this study will be focusing on the 18-25 age group. Demographers, marketers, sociologists and political scientists have long been debating about the cut-off dates and the existence or not of universally applicable trends amongst young people of that generation.

It is has been argued (e.g. Tulgan and Martin 2001; Howe and Strauss 2000) that those born approximately between 1980 and 1995 belong to what has often been labelled as Generation Y (with the preceding Generation X spanning from 1965 to 1979). These boundaries and labels are obviously schematic, if not arbitrary, but are mentioned here for the sake of clarity. Furthermore, a number of assumptions, observations and expectations have been offered by scholars regarding the generation under discussion, mostly in the US literature. The overall impression one gathers from that literature is one of striking contradictions and tensions: media "savviness" and buying power versus compliant consumerism; tolerance and sexual, religious and ethnic diversity versus cynicism, apathy and fear (DeRogatis 2001; Duffy 2001; Greenberg 2003; Neuborne and Kerwin 1998, Demertzis and Stavrakakis 2008).

However, it is important to avoid pigeon-holing an entire generation into a few keywords. If there is one salient theme amongst the work of scholars who have studied the social and civic attitudes of young people, this would be diversity (e.g. see Henn, Weinstein and Forrest 2005). That is not to say that contemporary youth in general cannot constitute a valid object of investigation or that common patterns of civic engagement cannot be discussed (indeed, the present study engages in such a project) but that care should be taken when generalising about the youth population as a whole.

1.3 Civic Engagement and the Public Sphere

There are probably as many definitions of civic participation as there are citizens, as every individual has their own perception of rights and responsibilities and a different sense of civic duty. At the macro-social level, political theory scholarship has traditionally

focused on the competing narratives of communitarianism, liberalism and pluralism, which respectively highlight the role of voluntary associations and social networks (Tocqueville 1994, Putnam 2000), individual rights and freedom of choice, and a deliberative model of citizenship within the public sphere (Habermas 1989, Fishkin 1991).

At the 'micro' level of the individual citizen, civic engagement can take different expressions and applications, broadly classified under three headings:

(a) Awareness: becoming aware of a public affair (issue, policy or problem) and gaining enough knowledge so as to form a rational judgement or opinion about it. Political knowledge and a good and informed judgement are key parts of citizenship, as they shape our understanding or our own interest and help us empathise with the interests and viewpoints of others. "The exercise of good judgment, as a component of citizenship, involves assessing when behaviour is needed to maintain the status quo and when it is necessary to take action to change it" (Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss 2002: 265).

(b) Interaction: discussing a public affair with others; constructing a political argumentation based on evidence, values and ideas; affecting – and being affected by – other citizens. Gastil and Dillard (1999) found that public deliberation increases the sophistication of citizens' political judgement, while Price, Cappella and Nir (2002) concur that exposure to disagreement amongst citizens does contribute to their ability to generate reasons and ultimately enhances their argumentation and political sophistication.

(c) Active participation: being actively involved with the affairs in the local community, society and, more recently, the world at large. This can include a range of activities such as: voting and campaigning; contacting elected representatives or local/national government with the view to influencing public policy; volunteering or donating money to a charity, political organisation or cause; demonstrating and protesting (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Engaging in such activities is the matter of democracy as it ensures that individual citizens hold their representatives to account, influence the course of government and ultimately have control over their collective existence.

While these three concepts appear as logical steps in a quasi-linear process of affective or cognitive engagement and subsequent practical involvement, in reality our engagement with news, public affairs and the political process is much less orderly or structured. That is to say, we may become aware of an issue through first-hand experience or random discussion with others; or we may talk about our preferences and actions after having engaged in them. Our awareness and judgement depend to a large extent on our interaction with the outside world, although first hand experience and psychological antecedents such as motivation are also important (Eveland 2004) and will be discussed further in this thesis.

Furthermore, any discussion of civic participation needs to acknowledge the space within which, and means through which, citizens engage. The boundaries of the political

community and the practices of engagement are not mere details – they partly constitute and shape the civic culture of a country (Almond and Verba 1963).

As the political community has extended, initially beyond the boundaries of the city-state and recently beyond those of the nation-state, so has the scope of civic engagement and the need for mediation of the communication between those who hold power and those in the name of whom power is exercised. As Dahlgren notes, "the dynamics of democracy are intimately linked to the practices of communication, and social communication increasingly takes place within the mass media" (1995: 2).

The media are today much more than a mere source or filter of information on news, politicians and public affairs (although the gate-keeping function of the media is in itself a potent determinant of civic culture). New technologies have extended the remit of the media so that they have become both channels of interaction between citizens, and between citizens and the government, as well as means of active participation.

Having defined the main elements and benefits of civic engagement allows us to explore social and cultural factors that are intrinsically linked to it, also known as prerequisites and predictors (although that choice of terms can be problematic). Understanding what facilitates and what obstructs public participation is vital in any attempt to develop it.

1.4 Facilitators of Political Participation

Almond and Verba's (1963) "unitary" or homogeneous conceptualisation of civic culture has been challenged over the years, not least by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). It has been shown that significant differences exist amongst not just different countries and cultures, but also across social groups within each country. Sánchez-Jankowski (2002) stresses the importance of recognising the existence of civic subcultures under the umbrella of the national civic culture. If we are to encourage civic engagement and active participation, we ought to understand the motivations and obstacles that particular groups face.

Time, money and civic skills have traditionally been considered the main resources that individuals need in order to participate (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). However, recent research on civic engagement has shown that in addition to these facilitators, the motivation and the ability to participate in politics depends on a variety of factors – demographic, environmental, cultural, socio-economic and psychological amongst others (Stewart and Weinstein 1997). In other words, "time and money", while potentially important, cannot fully explain the variance in participation and, subsequently, cannot be the sole basis for a strategy of active citizen engagement.

In terms of demographic factors, a number of studies (see Soule 2001) have shown that age is a consistent predictor as people become increasingly engaged over time, due to a number of factors such as maturity and life cycles (e.g. raising children, paying taxes, claiming rights in the workplace etc).

Several other demographic factors have also been occasionally associated with participation, although it would be risky to arrive at conclusions regarding direct correlations, viewing demographic factors as the independent variable and participation as the dependent one. For example, the fact that marginalised social groups tend to be less politically engaged than dominant ones could be attributed to important socio-psychological factors such as political socialisation and sense of efficacy.

Political socialisation, i.e. the process through which we as individuals acquire political orientations and position ourselves within the broader socio-political structures, is according to many scholars the most powerful predictor of political participation (Jarvis, Montoya and Mulvoy, 2005). Political socialisation itself is shaped by a number of other parameters such as familial and social networks, connectedness and social capital, levels of interest and trust, as well as social, voluntary and civic activities during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. It has been shown that adults are more likely to vote and engage in public affairs if they were active and involved with community or extracurricular activities in childhood and adolescence (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). Furthermore, psychological and developmental factors are intrinsically linked to political socialisation. Obradović and Masten (2007) found that volunteering and citizenship have different developmental antecedents and argue that both practices can be autonomously predicted by competence (academic and social skills) and activity involvement (actual experience of engagement).

The role of motivation on individual actions has been raised throughout several related disciplines such as pedagogy, psychology and political science. One of the crucial determinants of motivation is efficacy, i.e. a citizen's perception of their own ability to effectively participate in the political process and subsequently influence policy. The positive effect of efficacy on levels of participation was first highlighted by supporters of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970, Barber 1984). A number of studies (e.g. Finkel 1985, Bowler and Donovan 2002) have since shown that the relationship between efficacy and participation is, in fact, reciprocal constituting a virtuous circle of participation. That is to say, a citizen's confidence in the effectiveness of their own actions (internal efficacy) and in the responsiveness of the system to their actions (external efficacy) will usually lead to higher levels of participation; and the act of participation itself will in turn boost that citizen's confidence in their own actions, as well as their positive feelings towards the institution or process within which participation takes place.

However, this 'virtuous circle' is affected by the response of the system to the participating citizen. If the outcome of the participating effort goes against the citizen's wishes – or if the political leaders are not responsive to the input of the grassroots – then that may have the opposite effect, reducing the levels of efficacy (Ainsworth 2000). One example of this would be the mismatch between youth civic action (e.g. school strikes) before the 2003 Iraq War and lack of systemic responsiveness, or even punitive measures against young people (Banaji 2008a). A notable exception to that phenomenon is the case of anti-establishment activists, who may hold cynical views about the system's responsiveness (low external efficacy) but still choose to participate intensely through demonstrations, petitions and other political activities.

Still, a clear positive relationship between efficacy and participation has been documented through a series of seminal studies (e.g. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2003, Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). Of particular relevance to the efficacy-participation relationship is the desire of citizens to see the benefits of their involvement ranging from pure rational choice (economic benefit) to ideology (social change) to affective models (emotional rewards). Some have gone as far as to argue that political participation should have a specific end product – a clear utility, contesting the thesis that the process of participation *per se* produces civic or social virtues such as trust or social solidarity (Segall 2005). Others argue that civic action does not always – or even often – produce tangible outcomes; politics is about coexisting in an organised society, which involves negotiating, making compromises and distributing limited resources (Kahne and Westheimer 2002).

A final set of factors that can aid our understanding of civic participation is the individual's civic resources, which can include their civic education, political literacy, awareness of issues, available time and money, as well as opportunities (e.g. invitations) to participate. Highlighting the role of the latter, Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003: 466) concluded that "there is no substitute for mobilisation. Left to their own devices, people are not particularly likely to become active citizens. But when they are asked to participate […] they are very likely to do so".

A few points of caution should be made in regards to the discussion on the predictors and prerequisites of civic engagement. Firstly, political participation is an extremely elusive and intricate phenomenon and therefore one should avoid deterministic accounts excluding environmental, structural and other factors. Furthermore, these factors outlined above are, to some extent, interdependent, i.e. they have a reciprocal relationship. For example, a high socio-economic status (SES) will normally provide for a better education as well as more extensive familial support networks; these in turn can lead to higher levels of social capital and civic skills. On top of that, several of these factors are also self-reinforcing; for instance, civic activity is positively associated with political awareness (Pasek, Kenski, Romer and Jamieson 2006), which in turn facilitates political participation (Galston 2001).

Moreover, the relationship between variables such as participation, efficacy and trust is not a straightforward one. The 2005 Home Office Citizenship survey (Department for Communities and Local Government 2006: 11) showed that "participation in civil renewal was associated with feeling able to influence decisions affecting the local area". As can be seen in Appendix A (Table A1[*]) those who engaged in a range of civic activities were much more likely to have high levels of efficacy, compared to those who had not participated. Furthermore, "there were strong associations between feeling able to influence decisions and trust in political institutions" (2006: 14) meaning that those who had high levels of efficacy were more likely to also have high levels of trust in central and local government (Table A2). However, despite the seemingly positive relationships

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[*] Tables and Figures whose number is preceded by a letter can be found in the corresponding Appendix. Tables and Figures marked in **bold** and numbered consecutively throughout the thesis are embedded into the core body of the chapters.

between participation and efficacy, and between efficacy and trust, the survey showed that people who undertook civic activities (participation) were *less* likely to trust Parliament and local government compared to those who were not active (Table A3).

Finally, the unintended consequences of participation are also an important parameter affecting civic attitudes. Hence, in the said survey, engagement in civic consultation and civic participation were associated with lower satisfaction with local services, meaning that those who actually participated in local community affairs were *less* satisfied with the system (Table A4). As the authors of the survey note, "[p]ossible reasons for lower satisfaction among those who have engaged in civic consultation and civic participation are that people may have been motivated to undertake activities such as signing petitions or attending public meetings because they [already] had concerns about local services or that those who engage in these activities may be more critical of services because they are more knowledgeable about them" (Department for Communities and Local Government 2006: 11).

Therefore, while at a normative level one would assume that a successful democratic system is host to citizens who are actively engaged, have high levels of efficacy, trust in, and satisfaction with, the institutions of local and central government, in reality such measurements may have a rationally reverse relationship. Subsequently, assessing the state of civic participation through single or isolated variables can be misleading; a more holistic perspective is needed in order to capture the nuances of civic behaviour. For instance, "political knowledge is a *necessary* precondition to civic engagement, but information *per se* is unlikely to be a *sufficient* precondition to civic engagement" (Dudley and Gitelson 2003: 265). Also, what is often missing from discussions of civic engagement is the narratives of citizens themselves, and in particular young people. This study will be focusing on one youth community in order to explore the factors that motivate young people to (or de-motivate them from) engaging with public and global affairs.

Having set the scene in terms of the facilitating factors, core elements and beneficial effects of civic engagement, we will now review the evidence on whether Britain, amongst other liberal democracies, is facing a crisis of youth apathy and alienation.

1.5 Evidence For the Crisis Hypothesis

There is widespread and consistent evidence suggesting that we are witnessing a long-term decline in political participation both internationally (e.g. Gray and Caul 2000) and in the UK. This decline is evident in a number of established indicators and predictors of participation such as electoral turnout, institutional trust, efficacy, political interest and political knowledge.

Disengagement across the UK population

Turnout in the 2001 general election (59.4%) dropped to its lowest level since 1918, while it only marginally rose in 2005. Turnout in local government, devolved

administrations and European Parliament elections ranges from 30 to 50% (Table A5). Furthermore, electoral registration and turnout are particularly low amongst ethnic groups such as black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities (Marshall 2004: 8), demographic groups which traditionally have been feeling disenfranchised from the mainstream political system. Party membership has declined (Whiteley 2003), while O'Cinneide (2004: 6) argues that political parties in the UK are "failing to reflect Britain's cultural diversity".

The results of the UK-wide 2006 Political Engagement Poll (Tables A6 and A7) showed that a minority of citizens are satisfied with Parliament (35%) or the current system of governing (33%); Britons have low levels of efficacy (33%) and trust in politicians (27%). This study found only a small core of citizens (14%) who had engaged in at least three types of civic activities over the last two or three years (Electoral Commission 2007); it should be noted that these activities are fairly undemanding and include signing petitions and contacting one's MP. The same study found that 54% of the population express an interest in "politics", while less than half can correctly name their MP (44%) or know at least a fair amount about politics (49%).

In terms of assimilating political information, Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, Semetko (1999) examined what the British public had learned from the year-long election campaign preceding the 1997 general election based on their ability to identify the political party most strongly in favour of six policy areas. They found that the public had acquired no information on these issues despite extensive media coverage of the campaign throughout the year.

Drawing on extensive research based on the Citizen Audit, Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2004) summarise the pattern described above thus:

> "It appears that, with the possible exception of protest demonstrations, collective forms of participation have declined in Britain over [the last forty years] and that this decline has been reinforced by a weakening of the norms which sustain such participation. Put simply, individuals are less likely to believe that citizens should participate, and because of this fact they are less likely to actually get involved… *[W]e conclude that Britons are atomised citizens*" (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004: 275, our emphasis).

This pattern of disengagement, apathy and alienation appears to be particularly marked amongst the younger generations (Stoker 2006). Again, this is an international phenomenon and has been proved that it is not just due to differences in life cycles or an one-off aberration of the current generation, but a steady and consistent inter-generational effect (Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss 2002; LeDuc and Pammett 2003).

<u>Disengagement amongst young people (11 to 25)</u>

In the recent general elections, turnout amongst younger citizens (18-24) reached 39% in 2001 and 37% in 2005. Using data from the 2006 Political Engagement Poll, Table A8 provides a comparison of 18-24s' civic attitudes with those of older age groups. All the trends identified above both from that and from other studies are even more evident in young people. Levels of efficacy, propensity to vote, political knowledge and discussion

are just above 20%. Surprisingly, only 58% of people in the 18-24 age group *want* to have a say in how the country is run; unsurprisingly, a lot less (27%) feel that they actually *have* a say (Electoral Commission 2007).

Studies conducted in Britain during the 1990s, such as the one by Jowell and Park (1998), established that "young people are […] less likely than average to identify with a political party or to have strong anti-feelings towards any party [and] have much less political interest and political knowledge (1998: 6) (interestingly, this was noted in 1998 after 18 years of ultimately very unpopular Conservative administrations). Jowell and Park found that the trend towards less engagement signals a generational change rather than a life-cycle or period effect (1998: 17), while their interpretation of these levels of engagement was that "18-24 year olds just feel they have better things to do with their time, such as finding partners, homes and jobs" (1998: 8).

Feelings of apathy and alienation from politicians and the formal political process appear to be almost ubiquitous in recent academic research. A study on youth civic attitudes (16-24 years old) in Northern Ireland indicated that young people were negative about politics and "were frustrated as they felt that politicians ignored them. The overriding view was that politics was boring and complicated which did not act as an incentive to become involved" (Institute for Conflict Research, 2006: 3). Participants thought that there was not much point to voting as "it made no difference". Many felt confused by politics and thought that politicians were either too old or too removed from the real issues affecting them. Soule (2001: 18) notes that current generations of young people have been socialised in an era of frustration with the political process and subsequently their levels of social trust are very low in contrast to their parents.

These feelings are shared amongst younger age groups too (Table A9). The authors of the 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey (Children and Young People's Boosts) concluded that "young people [11-15] were most likely to feel they could influence decisions at lower levels such as within their family or school, rather than those affecting their local area or Britain; a similar pattern to that amongst adults surveyed" (Home Office 2005: 5).

Root causes and the role of the media

The discussion on the root causes of the decline in formal measurements of political participation has been at the centre of political science for a number of years. It has been a long and heated debate that has brought up a number of interesting interpretations. While a broad understanding of these accounts is relevant to our discussion, it is not strictly within the remit of this study to evaluate them in greater detail.

It is generally accepted that the "thawing" of social cleavages (e.g. capital v. labour), which were the basis of party identification in the West, have led to the ideological convergence of political parties towards the middle of the political spectrum (Mair, Müller and Plasser 2004). The decline of institutional mechanisms of voice aggregation (e.g. trades unions) along with the weakening of the core executive due to globalisation and

privatisation during the last thirty years have aggravated the democratic deficit (e.g. Gray and Caul 2000).

Yet, the state of civic engagement is also affected by a complex range of socio-economic trends, such as post-war prosperity (or, more recently, insecurity – Miles 2000), urbanisation and mobility, the emergence of issue movements and identity politics, as well as work-life balance (Inglehart 1990, 1997). These and other developments affect the establishment and strength of social ties and networks, as well as the levels of citizens' political awareness and interest.

By far the most salient and at the same time controversial factor in discussions over civic culture and engagement has been the media – in particular, television – due to their reach and role in contemporary polities and people's everyday lives. Putnam (1995, 2000) attributed the decline of associational involvement and social capital to television, and in particular to its "time displacement" effect, i.e. the fact that it takes up valuable time that would normally be used for social interaction or civic activities.

However, the role of the media in contemporary culture, including the political culture, is much broader and associated with trends such as the parallel rise of consumerism, celebrity and cynicism (Corner and Pels 2003). The professionalisation of political communication with the adoption of sophisticated marketing techniques (Negrine and Lilleker 2002) and the blending of news and entertainment with increased emphasis on personality and strategy frames over substance and ideology (Jamieson and Waldman 2003) appear to be part of a vicious circle of dumbing down, negativity and disaffection with the political system.

The changes in the content, style and discourse of media culture are directly linked – if not attributable – to the multiplication, privatisation and commercialisation of channels and media outlets. It has been argued that the segmentation of the public sphere has affected the socialisation of younger generations, depriving them of shared experiences and celebratory media events that facilitated the cultivation of collective identities (Wattenberg 2003, Katz 1998).

1.6 Evidence Against the Crisis Hypothesis

The existence of the above-mentioned trends is not unchallenged. While the opposition to the apathy and disengagement thesis branches out to a range of strands, the core argument of this school of thought is that young people are still very much engaged. If indeed there is a problem, proponents of this view would argue that it is due to the political system moving away from the citizens, effectively disenfranchising them (Edwards 2007, McKendrick et al 2007, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Smith et al (2005) argue that accounts of young people "lacking citizenship" are based on a misperception of youth; resentment and even resignation are inherently political responses.

Both of Putnam's core arguments, i.e. the decline of social capital amongst younger generations and the negative effects of television on youth civic engagement, have been strenuously contested by scholars and studies in the US and in Europe. Holland, Reynolds and Weller (2007: 97) reject the "deficit model of young people's social capital, demonstrating the many and varied ways that children and young people develop and use social capital [in their everyday lives in order] to negotiate important transitions and construct their identities". Furthermore, they challenge the evaluation of bridging and bonding social capital as useful and detrimental respectively and argue that these two forms of social capital are interdependent: "bonding social capital provided young people with the identity, resources, and support to bridge into other networks, especially if they are children moving into a new schooling environment or a member of a minority ethnic group" (2007: 113).

As for the effects of television and the other media on political knowledge and participation, based on a study of media uses, civic activity and political awareness amongst 14- to 20- year olds, Pasek, Kenski, Romer and Jamieson (2006: 115) – contrary to Putnam's evidence – find that "media use, whether information or entertainment oriented, facilitates civic engagement, whereas news media are especially effective in promoting political awareness". In fact their results indicate that "young people's use of media facilitates the development of those social networks" [that have declined according to Putnam] (2006: 130). This is consistent with Norris's (2000) conclusion that the media can play a constructive role in a virtuous circle of political engagement.

A related area of concern has been the alleged lack of interest in public affairs, which could mean that younger citizens make superficial political judgements. Yet, an issue salience survey of young citizens before and after the 2004 US presidential election showed that:

> "young adults' issues remained stable throughout early and late phases of the campaign. Issues such as the war in Iraq, education, terrorism and homeland security, economy and jobs, and health care were consistently among [their] top ranked issues. Civil liberty issues also garnered a significant place on young adults' agenda. Any concern that young adults are fickle about issues is erased as the issue agendas spanning the 15 months were highly correlated" (Tedesco, McKinney and Kaid 2007: 1290).

In the UK, several scholars and studies have contested the claim that young people are apathetic with many going as far to brand that as a "myth" (Citizenship Foundation 2005). Based on a nationwide survey of 700 young people, Henn, Weinstein and Forrest (2005: 573) posit that young people are "sufficiently interested in political affairs to dispel the myth that their apparent disconnection from formal politics is a consequence of their general apathy".

It has also been noted that, despite the decline in political participation over the last few decades, we are now witnessing signs of recovery both internationally (e.g. US, France) and in the UK. Such evidence would be the significant increase in voter turnout amongst young citizens in the last two presidential elections in the United States. Youth turnout in

the 2004 election rose by 10% and reached 46.7%, while in 2008 it increased further by over three million young voters and reached the highest turnout since 1972 (CIRCLE 2004, 2008). Lopez, Kirby and Sagoff (2005: 1) attributed these increases to "the confluence of extensive voter outreach efforts, a close election, and high levels of interest" in the recent campaigns. Similar traces of recovery appear in the UK, where the rate of the 18-34 group declaring an interest in politics has gone up by 8% to 46% within four years (Electoral Commission 2007: 14).

Furthermore, a consensus has been emerging in the US that young people, though sceptical of formal politics, volunteer in much greater numbers than previous generations (Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss 2002). Similarly, in the UK, the 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey (Young People's Boosts) [see Table 1.5] found that

> "young people [11-15] play an active role within their communities. Nearly half had engaged in one or more specified civic activities and the majority had given help to a group, club or organisation in the last 12 months. In fact young people were more likely to have given help to groups, clubs or organisations in the last 12 months than adults surveyed in the Citizenship Survey" (Home Office 2005: 11), while also "the majority of children and young people had good social networks and had regular contact with friends" (2005: 9)

The same survey found that:

> "Young people [11-15] were interested in current affairs and were prepared to engage in civic activities (67%) and voting (69%). However 81% of young people agreed that there should be a way to give young people a voice in politics." (Home Office 2005: 2).

The potential long-term benefit of citizenship education which was recently introduced to the UK curriculum may constitute grounds for optimism. However, as it has already been mentioned, young people's levels of efficacy at the national level, and their levels of trust in political institutions are still very low.

An alternative school of thought considers the decline of public trust towards institutions as a welcome sign of increasing rationality amongst citizens of late modernity, as it is argued that individuals cannot, in reality, establish meaningful relationships of trust with organisations (Hardin 1999). One problem with that interpretation is that it does not account for recent surges in trust following major events that disrupt everyday life (e.g. terrorist attacks). Perhaps more importantly, the rejection of institutional trust as a relic of a modernist era – albeit consistent with patterns of public cynicism towards authority – is not usually followed by the proposition of a workable alternative model of social organisation.

Perhaps the most salient interpretation of youth engagement combines various elements of the arguments just outlined. It is based on a distinction between formalised processes of participation and established carriers of power such as political parties and emerging practices of participation that are much more diffused in young people's everyday life. The argument is that younger generations, far from being alienated and apathetic, still care about democracy and are interested in public affairs, although they have their own

agendas and reject established political practices or what could be called "professional politics" (Inglehart 1990; Mulgan and Wilkinson 1997).

Therefore, the argument continues, the problem lies not with citizens themselves but with our measurements of their engagement, which are still based on the traditional ways of understanding politics. As Henn, Weinstein and Wring (2002) point out, these measurements, and subsequent criticisms of youth as apathetic, are usually based on predominantly quantitative surveys with preset categories of engagement (such as writing to MPs) and issues, such as middle-age, middle-class concerns regarding tax and immigration. Banaji (2008a) actually argues that "safe" channels of participation that are usually tolerated by governments, such as writing letters, can mask undemocratic policies, persistent injustice or abuse of power, while Puig-i-Abril and Rojas (2007) also note that such frameworks disregard expressive and symbolic actions of engagement, such as political conversation in private settings or identity building through material objects.

Henn, Weinstein and Wring's (2002: 169) conclusion is that "once young people are invited to discuss politics in their own terms, thus widening the definition of politics, then there is evidence of much higher levels of interest and activity by young people". This is one of the core principles informing the present study's research agenda, which includes a predominantly qualitative approach with young citizens articulating their civic motivations and attitudes towards civic organisations whose work falls within a broader conceptualisation of the political.

The claim of a new mode or paradigm of political engagement led by people themselves and hidden from the formal elements of political science and practice opens a range of interesting questions such as what is / is not political and where we draw the line between rejection of established processes as a conscious political statement and simple indifference.

1.7 The Divide Between "Formal Politics" and the "Everyday Life"

The debate on the boundaries of political engagement is not a new development. Traditionally, political scientists have focused on the established aspects of 'political' participation, whereas sociologists and developmentalists have preferred to look at the broader term of 'civic' engagement, which captures practices and attitudes that are outside of the narrow boundaries of the 'political' (Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss 2002; Flanagan and Faison 2001). For the proponents of participatory democracy and for the highly engaged sections of the population active citizenship is not simply a regime or a part-time responsibility; it is a way of life (Benhabib 1996; Damanaki 2004).

Therefore, it is vital to establish whether young people reject politics and the democratic system altogether, or whether they actually and consciously engage with their own issues and communities in ways that could be characterised as civically oriented. The evidence is actually inconclusive. Henn, Weinstein and Wring (2002: 175) conclude that "young people appear to exhibit a lack of engagement with politics […] because they

perceive the world of formal politics to be distant from their lives and broadly irrelevant" and that they are in fact "sophisticated observers" (2002: 179) of politics with their own agenda. Similarly, Henn, Weinstein and Forrest (2005: 556) find that young people "support the democratic process, but are sceptical of the way the British political system is organised and led and are turned off by politicians and the political parties". Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2004: 266) concur concluding that "citizens have not contracted out of politics, but rather are engaged in a multiplicity of political activities beyond the traditional ones", adding that we are witnessing the rise of "consumer citizenship" brought about by the rise of individualistic forms of participation and the steady decline of collective ones. The findings of the study conducted by the National Centre for Social Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (White, Bruce and Ritchie 2000) are similar.

What, also, clearly emerges from the literature is a big cultural divide between the political elite and a substantial part of the population or, in Coleman's (2003) metaphor, the *House of Commons* and the *Big Brother House*. Hobsbawm (1994 cited in Dahlgren 1995: 1) described the former as a "special-interest group of professional politicians, journalists, lobbyists and others whose occupations ranked at the bottom of the scale of trustworthiness in sociological inquiries". That gap between these two demographics is particularly dangerous since each group seems to ignore and question the legitimacy and role of the other. A potential breakdown of communication between the most- and least- engaged parts of the public would be particularly damaging for social welfare as it could eventually lead to social fragmentation and policy failure (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004: 278).

Following on from that, one of the Electoral Commission's key findings in its 4th Audit of Political Engagement (2007: 27) was that people are "using narrow definitions of politics and attaching negative connotations to the term", while often they fail to associate the word 'politics' with issues that affect their everyday lives. Thus, "it is important to define participation broadly since a narrow focus, say, on electoral participation, will miss much of the participation which is actually going on" (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004: 265).

Yet, when it comes to actually defining those non-formally political, alternative or emerging engagement practices that youth supposedly engage in, the evidence is not so encouraging or clear-cut. Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter and Zukin (2002), amongst others, present evidence that casts doubts over the validity of the view that we are witnessing a new paradigm of political or collective engagement showing that in reality young people's motives for volunteering are largely individualistic and that their 'community activities' include things such as giving directions to passers-by. While their expert panels made that distinction between elections, parties and governmental activities ("politics with a capital *P*") and issue / cause engagement / voluntary work ("politics with a small *p*"), their young participants were cynical about the political process as a whole, showing "no appreciation for the necessity of politics" (2002: 192) and viewing politics as something irrelevant to their problems. Similarly, Friedland and Morimoto (2005: 13) found that students' attitudes towards civic and community work were "uniformly instrumental" and largely determined by a general pressure to achieve.

Andolina et al.'s data directly rejects the notion that younger generations are keen to volunteer and participate in civically-oriented activities: their participants' notion of volunteering included giving friends car rides and talking to elderly customers on their coffee-shop jobs. It should also be noted that, methodologically, their participants were outliers in that they were engaged with their projects and represented a "participation-friendly" part of the youth population and still showed very little desire for community, political awareness, social conscience or global connectedness and were unapologetic about their apathy.

It is useful therefore to ask whether the hypothesis that young people engage in activities that fall within a broader conceptualisation of the political (and that they do that as a conscious act of rejection of the political system) expresses the hopes of academics and researchers, or whether it actually reflects the reality on the ground. This will be one of the parameters informing this study's empirical research into youth civic motivations.

1.8 An Emerging Research Agenda: Exploring Young People's Political Socialisation and Civic Attitudes

This chapter reviewed the main elements, facilitators and benefits of youth civic engagement, as well as the debate on the crisis of political participation facing Britain along with other liberal democracies. There is strong evidence to suggest that traditional indicators of participation associated with formal democratic processes, such as electoral turnout, institutional trust and party membership, have been showing a decline especially amongst younger people. However, disengagement with politics appears to be neither unqualified, nor unconditional; neither linear in time, nor equally spread in the population. Therefore it is important to explore the dynamics of youth engagement in further depth putting particular emphasis on young people's own civic narratives.

An underlying but central question emerging from the material presented so far is whether the shift away from formalised aggregators of political action are symptomatic of a broken link in the chain of younger generations' political socialisation process. Political socialisation is the integration of the individual into broader social structures, norms and rituals that comes with cognitive maturity, interaction with the outside world and commencement of rights and responsibilities (Hooghe 2004, Galston 2001). The transition from the individual and private domain to the collective and public sphere is a crucial determinant both at the micro-social level (i.e. political participation of the individual citizen), as well as at the macro-social level (e.g. health of the democracy, social integration etc).

As the process of establishing a link between the individual and the social, political socialisation has many practical implications and applications: it relates to the levels of efficacy (put simply, the impact that the individual can have on the system), as well as to the relevance of social structures, political processes and issues to a citizen's everyday life (i.e. the impact that the system can have on the individual). It is also associated with the development of values, moral codes and affective attachments to symbols, collective identities and imagined communities that act as civic motivators enhancing an

individual's sense of civic duty and responsibility, as opposed to being driven solely by material interest and private welfare. Finally, another aspect of political socialisation is issue salience, i.e. the relative importance that citizens place on public affairs or policy areas. Issue salience is directly correlated to efficacy (Fox and Schofield 1989): if an issue is high on a citizen's agenda (i.e. they care strongly about something) then it is more likely that they will feel confident to engage with that issue.

Recent evidence on these three areas (interdependence between the individual and the system, civic duty, issue salience) does indicate that we may be witnessing the results of a problematic process of political socialisation. The use of the word "problematic" is obviously based upon debatable normative assumptions (what is problematic and what is acceptable?), but it is used here to signify a political socialisation process not conducive to a democratically viable civic culture. Insofar as interdependence of the individual with the system is concerned, many young people feel that they cannot make a difference at the local or national level, or even to be heard by politicians (Epps 2001; Molloy 2002; Institute for Conflict Research, 2006) and that politics is not relevant to them (Finlay and Irwin 2004, Electoral Commission 2007: 51). Interestingly, however, it may be the case that citizens do engage with public affairs but do not recognise those as political. A survey by the Electoral Commission (2007: 47) showed that while 60% of the British public claimed not to have discussed any political issues or news in a period of two or three years (a mere 27% of 18-24-year-olds claim to have done so), only 6% have actually had not discussed any one of a long list of topical issues. All of these issues (including the war in Iraq and crime) are fundamentally political, which could mean that the problem lies with the perception of what is and is not political:

> "Perhaps the general impression of 'politics' is so negative or undefined for many people that they instinctively assume it is not the sort of subject that they spend time discussing, even though when prompted they may well realise they have indeed talked about issues they would consider political" (Electoral Commission 2007: 49).

This problem is related to whether citizens (of all ages, but especially younger ones) recognise the links between seemingly unrelated policy areas or issues, i.e. the ways in which policy decisions can affect each other and ultimately affect us – an area that has been surprisingly under-researched. Given the interdependent nature of public policy decisions, which involve a range of actors and institutions, and the complexity of contemporary governance, being able to establish such links is a key measure of political sophistication and socialisation. For example, several studies in the United States showed that two of the most salient issues amongst young voters during the 2004 presidential election campaign were the War in Iraq and homeland security / terrorism (Tedesco, McKinney and Kaid 2007; CIRCLE 2004). Yet, both of these isolated issues could and should be linked to the broader area of foreign policy, which has arguably been a key factor in shaping them. Another example would be cancer research – an issue particularly salient amongst the British public. The assumption of the political sophistication hypothesis is that an informed citizen ought to show awareness of the link between that issue and, for example, the state of the National Health Service (NHS), a national institution which is fundamentally instrumental in developing, supporting and implementing cancer research.

Finally, it has been argued that Britain is seeing the emergence of a new paradigm of political engagement consisting of "cheque-book participation" (i.e. donations to causes), "consumer citizenship" and "atomised citizens" (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004). The decline of collectivist forms of mobilisation and the rise of individualistic ones may be symptomatic of an age of consumerism and individualism. Street (1997: 16) contends that politics and popular culture are becoming increasingly intertwined and in fact both reside in one world "in which all choices – moral, political, aesthetic – are essentially consumer, lifestyle choices, arbitrated by the laws of supply and demand". Yet, going beyond one's self-interest and caring for the well-being of a larger social group is crucial to citizenship (Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss 2002: 265).

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined a provisional research agenda based on a series of questions about youth civic motivations and political socialisation. While research on youth civic engagement has recently proliferated, the evidence is inconclusive and new questions emerge constantly. The need for further analysis in order to "examine the links between young people's views on political and civic activities and their actual levels of participation [and] the reasons for their negative views of formal politics" was stressed in the Home Office's report on youth engagement (Home Office 2005: 6).

Based on the discussion so far, research into youth participation faces (at least) three challenges: (a) capturing political action beyond its traditional boundaries; (b) going into further depth regarding the civic motivations, frustrations, challenges and opportunities facing young people; and (c) focusing on specific youth communities so as to enrich our understanding of how different social groups address these issues. This study will be tackling these challenges by: (a) examining youth attitudes towards civic material on a range of issues that are part of an emerging global civic agenda (environment, food and farming, trade justice); (b) allowing participants to develop their own voice and narratives regarding their conceptualisation of political participation; and (c) focusing on a student community as a case study of youth civic attitudes. More details about the methodological framework of the study are given in Chapter 3.

However, before setting out to address these issues, it is essential to further refine the research agenda by linking youth civic attitudes to internet uses. The key functions of the media, both as gatekeepers of the public sphere and as agents of political socialisation, were mentioned earlier in the chapter. Given that this study focuses on young people, and given the central place of the internet in that generation's everyday life, the next chapter will consider the potential role of the web as a source of civic awareness, channel of civic dialogue and means of civic action. The unique properties of the internet create important opportunities and spaces for increased participation, but they also pose considerable tensions with some of democracy's core characteristics.

Chapter 2

The Internet and Youth Engagement

"The democratic potential of the Internet for young people lies in its scope for sampling and remixing so that civic life can be re-ordered and reconstructed to fit with young people's own needs and feelings rather than predetermined structures".

(Coleman and Rowe 2005: 3)

"The internet is not, yet, 'the answer' to young people's disengagement, though it may support the development of the skills and literacies required for engagement"

(Livingstone, Couldry and Markham 2007: 32)

In the previous chapter we outlined the main benefits and facilitators of civic engagement, stressing the importance of youth political participation for the health of our democracy. Given the integral role of the media in democratic polities, and in particular the increased diffusion of the web in young people's everyday life, it is important to examine its potential and actual civic uses. The purpose of this chapter is to review the main challenges to, and opportunities for, online youth civic engagement and formulate a research agenda linking youth civic attitudes to patterns of internet use.

The chapter starts with a brief outline of the internet's fundamental traits, which pose interesting tensions with those of democracy and have led to a heated debate about the medium's impact on political participation. We review the main schools of thought on the role of the internet in society and politics and note a move away from the grand narratives of utopias and dystopias, towards an emphasis on the individual user. It is argued that due to current socio-political, technological and cultural shifts, we ought to move beyond the search for a 'net' effect; instead, it is useful to explore the circumstances under which technological applications can be used for positive social change.

The discussion then focuses on the role of the internet in youth culture and everyday life, as well as the ways in which it has traditionally been utilized by political organisations. Emerging patterns of news consumption, online civic engagement and content creation are considered. Finally, the chapter puts forward a research agenda based on the need to listen to the end-users of online civic communication and compare/contrast their narratives with those of existing civic websites.

2.1 Democracy in Cyberspace: Oxymoron or a New Public Sphere?

The very nature of the internet, and the fact that its core features are so different to those of previous media, has led to a long discussion about the net's effects on society and democracy. It is well known that the internet's structure as a decentralised and rhizomatic network of networks promotes a radically different mode of private and public communication to the one we had been used to until recently. As Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) note, hypertextuality, packet switching, synchronicity and interactivity make up the internet's "architecture" – its DNA so to speak. Online communication can be anonymous and personalised (narrowcasting) as opposed to the top-down model of mass communication through printed press and broadcast media. Furthermore, the internet combines and integrates text, image and sound (multimedia) in a digital, virtual environment potentially beyond temporal and spatial boundaries. The boundaries between the public and the private, and those between the central and the peripheral can also be blurred in the virtual world (Mitra 2001).

The dual role of the mass media as the *de facto* public sphere, i.e. as the space in which debate on public affairs takes place, and also as a "fourth estate" scrutinising the three formal branches of government, was noted in the previous chapter. Given the traits just outlined, the potential of the internet to become a new, democratic public sphere (Poster 1995), i.e. a central space of political debate and a channel of interactive communication

between government and citizens, and between citizens themselves, is striking, as is its potential as a facilitator of direct civic action. Several studies have applied Habermas' criteria of universal access, rational-critical deliberation and equal participation onto the internet (e.g. Dahlberg 2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

This potentially perfect match can only really be understood if we go back to the principles of citizenship and community. As Coleman (2004: 14) notes:

> "To be a citizen… is to enter a communicative relationship with the social world… It is because people's experiences and interests are always disconnected from one another that the binding ties of citizenship perform such a vital social function, for there can be no community without communication, no citizenship without the prospect of connecting with strangers".

Therefore, civic participation is fundamentally a communicative process. Subsequently, it could be argued that if our means of (civic) communication are changing, then perhaps the substance and process of civic participation might be altered. For instance, Oblak (2003) claims that "expanding participation practices to include new digital, more interactive facilities, formed on the basis of the new information services and computer networks, challenges existing understandings of the idea of political participation itself". The web is known as a "pull" medium – in contrast to "push" broadcast media – because it is structured around the user's conscious choice of source and retrieval of information out of a virtually endless pool of data. Thus the net could potentially be a better gauge of citizens' political preferences and activities than previous outlets without the arguably distorting mediation of editors, pollsters and gatekeepers.

If, indeed, the internet can be the carrier of such fundamental change in the political status quo, then that could have profound consequences in terms of power structures and hierarchies. Hacker (1996a) argues that moving away from broadcasting to interactivity requires that we build new systems that are grounded in transparency and feedback:

> "Linear communication supports traditional power structures resting on active leaders and quiescent citizens. Interactive communication creates more symmetry in communication between leaders and citizens. This shifts the balance of power and is a threat to leaders who wish to remain elitist in their administration. Interactive approaches to political communication expand the public sphere and decrease the elite sphere of power and influence".

On closer inspection, though, it appears that the constituting elements of cyberspace are markedly different – even contrasting – to those of democracy. The logistics and complexities of contemporary policy-making and public administration processes require a finite space in which meaningful civic communication can develop. This, in turn, requires the setting of rules as well as boundaries of some sort, i.e. drawing a line between those included in and excluded from that process and "imagined community" (Anderson 1991). Democracy as we know it requires at least two fundamental elements in order for the demos to hold power: (a) spatial boundaries delineating the community and (b) a set of rules constituting the community.

Yet, cyberspace by its nature is resistant to the existence of both a finite geographical space and rules. According to Katz (1998: 103) there is a "lack of fit between geopolitical boundaries and the boundaries defined by the new media technology"; Holmes (2002) concurs noting that "[s]tate-bound kinds of citizenship cannot be considered coterminous with the kinds of citizenship which are achieved on the Internet". Holmes does indicate that a global sense of citizenship is possible. Similarly, Poster (1999: 236) calls the net a "paranational culture that combines global connectivity with local specificity, a "glocal" phenomenon that seems to resist national political agendas and to befuddle national political leaderships".

These profound matches and mismatches between cyberspace and democracy, which were charted during an era of fast and global technological and social change, allowed for the development of quite radical discourses highlighting either the revolutionary change or the disastrous impact caused by the medium, starting in the late 1980s and receding somewhat in the late 1990s. Typical of the former, optimistic view are contributions such as the early writings of Rheingold (e.g. 1993, 2002) predicting the rise of virtual communities and smart mobs, and the work of organisations such as the Electronic Frontiers Foundation (EFF) and the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT). More recently proponents of the Open Source movement claim that "the Free Software experiment successfully undermines the private property rights based form of ownership" (Pedersen 2004: 11).

The critique of that thesis has been equally powerful and grand in its predictive scope. Jones (1996) argued that the creation of a global polity aiming at securing universal rights could act as a catalyst for the formation of a "World State": "There can be no universal cyberspace. A total war between limited sovereignties and global tyranny lies before us". Other scholars stress the dangers and negative effects allegedly caused by the technological revolution, e.g. social isolation, the loss of face-to-face contact, the compromise of our privacy and freedom, the multiplication of libellous or factually incorrect messages, the fragmentation of the democratic domain leading to inequality and lack of collective identity (Virilio 1997).

The fear is that democracy will crumble "as the social fabric of society becomes fragmented and people become more isolated from one another" (Fisher and Wright 2001: 4; also Castells 1998, Nie and Erbring 2000, Uslaner 2004). Katz has repeatedly (e.g. 1998) argued that the multiplication of new media technologies is leading to the segmentation of the public sphere and the loss of collective identity and shared experience. Zizek (2006: 30) warns that "the hype of freedom on the web masks both disparities of power and the dangers of blurring real and virtual identities". Finally, the internet's reach, anonymity and lack of gatekeeping makes it particularly conducive to extremism; the proliferation of websites and forums harbouring fundamentalist causes and promoting radical practices demonstrates the potential for civic empowerment that is not necessarily benevolent (Banaji 2008a).

However, the interpenetration of online and offline practices, as well as the vastness of the factors at play, make the quest for a "black or white" effect futile. Fisher and Wright

(2001: 1) have called that discussion "ideologically charged, filled as much with the hopes and fears of individual authors as with the reality of the medium's effects". Similarly, Stevenson (2000: 204) highlights the technologically deterministic nature of many of these claims: "it is as if they have allowed themselves to [be] defined by the discourse of the other, and in doing so have robbed us of a future defined by political agency". International surveys, such as the one carried out by Norris (2001) found on the one hand a substantial and growing digital divide across and within nations, and on the other hand a consistent relationship between civic engagement and use of online political resources. Hence, it is becoming increasingly clear that the relationship between the internet and democracy is one which involves complex and multiple dynamics and one that has been posing a series of opportunities and challenges.

2.2 Beyond the Search for the "Net Effect"

In an attempt to empirically establish some of the claims mentioned above, a number of studies have tested the internet's effects on a range of civic facilitators, such as efficacy. The potential of the medium to boost citizens' sense of efficacy is obvious, as it offers less costly and demanding avenues to participation, and provides users with access to virtually infinite amounts of information. Also, due to its "pull" nature, the internet has the potential to facilitate deeper, intrinsic motivation for civic engagement as individual users choose to develop an interest in a political issue, as opposed to being urged to participate with a stick-and-carrot (external motivators) approach (Iyengar and Jackman 2004). On the negative side, users may feel discouraged because of the overwhelming availability and unstructured nature of online information. Without appropriate digital literacy the net may "replicate current knowledge gaps" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 2003). The evidence has been mixed and inconclusive. Pinkleton, Austin and Forman (1998) found that active media use is a significant predictor of external efficacy; similarly, Kenski and Stroud (2006) concluded that internet access was positively related to external political efficacy and political knowledge. Yet, Johnson and Kaye (2003) found no correlation between web use or reliance and external efficacy.

Another related question is whether the internet extends the power and ability of already engaged citizens ultimately furthering the divide between those who participate and those who do not; or whether it attracts and empowers people who would not normally participate in traditional, offline political processes because they lack the resources, the civic networks or the necessary motivation. In this field, too, there are many conflicting views on the relationship between exposure to the internet and levels of active participation: some argue that the relationship is positive (Weber, Loumakis and Bergman 2003; Shah, Cho, Eveland and Kwak 2005) although minor (Kenski and Stroud 2006); others, that it depends on the type of use, i.e. whether it is for information seeking (positive) or entertainment (negative) (Shah, Kwak and Holbert 2001); a third strand of thought claims that "the internet supplements political activities but does not change people's level of involvement" (Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte and Hampton (2002: 312)), i.e. that it makes a quantitative rather than qualitative difference; while, there are also those who conclude that "online and offline political participation tend to reinforce each

other but enable increased participation at the margins" (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006: 306).

Overall, many scholars have cast a doubt over the capacity of the internet to change anything, instead positing that the political motivation of individual citizens and existing offline forms of social inequality will be reinforced, rather than transformed, online. Hill and Hughes (1998: 25) argued that "the contemporary explosion of electronic communication is not a paradigm shift. Rather, people are moving their age-old patterns of interaction into a new realm". In a similar tone, Norris did not find significant traces of a paradigm shift; she concluded that, if anything, the gap "between information-rich and information poor has widened substantially, at both individual and societal levels in the emergent internet era" (2000: 133).

These studies have led to a critique of the technology's inherent capacity to trigger social change. For example, Herring (2004: 27) declared that the "technology-driven agenda" is biased and underestimates the effects of social forces, while Hargittai (2004: 138) noted that "access and use of new media is embedded in various social processes and does not evolve in isolation from existing social institutions". It is widely thought that, after an initial period in the hands of innovators and early adopters, the internet is going through a process of "normalisation" (Herring 2004) which involves the replication of offline patterns (e.g. commodification of cyberspace, dumbing down of political discourse etc). Lievrouw called that phase the "mainstreaming" of new media (2004: 9).

While this strand of theory is apt at spotting the shortcomings of previous discourses based on technological determinism, it has often been guilty itself of reducing change in the means and modes of communication to a set of pre-existing socio-political patterns, and therefore overlooking some of the real challenges and opportunities directly or indirectly brought about by the new technologies.

Still, the quest for a "net effect" seems increasingly futile. This is best articulated by Agre (2002: 315) who argues that "[if] the internet has 'effects', it has many effects scattered throughout the structures of society, so that it is difficult if not impossible to compute a resultant of the vectors along which the various effects run". Although his "amplification model" concedes the importance of existing forces, it attempts to understand change by focusing on how specific institutions adapt to change and make use of the new technologies: "The internet changes nothing on its own, but it can amplify existing forces, and those amplified forces might change something" (2002: 317). It should be remembered that positive effects, negative effects and no effects are not mutually exclusive conditions.

In other words, the potential for positive (or, indeed, negative) change is there but that change will not come from technology itself; it will depend on how the medium is used by people, organisations and governments. As Coleman put it, "[t]he new media offer a virtual public sphere for the enhancement of democratic citizenship; but democratic culture is not build in to the software packages or digital systems which constitute the new media" (1999: 70).

This is a very useful perspective because it highlights the fact that the distinction between technology (e.g. the internet) and human agency (e.g. political motivation or socialisation) and the subsequent quest for the original source of change (or for a blanket effect) is largely artificial. In danger of stating the obvious, new information and communication technologies (NICTs) are created by humans, and become an embedded part of everyday activity affecting humans. This could be seen as an interaction between "offline" civic cultures and "online" cyber cultures – an interaction which, the more it develops, the more difficult it is to discern the boundaries between "online" and "offline". That interaction is organically intertwined with globalisation and creates unique opportunities and challenges for traditional political organisations, nation states, social movements, power networks and citizens.

Therefore, adopting a complacent stance based either on the premise that technology will automatically transform democratic engagement on its own, without the need for human intervention, or conversely on the premise that technology has no effect whatsoever and therefore we need not deal with it would be missing the point. A wealth of examples, data and evidence presented above and below clearly show that the internet *can be used to* empower and/or further disenfranchise citizens in the democratic arena.

2.3 New Media, New Politics? Focusing on the User/Citizen/Consumer

In light of the points made so far, this study adopts as starting points two working assumptions which are separate but, in fact, lead to the same conclusion, i.e. the need to better understand the user-citizen at the micro-social level in order to aid our interpretation of cultural shifts at the macro-social level. The first starting point is a proposition put forward by leading observers of online political communication, who have been calling for institution-building in order to maximise the internet's potential benefits and minimise its risks (Blumler and Coleman 2001, Blumler and Gurevitch 2001, Coleman 1999, Barber 1998, Tambini 1999). The ultimate success of tools designed to rebalance the democratic deficit depends on how relevant they are to the needs of end-users, i.e. the citizens they aim to empower (OCED 2001 in McNutt 2004: 16).

Therefore, it is imperative that we understand users' civic motivations and internet preferences and their attitudes towards existing civic material. That will help us build even more effective, legitimate, inclusive and relevant processes and institutions that will make the most of the new medium and reach the maximum number of people, especially those currently disengaged from politics. This is what Hacker (1996b: 2) calls "electronic democratization", i.e. the process of enhancing democracy by rebalancing power, as opposed to the more generic term of "electronic democracy", which sees electronic forms of direct expression (e-voting) as a replacement for "offline" democracy.

The second starting point is the concept of accelerated pluralism put forward by Bimber (1998). Bimber predicted that the internet would act as a catalyst for the politics of issues (Converse 1964), which has been steadily replacing the traditional political cleavages, ideologies and solidarities (Inglehart 1990). The de-alignment of social and party

cleavages and the increasing complexity of public policy and human activity have led to the formation of single-issue or ad hoc interest groups. These groups and movements mobilise around a specific cause (such as the right to abortion, fox hunting, anti-war demonstrations or gay rights) rather than an across-the-board ideology. As Kim (2009: 258) notes, "issue publics' natural inclination to issue-specific selective exposure comfortably fits with the unique technological features of the Web".

Parallel to the emergence of the "citizen-consumer" (Scammell 2000) and identities based on lifestyle choices, new technologies may further accelerate this trend as they have the capacity to facilitate mobilisation actions such as fund-raising, petitions, lobbying and protest. Also, the decentralised nature of the internet favours small and flexible movements as opposed to large, collective organisations such as trades unions or political parties (Ward, Gibson and Lusoli 2003). The potential for a more pluralistic and active mode of participation is obvious: if citizens can use the internet to engage in collective forms of mobilisation on the basis of issues they care about, challenging obscure power networks outside of the formal boundaries of the nation-state, then not only does this alleviate civic disengagement and apathy, but it could also ameliorate the democratic deficit which has been aggravated by globalisation.

At the same time, the boundaries between traditional "hard" news and entertainment media, channels and programmes are becoming less clear as news is integrated into the individual user's personalised online environment via desktop news tickers, mobile text services, news alerts and aggregators (e.g. Google News). The emergence and cultural hegemony of "infotainment" along with the simultaneous diffusion of the internet in citizens' everyday life render traditional dichotomies (between "online" and "offline", "hard" and "soft" news, political participation and everyday life) problematic (Diddi and LaRose 2006). That is not to say that users may not use different media in different ways, but that the conceptual and methodological distinctions between these areas need to be reconsidered. Similarly, established means of understanding political participation ought to be updated and contextualised.

Hence, in addition to asking whether the internet is conducive to traditional avenues of political participation, such as contacting an MP or getting information about local services (e.g. Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006, Ward, Gibson and Lusoli 2003), it may be useful to examine the ways in which the net can facilitate alternative ways of youth civic engagement, which would perhaps be more at ease with the blurred boundaries outlined before. New information technologies may "encourage new forms of engagement that are sufficiently different from our traditional indicators to fall beneath our radar screen" (Delli Carpini 2000: 348). A key part of focusing on the user/citizen and linking internet uses to civic attitudes is grounding choices and motivations in the context of everyday life:

> "By contextualizing internet use within everyday life, research seeks to counter the technologically determinist assumption that the internet is external to, and so has an impact on, society; rather, it is longer, multidimensional processes of social change that shape the introduction of technology – in the family and childhood, leisure and lifestyle, work and education and social values. (Livingstone 2003: 159).

Traditionally, the main tool for the analysis of audiences' media preferences and motivations has been Uses and Gratifications (Blumler and Katz 1974). In the following section we argue that U&G is particularly relevant and applicable to the internet, although it is necessary to adapt the model to the study's research agenda and tackle methodological limitations (e.g. see LaRose, Mastro and Eastin 2001).

2.4 Connecting Internet Uses to Civic Motivations

The model of Uses and Gratifications developed as a way to deal with the weaknesses and limitations of the media effects model, which was largely based on assumptions regarding the role of the audience in the communication process. Successive studies have shown that distinct gratifications can be derived from at least three separate sources: the content of the medium (e.g. entertainment in comedy programmes), exposure to the medium per se (i.e. the process of using the medium, e.g. "zapping" TV channels) and from the social context within which media exposure takes place (e.g. watching a film in the company of others in a cinema theatre) (Rossi 2002). Despite that core typology, one of the main issues that media scholars have been facing when trying to use U&G is the lack of a commonly accepted framework of media uses and motivations. That is to say, different researchers have been using different categories and variables to measure U&G such as content/process/communication or information/entertainment/convenience (Ruggiero 2000).

Because of the internet's "pull" nature, U&G is a particularly appropriate framework for the study of web use patterns. Given the medium's interactivity and pluralism, we can learn a lot about what motivates users to access, read, use, purchase, interact or identify with opinions, products, services and brands, as the growing body of research on internet U&G has shown (Stafford 2004; Kaye and Johnson 2002, 2004; Johnson and Kaye 2003; Eighmey and McCord 1998; Lin 2002).

Yet, there are at least three limitations that need to be tackled. The first such issue is a question that has often been directed at U&G studies and considered by many as its core limitation: to what extent are audiences really active? Are the media, genre and programme choices that they are making deliberate and conscious or influenced by external factors? Ko (2000) and Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) suggest that people use the internet instrumentally, but it would also be useful to refer to the work of LaRose and Eastin (2004) and Diddi and LaRose (2006) who put forward a powerful argument about the importance of habitual use:

> "When confronted by a myriad of media choices, the consumer lapses into habitual patterns of media consumption in order to conserve mental resources, rather than repeatedly engaging in active selection. […] [T]hey quickly stop agonizing over the news selection decision from day to day and moment to moment, as the uses and gratifications paradigm insists they should. Instead, they fall into a pattern of repeated media behaviour that is not subjected to active self-observation, a media habit" (Diddi and LaRose 2006: 194 – 195).

That habit only changes when the individual's normal routine, life cycle, immediate environment or information facilitates change, perhaps due to a major event or an emerging technological application. It should be noted that habitual use of the media is different from ritualistic gratification, which is one of the main motivations for media use (see Rubin 1984) and presumes an active preference of the individual for a well-known media programme for the precise purpose of relaxation or pastime.

The second limitation of U&G regards the extent to which we should separate between information, entertainment and socialisation gratifications, especially in the context of converged, multimedia environments. The internet's applications and functions challenge the boundaries amongst U&G categories. Does email fall under socialisation, information-seeking or pastime? Where does blogging or podcasting fit into the model? To what extent do U&G allow for active civic participation, which has traditionally been separate from mere media consumption, but is now possible online?

This leads us to the third issue: if we aim to understand the conditions under which young users exploit the internet's civic potential (i.e. when, where, how and why they participate), then there needs to be a closer link between internet uses/motivations and civic attitudes/motivations (along the lines of Vincent and Basil 1997). Given what was said before about the organic link between communication and citizenship, our analytical tools should allow for that interaction between the medium and the process of participating.

All of these limitations can be ameliorated by opening up the study of internet uses and motivations to users' own narratives. The model of U&G has traditionally been applied through quantitative surveys using factor analysis of pre-defined categories (Bouwman and Van de Wijngaert 2002). This study chooses to use close-ended quantitative measurements as a baseline and subsequently emphasise on young people's own civic and web narratives through open-ended questions and user evaluations. In other words, we need to contextualize both civic engagement *and* internet uses in order to explore young people's attitudes towards participation, the ways (if any) in which they use the net for civic purposes and ultimately to translate civic motivators into practical web applications and materials that have the potential of mobilising them.

2.5 The Internet in Young People's Everyday Life

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the internet is quickly penetrating the household and becoming integrated in citizens' everyday life – especially in the daily lives of teenagers, young adults and students (Ogan, Ozakca and Groshek 2008, Livingstone 2002). According to the 2009 Oxford Internet Survey, 70% of Britons use the internet, primarily at home, which is considered particularly important for the development of digital literacy (Dutton, Helsper and Gerber 2009). These findings are consistent with the previous OxIS, which also highlighted the increasing importance of the net for people in the UK: seventy percent of all respondents considered the internet to be an important part of their everyday life, while 64% thought that losing access would

cause a disruption to their lives (the rate amongst students is 82%) (Dutton and Helsper 2007, Appendix A – Table A10).

Other indications of the net's prominence in daily life include the penetration of broadband across UK households using the net (85%) and the steep rise of wireless connections. These results are consistent with previous surveys (e.g. Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006: 302), which found that individuals are increasingly integrating the internet into their everyday lives, hence increasing its potential to shape the activities they carry out. A digital divide can still be discerned in these studies as approximately a third of citizens do not have the necessary IT resources or core skills. It should be reiterated that the digital divide is not just a UK problem, as many studies have established associations between socio-economic or educational variables and levels of internet access and use (e.g. Vromen 2007).

Levels of internet efficacy amongst students are very high (86%, Table A10), while the penetration of the medium to youth life appears to be qualitatively different to previous media. Based on autobiographical essays written by 72 college students in the US, McMillan and Morrison (2006) found that many of them felt dependent on the medium. Overall, they found a "deep personal need" for the internet that "exists in all spheres of the individual's life but develops most intensely when it becomes highly personal" (2006: 87). Similar results were produced by Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) and Metzger, Flanagin and Zwarun (2003) indicating that the use of the internet for news, entertainment and research is woven into the fabric of students' daily routines.

However, these facts should be put in the context of youth culture, which is neither exclusively online, nor necessarily similar to previous generations' media practices. Livingstone (2003: 151) noticed a blurring of the boundaries between the "virtual" and "real" worlds arguing that young people "integrate on- and offline communication in order to sustain their social networks, moving freely between different communication forms". One example of that is the practice of multi-tasking with a PC (OxIS 2007 - Table A10; Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis 2001). Multitasking involves undertaking a number of tasks simultaneously, such as chatting to a friend via Instant Messenger while downloading a podcast, listening to web radio and working on an assignment. The long-term impact of such emerging practices on areas such as cognitive skills, attention span and socialisation are currently being debated (Greenfield 2003).

Another area which needs to be explored further is young people's news consumption patterns, which usually form during the transition to higher education or first employment (Al-Obaidi, Lamb-Williams and Mordas 2004, Diddi and LaRose 2006: 196). The internet has become the "first port of call" when it comes to acquiring information of any kind, including getting up to date with news and current affairs (Dutton and Helsper 2007: 4, Table A11) as well as "for those who feel underserved by conventional mass media" (Hargreaves and Thomas 2002: 46).

It has been shown that young users are particularly active in – and apt at – seeking information online, which could lead to new patterns of news consumption, not because of the users' age per se, but because they have developed a much deeper familiarity

with the medium than previous generations (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006: 309). Based on a large survey of visitors of the Big Brother site, Jones (2003: 2) brands this a "DIY news seeking behaviour of the younger voter today […] These young people are accessing an eclectic range of sources and engaging in a set of, as yet little understood, communication routines". Jones identified three patterns of online youth behaviour ("infotainment", "social network" and "seeking reality") all of which are based on active engagement with the material and with other people. This appears to be a fairly unconventional approach to information on public affairs, which includes seeking alternative sources and combining entertainment with information in a 24/7 virtual environment in which news is embedded (through tickers, RSS feeds, aggregators, search engines, blogs, podcasts etc) but also mixed with opinion, argument, irrelevant, contradictory or even fictional material.

The role of politics and civic engagement in this simultaneously fragmented and converged online environment is unknown and perhaps uncertain – that is to say, it may depend on the development of applications and materials that effectively reach young users and cater to their civic needs. Although the data mentioned here demonstrate the integration of the internet in youth everyday life in a quantitative sense, many questions are still open regarding the ways in which users seek, process and follow up information and opportunities on the web. In particular, the role of reputation needs to be explored with reference to the role of established ("old media") news organisations and search engines, which are the dominant news providers. Diddi and LaRose (2006: 205) found that "internet portal sites [Yahoo, MSN, AOL] were among the most frequently consulted news sources [by their young participants], second only to the campus newspaper". According to the 2007 OxIS survey, 57% of users self-report being dependent on search engines for their information search (considerably up from 19% in 2005). This trend has fundamental implications for gate-keeping and pluralism, as well as the relationship between new and old media. These questions are part of a broader debate on whether young people are exploiting the net's potential through innovative and creative uses or whether they are merely using the medium in a functional, passive or habitual way.

Based on the evidence presented here, it would be reasonable to assume that precisely because of its integration into youth lives the internet has the *potential* to facilitate youth empowerment, albeit a "vulnerable potential" (Gurevitch and Blumler 2003). Above all else, this potential is founded upon the unprecedented advantage that young people enjoy in the online world – in contrast to their historical under-representation in traditional political action – (Iyengar and Jackman 2004: 3), as well as the medium's capacity for interactivity and co-production. It is this particular potential for a more symmetrical, meaningful civic communication that might motivate citizens, such as the young, who would not normally consider participating because of low levels of external efficacy (Dutton and Helsper 2007: 310).

Therefore, it is important to ask whether we are, really, witnessing a revolution of conscious exploitation of the internet by young content creators - what Bruns (2005) called "produsers" (combining media use with production of original material) - possibly focusing on issues that are relevant to their lifeworld; or whether teens and young adults

merely use the medium for escapism and passive consumption of information in the same way that they might have functionally accessed entertainment media before.

2.6 Active "Produsers" or Passive Consumers?

Recent studies concur that internet use in the UK for traditional political activities has been consistently low. For example, the 2007 Oxford Internet Survey found that "the most popular [political] activity (signing online petitions) is undertaken by less than one tenth of Internet users" (Dutton and Helsper 2007: 5) and that "the number of civic activities undertaken remains very low" (2007: 72, Table A11). Moreover, while contact with (e)government has reached 46%, the percentage of people using the internet to communicate with government is lower in comparison with European or North American countries and quite low in comparison with e-commerce figures (2007: 72).

Still, there are some encouraging signs as far as younger users are concerned. Based on data from the UK Children Go Online project, Livingstone and Bober (2005: 3) found that "54% of 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly have sought out sites concerned with political or civic issues". Also, it appears that young people are more likely to engage in online than offline politics, while some of them (significantly, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds) prefer online-only politics (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2005), which could mean that sites utilizing new media for civic mobilisation are reaching beyond the "usual suspects". In a previous study, Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2002) noted that while only 1/10 of 15-24-year-olds took part in offline activities, three times as many engaged politically online.

In some respects, these trends may be consistent with Coleman and Rowe's (2005) thesis that those at the centre of the political establishment are failing to engage and interact with young people who prefer more alternative, informal and dynamic forms of interaction and participation through peer-to-peer systems (P2P) and social networking sites. The evidence, however, regarding youth take-up of a more active approach to the use of the internet is still inconclusive. One such area of internet uses that could potentially have positive repercussions regarding youth engagement is online content creation. Active and creative use of the internet, building on the online youth culture described earlier, could enrich the individual with all the benefits of civic engagement such as voice expression, development of identity, better argumentation skills, interaction with diverse interests and opinions and intellectual stimulation.

Such activities are already widespread amongst American youth. Several surveys from the Pew Internet & American Life Project and the Center for Social Media present an encouraging outlook in terms of youth content creation. According to Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson (2004: 1) young people are not mere consumers of digital content – "they are active participants and creators, developing content, designing personal websites, and launching their own online enterprises". Similarly, Lenhart, Madden and Hitlin (2005: i) concluded that "[y]outh are leading the transition to a fully wired and mobile nation" noting that the majority of teenagers go online at least daily and that most get their news online. As far as content creation is concerned, Lenhart,

Horrigan and Fallows (2004) found that 44% of all US internet users had created content for the online world through creating or posting to websites and weblogs, and sharing files; "power creators" are much more likely to be young (avg. age of 25). Content creation activities such as sharing artwork and remixing content found online is even greater amongst teenagers (Lenhart and Madden 2005).

Online content creation is less widespread amongst UK youth. Dutton and Helsper found a clear divide between passive activities (covering, at best, interpersonal communication such as email and instant messaging) and active content production which is still limited to less than 1 out of 5 users (see Table A12). "OxIS 2007 shows that online content production has not yet reached a large proportion of users. Passive production such as posting pictures is most common, while those kinds of production that require more continuous activity such as maintaining a website or blogging are less popular" (2007: 61). Interestingly, the recent rise of social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo, has blurred that distinction as it potentially combines simple tasks such as uploading photographs with more advanced activities, such as creating pages for events and groups. However, the shelf life and actual utility of many of these activities is uncertain.

Livingstone and Bober's research (2005: 18) "identified only modest ways in which the internet encourages creativity, interactivity and civic participation", while popular activities such as quizzes and e-polls were not particularly creative or demanding. They found that many young people "are not yet taking up the full potential of the internet, for example visiting a narrow range of sites or not interacting with sites" (2005: 2). Even Coleman and Rowe's encouraging account of the emerging youth culture notes that "most young people tend to use and talk about the Internet in terms of consumption" (2005: 8); most of their young (13-18) participants had not even heard of blogs and regarded the Internet as a supplementary resource for coping with busy lives, i.e. they took what we defined earlier as a functional approach to the internet.

In conclusion, it appears that while the internet has the potential to facilitate a more pluralistic and participatory youth civic culture, that potential may not yet have been exploited. As argued earlier, this will not happen automatically; it will depend on how governments, organisations and individual citizens use the medium. There are strong indications that interesting patterns of news consumption and social interaction are emerging amongst many young people. Passera (2006) notes that, within a new media ecosystem, there is a shift in the way young people learn, interact with each other and react to brands and organisations. The rise of citizen journalism and user-generated content create significant opportunities for the democratisation of the public sphere and the opening-up of the "gates" to the disenfranchised citizen; yet, they also create fundamental challenges in terms of credibility, trust and reputation.

Hence, understanding the factors that motivate citizens to use the internet for civic purposes is essential. In particular, it is crucial to compare and contrast the agendas and mobilisation approaches of civic organisations with the needs and preferences of the end-users, i.e. in our case, young citizens. As Papacharissi (2002: 15) stresses, "online technologies render participation in the political sphere more convenient, but do not

guarantee it". Therefore, it is important to understand whether and how civic organisations are tapping into this unique opportunity to engage with youth audiences, and subsequently to examine young people's own evaluations of the online civic material that is available.

2.7 Online Youth Civic Engagement in the UK: Practices and Problems

With the exception of the recent CivicWeb project (e.g. Banaji 2008b), the empirical evidence on how UK civic organisations and non-governmental movements have utilised the net to empower and mobilise young citizens is surprisingly limited (Zimmermann and Erbe 2002: 113). This may be symptomatic of limited civic use. Research on UK practice has traditionally focused on internet utilisation by parliaments, political parties and MPs (e.g. Ward, Gibson and Lusoli 2003; Ward 2005; Jackson 2003), government departments and local authorities (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, Callaghan and Yared 2002). The common conclusion of these studies is that established political organisations have not exploited the internet to its maximum potential at all. Politically, the internet has been an untapped resource – a dumping ground for existing, offline promotional material (also known as 'shovelware') without any real consideration for the particular characteristics, challenges and opportunities posed by this relatively new medium.

There have been several efforts in recent years to facilitate online youth participation in the UK through a series of web spaces set up by organisations funded by, or closely working with, government and parliament. Examples include the HeadsUp forum established by the Hansard Society, and the DoPolitics site set up by Electoral Commission – an independent body accountable to the UK Parliament. Furthermore, several youth parliaments, forums and assemblies, which aim to offer UK youth with additional means of participation and voice simulating the 'adult' parliament, have been set up around the country (Scottish Youth Parliament, Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Funky Dragon in Wales, as well as the UK Youth Parliament itself).

A number of scholars in the UK (Smith, Lister, Middleton and Cox 2005) and internationally (Bessant 2004) have expressed scepticism about the recent government enthusiasm for youth participation, arguing that it is based on a misperception of youth and its needs, as well as a sketchily conceptualised and operationalised view of democratic practice and its requirements. Davies (2004: 2) raises an important question that goes to the heart of the debate regarding electronic democratisation and online participation: "is there a role for government in the *decentralised* social and political activities that take place online?".

Established political institutions have received a lot of criticism both for the way they manage their own business online (e-government, political websites) and for the quality and quantity of support they offer to civil society (e.g. Dutil, Howard, Langford and Roy 2007). According to Blumler and Coleman:

> "government is finding it extremely difficult to respond satisfactorily to the many new needs and problems that are continually being thrown up by the pressures of a rapidly

changing society. Top-down ways of coping – through established bureaucratic routines, inter-departmental committees, commissioning opinion surveys etc. – are simply inadequate. Better ways of tapping people's experience and felt needs and of feeding them into the making of laws and policy are required" (2001: 5).

This 'top-down' notion of online political communication is aggravated by what Chadwick and May (2003) call the "managerial" approach to e-democracy, which often dominates thinking over the civic utilisation of the internet. Managerialism views the web as a means of improving efficiency in the transactions between government and its "clients", including the citizens. It is thought that this approach does not promote a deeper and more politically meaningful interaction between the political establishment and the public, especially those currently disengaged from the political process.

Perhaps surprisingly, some early research on grassroots movements and issue groups (Pickerill 2001, Earl 2006) notes that such organisations, too, have not really made the most of the web, which is paradoxical as their modus operandi is quite compatible to the medium's nature. Issue campaigns, such as the environmental, anti-war and alternative/anti-globalisation movements, are favoured by the rhizomatic structure of the internet, which challenges hierarchies, borders and control and can facilitate awareness, recruitment, resources and direct action. Other studies of voluntary organisations' web presence (such as Taylor and Burt 2001) found that such NGOs make a range of contributions to the democratic polity with high quality information, contact details and reasonably good navigation. However, it was also found that these sites generally lacked the capacity for democratic interactivity, e.g. by not seeking the views or preferences of users and only promoting weak forms of discussion.

Based on the developments outlined above, this study is founded upon the need to understand the civic needs and online behaviours of end-users of civic websites, i.e. young citizens. This requires the employment of analytical tools from the field of civic engagement, as well as from that of web user experience.

2.8 Towards the Study of Civic Usability: Bringing Together Civic Mobilisation and User Experience

The theory and practice of web usability has grown rapidly over the last ten years, leading to the widespread implementation of standards, benchmarks and practices, especially in the corporate sector (e.g. ISO 13407 1999). The work of Nielsen (e.g. Nielsen and Tahir 2001, Nielsen 2009b) has been particularly instrumental in setting and disseminating industry standards. However, while the usability industry has witnessed considerable advances in the development of sophisticated information architecture and user testing practices, such as agile software design and eye tracking (e.g. Tzanidou, Petre, Minocha and Grayson 2005), the "civic web" still appears far removed from the end user, i.e. the citizen.

The present study aims to address an important gap in the literature of online youth civic engagement, i.e. the study of the civic web with an emphasis on the user – what could

be called *civic usability*. Mitra, Willyard, Platt and Parsons (2005) is one of the very few studies examining young people's (and in particular students') criteria of evaluating websites. Moreover, Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson and Kurpius (2008) is the only published scholarly study that has attempted to link a user-oriented media theory (Uses and Gratifications) to the issue of civic engagement and apply that to an examination of civic sites' usability with the view to encouraging citizens to participate in politics via the net. Coleman et al. found "no literature that discussed usability testing of websites for non-commercial sites such as those news organizations, governments, candidates, non-profits or NGOs" (2008: 187) and reiterate that "there is no research that examines which features of a website actually enhance or impede civic engagement" (2008: 180). While Coleman et al. carried out an experimental design, our study will be taking a slightly different approach, juxtaposing a comprehensive civic web content analysis with users' own evaluations and responses to civic websites.

Such an investigation could potentially shed some light on the scholarly divide amongst those who consider civic-minded young people to constitute a distinct demographic (Livingstone, Bober and Helsper 2005) and those who argue that everyday internet activities such as consumption and online networking go hand-in-hand with digital political participation (de Vreese 2007). That is to say, it is uncertain whether there is a line separating those who are willing to participate online from the majority of young users/citizens/consumers who engage in a range of other, non-civic activities. This study will be partly focusing on a group of highly internet-literate media students, who, however, are not part of a politically active community. This will allow us to establish whether – and, if so, under which conditions – these young people are willing to cross that important but elusive line of engagement and use the net for civic purposes. It may be the case that in addition to empowering citizens who, for a number of reasons, are already mobilised (i.e. are intrinsically motivated), civic websites may offer users a range of stimuli that motivate citizens extrinsically and boost their sense of external efficacy (Kim 2007).

It is, thus, essential to first contextualise and link young people's civic attitudes to their internet uses; only through understanding what motivates young citizens to engage with civic and global issues online will we be able to build those cultural and institutional safeguards, which will facilitate access and engagement with the democratic process – what scholars call an "enabling environment" (McNutt 2004). In order to do that, the study will be exploring participants civic narratives – and especially key motivators and de-motivators – and, subsequently, asking users to translate these factors into specific online features, activities and applications that they would like to see on civic websites.

This will be followed by an in-depth content analysis of civic websites in order to register and evaluate current approaches to online engagement in the UK online public sphere – and compare those to the participants' expectations and needs. A range of criteria and benchmarks covering content, design, navigation and interactivity will be employed from the relevant literature. A range of civic organisations – both government-led and non-governmental – have produced websites aiming to promote issue campaigns, raise awareness and mobilise citizens. It is important to evaluate the extent to which such efforts meet basic standards of accessibility, transparency, appeal, interactivity, as well

as substantial empowerment. Burt and Taylor (2008: 1051) argue that civic sites should include "guidance on how to engage with the formal institutions of government and with private enterprise, through the exercise of 'consumer democratic rights'", as well as online links to various independent bodies and affiliate organisations, along with participation tools and emotive imagery.

One of the common pitfalls amongst top-down youth websites is their approach to aesthetics and, in particular, their effort to "look cool". As Coleman and Rowe 2005 note, such as attempts are bound to fail, especially if sites are not designed by young people themselves. Content creators and designers need to have an in-depth understanding of what users are looking for in a website. The appeal of a site, however, is only one aspect of its design. Attracting young users to an online space is not enough in itself. Accessibility and usability are major factors that ought to guide both design and content. New information and communication technologies can be particularly empowering for traditionally marginalised groups such as young people, the disabled or those with mental illnesses (Mäkinen 2004). Access to the online public sphere should include the ability to make the most of the medium, i.e. to be able to access the tools and facilities available, as well as understand the online culture, language and risks (Diamond and Shreve 2004). Therefore, enhancing accessibility can be achieved by: "providing online information in terms of specific live events or policy issues; search engines; software for style checking and improving the intelligibility of government texts; multilingual translations of official documents; and provision of online glossaries" (OCED 2001 in McNutt 2004: 16) as well as providing for people with special needs.

The information, tools and community prospects offered by a site also need to be considered carefully as these are ultimately the substantive elements upon which the potential of mobilisation depends. At a first level this involves making people care about the organisation's agenda or issue, i.e. appealing either to the citizens' values and moral principles, or to their personal interest. Ideally, the website should have a specific agenda with a clear focus, grounded in a local setting or a specific problem. In addition to motivating visitors into engaging with an issue, we hypothesise that demonstrating the relevance of an issue, as well as specific ways through which the citizen can make a difference or contribute to a debate, should be vital in facilitating civic efficacy. Coleman (1999: 71) argues that "any notion of a relationship between public input and policy output" is currently missing from politicians' use of the internet.

That is to say, there needs to be a link between the participating process and the participants' lifeworld, i.e. a bridge between the 'macro' and 'micro' levels of politics. Delli Carpini (2000: 346) notes that civic engagement has become defined "as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, cleaning trash from a local river, or tutoring a child once a week". It is important to test whether civic websites demonstrate (or miss) "an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated 'problems' these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy", i.e. being able to connect one's actions to the world at large and to see the outcome of their contribution. That links back to the process of political socialisation and how individuals integrate themselves into the body politic, and it is precisely what online youth – or indeed any civic – engagement projects ought to do.

Another common problem of online discussion and consultation spaces is the lack of follow-up action; the mere "existence of a communications channel counts for nothing if information is not acted upon" (Coleman, Morrison and Svennevig 2006: 6). As Livingstone, Bober and Helsper (2005: 306) explain "other than receiving information, it is unclear to young people what they stand to gain from the opportunity to 'have their say' online". Accountability and transparency are important ingredients for an effective and credible online presence (OECD 2001).

Finally, scholars have argued that, in addition to design and content, the existence of an online community is a decisive factor in a successful online strategy. This is particularly important for sites attempting to mobilise younger users who, as discussed above, seem to favour a mode of interaction along the lines of Peer-to-Peer (P2P) and Social Networking Sites (SNS). According to Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson (2004: 14), even if the site features good material "websites may be most effective when used within a well-defined community that can commit to sustained use… as opposed to one-time, involvement".

These criteria for the analysis of civic websites are further distilled in Chapter 3. However, merely evaluating what is available "out there" is not enough to assess a site's eventual success, nor does it give us any understanding of what young people are actually looking for and how they respond to that real-life material. For that reason, another major objective of this study is to compare the analysis of website content with young users' own evaluations of that material as part of our effort to investigate their online civic attitudes. This is essentially an exploratory attempt to facilitate a dialogue between the (online civic) text and the (young citizen) user, as well as between potential and actual uses – both by civic producers and users.

The broader aim of this quest is to understand whether a more interactive and empowering mode of civic communication has emerged, or if not yet, whether such a mode is possible and under which conditions. Recent evidence provided by site producers (Banaji 2008b) suggests that the number of young people who actually take up the offers for engagement via youth sites and projects is quite small. It is important to establish whether there is a gap of expectations between online civic texts and end-users. This dialectical approach can be particularly beneficial to the study of interactivity both as an attribute of technology and as a perceived user experience (Sundar 2004), addressing potentially important mismatches between producers and users.

Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006: 300) found that "[c]ompared to the debate generated around [the issue of the internet and civic engagement], there have been relatively few empirical studies of [online] political behaviour in both the United States and United Kingdom"; that is particularly true regarding *youth* political behaviour and even more so in a way that links an evaluation of online civic material that is already available with young users' own narratives, expectations and reactions. It is that gap that this study attempts to address in the following chapters.

Chapter 3
Research Design and Methodology

"It is important to understand not just why people are disengaging from public life and what forms of media contribute to this, but also to discover ways to counteract this trend. Social science should strive not only to understand, explain and predict opinions, attitudes and behavior, but also to improve society by findings ways to promote social interaction and civic engagement".

(Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson and Kurpius 2008: 180)

The purpose of this chapter is to set out the study's research agenda, methodological approach and data collection / analysis processes. The chapter starts with an outline of the primary study's core aim, objectives and rationale, followed by a presentation of the overall epistemological approach and research design chosen to operationalise those objectives. Each of the three core empirical components of the study is then presented in turn detailing the methods, tools and data elicitation and analysis techniques used. As this is an interdisciplinary project that uses a range of methods aiming to make an original contribution to a quite underdeveloped field, a number of significant methodological questions arose during the planning and realisation of the research. Such questions touch upon research design principles, trade-offs between depth and breadth, ethical implications, limitations as well as synergies amongst the study's various elements, and are addressed throughout this chapter.

3.1 Aim, Objectives and Rationale

The overall aim of the primary research conducted for this study is to explore the factors that would motivate young people to (or de-motivate them from) taking a more active civic approach to the internet.

In order to do that we need:

Objective 1: *to investigate the participants' attitudes towards civic engagement and issues and establish key motivating and de-motivating factors*

Before identifying the specific *online* strategies and tools that may appeal to, and empower, younger people, it is vital to explore their feelings towards democracy, participation and civic issues, as well as factors that would motivate them to engage altogether. As mentioned earlier, technology in general and the internet in particular have the potential to empower citizens but the underlying motivations and attitudes depend on deeper political, socio-cultural and institutional root causes, which need to be taken into account. In other words, we cannot build effective technological applications, or indeed political institutions, unless we know precisely which deficiencies, problems or other issues these services are meant to address.

Objective 2: *to survey the participants' patterns of internet use, including their levels of online civic engagement, and explore how their civic attitudes translate into specific online preferences and expectations from civic websites*

If we aim to utilise a medium in order to reach and mobilise its users, then it is vital that we understand those users' routines, practices and preferences. Due to the net's virtual infinity and "pull" nature, we cannot assume that it is possible to design a service, facility or civic tool without considering the needs and practices of our target group. Part of this agenda is probing the extent to which young people are using the internet in civically oriented innovative and creative ways or following habitual patterns of functional or passive use.

Objective 3: *to evaluate the civic material available to young people by assessing the websites of youth and non-governmental organisations using a range of content, design and interactivity benchmarks.*

It has been suggested that civic organisations have so far underutilised the internet in terms of its democratic potential, although the need for more rigorous empirical research is marked. If that hypothesis were confirmed, it could partly explain why there has not been an improvement in the levels of youth engagement with politics despite the apparent abundance of available communication means. Furthermore, such an exercise can provide us with crucial data regarding the approach that political organisations are taking towards both the medium and younger citizens. However, an evaluation of existing civic content on the internet is important for an additional, related reason, i.e. because it provides us with an ideal baseline for the exploration of young users' own attitudes towards online civic engagement through their responses to what youth groups and NGOs are offering them online – producing a dialogue between (online civic) text and users.

Objective 4: *to analyse users' own evaluations of sampled civic websites and, through that, compare and contrast participants' civic motivators and de-motivators to the online civic text.*

Having explored the participants' civic attitudes and internet use patterns, as well as having conducted an in-depth assessment of existing civic material online, we can then move on to the final stage, which is exploring young people's own responses to the sampled material. The main purpose of that inquiry is to identify particular elements of website design or content that appealed to participants – or, conversely, that would deter them from engaging through those sites – as well as the underlying roots of those motivators and de-motivators. Establishing the main criteria on which users base their assessments, comparing post-evaluation responses to pre-evaluation expectations, and surveying their attitudes towards certain mobilisation strategies are all integral techniques in facilitating the development of civic usability.

The four objectives, corresponding research questions and links to the literature review are outlined in Appendix B, Table B1. One major advantage and original contribution of the approach outlined above is that it contextualises and links young people's civic attitudes to their online practices – two fields of study that have traditionally been explored separately but, as the evidence suggests, may be becoming increasingly intertwined. Furthermore, this approach opens up the study of internet uses and motivations to users' own narratives. A big part of the research on young people and the internet has focused on dangers and negative effects; as McMillan and Morrison (2006: 74) note, we need to move beyond "behaviorist assumptions and listen to young people's own experiences with new media technologies".

As mentioned already, there are extremely few studies on online content evaluation by young users in a political context. Montgomery et al. conducted an in-depth content analysis of youth civic sites in the US and found "an abundance of civic and political activity by and for youth" (2004: 2). Apart from adapting this to the UK context and

comparing the content with young users' actual experiences, we also need to ask whether those who use these facilities are citizens who are *already* keen to participate in public affairs or whether the sampled sites can reach across population groups that are disengaged, sceptical of the political process or do not feel that they have the power to make a difference. Moreover, Livingstone and Bober (2005: 19) highlight the need to investigate best practices for participatory websites and offer a set of recommendations for such sites, which will be produced in latter chapters.

There is one additional dimension to the study's approach that aims to make an original contribution to the existing body of knowledge: most of the websites sampled for the content analysis and, even more so, the sub-sample of the four sites chosen for the user evaluations belong to charities and organisations associated with important global civic issues such as climate change, global poverty, organic food and factory farming. These are certainly pressing matters with massive implications for humanity, but also, crucially, issues that would fall under the broad term of post-modern or issue politics (Inglehart 1990) as opposed to traditional socio-political cleavages (SES/class, religion, centre/periphery). That allows us, firstly, to go beyond the boundaries of institutions such as political parties and government departments and evaluate the online strategies of NGOs and issue groups that may (or may not) be closer to citizen-consumers' daily lives; and, secondly, to further probe into young participants' global awareness and attitude towards such causes. That in turn can reveal whether they engage in such activities, which fall within a broader conceptualisation of the political and are associated with emerging or alternative forms of participation.

3.2 Research Design and Methodological Approach

A range of qualitative and quantitative methods were employed for this study in order to facilitate the "dialogue" between online civic text and young users. Core tools of the case study approach were used, such as purposive sampling and data triangulation. The research design (**Figure 1**) comprises three core elements:

Main Study 1 [users]: a large survey of Bournemouth University's Media School undergraduate students (n=487) conducted in late 2004 on a range of questions related to civic engagement, attitudes towards civic issues, news media access and internet uses (Appendix C). The choice of this student community was based on a number of working propositions and hypotheses outlined below and underpinned by a preliminary study of the use of the internet as a mobilisation tool in the Bournemouth University community, in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War (Gerodimos 2003 and Appendix D).

Main Study 2 [text]: in-depth content analysis of 20 youth and NGO/issue websites conducted in 2005-06 on a range of features covering all major aspects of content, design and interactivity (Appendix E). A follow up evaluation was conducted in 2008-09 so as to check for major changes in terms of content, design or interactivity and capture shifts related to the meteoric rise of web 2.0. The choice of websites sampled for the content analysis was underpinned by a preliminary hyperlink network analysis of UK

youth and issue networks conducted in the same period so as to identify the key nodes in the UK's online civil society (Appendix F).

Main Study 3 [text v. users]: individual user evaluations and group discussions with a sub-sample of participants from MS1 (n=46 users) on a sub-sample of websites from MS2 (n=4 sites) conducted in March 2006 (Appendices G, H, I and J). These sessions contextualised participants' evaluations of the sampled sites by surveying their civic attitudes and internet use patterns with particular emphasis on the factors that would motivate them to take a more active civic stance. In other words, generic civic and online behaviours were applied onto specific, actual civic material from the sampled sites.

Before presenting these elements of the study in more detail it is crucial to elucidate the rationale and philosophy upon which this research design is based – in particular the processes of sampling and triangulation. At the level of users, focusing on a single student community is intended to address a gap in the existing scholarship as few studies have focused on young adults in general and the UK student body in particular (several UK studies focus on pre-teen children or adolescents, e.g. see Livingstone 2003 and McMillan and Morrison 2006). In fact, this particular student community was deemed ideal as a case study of UK youth vis-à-vis the objectives set earlier. Whilst not being otherwise atypical of many UK universities' student populations, this community has two particular traits:

- due to the learning environment and the subject matter of their studies, Media School students have high levels of internet literacy
- at the same time, a preliminary study of this community during a time of civic upheaval (2nd Iraq War) indicated very low levels of student engagement through mobilisation avenues such as student societies and street demonstrations (Gerodimos 2003 and Appendix D).

Consequently, this particular community offers a considerable margin for the internet to constitute an effective means for civic empowerment (as opposed to demographic groups that are *both* internet literate and already engaged, or to those who are *neither* engaged nor digitally literate). Hence, were the findings of this study to demonstrate that, indeed, there are ways to reach and mobilise these young people through the net, then that would constitute a positive outcome. Conversely, if the study were to identify insurmountable obstacles that impede these highly internet literate citizens' civic mobilisation, then the outlook would be bleaker for the broader population. It is strictly in this sense, and whilst acknowledging the limits of that approach, that our findings may provide us with material that, in addition to offering valuable qualitative insights into the civic and online "thought processes" of these young people, might also be considered indicative of patterns in the broader UK youth population.

At the level of the online civic text, a wide range of youth and NGO websites were chosen and analysed following a preliminary mapping of the UK's civil society via Hyperlink Network Analysis. Four of these sites were then selected covering a range of global civic issues and mobilisation approaches. In the final stage of the research users were asked to offer their evaluations and responses on existing online civic material. This

process of multiple filtering and contextualisation meets the commonly accepted principles of the case study approach (Creswell 1998: 61), i.e.

- a "bounded system": the study focuses on a specific student community which is extensively contextualised; furthermore, it analyses a specific set of websites within the context of UK-wide online networks
- "detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context": this is achieved by using multiple sources of in-depth data elicitation to provide a detailed picture of the case under investigation; the emphasis being on exploration and interpretation, rather than formal generalisation.

The research design combines quantitative with qualitative elements as well as structured (close-ended), open-ended and unstructured ("in their own words") variables, a framework which is particularly appropriate for the case study approach (Yin 2003) as it produces rich data and supports triangulation. Creswell (1998: 213) defines triangulation as the search for the convergence of information. That verification of findings is particularly crucial in case studies in order to strengthen the validity of data. Livingstone (2003: 158) notes that "although the combination of qualitative and quantitative research is widely valued – for 'triangulation' allows one to identify and address differences in findings or interpretation arising from the use of different methods – it remains the case that little such research has been published [on the area of young people's new media uses]".

Such instances of "triangulation protocols" (Denzin 1970) occur throughout this study: the large survey and the user evaluation complement each other in terms of the exploration of participants' civic attitudes and internet routines; the data from the content analysis is triangulated with users' own evaluations of the selected sites; these evaluations themselves include both structured questions (collected individually from each participant) and open-ended responses (both individual and in the context of group discussions) [triangulation of data per method is presented in **Table 1**, while triangulation of data per research question is presented in Table B1].

It is important to note that the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods has been at the heart of heated debates in social research, as the former has traditionally been considered an approach based on positivism and systematic analysis, whereas the latter has been associated with interpetivist and reflexive approaches. In fact, the two paradigms have often been considered as irreconcilable (see Bryman 2001). Recent contributions, however, have successfully challenged that notion by highlighting both, the constructivist and subjective elements involved in the process of quantitative research (e.g. framing questions, interpreting results), and the systematic and naturalistic traits of qualitative research (e.g. rigorous rendering of the data, in-depth understanding of human behaviours). As Bauer, Gaskell and Allum (2000: 4) argue, "[a]dequate coverage of social events requires a multitude of methods and data: methodological pluralism arises as a methodological necessity". Therefore, the approach followed in the present study is not far from Bhaskar's notion of critical realism, which takes the view that "the social world is reproduced and transformed in daily life" (1989: 4 cited in Bryman 2001: 430).

FIGURE 1: THE RESEARCH DESIGN

	STAGE A	STAGE B

USERS

Preliminary 1

Online anti-war mobilisation in the Bournemouth University community
Interview, Observation, Survey

Main Study 1

Large survey (n=487) of BU Media School undergraduate students: civic attitudes, attitudes towards issues, news awareness, media use, internet uses

Main Study 3

User evaluations (n=46 BU Media School undergraduate students from **MS1**) of issue websites (n=4 websites from **MS2**).

Close-Ended and Open-Ended Questionnaires, 4 Focus Group Discussions

ONLINE CIVIC TEXT

Preliminary 2

Mapping of UK youth and issue networks so as to establish key nodes
Hyperlink Network Analysis

Main Study 2

Content analysis of youth and NGO ("issue") websites (n=20) [includes key sites identified in P2]: content, design, accessibility, interactivity, tools and facilities

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION AND TRIANGULATION OF DATA (VARIABLES AND THEMES) IN EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS

chapter →	Chapter 4	Chapter 5	Chapter 6	Chapter 7
method ↓	OBJ 1: CIVIC ATTITUDES & MOTIVATORS	OBJ 2: INTERNET USES & CIVIC MOTIVATORS	OBJ 3: SITE ANALYSIS	OBJ 4: USER EVALUATIONS
Large Survey	**v5-19:** Active Engagement Indicators **v20-30, v101:** Attitudes Towards Democracy and Participation **v31-55:** Attitudes Towards Issues **v56-61:** News Patterns **v62-66:** Awareness of International Current Affairs	**v67-75:** Internet Access **v76-90:** Internet Uses and Activities **v91-100:** Attitudes Towards the Internet		
Content Analysis			**v0-6:** Visibility and Maintenance **v7-19, v140-147:** Community and Interactive Facilities **v20-41:** Navigation and Accessibility **v42-55, v134-139:** Transparency **v56-80:** Content and Information **v81-96:** Agenda and Youth Focus **v97-117:** Empowerment and Participation Tools **v118-133:** Links to Political Institutions **v148-151:** Coder Evaluation (Content, Design, Community)	
Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions	**v31-33:** Political Engagement [v32-33 Qual] **v34-45:** Attitudes Towards Political Activities **v55:** Motivators and Demotivators for Active Engagement [Qual] **v56-57:** Attitudes Towards Global Issues	**v6-10:** Internet Access and Integration [v8-10 Qual] **v11-30:** Internet Motivations **v46-54:** Engaged in Potentially Political Online Activities **v58:** Expectations from Civic Websites (Content, Design, Interactivity) [Qual]		**v59-62, v64-66:** Evaluation of Site 1 [v60-62 Qual] **v63:** Comparison with Expectations **v67-72:** Potential of Following Up Site 1 **v73-79:** Evaluation of Site 2 [v74-76 Qual] **v80-85:** Potential of Folowing Up Site 2 **FGD Themes:** Design, Navigation and Visual Appeal; Efficacy, Encouragement and Positive Reinforcement; Actions on the Micro Level; Attitudes towards Level / Amount of Information; Trust, Reliability, Brand; "Getting There" and "Going Back"; Attitudes towards Mobilisation Tactics; Patterns of Internet Use.

Having established the broad research framework, we will now outline the three main components of the primary research in more detail.

3.3 Main Study 1: Large Survey

<u>Purpose and Rationale</u>

The purpose of the survey was to contribute towards addressing the first two objectives of the study, i.e. to capture the civic attitudes and internet preferences of the members of the chosen student community. As is the case for any one-off survey, this investigation is only a snapshot of attitudes in that specific point in time – albeit a very comprehensive and revealing snapshot. One of that method's main strengths is that it allows for a large number of factors and variables to be assessed in a short period of time. It therefore constitutes the basis upon which more in-depth, qualitative research was conducted in the latter stages of the project.

One important aim of this survey was to assess the level and extent of youth disengagement from political participation and democracy in general, as well as the participants' attitudes towards a range of civic engagement methods and public affairs. Some of the main research questions covered in this survey relate to the issue of whether young people see the impact of broader structures on themselves and, conversely, whether they are aware of the civic aspect and political potential of everyday activities; in other words, their level of political socialisation and integration. Another major part of the survey covered their news consumption and internet use patterns in order to evaluate the extent to which the net is integrated in respondents' everyday life.

<u>Sampling and Data Collection</u>

Sampling for the survey was purposive and was not supposed to represent British youth at large, but to capture the attitudes of a particular student community with interesting traits of civic engagement and internet uses, as mentioned earlier. As Ogan, Ozakca and Groshek (2008: 170) note, "by virtue of purposively sampling the heaviest and youngest adult users, emerging sociocultural patterns may be identified and contextualized with current ones".

Data collection took place during the first 15 minutes of lectures and seminars in many units and programmes across Bournemouth University's Media School (TMS). While students were free to opt out of the survey, all students attending classes chose to complete it (the details of data collection sessions are presented in Table B3). The total number of undergraduate students at Bournemouth Media School at the time of the survey (22 November – 10 December 2004) was 1631, of which 487 took part in the research – i.e. almost one in three TMS undergrads took part in the survey.

The demographic data showed that the sample mirrors the makeup of the School's undergraduate population and, subsequently, reflects its demographic skews: a 2/1 females-males ratio, while one-half of the sample come from the South East or the South West of England. The mean age was 19.72 and the sample was quite clustered around the ages of 18-

21, thus age was not used further in subsequent crosstabulations and tests [for a profile of the sample see Table B4]. Nine participants (1.85% of the sample) were above the age of 25 but as it was observed that their responses were largely typical of the sample, they were not excluded from the study.

Survey Structure and Variables

Initial pilots carried out on the first draft of the survey with five third-year undergraduates (who did not subsequently take part in the main data collection) showed that the questionnaire was too long and took up to 18 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was revised and the overall number of variables was reduced from 119 to 102 by merging overlapping variables, collapsing options into broader ones and simplifying the design of the Likert-scale cells. Further pilots showed that the second draft was both easier to comprehend and quicker to complete with an average completion time of 12 minutes.

The final draft of the questionnaire (8 pages – Appendix C) included 102 variables that can be sorted into six sets or factors (excluding basic demographic questions):
F1: active engagement
F2: civic attitudes
F3: interest in issues/policies
F4: news media use
F5: awareness of international news
F6: internet access, use and problems

The survey's questions comprised a mixture of parameters traditionally used in existing literature and measurements developed for the purposes of this study. Some of the active engagement variables (v10-19) were taken from Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) and Weber, Loumakis and Bergman (2003). The question on societal change (v28) was taken from Inglehart (1990, cited in Muller and Seligson, 1994). The motivators for internet usage (v76-80) were adapted from LaRose, Mastro and Eastin (2001); key demographics on internet access and usage (v67-75 and 81-90) were chosen from King (2001); while internet problems variables (v91-99) were inspired by Newhagen and Rafaeli's (1996) discussion on how obstacles can affect the experience of users.

In addition to those questions, several original measurements were drafted specifically for this study. These included one question (v29) focusing on the motivating factors of participation distinguishing between civic duty, own interest and rejection of participation. Moreover, participants were presented with a list of methods for voice expression and participation and were asked to evaluate their effectiveness using a Likert scale (v20-27).

A critical section of the survey presented respondents with a list of 25 issues (ranging from climate change to sexually transmitted diseases) and areas of public policy (ranging from foreign policy to education). Each set of policy areas had two or more variables phrased in different ways (some were oriented towards the individual respondent, e.g. "my career prospects", while others were oriented towards the collective or public good, e.g. "unemployment"). Before the actual survey, a model was developed linking those variables (e.g. cancer research to the NHS); the 'null hypothesis' being that respondents would not recognise the links between paired issues (thus ranking one high and the other low). In the

actual questionnaire those 25 issues were presented in random order so as not to lead the respondents, who were asked to state how much they cared for each one using an 1-5 Likert scale (v31-55).

Furthermore, five general knowledge multiple-choice questions assessed respondents' familiarity with global affairs (the European Union, the Olympic Games) and knowledge of international stories that were very topical at the time of the survey (hostage-taking in Beslan, string of lethal hurricanes in the Americas) (v62-66). Table B1 details the links between specific variables of the survey (column 4) and the research questions of the study (column 2) so as to aid transparency and precision.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 14.0) was used for inputting and analysis of the data from the survey. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, the details and specifics of the data analysis process (e.g. statistical tests performed) are explained along with the presentation of the results and supplementary materials.

Overall, the data was analysed in four stages. Initially, frequencies of all 102 variables were analysed in order to get a first impression of the results. A process of collapsing variables into composite ones was then followed. For instance, the responses to the five international news quiz questions were collapsed into a composite variable showing how many correct answers each respondent got (out of five, ranging from 0.00, 0.20, 0.40 etc to 1.00). Also, the results from the eight variables assessing the effectiveness of engagement methods (such as voting, discussing, protesting etc) were added into a new composite variable; the point of that was to distinguish between those who have a sceptical attitude towards those methods of civic engagement in general (e.g. if they've scored close to the minimum of 8) and those that are more positive and optimistic about the effectiveness of those methods in general (scoring closer to the max of 40). A similar procedure was followed for the variables covering internet-related problems so as to distinguish between those who, overall, face more problems with the internet and those who do not. Following from that, we focused on five of the six sets/areas of variables mentioned above (F1, F2, F4, F5, F6) and selected twenty-four key variables that could potentially produce valid and useful crosstabulations (C1 – C10) that link to the study's objectives. These are outlined in more detail in the following two chapters. [For a snapshot of these crosstabulations see Table B5].

The third stage of data analysis focused on F3, i.e. the twenty-five issues and policy areas that respondents were asked to rate. In addition to a means analysis, a correlation matrix and an hierarchical cluster analysis were performed so as to find links and patterns of responses amongst issues. In the fourth and final stage of the analysis, gender was crosstabulated with all original and composite variables so as to establish whether it was a significant factor in all aspects of the survey. This was deemed particularly necessary due to the sample's (and the specific community's) female skew, but also because of the ongoing discussion about the gender divide in internet access/uses (Liff, Shepherd, Wajcman, Rice and Hargittai 2004) and in civic attitudes (see the report on the 'activism gap' by the Electoral Commission 2004).

Limitations and Synergies

The generic limitations of large, quantitative surveys have been extensively discussed in the literature (e.g. see Little 1991 for the philosophical and epistemological critiques to statistical analysis). These include the close-ended nature of the questions, which the researcher has formulated perhaps charged with their own cultural or epistemological baggage. By listing the origins of the survey's variables and explaining their rationale it is hoped that such risks can be minimised. Lack of depth and the inability to offer in-depth accounts of motives and causes are also common problems of surveys. That issue was subsequently addressed by triangulating and complementing the survey data with a comprehensive, qualitative study involving a sub-sample of students who took part in the survey (Main Study 3 below).

There are obviously additional limits to what this particular survey can achieve given the fact that it sampled a single student community. While a significant proportion (almost one-third) of that community took part in the study, one should still be very cautious when making generalisations or projections to the rest of the UK youth populations especially given the gender and regional slant of the sample. Hence, the survey should be viewed as a tool for the understanding of the community (as a case study of UK youth), which itself has a strong gender imbalance. Finally, as in every such study there is a third set of limitations – resource restrictions; more depth and more questions would have been ideal, although any survey containing many more than 102 variables and taking much longer than 13' to complete would raise other methodological problems (respondents' attention, reliability of responses etc). Therefore a balance was sought between depth and accessibility.

3.4 Main Study 2: Web Content Analysis

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of the web content analysis was to address the third objective of the study, i.e. the in-depth assessment of civic youth and NGO / issue websites. The way in which civic organisations such as the ones sampled in this study employ the internet both at the strategic level (purpose of the site, political agenda, target groups) and at the tactical one (tools and facilities used, aesthetic and interactive approach) constitutes an important indicator of current political practice and, as such, it allows for comparisons across time and space. Combined with other data collection methods it can help us understand what does or does not work, as well as what the motivations and strategies of the organisations are. Despite the decline of public engagement with the formal institutions of parliamentary politics, Taylor and Burt (2001) note that public trust in voluntary organisations is high, while in recent times we have also witnessed an intensification of volunteering and mobilisation through civil society organisations.

Content analysis has traditionally been used as a strictly quantitative research method (Bryman 2001) – or to be more precise, as a tool for the coding and analysis of existing material, as opposed to the generation of original data. Berelson – one of the "fathers" of content analysis – defined content analysis as "… a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (1952: 18).

This narrow definition soon widened to include "any technique for making of inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of a message" (Holsti 1969: 14). The scope and application of content analysis has evolved and expanded along with the proliferation of new media and new messages. While there has been a rapid rise in the number of studies using web content analysis (Weare and Lin 2000), their scope is still largely quantitative (Gerodimos and Ward 2007, Gibson and Ward 2000).

The emphasis of this particular web content analysis was on the systematic, rigorous and reliable aspects of the method rather than on its quantitative ones. The analysis focused on the existence, usability and function of a large number of web features ranging from navigation menus and corporate logos to interactive message boards, promotional materials and participation tools, political agendas and youth-oriented facilities. The data was analysed horizontally (i.e. comparing practice across different websites of the same or of different types / "genres"), vertically (i.e. comparing aspects of the same website) and across time, all of which brought out interesting patterns.

Preliminary Study and Sampling

Twenty websites of UK civic organisations were coded and analysed. Primary coding took place between June 2005 and July 2006, while all sites were revisited between December 2008 and April 2009 for a follow-up evaluation. It should be noted that two of the sites, www.whiteband.org (which is the umbrella organisation for the Make Poverty History campaign) and www.themeatrix.com, are international, but their inclusion was deemed useful because they have UK-focused sections, as well as for comparison purposes. A variety of sites focusing on youth engagement and on issue campaigns were chosen: youth forums, youth parliaments and consultation spaces, youth portals and training sites, charities and Non-Governmental Organisations, lobbying and campaigning sites (see **Table 2** for the full list of sites, URLs and dates of coding).

It is widely accepted that sampling is one of the most challenging issues in internet research (Gerodimos and Ward 2007, Weare and Lin 2000). The mere size, lack of geographical boundaries and unstructured nature of the web means that it is virtually impossible to define populations and audiences. Subsequently, producing a sample of websites that can be characterised as random or representative (in the statistical sense of the term) may not be even relevant. In addition to established sampling techniques, such as word of mouth amongst researchers, prominence in UK civil society, appearance in links pages, search engines results and civic portals, all of which were employed both by the CivicWeb project (Banaji 2008a) and by this study, additional techniques have recently become available for researchers so as to tackle the problem of case selection.

One such technique is Hyperlink Network Analysis (HNA), i.e. the mapping of networks of websites based on the analysis of their in/out-links and the ensuing centrality of sites within clusters (Park 2003; Park and Thelwall 2003; Farrall and Delli Carpini 2004). HNA is an increasingly popular, emerging method based on the principles of Social Network Analysis – a well established procedure for the dissection of structures in social systems based on the relationship between the main actors or elements of those systems, also known as the nodes

(Jackson 1997; Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1997). Hyperlink network analysis can produce valuable findings as a research method per se (e.g. see Shumate and Lipp's (2003) study of NGO networks), although in this case it was used as a stepping stone for the content analysis. The choice of campaign and lobbying sites for our study was based upon a mapping of issue networks through an HNA of the UK's civil society using the Issue Crawler software by the Govcom.org foundation. Initially, several issue networks were mapped on major current affairs (global poverty, the fair-trade movement, organic food & farming, climate change etc, see Table B2).

The websites featuring consistently as key nodes within and across all of those issue networks were then identified: Make Poverty History, The Fairtrade Foundation, Soil Association, Friends of the Earth (FoE), Greenpeace (see Appendix F). All of those sites were included in the content analysis sample, and three of these sites (Fairtrade, Soil Association and FoE) were also chosen for the user evaluations that followed up the content analysis. The Live8 and Make Poverty History websites were coded four days before the July 2005 Live8 concerts, thus capturing the sites at the peak of the event when all facilities and tools were already in place and at the time when the sites were at the centre of mass media interest. Also, the Fairtrade Foundation website was coded at the start of Fairtrade Fortnight in March 2006, a national event which again would have been expected to attract more visitors to the site.

The other type of sites sampled was web spaces focusing specifically on young people. These included youth parliaments and forums across the UK: Funky Dragon (Wales), the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, the Scottish Youth Parliament and the UK Youth Parliament. Youth portals such as Young Scot, The Site and Connexions-Direct were also sampled. Finally, sites aiming to engage young people with politics were also coded: DoPolitics, Where Is My Public Servant (WIMPS) and HeadsUp. Coleman and Rowe (2005: 7) found that "there is a lack of systematic commitment across political institutions to actively engage with young people through sites such as [HeadsUp, WIMPS, Funky Dragon and Young Scot]", therefore including all of these sites in the sample can further our understanding of their uses.

Data Collection and the Coding Sheet

A 153-variable coding sheet was completed for every website sampled (Appendix E). The coding sheet focused on the availability, usability and relevance of a range of features (Features Analysis) considered vital from a civic usability perspective (see 2.8 above). The coding sheet benchmarks covered the site's visibility, accessibility, maintenance, transparency, interactivity, community-building, media relations, youth focus, geographical focus, political agenda, empowerment and participation tools, promotional material, civic content, contextual and background information about the organisation and its managers, as well as links to other political or civic organisations. The coding sheet incorporates several variables used in seminal web content analyses such as the *Government on the Web* project (Dunleavy et al. 2002), benchmarks used in the usability industry (Nielsen and Tahir 2001), as well as others discussed in the scholarly literature (Weare and Lin 2000). Most parameters covering the civic content (v56-85), agenda / focus (v86-96) and participation tools (v97-108) were designed for this study.

	TABLE 2: CONTENT ANALYSIS – DATA COLLECTION				
	Sample: 20 "youth" and NGO ("issue") websites				
Code	Case Name	URL	Date of Coding	Date of Follow-Up Visit(s)	Observed Differences between Original and Follow-Up Visits
001	**Live 8**	www.live8live.com	28/06/2005	17/12/2008 13/02/2009	No visible evidence of maintenance since 2007
002	**Make Poverty History (MPH)**	www.makepovertyhistory.org	29/06/2005	17/12/2008 20/02/2009	No visible evidence of maintenance since 2007
003	**Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP)**	www.whiteband.org	30/06/2005	20/02/2009	Redesigned menus and updated content (although inconsistently)
004	**Urban75**	www.urban75.com	13/07/2005	13/02/2009 20/02/2009	Updated with no significant structural changes
005	**Kikass**	www.kikass.com	14/07/2005	20/02/2009	www.kikass.com now defunct; core site moved to www.kikass.tv very limited scope/updates
006	**TheSite.org**	www.thesite.org	15/07/2005	17/12/2008	No significant structural changes, minor redesigning of visual elements (logo, buttons)
007	**Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF)**	www.niyf.org	01/09/2005	06/03/2009	Redesigned and restructured but still content-light and flawed
008	**Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP)**	www.scottishyouthparliament.org.uk	02/09/2005	08/03/2009	Redesigned and restructured; considerable overhaul
009	**Funky Dragon**	www.funkydragon.org	07/09/2005	08/03/2009	Minor restructuring; little change to overall philosophy / approach
010	**YoungScot**	www.youngscot.org	09/09/2005	08/03/2009 10/03/2009	No redesign / restructuring; updated and enhanced with sharing/multimedia features

011	**UK Youth Parliament (UKYP)**	www.ukyp.org.uk	13/12/2005	13/03/2009	No redesign / restructuring; minor additions without change to overall approach
012	**Connexions-Direct**	www.connexions-direct.com	13/12/2005	13/03/2009	No redesign / restructuring; enhancement of accessibility features
013	**HeadsUp**	www.headsup.org.uk	13/12/2005	15/03/2009	No redesign / restructuring
014	**The Meatrix**	www.themeatrix.com	04/03/2006	31/03/2009	Restructuring, addition of two more Meatrix films and development of its "sister" sites
015	**The Fairtrade Foundation**	www.fairtrade.org.uk	05/03/2006	01/04/2009	Redesigning of navigation and palettes, without changing core structure and approach
016	**Greenpeace (UK)**	www.greenpeace.org.uk	20/07/2006*	02/04/2009	Minor redesigning of homepage menus; restructuring of the campaign sections; blog
017	**The Soil Association**	www.soilassociation.org.uk	26/06/2006*	02/04/2009	No restructuring; minor changes to the homepage; many pages unaltered
018	**Friends of the Earth (UK)**	www.foe.org.uk	29/06/2006*	05/04/2009	Minor changes to design, no significant changes to structure or content
019	**DoPolitics**	www.dopolitics.org.uk	07/07/2006	10/04/2009	Complete redesign and restructuring; change in scope and target audience; issues remain
020	**WIMPS**	www.wimps.org.uk	10/07/2006	10/04/2009	Redesign and minor restructuring; issues remain
021	**Pants to Poverty**	www.pantstopoverty.com	Not coded	17/12/2008	Started as a young people's group from Case 002 (MPH)
Parts of these sites were originally coded on 05/03/2006 in time for the user evaluations; the entire sites were then coded (from scratch) on the dates given.					

The benchmarks used for the evaluation of these websites' "democratic potential" are similar to, or consistent with, recent studies of NGOs' web presence (Burt and Taylor 2008; Kenix 2007). The links between the coding sheet's variables and the study's overall objectives / research questions are outlined in Table B1.

A considerable advantage of content analysis in general, and of the sort of structured coding sheet used in this particular study, is the production of data that is: (a) non-obtrusive (i.e. does not stem from an interaction of the researcher with the object of the study, thus eliminating a potential effect); (b) considerably more rigorous than judgements based, for instance, on individual aesthetic preferences; (c) comparable, as the same coding sheet can then be used by other researchers to compare their own analysis of either the same sites or of different ones.

However, it should be noted that there are aspects of a website or user experience that a structured coding sheet cannot capture on its own. The analysis of features was triangulated with a detailed report on each case written at the end of each coding session so as to capture the user experience and overall feel of the website. An expert report drafted during or immediately after the coding session is vital so as to locate problems, technical glitches, omissions or other structural or content issues that may not be captured by a close-ended coding sheet (e.g. linkages between suggested user actions and civic problems).

The data from the sheets were then entered into an SPSS database. The qualitative evaluation of each case was typed into a separate Word document immediately after the coding session. At least three screencaps of the site were collected throughout or at the end of each coding session, while other supplementary materials (promotional flyers, participation manuals, briefing papers etc) were also collected.

Data Analysis

The data from the web content analysis was approached in a number of different ways in order to gain the most accurate and comprehensive picture. These interpretations could be distinguished into vertical and horizontal analytical approaches in that the former aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of each site separately, whereas the latter involved comparing and contrasting various areas and features amongst sites and groups of sites.

Based on the qualitative evaluations and the completed coding sheets, a profile was built for each case individually in order to spot its main strengths, weaknesses, innovations and problems. Even at that early stage clear patterns started to emerge distinguishing certain groups of sites (e.g. youth parliaments) from others (e.g. NGOs). Another approach taken was the collapsing of sets of variables into composite ones, which allows both for a quicker snapshot of each site, and also for easier comparison across sites. It is worth reiterating that the mere presence of a feature does not necessarily preclude problems of design or usability that can only be captured by user testing, and therefore

such structured or quantitative measurements should be read in conjunction with qualitative assessments.

Limitations and Synergies

A number of resource and method limitations ought to be acknowledged at this stage. In a population of millions of websites, blogs and other online spaces, the analysis of twenty sites can only offer us a finite perspective on the state of online youth engagement in Britain. Having said that, the mix of sites sampled, combined with the depth of the analysis, produce a comprehensive overview of a range of important sources, approaches and issues.

A related challenge, given especially the increasingly accelerated evolution of technological applications, is the fact that by the end of this study the websites or online practices sampled here may have changed radically – perhaps tackling some of the very issues raised by the evaluation. While this is an important point, it is still important to register and dissect online practices and applications, i.e. to take comprehensive and rigorous "snapshots" of how the internet is used for youth civic engagement, even if some of these practices and applications are inevitably going to become dated or obsolete after a few months or years. While the frantic rate of change in information and communication technologies does not match the slow cycle of academic research, each snapshot can contribute to an informed historical perspective of how practitioners used (or failed to use) the net at a specific point in time and, thus, offer useful lessons about civic cultures and political practices. That is to say, websites, which are both media and texts, can be seen as social artefacts and independent objects of study (Brügger 2009).

Another important caveat is that content analysis cannot establish the intentions of producers or the effects (if any) on users. The method's aim is to assess the actual content on the page leading to a comprehensive evaluation of the website's design, content and interactivity as well as, specifically in this case, of the *capacity* of the site to engage and empower young people. Therefore, this particular part of the primary research does not claim to measure the 'effects', uses or ultimate success of these sites amongst young people; this can only be done through extensive user research, which followed the content analysis. However, given precisely that published media text (such as the content of civic websites) is an artefact, the analysis of such material can produce interesting patterns or indications about the producers' strategic approach or tactical tools used, which can then be compared and contrasted to primary or secondary accounts of producers' and users' own narratives.

3.5 Main Study 3: User Evaluations

<u>Purpose and Rationale</u>

Following the large survey of the youth civic attitudes and internet uses and the in-depth content analysis of twenty national youth- and issue-oriented websites, the final stage of the primary research brings these two strands together. It does that by further exploring questions of civic motivations (objective 1) and internet uses (objective 2), as well as applying those often abstract concepts and generic practices onto the evaluation of four key websites of civic organisations active on a range of issues (organic food, fairtrade, climate change) by young users themselves (objective 4). This was achieved through sessions combining individual user testing with focus group discussions; the aim being to identify specific factors of the online civic experience (such as applications, messages, tools) that motivate and empower young citizens to engage in the broader political process – or, conversely, to identify practices and glitches that deter and demotivate them from doing so.

Usability testing has been a core tool of programmers and designers of technological applications in the commercial and private sectors (see, for example, Cooper 1999). Understanding what customers (or, in the case of internet applications, users) want or need, and how they react to specific scenarios, is the only way to build or develop sustainable and ultimately successful products and services, given that it is the same people who will eventually make use of those. It should be noted that the user evaluations conducted for the purposes of this study are somewhat different from standard industry testing as the focus is not on the technical (programming) aspects of usability, but on the civic uses and implications of the available materials and tools, although issues of navigation, accessibility and overall design were covered extensively with the ultimate purpose being to identify ways of increasing users' intentions of using the technology (Jansky and Huang 2009: 263).

The approach taken here allows for a number of synergies amongst methods and data sources, as well as for a comparative interpretation of narratives: comparing users' evaluations of specific websites to the researcher's own assessment (the object of the web content analysis); comparing users' expectations from civic sites to their reactions following the actual experience; as well as comparing individual assessments (registered at the beginning of the sessions) to collective evaluations formulated during the group discussions that followed user testing. Jansky and Huang (2009) highlight the benefits of employing a multifaceted approach to soliciting end-user input, which includes the use of focus groups.

Focus group discussions are ideal for triangulation purposes (Denzin 1989) especially when employed in conjunction with other data gathering techniques (Fontana and Frey 1994: 365). Such group sessions are used for the "study of audience interpretations of cultural and media texts" (Bryman 2001: 348) and are especially appropriate for research questions relating to consumers or users' own uses and gratifications. At the very core of both the conceptual approach followed here (focusing on the users' civic and online attitudes), and of the method (focus groups) is the question of "why", i.e. the motivations

for engaging in certain actions. Central to the utility of focus groups are the patterns of interaction amongst participants and the joint construction of meaning via disagreement and argumentation.

Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling framework adopted for this study was purposive: the participants were all Year 2 undergraduate students in the BA (Hons) Communication and Media programme at the Media School and constituted a sub-sample of Main Study 1, i.e. they were part of a cohort that had been sampled in the original large survey. Patton (2002) and Blumer (1969) note that purposive sampling can be a very appropriate and potent sampling framework for focus group discussions. While the collection of a range of views and backgrounds is important, the aim is not to survey a representative sample of a population but to explore the narratives and interactions of a specific target group; in this case, the target group being highly internet- and media-literate, yet presumably disengaged in strictly political terms, as well as part of a community situated in a "new" (post-1992), vocationally-oriented university.

The choice of the first three of the four sites sampled in the user evaluations (Fairtrade Foundation, Soil Association, Friends of the Earth) was based on a number of factors, namely their central role in the UK's online sphere (as established through the Hyperlink Network Analysis), as well as their high profile and presence in British civil society at large. For example, UK sales of Fairtrade products rose by 43% year-on-year to £700 million in 2008 (Boyle 2009), while membership to Friends of the Earth (FoE) rose from 1,000 in 1971 to 119,000 in 2002. FoE is a particularly interesting case from a political science perspective as it is one of few NGOs to explicitly identify itself as pursuing democratic objectives (Taylor and Burt 2001: 60). The inclusion of The Meatrix in the sample was deemed useful as the content analysis produced interesting contrasts between its online presence and mobilisation approach to that of the other sites.

Four sessions lasting on average one and a half hours took place in March 2006 with a total of 46 students taking part in the sessions (see **Table 3**). The mean age of the participants was 20.57 (σ=1.8); reflecting the make-up of the Media School's undergraduate population, the sample was dominated by UK students (91%) and females (82%), an issue which is discussed below.

The sessions took place at university computer labs during the regular seminar slots of a Level I unit. All students had been notified about the nature, purpose, structure and duration of the sessions prior to the event and were free to opt out of the activity or leave at any point during the session without any consequences to their academic profile or attendance record whatsoever. It was noted, however, that they might find the sessions useful in conjunction with other lectures and seminars on internet uses and gratifications that were to follow.

Session	Participant IDs [Code, Initials, Site Evaluated]	Date
TABLE 3: USER EVALUATIONS AND FOCUS GROUPS – DATA COLLECTION Sample: 46 BA (Hons) Communication and Media, Level 2 students		
1	*01* (AW), *02* (CB), *03* (ED), *04* (JP), *05* (JW), *06* (LR), *07* (NW), *08* (NR), *09* (SJ)	06/03/2006
2	*10* (AB), *11* (BS), *12* (CH), *13* (DB), *14* (EC), *15* (GN), *16* (KK), *17* (SH)	06/03/2006
3	*18* (BC), *19* (BW), *20* (CW), *21* (HB), *22* (HM), *23* (JP), *24* (KC), *25* (KG), *26* (KM), *27* (KR), *28* (KS), *29* (LB), *30* (LC), *31* (LW), *32* (NS), *33* (RW), *34* (ST), *35* (TM), *36* (TR)	13/03/2006
4	*37* (AM), *38* (BP), *39* (CS), *40* (EW), *41* (JO), *42* (JS), *43* (MK), *44* (NH), *45* (SJ), *46* (TM)	13/03/2006
Key: 18 participants evaluated the website of the **Fairtrade Foundation** 14 participants evaluated the website of the **Soil Association** 14 participants evaluated the website of **Friends of the Earth (Climate Change)** All 46 participants subsequently evaluated the website of **The Meatrix** All sessions took place in Weymouth House, Talbot Campus, Bournemouth University, Poole BH12 5BB		

The fact that participants knew each other well was vital in avoiding pitfalls and obstacles usually associated with focus group discussions (such as having to "break the ice", participants being shy or self-conscious etc). Allowing them to evaluate the sampled sites in a computer lab along with their seminar group peers created a more natural setting, as opposed to interviewing them individually and watching over their shoulders on an one-to-one basis, as is the norm in commercial usability testing.

Participants were explicitly asked to give their informed consent by signing a declaration at the beginning of the session, which ensured that they were content with taking part in the session, as well as being aware of the recording, confidentiality and release terms relating to the data. The aims and objectives of the study were clearly communicated to the participants from the outset. Furthermore, it was stressed that there were no right or wrong answers; that it was not themselves who were being evaluated; and that, on the contrary, it was their own evaluations of the websites that was the core interest of the study. Participants were asked to critically assess the four sites and offer recommendations and constructive comments based on their background.

While not going as far as engaging in "action research", the flexible approach outlined was particularly appropriate both in terms of research ethics (Punch 1994) as well as in those of data validity. Given the fact that the study took place in the physical and temporal context of a seminar class, this approach ensured that students did not feel forced to take part or act in a specific way (e.g. give answers that they thought would please the researcher). Rather, it was clear that they were being treated not as "subjects"

but as "equals" and that they engaged in an honest, "real" and sometimes semi-informal conversation with the researcher – whom they knew quite well anyway. Many scholars (e.g. Daniels 1983 in Fontana and Frey 1994) argue that this approach can enhance the depth and validity of the data, rather than infect them with the biases of the researcher.

Session Structure and Variables

Each of the 46 users taking part in this study reviewed two sites, responded to 85 close- or open-ended questions on the four Sheets that were distributed and collected before, during and after the site visits, and contributed to a loosely structured group discussion lasting about 30 minutes.

Each of the four sessions followed a similar order (Appendix G). After being welcomed and briefed on the session's aims and structure, participants completed two short questionnaires (Appendix H). Sheet 1 included demographic data and focused on the role of the internet in respondents' everyday lives (v6-10) as well as asking them to assess the extent to which a range of factors motivated them to use the internet. Sheet 2 focused on the respondents' civic attitudes and covered aspects such as their self-perception of political engagement (v31) and awareness (v33), levels of online engagement (v46-54) and attitude towards global issues (v56). In order to understand how broadly young people define political participation (and therefore whether their engagement in activities of a civically alternative or emerging nature could be considered as conscious), the participants were asked to rate the extent to which a list of activities was political (v34-45).

One of the central points in the entire primary research was v55 in which participants were asked to reflect on their own political engagement and to cite motivating or demotivating factors that could make them more or less active as citizens and consumers. Subsequently, they were invited to reflect on those motivating and demotivating factors and link them to their expectations from civic websites by mentioning features, materials, ideas and applications that, if adopted by the civic website, could motivate them to engage (v58). That question was divided into three response boxes (Site Content, Site Design, Site Interactivity) so as to explore the various expectations and motivations in as much depth as possible, as well as produce data that could be easily comparable, both with the data from the web content analysis, and with the participants' own post-experience evaluations. Finally, participants were offered the chance to rate three current issues or causes (organic food, fairtrade products, climate change) according to their preference (v57).

Following the completion of Sheet 2, each individual was given one of three briefs (Sheet 3) which were identical apart from the address (URL) of the website to be evaluated. The first subgroup of participants evaluated the site of the Fairtrade Foundation; another subgroup assessed the Soil Association website; the final third of each session's participants evaluated the Friends of the Earth Climate Change microsite. The allocation of the briefs was based on two criteria, namely the participants' own preferences (based on their Sheet 2 rating) and the need to distribute the briefs as evenly as possible. The

first user evaluation lasted approximately 15 minutes, after which Sheet 3 was collected. The evaluation sheet comprised of a section that aimed to collect qualitative data, on which users were asked a series of open-ended questions covering their overall opinions on the site's strengths and weaknesses (v59-62), and a structured section through which respondents rated the site's content, design and interactivity (v64-66) and also indicated the likelihood of following up their online experience with a range of political actions (v67-72).

Subsequently, the entire session group was shown the 4-minute animation film that appeared on the homepage of The Meatrix – the fourth site sampled in this study. The short film is the focal point of the website and introduces the visitor to its agenda. After the screening, participants were given Sheet 4 and 10 minutes to review and evaluate the site. The two evaluation questionnaires (Sheets 3 and 4) are identical with the exception of v63, which made specific reference to participants' expectations of (one of) the three original issue sites and, therefore, was not applicable in the case of The Meatrix. As all sessions followed the same order of tasks and stimuli, it can be reasonably assumed that variance of responses amongst the groups cannot be attributed to order effects. Furthermore, given that this was an exploratory and largely qualitative study, the size of the sample was not deemed appropriate for a more formal experiment on the order effects of visiting websites.

Following the completion of Sheet 4, all students took part in a 30 minute group discussion, the purpose of which was to complement the individual questionnaires by capturing reactions and attitudes not covered in the Sheets, as well as to further explore issues of motivation and online uses with the added advantage of group dynamics and interaction.

This study combines elements of Group Usability Testing (GUT), Task Based Focus Groups (TBFG) and Multiple-User Simultaneous Testing (MUST) (Downey 2007, Nielsen 2007b): it involved many participants individually but also simultaneously evaluating the chosen sites. The actual structure of the sessions was similar to the protocol followed by Downey (2007), i.e. initial user profile survey, followed by the basic task of individuals reviewing the site, followed by a usability issues (group) discussion. This approach alleviates the danger of co-discovery which is common to usability focus groups (Nielsen 2007b) as users convened to groups after having experienced websites on an individual basis. The actual evaluation was largely unprompted and near natural (Nielsen 2008b) with only a couple of minor tasks being given towards the end of the evaluation of The Meatrix, so as to test certain navigation problems that had been identified during the original content analysis.

Data Entry and Analysis

The structured (close-ended) variables from the four sheets were entered into SPSS. That data were analysed using frequencies, crosstabulations, composite variables and the visual comparison of small groups or sets of variables. The qualitative data, i.e. the open-ended responses that the participants handwrote on the sheets totalling more than

26,000 words, were typed manually into Word for each participant separately. They were treated both as self-sufficient narratives highlighting common themes, patterns, outliers, questions and issues, as well as supplementing the group discussion transcripts. Finally, these responses were also matched to individual participants' close-ended answers and group discussion contributions so as to create profiles for each participant. This process of cross-checking and triangulation helped identify common patterns as well as contradictions both within and across groups.

The four group discussions were manually transcribed into Word. The transcripts then went through a process of distilling that included repeated readings and comments on the margin of the text, engaging thus in a process of reflexive reading of the data (Mason 2002, Croghan etal 2006). That process led to the development of key themes and codes, which were revised throughout the analysis (Creswell 1998: 140-141), thus combining the flexibility of a grounded theory approach with a pre-existing agenda. The transcripts were then colour-coded based on these themes; the full text of the colour-coded transcripts is included in Appendix J and the key of the codes is presented in Table B6. This approach concurs with Silverman's (1993: 114) argument that we should treat interview accounts as "compelling narratives" that are not merely "accurate or distorted reports of reality" – in other words, they are a reality in their own merit, a position that is consistent with the ontological paradigm of critical realism (Bryman 2001).

Limitations and Synergies

One obvious limitation of the present study is the strong gender bias. While the purpose of focus groups is not to produce a demographically representative sample of views, this study's findings should be treated with care and in conjunction with the caveat that this is an in-depth study of a specific student community. As Coleman, Morrison and Svennevig (2006: 3) point out, "focus groups are good for gathering the range of opinions that exist in a population, but not the distribution of those opinions".

Group discussions have a number of advantages, including being data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding, cumulative and elaborative, over and above individual responses (Fontana and Frey 1994: 365). Yet, one common problem with group interviews is the potential for the discussion to be dominated by certain individuals while others remain silent. This pitfall was avoided by ensuring that all participants were asked to share their views on the sites that they had evaluated.

Insofar as the observer effect is concerned, Macefield (2007) notes that qualitative techniques (such as the post-evaluation semi-structured group interviewing of participants) can provide indications of causation mechanisms, i.e. of the mental models users have of the interface and how that affected their response.

Furthermore, few participants reported that they did not have enough time to fully review all aspects of a site, which could be considered as a minor weakness of the study. However, apart from the practical (time) constraints of the study, 10-15 minutes were deemed an adequate time for users to review and gain an overall impression of the

sampled sites; in reality, few users would spend more than that browsing through all the pages of a single website that they had not encountered before.

As the sessions took place during regularly scheduled seminar slots, and due to factors outside of the researcher's control, one of the sessions featured 19 participants, which may have limited the input of each participant during the group discussion, but it ensured that the maximum number of users being able and wishing to participate actually took part and, subsequently, that a greater range of views could be collected.

3.6 Concluding Reflections

Punch observed that "fieldwork is definitely not a soft option, but, rather, represents a *demanding* craft that involves both coping with multiple negotiations and continually dealing with ethical dilemmas" (1994: 84, emphasis in the original). This chapter has outlined the aim, objectives, rationale and underlying philosophy of the thesis' primary research, while attempting to address both of these issues, i.e. multiple negotiations and ethical dilemmas. The former encompass the entire process of the research design from the articulation of coherent and informed research questions, to the choice of sampling frameworks, to the collection, entry and analysis of data, in addition to the acknowledgment of the strengths weaknesses, limitations and synergies of the approach adopted. The latter involves reflecting on potential issues of harm, consent, deception and confidentiality that may affect the study's participants, as well as an ethical and professional rendering of the data that does not pick and choose those parts of the evidence helping the researcher's case, but taking a reflexive approach that brings out the contradictions, unanswered questions and grey areas that emerge during the research process.

Chapter 4

Rules of Engagement
Youth Civic Narratives and Motivations

"If what I said or how I felt made more of a difference it would encourage me [to participate] more as I would think I could actually change things. Because [I] feel like I can't or won't have any effect on making a difference it makes you feel like 'why should you bother'. If the government paid more attention to global warming and endangered species I may be more active as these things matter to me".

(Participant #3.24-KC)

"I do not find it relaxing to be thinking about public affairs and I find it hard to relate to the importance of some issues within my life."

(Participant #4.38-BP)

Chapter 4 Overview: Themes v. Data

Objective 1: *to investigate the participants' attitudes towards civic engagement and issues, and establish key motivating and de-motivating factors*

Attitudes towards democratic engagement (study 1 – survey data)

⇓

Attitudes towards voting (study 3 – qualitative data)

⇓

Attitudes towards established and alternative participation methods: Perceived effectiveness (study 1 – survey data)

⇓

Attitudes towards established and alternative participation methods: Defining the boundaries of the political (study 3 – qualitative data)

⇓

Interest in issues (study 1 – survey data)

⇓

Awareness of global current affairs (study 1 – survey data)

⇓

Political sophistication and issue cognition (study 1 – survey data)

⇓

Civic motivators and de-motivators (study 3 – qualitative data)

⇒ Chapter conclusions: broken cycle of political socialisation and communication

This chapter addresses the first of the study's four objectives, namely the exploration of youth civic attitudes with particular emphasis on the participants' feelings towards a range of public affairs, engagement methods and civic motivators. This first instalment of the empirical discussion draws on parts of two of the three main datasets: the large survey of 487 undergraduate media students (2004) and the qualitative study (2006) in which 46 of those young citizens took part.

The chapter starts by exploring the sample's perceptions of democracy and various traditional and alternative participation methods, in order to contribute to the debate on whether young people are rejecting traditional channels of participation in favour of emerging ones. We then survey the sample's attitudes towards a range of issues, policy areas and global affairs. While it is important to be aware of the issues that make-up young citizens' own agendas as an object of study in its own merit, there is an additional reason for this line of inquiry: one of the key elements of civic participation and political socialisation is the ability to draw cognitive and affective links amongst issues, policies and affairs, and to be able to see the impact of broader social structures on one's everyday life.

The discussion then moves to the core of this part of the study, i.e. the factors that young people themselves put forward as playing a crucial motivating (or de-motivating) role in their civic engagement. If we aim to consider institutional and organisational responses to the issue of youth participation, it is vital to listen to young people's own narratives so as to correctly diagnose the faults of the current system. These responses will be used in following chapters as the broad canvas for a more detailed investigation of how young people (can) use the internet to participate.

4.1 Attitudes towards Democracy and Engagement

The decline of public trust in the institutions and processes of politics has raised questions about young people's feelings towards democracy itself and whether they are willing to participate in principle, or whether they are cynical about politics to the extent of rejecting civic engagement altogether. Our survey data challenges the latter notion: when asked to assess the relevance of democracy to their everyday life on a 1-to-10 scale (Q30), a considerable majority of the sample (70.6%) gave a mark of 7 or above. Overall the mean score for that question was 7.39 (in fact, almost a quarter of the sample gave the highest mark of 10). On a related question probing the affective attachment of younger citizens to the concept of democracy, the big majority of respondents (70.5%) consider democracy to be either quite or extremely "important to them" (Q101) [Appendix K, Figures K1 and K2].

Furthermore, Q29 enquired after the respondents' overall stance towards civic engagement per se; more specifically, whether they think that every citizen must participate (i.e. that participation is a civic duty), whether we should participate only when we have a personal interest in one issue or, finally, whether participating does not make any difference anyway. In some contrast to the view that young people are self-possessed individuals with little regard for civic identity, more than half of the sample

thought that all citizens have a duty to participate, while 39% saw engagement as being based on personal interest. Only 8.5% rejected that distinction between civic duty and personal interest concluding that participation does not make any difference whatsoever (Figure K3).

The survey also included a question used by Inglehart (e.g. 1990) and applied by Muller and Seligson (1994), which is often used by political scientists in order to assess public attitudes towards societal change and extremism (Q28). Increased support for either revolution or reaction could be interpreted as evidence of uneasiness with the political system at large. The overwhelming majority (86.5%) supported gradual reform, which is associated with the mainstream of party politics, while revolutionary action and defence against "rebellious or subversive forces" received little support (Figure K4).

The responses to these broad and structured questions do not in any way mean that the participants are satisfied with the political system, but they clearly show that these young people value democracy and, in principle, have considerable faith in democratic reform and participation. It might appear that participants responded in a way that could be considered socially desirable or acceptable. Even if that were to be the case, that would still mean that they care enough about the democratic system so as to not be indifferent or reject it altogether.

TABLE 4: REASONS FOR VOTING (CODES) USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q32B				
Category	**Code No**	**Code**	**Occurrences**	**Category Tally**
A. Personal Duty (Moral-Habitual)	1	It's my duty / privilege (moral obligation)	5	9
	2	It's my right	3	
	3	I have always voted	1	
B. Collective Responsibility (Communitarian)	4	You can't complain if you don't vote	7	12
	5	Voting is important / every vote counts	5	
C. Voice	6	I want to have a say / make a difference	3	7
	7	Motivated by a specific attitude towards a political party (e.g. anti-Labour)	2	
	8	Motivated by a specific issue (e.g. Iraq war, top-up fees)	2	

Furthermore, our findings indicate that youth grievances about democracy refer to specific emotional and communicative deficits in the current modes of civic participation, as opposed to a blanket rejection of politics. This emerged clearly through the qualitative data of the follow-up study. Participants were asked whether they voted in the last

election that they were eligible to vote and why (or why not) (Q32, see Appendix L for the coded responses). A close reading of the data produced eight typical responses (codes) which broadly fall within three categories for "the voters" (**Table 4**) and for "the non-voters" (**Table 5**).

The coding for those who did vote (henceforth called "the voters") shows that, perhaps surprisingly, affective and communitarian motivations were much more dominant than those associated with voice or specific issues. One very common response was:

> "Because I feel it is important to vote – you can't complain about issues and then not vote. Every vote counts!" [#3.36-TR]

Variance in electoral turnout could sometimes be attributed to factors related with the structure of the electoral system, such as the margin between the two main parties (i.e. to the extent that an election is realistically competitive) and whether a constituency is considered a marginal or safe. Yet, affective and ritualistic gratifications, i.e. the pleasure derived from the act of voting itself, should also be accounted for when we think of a citizen's decision on whether to vote as a rational, cost-benefit calculation. Jones and Hudson (2000: 3) distinguish between utility derived from fulfilling a civic duty (ritual and process) and that derived from expressing a political preference (voice and/or personal interest), and find that "perceptions of the importance of civic duty are important when deciding whether to vote". Therefore, one question that needs to be examined further is whether younger generations take increasingly less pleasure from the act of voting itself, and from following the process of politics more broadly, than before.

The importance of affective, communitarian and cultural motivators is supported by a further textual analysis of the responses: if we look at the language used by the voters in their write-in answers to this question, the word "feel" is by far the verb used most often to determine their responses (the second most frequent is "want", while all other verbs such as "believe", "think", "need", "like", "state", "voice", "dis/agree" appear only once or twice throughout the responses of those who did vote) (Appendix L). While the verb "feel" can also denote opinion (and be used as a substitute to "think"), its use by the participants actually had clear affective purposes, as in:

> "I felt I had a right to voice my opinion. Also as a woman I felt a duty to the suffragettes that died so I could have freedom of speech". [#3.19-BW]

Of equal interest to the factors motivating those who vote is the analysis of the rationale given by those who choose not to vote. Before reporting on our results, it would be useful to make a distinction between apathy and alienation – phenomena which have often been attributed to youth (e.g. White, Bruce and Ritchie 2000). As Russell, Fieldhouse, Purdam and Kalra (2002: 21) note, whereas alienation implies an emphatic rejection of politics, apathy implies indifference, which may or may not be a sign of contentment.

If we accept this distinction, apathy very rarely makes a direct appearance in our data, whereas some of the non-voters' responses could be attributed to a form of alienation. Were we to refer to Olsen's (1969) classic distinction between forced alienation (feeling

that the system obstructs you from participating) and voluntary alienation (feeling that the world is not worth participating in), the participants' civic narratives would probably tend to touch upon the former, rather than the latter.

TABLE 5: REASONS FOR NOT VOTING (CODES)				
USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q32C				
Category	Code No	Code	Occurrences	Category Tally
A. Apathy	1	Result doesn't affect me	1	4
	2	Not interested enough / low motivation	2	
	3	Parents don't vote / not politically aware	1	
B. Lack of Information / Alternatives	4	Not adequately informed / was not sure what each party is offering	5	11
	5	Not sure who to vote for / did not like any of the alternatives	6	
C. Process / Circumstances	6	Don't understand the registering procedure	1	14
	7	Lack of preparation / forgot to register	8	
	8	Wanted to but couldn't / not eligible	5	

Still, the results are somewhat perplexing as most participants attributed their non-voting to either a lack of information / alternatives or to processional / circumstantial reasons (**Table 5**). What is interesting about our participants' complaint that they lack adequate information about political parties and alternatives is that it comes amidst an environment of intense, professional, segmented and increasingly interactive political campaigning (Negrine and Lilleker 2002). Whereas the model of cognitive mobilisation attributes political disaffection to the *abundance* of available political information which, coupled with the public's increased political interest, leads to informed public criticism of politicians (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley 2004, Phelps 2006), our participants complained for the *lack* of information on alternative policies and parties.

Yet, the visible abundance of political messages in the public sphere effectively precludes the non-availability of policy-related materials as the culprit for this lack of awareness. Subsequently, one of two things could be happening:
- political messages *are not* reaching these young people because of ineffective communication strategies or because young people are not listening, or
- political messages *are* reaching young people but they do not assimilate them, again, either because the messages are not appealing/relevant to them or because they are not interested.

We will return to this interesting paradox later in the thesis, as it is important to explore if this is a problem of finding the right channels of communication (in which case the internet might have a role in facilitating a resolution) or whether it is the result of broader socio-cultural shifts in the perception of the role of the citizen towards a model of civic consumerism. The specific relationship between the production of political messages and their reception by young people will also be revisited in Chapter 7 in light of our participants' responses to existing online materials.

The other main reason that participants cited for not voting – circumstantial factors – includes not completing the registration process (due to lack of understanding, preparation, time) or being away during the election. More than half of those who did not vote attributed that, at least partly, to such reasons, with the commonest response being "lack of preparation / forgot to register". The extent of that phenomenon in our sample, in conjunction with the consistently low levels of voter turnout amongst younger citizens across the UK and internationally, indicates that if these responses are widespread, it may be reasonably assumed that some of those participants were not motivated enough in order to complete the registration and voting process in time. That is to say, it is not reasonable to expect that such circumstantial factors could be so widespread in continuous elections so as to create a crisis of youth turnout merely because of registration problems or absence from the voting place. If this assumption were valid, the question then would be whether our participants have not reflected on that lack of interest (which would account for the fact that they attribute their non-participation to circumstantial factors) or whether they are simply reluctant to acknowledge such lack of interest.

That is not to demean the issue of electoral registration, which is important and consistently occurs in studies of youth participation. According to Russell et al. (2002: 20) "non-registration remains one of the key features behind low levels of turnout among young voters" considering especially the increased geographical mobility of people in their late teens and early twenties in the UK. Non-registration can have serious implications for the estimations of turnout, while the fact that it tends to be clustered within specific geographical areas can have adverse effects for the local area and democracy at large. Fitzgerald (2003) found that simple mechanisms such as the ability to register on Election Day substantially increased the likelihood of young people turning out to vote.

The issue of non-registration did appear in our survey data as one-third of the survey's eligible voters were not registered at the time of the survey (Q6, Appendix K, Table K1). Interestingly, though, three quarters of eligible voters (or two thirds of all respondents) stated their intention to vote in the 2005 election. Apart from the fact that more respondents answered that they would vote than those who were actually registered, in the actual event youth turnout nationally was 37%. Still, coupled with responses to other participation questions (Table K2), these results could indicate that young people are not trying to distance themselves from the political process. In other words, our respondents' tendency to overstate their intention to vote, while potentially worrying from a methodological perspective, could reassure us that, at the very least and in an abstract

way, they are *willing* to engage or know they "should" within a context of civic conventions.

Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2004) consider three possible explanations to this often occurring mismatch between words and actions:
- costs involved in acting on beliefs deter citizens from doing so (resources)
- opportunity structures do not support participation (opportunities)
- respondents are simply lying about their intention to vote / participate. According to the authors, it has been empirically proven that this last explanation is the weakest one.

Therefore, once again, resources and opportunities emerge as key to participation. Crucially, new media such as the internet have the potential to lower participation costs and entrance barriers, as well as provide citizens with more opportunities to participate within the context of their lifeworld. However, as it will be shown in later chapters, there is considerable distance between that theoretical potential and its fulfilment in real life.

4.2 Attitudes towards Established and Alternative Participation Methods

An increasingly popular view in the scholarship of youth engagement (e.g. Henn, Weinstein and Wring 2002, Bell 2005) posits that young people are not apathetic towards politics, but that they are merely participating through everyday forms such as volunteering, engaging with the community and in politically conscious consumer behaviour. Subsequently, scholars such as Gauthier (2003) have argued that the problem rests not with youth engagement but with our measurements of it, as the often used analytical tools fail to capture young people's new modes of political activism.

Our evidence partly concurs and partly contradicts that view. In accordance with received wisdom, there is very little to suggest that these young people engage in political affairs through the methods that have been traditionally studied. The responses to Q10-19 of the survey, which probed the participants' levels of engagement, show that, on the one hand, very few of the people taking part in the study were registered as members of a political party, social movement or activist organisation (**Figure 2**) and only a small minority had sent an email to an elected representative or to an institution of government. On the other hand, 41.9% were a member of a society, club, network, charity or other local group, and almost half of our sample had volunteered for such a group.

While such societies, clubs and groups are not necessarily of a political nature, the social capital literature (e.g. Smith 1999) has shown that community membership can spill over to political engagement and is very important on its own especially in childhood and adolescence, while McKendrick, Scott and Sinclair (2007) also found a positive association between participation in non-school organised leisure activities and civic attributes. Furthermore, a quarter of the sample had run for, or had served as, a student representative, which is a useful indicator of a young person's belief in political participation and leadership. Finally, half of the survey's respondents had written to or for

a newspaper or magazine (including student press), although that number may be inflated due to the survey taking place in the media school of a vocational university.

FIGURE 2: PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC ACTIVITIES (%)
SURVEY Q10-19

Activity	%
Party Member	0.6
Written Rep	17.9
Emailed Rep	15.3
Volunteered (Campaign)	4.7
Volunteered (Community)	49.4
Member of Civic Org	4.1
Member of Student Org	41.9
Student Rep	24.8
Attended Civic Event	29.8
Written to Newspaper	44.7
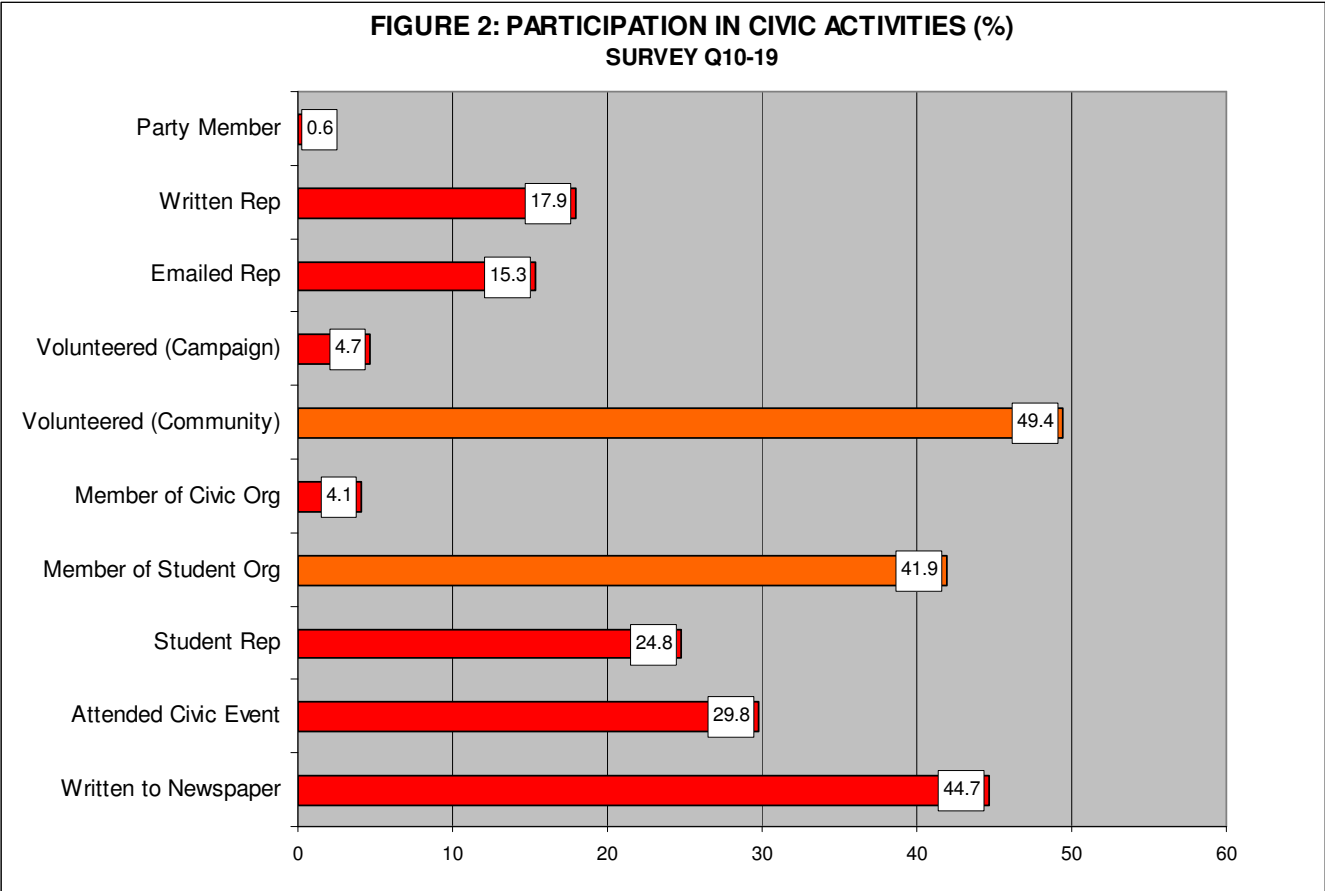
However, some of our data cast doubts about the extent to which young people consciously reject traditional forms of political participation and actively engage in emerging ones. In Q20-27 respondents were presented with a list of civic activities and were asked to rate how effective they thought those actions were in expressing their voice on issues that matter (**Figure 3**). It is perhaps surprising, vis-à-vis the previous results, that volunteering had by far the lowest mean score (2.88/5), while "gaining access to those in power" (3.59), "standing for an elected post" (3.33) and "direct action" (3.26) had the highest mean scores. "Voting" (3.21), "joining a group/movement" (3.18), "discussing about issues with others" (3.14) and "writing a letter/article on an issue" ranked in the middle.

In order to explore this issue further, participants in the follow-up study were presented with a list of twelve activities and were asked about the extent to which they consider those as political. The broader point of this exercise was to explore young people's own perception of the political, i.e. the extent to which they perceive of alternative forms of engagement as conscious political acts.

Hence, the list of the twelve activities included three types of activities: four of these could be characterised as traditionally political, or falling within a narrow definition of the political, (voting, standing as a representative, discussing public issues, volunteering to a community or cause); another group of four activities could be labelled as *de facto* but

not directly political, i.e. falling into a more flexible definition of the political (writing about public issues, donating money to charities or causes, following the news, learning about public issues); finally a third group of four variables could be characterised as indirectly political, i.e. only if one adopts a broad definition of the political (working in the news media, shopping, enjoying art, creating art). The rationale for that last group of activities is the widespread view that shopping can have direct political consequences, such as perpetuating social inequalities, supporting firms with a Corporate Social Responsibility or Fairtrade policy or ecological orientation, and so on. Similarly, art can be considered as a thoroughly political medium, expressing voice and dissent and creating collective identities.

FIGURE 3: PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF CIVIC ACTIONS IN EXPRESSING VOICE (MEAN)
SURVEY Q20-27
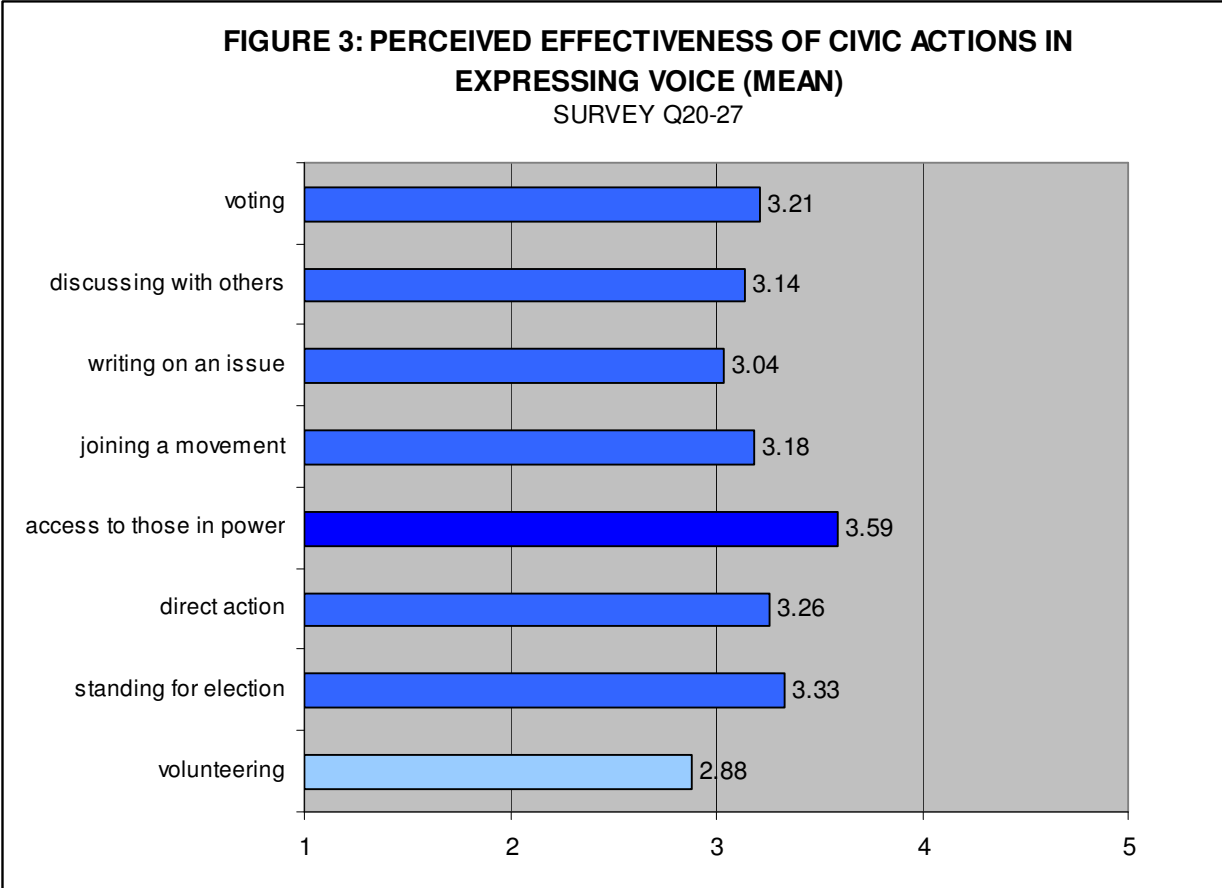
The starting hypothesis was that participants asked to rate the political nature of these activities on a range of 1 to 5 (max), would rate narrowly (N) political activities higher, followed by those which fall within a more flexible (F) conceptualisation of politics and finally by those which would be captured by a broader (B) definition of the civic. Hence, the following sequence of means was expected: N, N, N, N, F, F, F, F, B, B, B, B (see **Table 6**). The grouping of these twelve activities into narrowly, flexibly and broadly political is obviously only a working assumption based on received wisdom – the important issue is how young people themselves perceive of such activities.

The results are broadly consistent with our hypothesis: three out of four narrowly political activities are in the top 5 places; and three out of four broadly political activities are in the last 3 places. The interesting outliers are: "working in the news media" (m=3.7), which while having been defined as a B appears in the top half of the list (perhaps because of

the subject matter of these participants' studies); and "volunteering to a community or cause", which was assumed to be an N, yet comes 8th out of 12 (m=2.83). That last finding is consistent with the results of the survey and supports the view that the young people participating in this study do not consider volunteering to be a political (and perhaps an efficacious) activity. Another important finding is the rating of shopping (m=1.85) as the *least* political activity, well below anything else (the second from the bottom is Enjoying Art with m=2.57). This issue will be revisited in following chapters as it comes in some conflict with the hypothesis that young people have become active citizen-consumers who consciously use shopping as a tool of political expression (Scammell 2000; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004).

TABLE 6: DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE POLITICAL
USER EXPERIENCE STUDY, Q34-45

"To what extent would you rate the following activities as <u>political</u>? (min = 1 – 5 = max)"

Working Assumption

Traditionally political activities (N for Narrow)		Politically relevant (F for Flexible)		Indirectly relevant (B for Broad)	
Voting	Standing	Writing About Issues	Donating	Working in News Media	Shopping
Discussing Issues	Volunteering	Following News	Learning About Issues	Creating Art	Consuming Art

Hypothesis (highest to lowest mean score)

N	N	N	N	F	F	F	F	B	B	B	B

Results (highest to lowest mean score)

N	N	F	F	N	B	F	N	F	B	B	B
4.57	4.24	4.07	3.96	3.83	3.7	3.61	2.83	2.83	2.8	2.57	1.85
Voting	Standing	Writing About Issues	Learning About Issues	Discussing Issues	Working in News Media	Following News	Volunteering	Donating	Creating Art	Consuming Art	Shopping

The two main outliers are marked in **purple** shade.

Volunteering, donating and especially shopping are not considered by these young people as particularly political (low means marked in **blue** shade).

4.3 Interest in Issues and Awareness of Global Affairs

Research carried out by the Institute for Conflict Research (2006) showed that while many young citizens do not report an interest in politics, they feel passionate about political issues that are close to their everyday lives. That is not a particularly recent development: twenty years ago, Denver and Hands (1990) found that there was a clear connection between issues and party choice and that youth voter preference was not really based on "deep-seated political principles". Similarly, Strama (1998) argued that while young people care about a variety of social and political issues, they do not vote because they perceive of politics as being corrupt. Therefore, issues – especially the ones that youth can relate to – are important as a tool of mobilisation and political socialisation.

In Q31-55 of the survey, respondents were presented with a comprehensive – albeit not exhaustive – list of issues and current affairs, which they were asked to rate using a 1-5 Likert scale according to how much they cared for each one (for the full list and exact wording of the variables see Appendix C). As was expected, the issue of employment framed at the level of the individual ("my career prospects") topped the chart with near unanimity (mean of 4.41 out of 5). However, the results clearly indicate that the young people sampled also care passionately for a range of public and global political affairs (see **Figure 4**). Three issues related to the public services really stand out: cancer research (mean 4.16), education standards (4.14) and the NHS (4.13). A range of other global and public affairs, such as peace, third world debt and security, follow with average scores well above 3 ("care somewhat").

The survey also included two issues that were in the headlines during the time of the research but also considered as minority interests – gay marriage and fox hunting (although the latter mobilised a wide coalition of interest groups in the UK). Both issues were at the bottom of the list: "fox-hunting" had a mean score of 2.42 and "gay marriage" a similar mean of 2.45 out of 5, although they had the biggest standard deviation (1.34 for fox-hunting and 1.26 for gay marriage) denoting that while the majority did not care very much or at all, there is still a minority of young people who are very passionate about either of those two issues (also see Appendix K, Figure K5).

This part of the survey produced some other interesting findings, which are in some tension with the more qualitative elements of the research. One such finding is that, climate change and environmental affairs did not receive particularly high ratings in the survey, although the data was collected in late 2004 and it may be the case that since that time there has been more intensive campaigning and greater awareness about these issues.

Another thought-provoking finding is the fact that media freedom, censorship, "representation of my own voice" and constitutional affairs – i.e. what we could collectively call as the rules of the democratic game – do not score higher means. This was at odds with the qualitative responses of many young people who cited the lack of opportunities for the meaningful expression of their voice as one of the leading factors of disengagement (see section 4.6 below) and could be due to a discursive distance

between the citizens and the abstract framing of such issues. The difference between respondents' cool attitudes towards processual political affairs such as censorship and representation and their unequivocal interest in global affairs such as peace and poverty could indicate that they consider the latter to be much more relevant to their lifeworld than the former.

FIGURE 4: INTEREST IN ISSUES AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS (MEAN SCORES)

SURVEY Q31-55:
"In the list below are some issues I would like you to look at.
Please consider each issue separately and carefully. Rate to what extent you care about each issue.
The values you can give are 1 (not at all), 2 (only a little), 3 (somewhat), 4 (quite), 5 (very much)"

Issues ranked by average

Issue	Mean
care-career	4.412
care-cancer	4.161
care-education	4.142
care-nhs	4.128
care-peace	3.822
care-third-world	3.759
care-security	3.726
care-stds	3.699
care-taxes	3.519
care-food	3.491
care-own-voice	3.489
care-recycling	3.393
care-environment	3.381
care-defence	3.326
care-asylum	3.313
care-media	3.279
care-climate	3.279
care-middle-east	3.258
care-pensions	3.244
care-unemployment	3.19
care-foreign	3.048
care-censorship	3.025
care-constitution	2.697
care-gay	2.452
care-hunting	2.418

Mean

In order to probe further into our respondents' levels of global awareness, part of the large survey (Q62-66) comprised a brief quiz on general knowledge of five international news stories and related facts. The first three questions were based on two global news

items that were in the headlines of the UK news media for several weeks/months: the Beslan school siege by Chechen terrorists that took place on 1 September 2004, i.e. about two months before the survey; and a series of lethal hurricanes in the US that took place earlier that year. While both are international events, moderate reception of UK news via any medium is likely to have led to familiarity with those stories.

The other two questions referred to basic facts relating to two major global institutions (the European Union and the Olympic Games); once again, the working hypothesis was that any viewer/listener/reader/user with a minimum of regular news consumption and attention span would be familiar with those facts, given that Britain is a member of the EU and especially as ten new countries had just joined the Union earlier that year (bringing the total number of member states to 25), and given also that the 2004 Olympic Games had just taken place in Athens, which meant that the 2008 Beijing Olympics were in the headlines. Therefore it was assumed that the answers to those two questions would have been mentioned regularly in the headlines and in the news.

The fact that the survey took part in a department of media studies, with some of the participants being journalism students, raised the bar of expected awareness, in the sense that if it was found that media and journalism students were unaware of these global affairs, then that would have been cause for concern regarding global awareness amongst young people in Britain at large. As a caveat to the adopted approach, It is should be acknowledged that there are different ways of assessing awareness of current affairs. For instance, the rise of search engines, Web 2.0 and user-generated content has been changing the way internet users – especially those of younger generations – access news. This emerging online news and research culture may favour skills such as the quick retrieval and more superficial cognitive processing of information from different websites, as opposed to in-depth memorising.

Having this in mind, the results support the hypothesis that the young people sampled were broadly knowledgeable of global affairs and international stories (Figure K6). Nine out of ten respondents got the "country" of the Beslan crisis correctly, while in the most challenging of the five questions, that of the number of casualties, the correct answer (301-600: 32.6%) closely followed the most popular one (101-300: 44.4%; which is itself not far from the approximate number of casualties). The majority of respondents got the name of the US hurricane right (59.4%), while 69% got the 2008 Olympic city correctly (Beijing).

Interestingly, the only aberration to these results was in regards to the question of the number of EU member states: only just above a quarter (28.5%) of respondents got the number right; an equal 28.5% thought that there are 20 members in the EU (which has never been the case); one-third (32.5%) of the sample thought that the European Union comprises of 15 member states (which was the case from 1995 until early 2004); while the remaining 10.5% thought that there are 12 member states (which was true in 1986-1995).

Despite this outlier, the evidence does suggest that these young people are both interested in, and knowledgeable of, a variety of issues, policy areas and public affairs,

including global ones. However, issue interest and political knowledge are only two of the tools that political scientists usually employ to explore youth civic attitudes. We also need to take into account a crucial third factor, which is political sophistication – an essential part of a citizen's civic profile, albeit a concept that has evolved through the decades amidst heated scholarly debates (Denny and Doyle 2008). Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2004: 139) note that according to cognitive engagement theory, "cognitive mobilisation produces individuals who have an interest in politics and civic affairs, are politically knowledgeable and have a clear understanding of the norms and principles of democracy".

4.4 Issue Cognition and Political Sophistication

The exact definition and components of political sophistication have been the subject of many interesting contributions to the field of political science and political psychology over the last fifty years, especially since Converse's (1964) model of political conceptualisation (see Lawrence 2003). Alternative terms include "political expertise", "cognitive complexity" and "cognitive engagement" (see Luskin and Bullock 2004). Without getting into an in-depth semantic debate which is not part of this study's agenda, it is important to distinguish political sophistication from political awareness (i.e. information or knowledge) and political interest (i.e. affective relationship to an issue or cause). Put simply, political sophistication is essentially about the degree to which a citizen understands the workings of politics and government and is able to build coherent cognitive links amongst a variety of factors such as political events, pieces of information, news, values, policy stances and party choices.

For the purposes of this study, we borrow elements from Neuman (1986) and Luskin (1987) and focus on the aspect of political sophistication that concerns a citizen's ability to connect seemingly unrelated but politically interdependent issues between them; or to understand the links between policies or public affairs that are often articulated in abstract terms or in ways that do not relate to that citizen's everyday life. It should be noted that this specific aspect of political sophistication (for which we use the term issue cognition) is similar but not identical to the sophistication-interaction theory of mass policy reasoning, which argues that the levels of political sophistication determine the ways in which individuals "translate" their abstract values and ideologies to specific policy preferences, and which some criticise for lack of reliability (Goren 2004).

The discussion of issue cognition and political sophistication which follows draws on three types of data analysis:
  – an hierarchical cluster analysis (see **Figure 5**)
  – non-parametric correlations of all possible pairs of issues (Table K3)
  – a comparison of the mean score of each issue (**Figure 4**).

The analysis of the data produced strong evidence confirming the political sophistication hypothesis, i.e. direct links were drawn by the young people in our study amongst policy areas that were assumed to be related or interdependent, and between macro-social affairs and micro-social issues. Hence, the respondents demonstrated a high degree of

political sophistication and consistency in their responses. That is not to say that respondents cared equally about the issues within each cluster, but simply that there is a clear pattern in the data across the sample indicating a consistent response to those clustered issues. The twenty-five issues and affairs were listed randomly in the actual survey, yet a mere glance at the dendrogram, which was produced directly by the software without any researcher input regarding the expected associations or the order of the issues, shows visible clusters of related and interdependent issues (highlighted in **Figure 5**).

FIGURE 5: HIERARCHICAL CLUSTER ANALYSIS – ISSUES AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

SURVEY Q31-55
Dendrogram using Average Linkage (Between Groups) - Rescaled Distance Cluster Combine

Colour coding highlights clusters confirming "sophistication" hypothesis
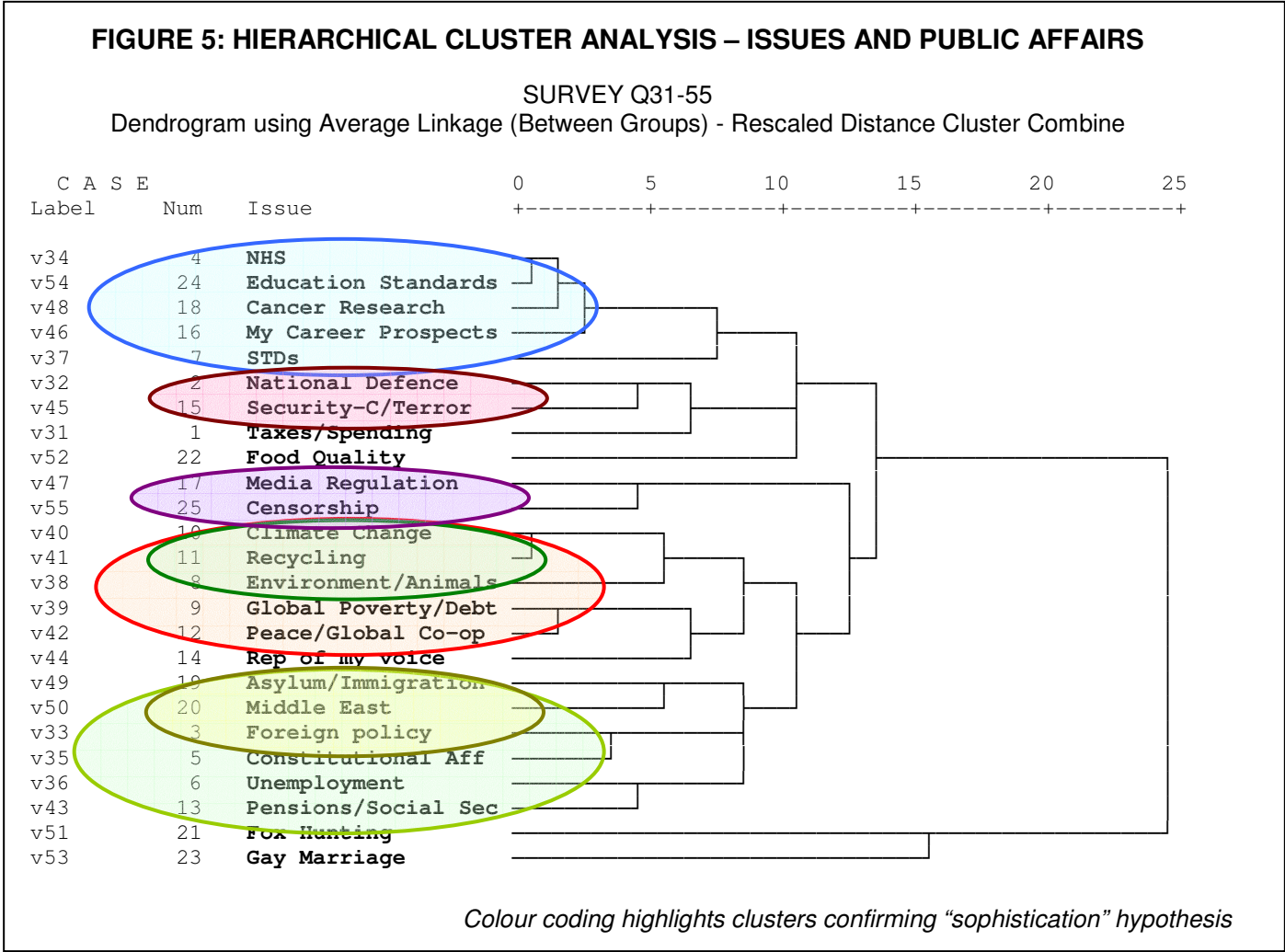
These "cognitive clusters" include: national defence with security/counter-terrorism; media regulation with censorship; climate change with recycling and environmental protection / animal welfare; third world debt and global poverty with peace and global cooperation. All health-related issues and policies (NHS, Cancer Research and STDs) were also clustered. Another key group included asylum/immigration, the Middle East conflict and foreign policy; the working assumption here being that immigration movements towards the UK are directly affected by humanitarian crises and conflicts in the Middle East, which in turn relate to the country's foreign policy.

In addition to these closely-knit clusters, there is a number of associations moderately linked in statistically significant relationships but outside of clusters, such as the variables linked to voice and representation (Table K3). Finally, there are a couple of weak

associations and outliers, i.e. evidence against the sophistication hypothesis. For example, food quality was not directly linked to environmental protection and animal welfare; the working assumption being that free range and organic practices in the breeding of livestock and poultry may lead to better food quality, while factory farming leads to food products of lesser quality. Another important outlier was the distance between the micro-oriented issue "My Career Prospects" and the macro-social issue of "Unemployment"; one could assume that a crisis in the job market or economic recession could well affect an individual's hopes and fears about their own job security/prospects or progression in the career ladder.

One area that merits of further exploration is apparent contradictions in the attitudes and priorities expressed by respondents in this part of the survey, possibly denoting lack of clarity about concepts that are widely used in everyday politics (Westminster jargon), and perhaps indicating one way for the improvement of public communication, i.e. building links between abstract institutional concepts and everyday realities. Thus, it is interesting to note that "representation of my voice and concerns" appears in the upper half of the chart (mean=3.489), yet "constitutional affairs" (which is the obvious match i.e. area of public policy that would ensure this representation) is in the bottom of the list with a mean score of 2.697.

Another such example is "security and countering terrorism", which ranks quite high (mean=3.726), whereas "foreign policy" is fifth from the bottom in the chart (mean=3.048). National security obviously has an organically interdependent relationship with foreign policy not only because of alliance building, but also due to the fact that foreign policy is one of the key tools for the tackling of the root causes of terrorism (e.g. through the Middle East peace process and the tackling of Third World debt and poverty).

Future research of a qualitative nature could explore further youth attitudes towards such important policy areas not only in terms of substance (i.e. their stance towards specific policies), but also insofar as the presentation and communication of those policies to the wider public is concerned as some citizens may feel that these Whitehall-led public affairs do not relate to their everyday life. That view is somewhat confirmed by the grouping of what could be considered macro-social or Westminster-oriented issues (constitutional affairs, unemployment, social security, foreign policy) into a cluster (**Figure 5**). It would be interesting to explore whether this clustering indicates a blanket perception of such macro-political affairs as outside of young people's reach or everyday life. That interpretation would also be supported by the fact that all four affairs are in the bottom quarter of their "care" list (**Figure 4**).

Finally, the two topical issues of the survey, i.e. gay marriage and fox hunting, were almost completely detached from the rest of the list of public affairs; they were outside of all clusters and were not statistically associated with other issues, with the exception of the (expected, still relatively weak) correlation between fox hunting and animal welfare (.380, p<.001). Overall, there was a grouping of many environmental and poverty-related issues into a closely knit global affairs cluster (marked in red in **Figure 5**). These global affairs are at the forefront of post-modern issue politics; the online strategies of key civic

organisations promoting some of these issues, as well as our young participants' response to those online messages, will be further explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

4.5 Civic Motivators and De-motivators

The last empirical element of this part of the study focused on a question which is essential to our understanding of youth attitudes towards politics and civic participation. It is common to approach the question of what motivates young people to (or de-motivates them from) becoming more active citizens indirectly through complex statistical analyses based on close-ended, structured variables. In this study we adopt an alternative approach based directly on young people's own narratives. In a focal point of the in-depth user experience study, participants were asked to reflect on the things that motivate and demotivate them in a civic sense (Q55).

		TABLE 7: CIVIC MOTIVATORS (CODES) USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q55A		
Group	**Code No**	**Code**	**Occurrences**	**Category Tally**
A. Efficacy and Relevance	1	Feeling I could make a difference or that my voice counts	11	26
	2	Getting more out of it or being able to see the benefits	3	
	3	Explanation of how the issue directly affects my self / family / community	12	
B. Accessibility and Appeal	4	Being more informed / inspired	8	35
	5	Being more encouraged to express myself; being listened to	6	
	6	More accessible, appealing, youth-oriented, less patronising material	14	
	7	Resources (more free time / money / energy)	7	
C. Systemic / Social	8	Knowing others care or have same beliefs	5	9
	9	Better politicians; less negativity	4	

The depth, justification and originality of many responses are impressive and leave little doubt about the fact that these young people are willing, and even keen, to engage in a discussion about civic engagement and, contrary to some beliefs, are able to articulate consistent civic narratives (for the full text and coding of responses see Appendix M). The raw data were distilled and gradually reduced to nine colour-coded motivators (**Table 7**) and nine matching de-motivators (**Table 8**), which can broadly be classified

under three categories: efficacy and relevance; accessibility and appeal; system and society.

Despite the rich responses and differences amongst participants, some clear patterns emerge from this body of data. The single most important factor (both motivating and de-motivating) is the availability (or lack) of accessible, appealing, encouraging and constructive communication that acknowledges young people's needs, abilities and cultures (codes 4, 5, 6). However, it is vital to stress that when we refer to communication, we do not simply refer to the messages, campaigns and arguments that political leaders or organisations produce in a top-down way; many of our participants expressed frustration at the lack of accessible channels for the expression of their own voice:

> "Making things more accessible to young people would motivate me to be more active. Perhaps to feel that when we discuss public affairs online we will be listened to – otherwise it's all complaining and nothing being done" [#3.22-HM].

> "I feel de-motivated when I feel I do not have enough information or feel uninspired to learn more about an issue. And if I had less opportunity for my opinions to be expressed – if no-one cares what's the point?!" [#1.05-JW].

Furthermore, many thought of political discourse as patronising, inaccessible and, often, even intimidating:

> "To become a more active citizen I feel debates in class / groups would make me more inspired in taking a stance within society. At the moment I am too lazy because I don't know enough and therefore don't care enough. I would like more interaction with people [of] my own age on political matters because I would not feel so intimidated to speak out" [#1.03-ED].

> "Less political jargon and for it (politics) to come across less patronising when trying to reach younger audiences. It's almost as if it's like BBC / CBBC, they need to find a middle ground" [#1.04-JP].

The theme of inaccessible messages is a recurring one in our study; one expression of this problem, as highlighted by the young people themselves, is the fact that media coverage of news and current affairs assumes and requires a lot of prior knowledge about an issue or event (e.g. #4.44-NH, #4.42-JS). This, subsequently, leads to a challenge for journalists and broadcasters: there is a strong call for more contextualisation of news and current affairs, yet giving background information in an holistic, comprehensive way goes against the emerging culture of segmentation, multi-tasking and short attention spans.

The appearance of information/communication at the top of the list of (de)motivating factors brings us back to the paradox upon which we touched earlier. We seem to be witnessing an abundance of political messages almost to the point of over-saturation, yet at the same time many citizens find it difficult to follow the public debate. That gap between production and reception could partly be attributed to different agendas: Coleman (e.g. Coleman and Rowe 2005) argues that the political agenda set by the parties and the media has been too remote from the interests of ordinary voters; young

citizens' disinterest should not be confused with a disengagement from politics altogether. Another (not mutually exclusive) explanation could be that citizens, such as the ones sampled in our study, do not appreciate the quality, utility and tone (or "pitch", for lack of a better word) of the available political messages and of the civic interaction, which they see as inaccessible, patronising and intimidating.

Group	Code No	Code	Occurrences	Category Tally
TABLE 8: CIVIC DE-MOTIVATORS (CODES) USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q55B				
A. Participation does not produce positive results	1	Feeling I could not make a difference / my participation has no effect	10	16
	2	If things got worse; views or policies I strongly disagree with	5	
	3	Not relevant to me	1	
B. Participation is forced, difficult or resource-intensive	4	Threats and feeling forced to act	2	24
	5	Not being encouraged or not having enough opportunities to express my opinion or participate	4	
	6	Inadequate, inaccessible, complicated, confusing information	11	
	7	Too demanding (too expensive / takes too much time)	7	
C. Systemic / Social	8	No-one cares; less concern by others	2	9
	9	Scandals; disliking politics	7	

Cognitive engagement and political literacy are only the first virtuous effects of accessible and interactive political communication. Our study concurs with the view that young people today are facing a considerable deficit of efficacy, which has led them to scepticism and often to the borderline of resignation about the (in)ability of the individual citizen to make a difference. Efficacy, in its various articulations and expressions, is the keyword that recurs most often throughout the various parts of our study; many participants reported feeling simply powerless:

> [Would de-motivate:] "The current feeling that whatever I do will have no effect on the world, just a tiny demographic powerless to change anything" [#1.02-CB].

That quote also raises another important pattern that emerged through these responses, i.e. the fact that these young people feel very isolated and even, in a civic sense, lonely. We will return to this major issue in a moment. Directly linked to efficacy, is the relevance (or irrelevance) of political debates, discourses and messages to these citizens' everyday life; according to one participant's quite typical response:

> "By seeing how events and issues would affect me personally or area am in. if it's an issue that does not necessarily impact upon my life directly it tends not to be a direct concern of mine…" [#2.17-SH].

The relevance of a current affair or cause to the individual's lifeworld, coupled with the existence of visible evidence that their participation will make a difference, seem to be the determining factors of their engagement – the "litmus test" on whether they will engage with a political issue or not. Hence, the onus lies with the communicators or political leaders who have to "sell" not just their cause or issue, but also – and perhaps this is a relatively recent development – appropriate tools for action which have capacity for change. These young people do not reject democratic politics, public affairs or civic participation as such; there is very little, if any, evidence of apathy and systemic rejection in these qualitative responses, although traces of scepticism, frustration and resignation do appear in their narratives. Kirshner, Strobel, Fernandez (2003) argue that young people are "critically aware of their social and political environments" and keen to engage when presented with the opportunity to influence positive change. However, critical awareness is not enough on its own and can, in fact, act as a double-edged sword. If such opportunities for meaningful participation are lacking, awareness can lead to withdrawal and apathy rather than empowerment.

One wonders, however, whether these snapshots of youth civic attitudes are part of a broader civic culture that treats citizens as customers who, in a quasi-marketing mode, have to "buy into" the product of participation. Going through some of the obstacles to youth participation that we have mentioned so far, it may appear that these hurdles are almost excuses for non-participation: the difficulty of registering to vote, the lack of information about the political alternatives, the lack of available channels for the exercise of voice, the lack of guarantees that the act of participation will be followed up and lead to visible change… These obstacles seem to be putting citizens off politics, rather than making them more determined to fight for their civic rights as they might have done a few decades ago.

If there is one major difference between our participants' civic narratives and the established norms of democratic participation, that would be the absolute lack of any reference to collective action. That is to say, collective identity, membership to organisations of collective action or simply references to collective mechanisms for participation are nowhere to be found in their responses. Coupled with the afore-mentioned deficit of efficacy, it almost appears as if these young people have diagnosed that as individuals on their own they are unable to "change the world", yet that frustration does not lead them to take the initiative, integrate with others, join groups and participate in collective efforts, but to withdraw to the realm of their own lifeworld. One interpretation for this scepticism towards collective action amongst current youth is offered by Delli Carpini (2000) who argues that people in their 30s or younger have never really experienced the potential or direct impact of collective action, which affects their perception of that action's efficacy. Given the recent examples of youth mobilisation (e.g. in the run-up to the 2nd Iraq War and during the top-up fees debate), an alternative theory would be that young people are willing to engage but feel that their action will not make any difference because leaders are not listening.

While youth in Britain today are leading a socio-cultural sea-change in terms of choice, consumption, use of new media technologies and social networking, our sample of internet-literate students project a mixed image of pragmatism and civic passivism: on the one hand they are very strategic and (almost too) realistic insofar as their own engagement to public affairs is concerned; on the other hand, they seem to be unaware of the potential of collective mobilisation, and express what can only be described as civic loneliness. In fact, a few participants expressed the wish that they could see other people of their age caring about the issues that they care, i.e. that knowing others have similar beliefs or face same issues would act as a motivator (similarly, others felt that "no-one cares" and that less concern by others is de-motivating them):

> "If other people my age / interest were doing similar activities I would also join in" [#2.13-DB]

> "Being shown that other people care about issues would motivate me more" [#3.21-HB]

> "If more young people got involved with public issues that would make me more involved with this type of activity" [#3.28-KS].

The need to belong to a larger social grouping is obviously not a new feature in adolescence or early adulthood; yet, the fact that there is not a single positive mention of such a group or collective initiative in our participants' narratives makes that collective condition sound almost like a utopia. Seminal models of persuasion and behavioural intentions (such as Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action (1980) and Ajzen's updated model of Theory of Planned Behavior (1991)) have highlighted the role of subjective norms as catalysts for action, i.e. individuals take seriously into account what others (and especially those in their immediate social environment) expect them to do or not do. However, it is fascinating that in the case of civic action there was no reference to peer pressure or established social norms about participation and, in fact, the reverse was true: our participants expressed the wish to see others engage in civic behaviour in order to be motivated themselves, i.e. it was almost as if they were calling for the establishment of such norms.

In conclusion, this section has singled out four key factors that emerge from young people's own civic narratives; factors that ought to be taken into account in any effort to develop user-aware civic material on the web:

- lack of meaningful communication between young citizens and the political system, including the lack of accessible and appealing material
- lack of efficacy
- emphasis on the individual lifeworld
- ambivalence towards the collective.

Even with a quick glance, one can see that these factors are not independent of each other. In fact they are so directly interconnected that all four constitute symptoms of the same phenomenon: the distancing of the citizen from the public sphere, and the political, economic and socio-cultural shift towards the private realm habituated by segmented

individuals who are increasingly treated and act as consumers. No value judgement (or, at least, direct accusation against either individuals or institutions) should be read in this statement. The historical, institutional and ideological factors that have led to this emerging mode of civic culture and political engagement are far too complicated and elusive for the researcher to determine in the context of the present thesis. For example, if there is political alienation amongst today's youth, and if that alienation is dangerous or damaging to representative democracy as we know it, then it can be safely argued that it is not these young people's fault.

The role of political socialisation as the process that has an instrumental role in shaping citizens' attitudes towards the political process, and the related distinction between individual choice and social structure are examined in the final section of this chapter.

4.6 The Broken Cycle of Political Socialisation and Communication

The nuances in the data presented in this chapter imply that sweeping generalisations about the state of youth engagement should be avoided. Still, some patterns do emerge and robust conclusions can be formed.

A sense of civic duty was discernible in the participants' narratives, although they were generally unsure of how to *fulfil* that duty (lack of appropriate opportunities and resources). There was also ambivalence towards the political process, scepticism about the extent to which individual citizens can contribute to social change, as well as an increased emphasis on the individual's lifeworld. Furthermore, with regard to the view that young people are consciously engaging through everyday activities, participants did not consider volunteering (or indeed shopping) to carry any particular civic connotations. Friedland and Morimoto (2005: 3) argue that the recent rise in youth volunteering is not due to a civic renaissance but to an increased sense of job insecurity and the need for "résumé-padding": "the increasing pressure to achieve is a driving structural context for many young people, and, as such is a powerful motive that can organize other motives". This would also be consistent with the survey data, which showed that "my career prospects" was by far the most salient issue in young people's agendas.

This increased emphasis on the micro-social level of the individual citizen highlights the role of political socialisation in facilitating civic integration and participation (Hooghe 2004; Jarvis, Montoya and Mulvoy 2005). Concepts such as political socialisation and civic culture are not abstract terms – they have very real everyday applications. They both relate to the so-called civic consciousness, i.e. the vital link between one's private condition and the public affairs. The study of socialisation (and, subsequently, political socialisation) has traditionally focused on children and adolescents through the field of developmental psychology. Based on the evidence presented so far, it could be argued that political socialisation ought to be viewed as an ongoing, lifelong process rather than a finite one.

Lenk (1990: 176) argues that political participation stems from the need of citizens who have grown up in, and shaped by, specific social circumstances (e.g. institutional

structures, policies, laws) to actually determine or change those very circumstances in their own turn. Citizens acquire civic consciousness by cognitively linking apparently unrelated everyday activities to broader public affairs, social structures, economic interests and, ultimately, collective causes. In other words, citizens realise that their individual experiences can be largely attributed to society-wide forces; subsequently, if they wish to improve their private condition they would have to actively engage with those public issues and structures.

In traditional political science and sociology, citizens would do that and, in fact, historically have done that through a vehicle of collective action (e.g. political party, social movement, grassroots campaign), which would complete the cycle of political socialisation: citizens can trace the effects of broader political structures on their own lives, but they can also see the effects of their collective action on those structures, through the outcomes of political participation.

Our study, albeit being an exploratory investigation of a single youth community, indicates that many young people may find it difficult to relate some political debates and affairs to their everyday lives, while, at the same time, feeling that they have no control of, or power upon, the broader socio-political structures. Furthermore, insofar as the issues that they do care for are concerned, some either feel that the present situation is so negative that nothing significant can be done by an ordinary citizen, or that those in power are so disconnected that a citizen's voice will not make a difference anyway. This resembles Olsen's (1969) notion of forced alienation, i.e. the feeling that the system actively obstructs the citizen from integrating politically.

Their response to this situation does not follow the predicted pattern of political socialisation and civic engagement: their reaction to those feelings of helplessness may not be to resort to collective action by integrating with others in politically active groups, but to "escape" by turning their attention to other areas of social and human activity (e.g. private enterprise / career, entertainment / leisure, consumption). Subsequently, in such instances the cycle of political socialisation breaks in both directions (system to citizen, citizen to system).

Recent cases of civic action (e.g. the Live 8 concerts for the Make Poverty History campaign, the Live Earth concerts for climate change, the Stop the War coalition demonstrations, the widespread adoption of charity wristbands) show that younger citizens can be approached and mobilised. However, a core lesson emerging from our data is that, while young people are willing to engage, a number of terms and conditions ought to be met in order to *make that engagement meaningful to them*. These include amongst others: (a) a visible link between the particular issue or cause and the citizen's own lifeworld, or conversely the existence of clear benefits for the would-be participant; (b) evidence that one's participation and resource investment (money, time, effort, social capital, emotional attachment) could make a positive difference (efficacy); (c) the existence or creation of a critical mass of citizens engaging in a certain political activity, which then encourages others to do the same.

These factors are not isolated from each other. Rather, they are organically interconnected and together signify a sense of communicative as well as emotional distance between the agendas, discourses, priorities and values of individual citizens and of established political institutions. Branding that distance simply as "disengagement" or "non-participation" would not do justice to the citizens, but it would also not be an accurate description of reality and, subsequently, it would not yield effective reforms. This structural distance goes further than a mere disapproval of individual politicians or specific forms of participation. It seems to stem from subtle but widespread scepticism towards the collective, and could be linked to the privatisation, segmentation and marketisation of the public sphere (Marquand 2004). It might also be linked to the failure of established conceptualisations of citizenship (Jones 1990) and of the public sphere (Fraser 1992) to incorporate the needs of traditionally disenfranchised groups such as women and youth. These findings are not irrelevant to the discussion on the interpenetration of the political sphere and popular culture which has led to an increased emphasis on celebrities, style and consumption, i.e. a narrative of the private individual rather than the social (Corner 2003, Street 2003, Bennett 2003).

The conditionality of the outlined mode of engagement (i.e. the fact that an individual will only engage if certain terms and conditions are met) seems compatible with traditional rational choice theory, which attributes civic behaviour to cost-benefit calculations by individual citizens (Grofman 1993). However, intrinsic motivation for participation – that is to say, motivation that comes from within the individual rather than as response to an external stimulus – has its own rationality and consumption benefits (Lee 1988). Scholars such as Jones (2004, 2007) highlight that citizens take pleasure and pride in the act of collective participation itself because of internal moral, ethical or ideological reasons. Hence, intrinsic motivation can play a key role in nurturing sustainable civic engagement. It can, in turn, be nurtured through the process of political socialisation in a civic culture that allows citizens to feel pride when taking part in the political process and respect for institutions that belong to everyone.

Therefore, it is quite clear from this discussion that facilitating youth engagement is more complicated than producing a few press releases that brand politics as "cool" (see Coleman and Rowe 2005). In order to motivate young people to become more active as citizens and consumers, it is first vital to understand their needs. One such need that has clearly emerged, not least from our participants' own responses, is their *need for encouragement*, meaning accessible language and appealing opportunities for interaction. Bishop (2003) concludes that we need to view youth cultures as "sense making processes"; when these cultures are recognised as "acceptable" and "official", for instance by teachers, new power sharing interactions and participation patterns occur. In a similar vein, Matthews, Limb and Taylor (1998) find that, contrary to practice in continental Europe, young people in the UK are not listened to with respect or treated seriously by the political system. According to Russell et al. (2002: 23), youth "are the least likely of all sections of society to be included in the political process… The way that the established parties 'look' to the outside world may be important to their ability to recruit young people to the electoral process as a whole".

Another such need, which is somewhat underestimated by researchers and practitioners,

is young people's *need for acknowledgment* and for a sense of belonging. Acknowledgment does not necessarily mean responding directly to a citizen's input. It can also be interpreted in a broader sense as the signal that a society or civic culture is emanating regarding the historical, cultural or social importance of a political event or participation process per se. As it has been shown, the intrinsic value of a civic action is enhanced when other members of the society signal their commitment to it (Jones 2004, Frey 1997). That is to say, when a citizen knows that they are taking part in a collective process to which other citizens and the society in general attribute respect and consider important for the collective good, then that citizen's intrinsic motivation increases. Conversely, when a citizen has the perception that individuals are "in it for themselves", self-interest becomes much more important a driver of behaviour.

One possible reading of these two needs is that the former is more about citizens' ability or willingness to participate and express their voice, whereas the latter represents the contextualisation or realisation of that voice. Or, if we were to take the efficacy metaphor further, we could say that encouragement corresponds to internal efficacy (one's belief in own ability) while acknowledgment matches external efficacy (system responsiveness). Alternatively, and given that the paradox has been identified of a deficit in real, two-way communication between the political system and young people within a context of unprecedented connectivity and information volume, these two needs capture a broader call for more affective interaction between political leaders and citizens.

The internet has been identified as a potentially ideal medium to bring closer young people with political organisations and messages, so the next chapter focuses on our participants' patterns of internet use and online civic needs. Chapters 6 and 7 will then attempt to further explore the afore-mentioned dynamics by assessing existing online civic material and comparing it to our participants' own responses and evaluations of that material. This is part of this study's quest to explore the constituent elements of civic usability, i.e. the elements of civic communication that would make a civic website more effective and empowering from the perspective of the end-user, i.e. the young citizen.

Chapter 5

Patterns of Youth Internet Use and Challenges to Online Civic Engagement

"I think my political and consumer behaviours wouldn't really affect where I go on the web because when I go on the web I normally use it only to talk to friends or research. I don't think that I would do it actively on the internet. I think it's just because of my patterns of what I do on the internet".

(Participant #4.37-AM)

"I argue that consuming the social web and sharing that content for others to consume is not, in fact, using the social web to its potential. Even content-creation, if it is not truly reflexive, is just a mechanic reproduction of a consumer product… [W]hat are these individuals sharing? What are they communicating? How are the countless social operating systems on Facebook, such as the "What Prostitute Are You?" actually being productive?"

(Bialski 2008)

Chapter 5 Overview: Themes v. Data

Objective 2: *to survey the participants' patterns of internet use, including their levels of online civic engagement, and explore how their civic attitudes translate into specific online preferences and expectations from civic websites*

Internet access and uses (study 1 – survey data)

⇓

Obstacles to internet use (study 1 – survey data)

⇓

Role and integration of the internet in everyday life:
Places of access, perceptions of integration (study 1 – survey data)
Perceptions of integration, reasons for going online (study 3 – qualitative data)

⇓

Active content production or passive consumption?
Online activities (study 1 – survey data)
Internet motivations (study 3 – comparison of means)

⇓

Levels of online civic engagement (study 3 – comparison of means)

⇓

Power laws and online destinations (study 3 – distribution of nominated websites)
Factors affecting web browsing (study 3 – focus group data)

⇓

Expected civic motivators of issue websites: content, design, interactivity
(study 3 – qualitative data)
(case studies: NSPCC, PETA)

⇒ Chapter conclusions: challenges to the internet's empowering potential

Having established the participants' attitudes towards civic engagement, and having identified the conditions under which they might consider participating, this chapter explores patterns of youth internet use, such as online routines, gratifications and destinations. While it is widely accepted that the net is becoming increasingly integrated into youth lifeworlds, the extent to which users actually exploit the medium's potential – especially in civic contexts – is unclear. The discussion will then focus on a key element of civic usability and of the user experience study, i.e. an in-depth analysis of what young users themselves would expect and like to see in a civic or issue-oriented website. Following directly from the previous chapter's civic narratives, the participants were asked to elaborate on the factors that can affect their willingness to engage with public or consumer affairs via the internet, as well as to elaborate on specific online (content, design or interactivity) features that might motivate them to participate online. What emerges from this exercise is not merely a coherent set of user preferences, which could determine the effectiveness of a civic website, but also a rich narrative that illuminates our understanding of young people's civic needs and values. These themes will then be revisited when evaluating civic websites in Chapter 6, as well as in Chapter 7 vis-à-vis users' own experiences with sampled websites.

5.1 Utilitarian Users…

The young people sampled in both parts of the study (the large survey and the user experience study) are experienced and regular users of the net, although perhaps not as constantly online as one might expect from media students. According to the survey data, only a small minority (15.8%) of survey respondents could be classified as heavy users, while half of the sample reported using the net for approximately one to two hours a day (details about the users' internet profile and time spent online can be found in Appendix N, Figures N1, N2 and Table N1). However, the analysis of participants' responses to the qualitative study (Appendix O) clearly shows that the internet is very integrated into their lives. They go online on a daily basis and for a few it has even acquired a more substantial part in their daily routines:

> "Pretty much completely integrated – it goes on first thing in the morning and often last thing at night" [#3.30-LC].

> "It is very integrated in my everyday life. I basically use it everyday for several hours and feel that something is missing if I'm not able to check my emails frequently" [#4.45-SJ].

Our findings are also consistent with the 2007 Oxford Internet Survey [OxIS] (Dutton and Helsper 2007), which found that young people, and students in particular, have high internet efficacy, i.e. the self-rated ability to use the net. Issues such as pop-up ads and the price and quality of internet access appear to be of much greater concern to them than familiarity with either technology in general or with the internet in particular (**Figure 6**).

Two factors emerged as salient in this investigation of the net's role in youth everyday life: university life and necessity. Firstly, our evidence suggests that the respondents' use

of, and overall attitude towards, the internet is intrinsically linked to their life as students: not only is the campus the main gateway to the internet (Figure N3), but also the participants themselves cited university work as the main vehicle for the integration of the net into their daily routines:

"It is part of my university life, usually done out of necessity not pleasure" [#3.26-KM].

This leads us to the second factor – necessity. Interestingly, more respondents saw the internet primarily as a "useful tool" for their work and leisure – "an alternative to existing means" – than as "an integral part of my everyday life" that allows them to do or find things they cannot do or find elsewhere (Figure N4). The primary, and almost universal, reason for using the internet is necessity (93.7%); leisure (81.9%) is also a big factor, whereas fewer users are motivated by habitual (54.8%) factors, and considerably fewer by communitarian or socialisation factors (Figure N5). This attitude towards the internet, which we could call *utilitarian*, emerges throughout the study's data – both qualitative and quantitative. While the big majority (82%) of students taking part in OxIS 2007 stated that losing internet access would be a problem to their everyday life (Dutton and Helsper 2007), the data presented throughout this chapter suggest that this response might primarily be attributed to the functional properties of the internet (such as convenience), rather than to an emotional or otherwise organic attachment to the medium.

FIGURE 6: OBSTACLES TO INTERNET USE (MEAN)
SURVEY Q91-99

Obstacle	Mean
hardware cost	2.97
access price/quality	3.69
familiarity with tech	3.01
familiarity with net	2.71
poor search results	3.22
spam and junk	3.56
flaming	1.95
ads and popups	3.65
viruses	3.51
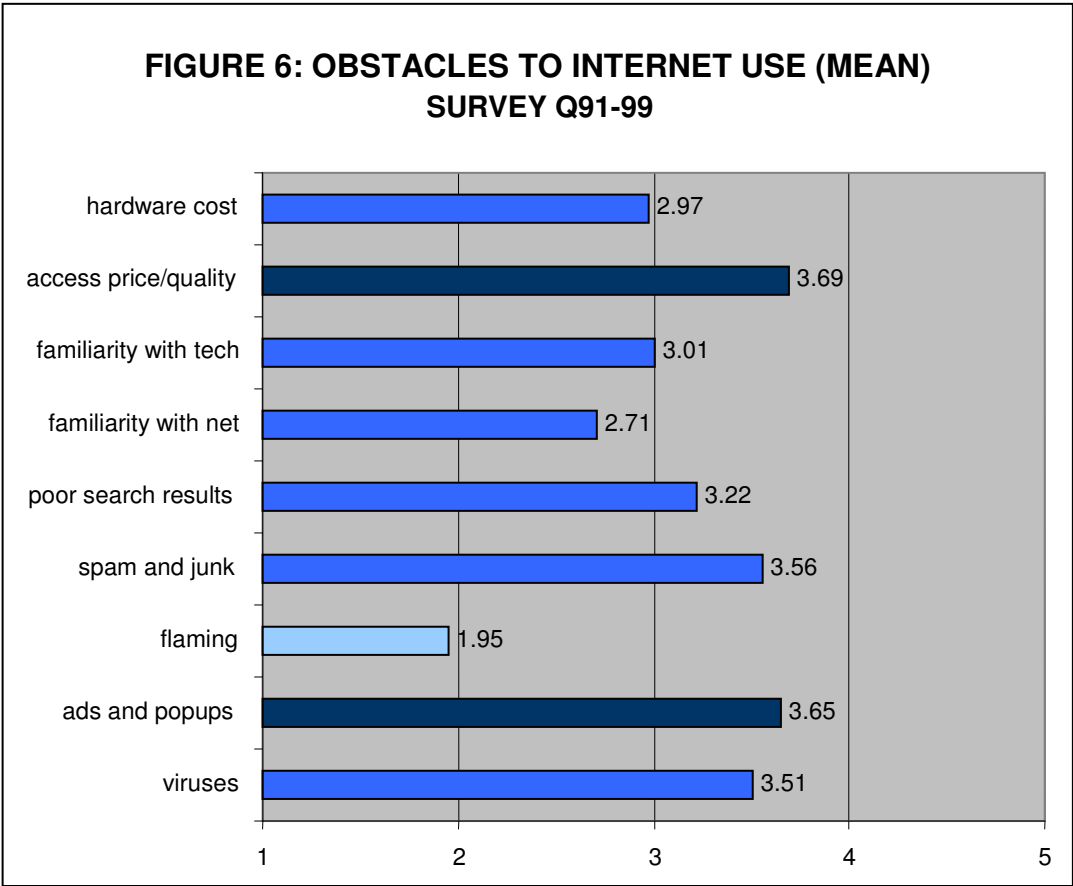
A related question, which lies at the heart of the debate regarding the internet's potential for civic empowerment, is the extent to which young users make the most of the medium's virtually infinite potential for interaction, awareness and participation. Are young people using the net to become active creators of content, or "produsers" (Bruns

2005), a development that could have profound implications for the diffusion of civic power? Or are they simply adopting a passively consumerist approach to the internet – an approach usually associated with "old" and arguably more inflexible media such as television and print?

FIGURE 7: ONLINE ACTIVITIES
SURVEY Q81-90
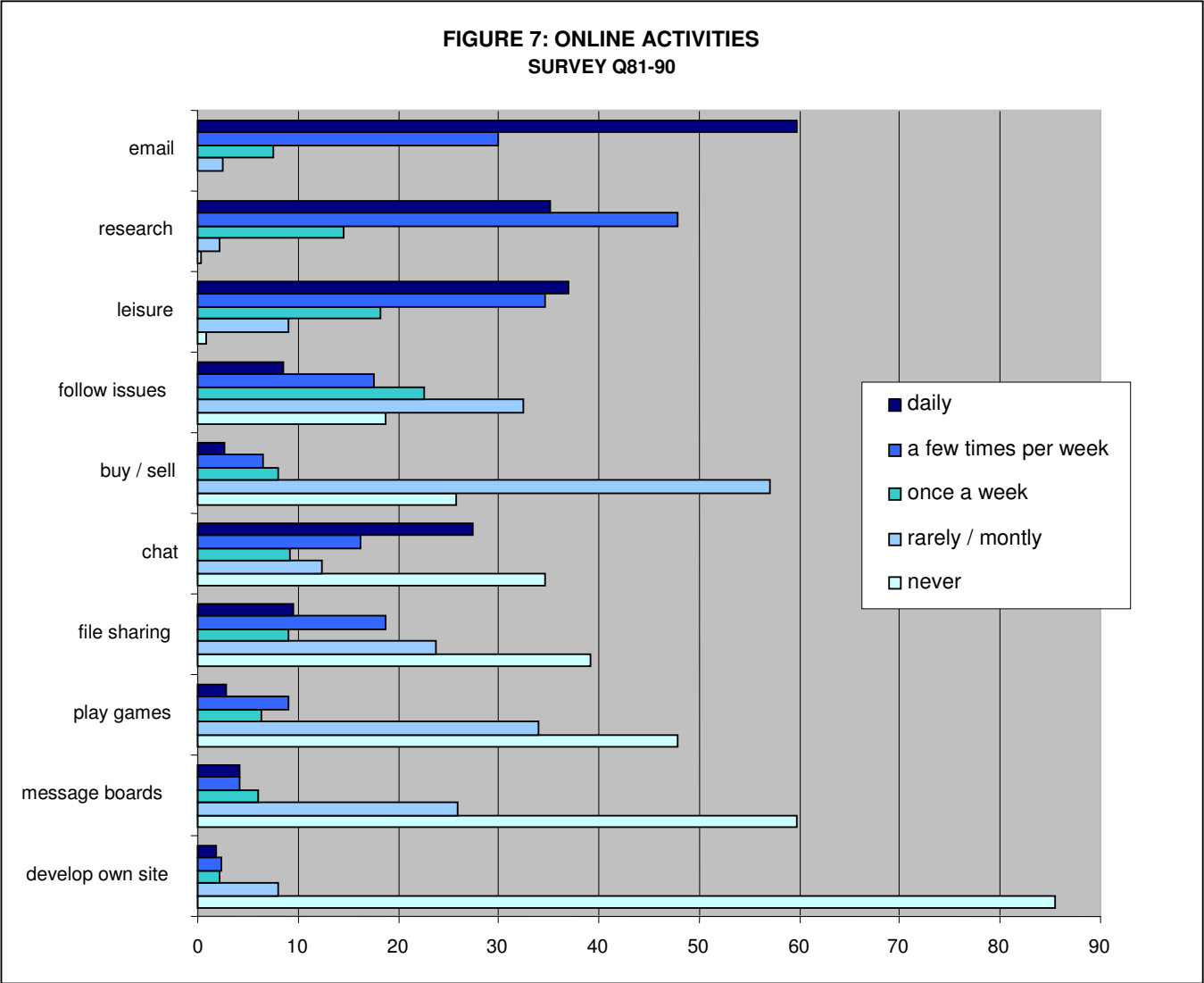
One way to approach this issue is to examine the type and range of online activities that users engage with, and whether these could be classified as active and creative or passive and consumerist (although it should be acknowledged that the boundaries between and within these two pairs of adjectives are contestable – see Schudson 2007 and below). Our survey evidence highlights the central role of email as the ubiquitous application (**Figure 7**). Only two other activities attract more than half of our sample: "research for my work and study" (35.1% daily and 47.9% a few times per week) and "search or surf the internet for leisure" (37% and 34.7% respectively). While the survey was conducted in late 2004, a recent study (August 2008) by the Pew Internet Project (Fallows 2008) on users' online activities produced identical results. The survey's findings are also consistent to Pew's results insofar as online news access is concerned: 37.15% of our survey participants reported accessing online news at least once a day, while the respective number for the Pew survey was 39%.

However, the data from our Bournemouth University student sample do not concur with the view that active and creative uses of the web are widespread amongst Britain's internet generation: only small fractions of our sample engaged in activities such as file-sharing, developing their own site or blog, posting on message boards or, even, playing online games (**Figure 7**). Especially considering that our sample consisted of media students, there is not enough evidence to support the claim that these particular users have become active content creators yet.

These patterns were confirmed by the follow-up qualitative study, conducted in March 2006, in which users were asked to describe, in their own words, the main reasons they go online (Appendix P). While these narratives fully mirror both the survey's results and other internet studies such as the aforementioned Pew survey, they can also enrich our understanding of youth online routines and preferences. As before, communicating via email or instant messenger with friends and family is a ubiquitous online activity and using the web as a research tool or fact-finding mechanism is also very common (**Figure 8**). In that respect, our internet-savvy media students are no more active or creative than the average user. In fact, the four activities following email and search – i.e. leisure (e.g. music, films etc), shopping, news and banking – are only cited by about a quarter of the respondents each.

FIGURE 8: ONLINE ACTIVITIES (TAG CLOUD)

USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q9
"In a few words, what is the main reason (or reasons) you go online?"

It should be noted that the data collection for this part of the study was completed a few months before the rapid growth of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo (late 2006 – early 2007), which have since become very popular amongst younger users. Such sites are particularly well suited to satisfy the need to keep in touch with friends and family. Yet, the civic and active potential of social networking sites – and of Web 2.0 in general – merits discussion and it would be interesting to use these findings as a baseline for future research.

The analysis of the users' online routines showed that most participants maintain a very restricted diet of web activities. Almost no references to free, aimless or open-ended browsing or alternative uses were found (let alone to creating content or engaging with political or broadly civic issues, which is consistent with the findings of Couldry 2006). The "open-endedness" of one's approach to the internet is a useful indicator of active or passive medium use. The close- and open-ended binary is, indeed, a schematic and perhaps oversimplified way of making an analytical distinction between:

- an habitual and instrumental use of the net based on a functional, utilitarian approach (i.e. only using the net to get what one needs)
- and a pattern of use that is more communitarian and interactive (contributing as well as receiving); embedded in everyday life (covering all aspects of human activity); and crucially more fluid, in terms of coming across material that one might not usually encounter or be inclined to agree with.

While these two patterns of use are not always mutually exclusive, our data strongly suggest that the big majority of the young people taking part in this study made instrumental and functional uses of the net, also known as "directed browsing" (Gibbs 2008), i.e. focused and systematic browsing aimed at a target.

In his seminal study of uses and gratifications on the internet, Hunter (1997) argued that:

> "Browsing is not a singular function, but rather an extension of the cognitive and entertainment functions… By surfing the web, users seem to be experiencing the thrill and excitement of exploring a new world, which is part of the entertainment function".

This description of browsing highlights the gratifications that the user receives by the mere *process* of surfing the web. However, a lot of the discourses on the medium's structural potential evolved in the 1990s i.e. at a time of momentous innovation, in which the novelty of the medium per se provided considerable gratification for users. The qualitative parts of our study (both the write-in individual responses and the open-ended group discussions) produced very little evidence of users enjoying open-ended surfing: almost all of the participants reported using the internet in a directed way, with only two participants making any reference to open-ended browsing. Overall, our findings concur with previous studies which found that people use the internet instrumentally rather than as a habit (Kaye and Johnson 2002; Ko 2000; Papacharissi and Rubin 2000):

> RG: So what sort of sites do you guys normally go to, like in your everyday life?
> #2.10-AB: Well the ones that I use, usually for a reason… shopping, online banking…

"I only really get on the internet for a specific reason, I wouldn't just sit and just browse around… just for the fun of it" [#1.01-AW]

Recent evidence shows that this pattern of use is becoming widespread amongst internet users at large. In his 2008 annual report on web habits, Nielsen noted that:

"Instead of dawdling on websites many users want simply to reach a site quickly, complete a task and leave. Most ignore efforts to make them linger and are suspicious of promotions designed to hold their attention. Instead, many are "hot potato" driven and just want to get a specific task completed" (BBC Online 2008).

While this finding may sound like a truism, it has vast implications in terms of, for example, narrow search patterns (Kim 2009) and minimal time spent on a new website (e.g. Nielsen 2007a found that users spend an average of 30 seconds on the homepage and less than 2 minutes on the entire site before deciding to abandon it).
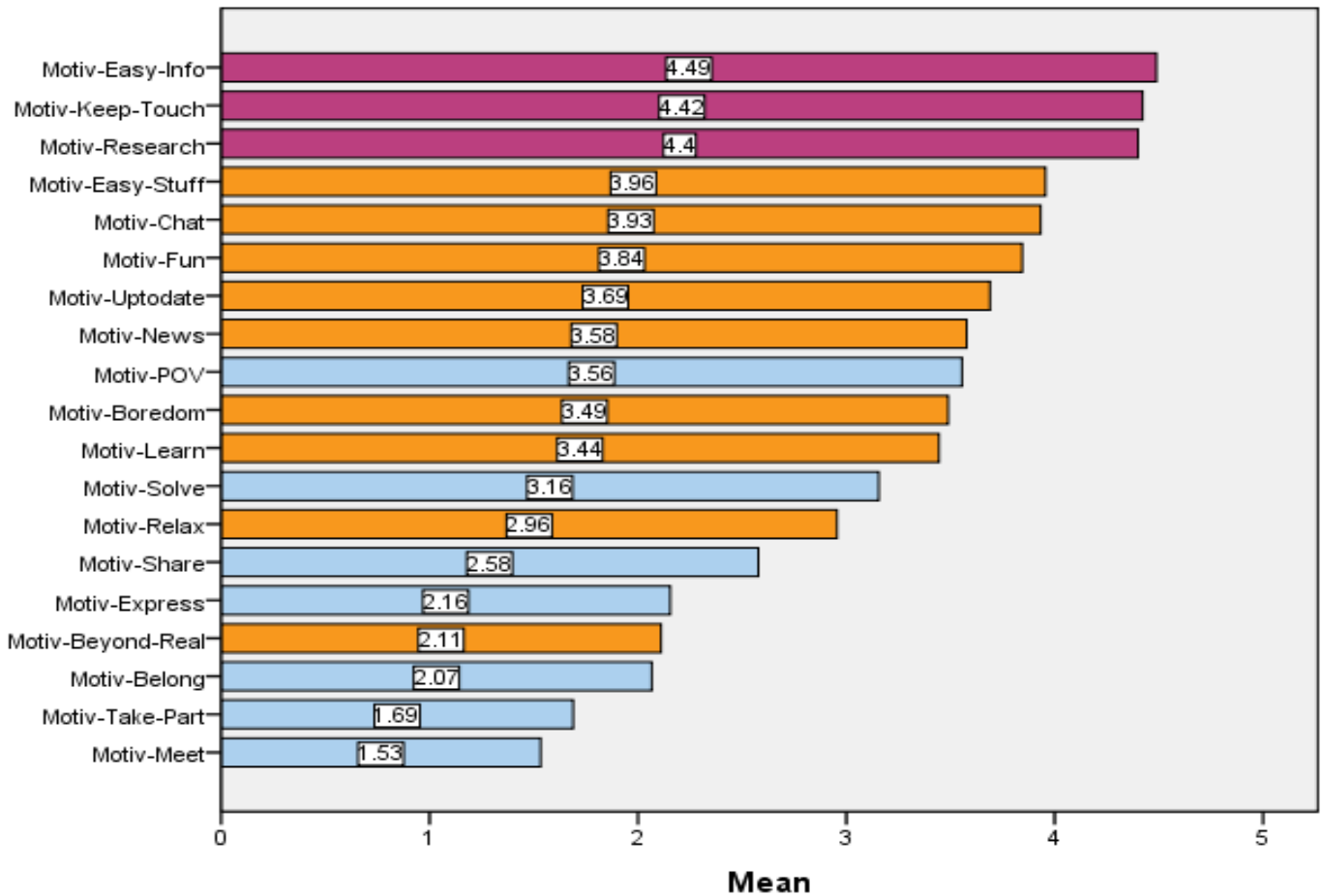
5.2 …Seeking Convenience and Awareness

A further probe into our respondents' motivations for using the internet strengthens the view that their approach to the medium is more consumerist that creative, and more passive than active. Users were asked to consider the extent to which 19 different motivations for using the internet applied to themselves.

Easiness of finding information, keeping in touch with existing friends and family, and researching for work and study were, once again, the three factors that received universally high ratings (with means close to 4.5 out of 5 – marked in purple in **Figure 9**), mirroring the two primary online activities described above. A range of other factors that could be classified as consumerist or passive motivations, in the sense that they do not require active participation or contribution on the part of users, followed in the chart (marked in orange). Most of the more interactive, creative or innovative motivations – such as sharing experiences with others, meeting new people, taking part in collective action, belonging to a community or group, and "expressing myself" – appear at the bottom of the chart with means of 2.58 or less (marked in blue). The one visible exception was getting "more points of view / learning about issues", which combines elements of action and passivity.

An additional measurement was employed in order to establish whether young people are engaging in their own, alternative ways, through activities that do not fall within the traditional boundaries of established political institutions and processes. Such active uses would include volunteering for, or donating money to, a community or cause; writing or discussing about public affairs with others; creating music, films, books or other forms of art. More consumerist or passive activities would include following the news, shopping, learning about issues and enjoying (but not creating) various forms of art, such as listening to music, reading books etc.

FIGURE 9: INTERNET MOTIVATIONS

USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q11-30:
"To what extent do the following motivations for using the internet apply to you?"

Motivation	Mean
Motiv-Easy-Info	4.49
Motiv-Keep-Touch	4.42
Motiv-Research	4.4
Motiv-Easy-Stuff	3.96
Motiv-Chat	3.93
Motiv-Fun	3.84
Motiv-Uptodate	3.69
Motiv-News	3.58
Motiv-POV	3.56
Motiv-Boredom	3.49
Motiv-Learn	3.44
Motiv-Solve	3.16
Motiv-Relax	2.96
Motiv-Share	2.58
Motiv-Express	2.16
Motiv-Beyond-Real	2.11
Motiv-Belong	2.07
Motiv-Take-Part	1.69
Motiv-Meet	1.53

Mean

Once again, it should be stressed that the distinction between "active" and "passive" forms of online engagement is neither charged with a value judgement (i.e. active is good, passive is bad), nor does it imply that less creative activities are necessarily less empowering. While both types of online activities potentially have civic merit, it is interesting to explore whether most users engage in both ways in proportional measure.

Our results (**Figure 10**) indicate a clear distinction – indeed a very wide gap – between passive or consumerist online activities (the top four activities, marked in orange, with means above 3.5 out of 5) and active / creative uses of the net (bottom five on the chart, marked in blue, with means below 2.2). This indicates that the young people taking part in our study were much more likely to use the internet in established, consumer- rather than creator-oriented ways.

Therefore, two narratives emerge from both the structured (quantitative) and the qualitative elements of our study: a narrative of *convenience*, and one of *awareness* (which has some similarities with the concept of surveillance in traditional Uses & Gratifications theory, Vincent and Basil 1997), although our participants' need for

awareness extended to all aspects of everyday life, from leisure and hobbies, to news and consumer affairs. Convenience and awareness are considerably more salient than any other type of gratification, such as innovative, interactive and even escapist motivations. In essence, they constitute the two critical (but not necessarily the only) reasons for which the respondents use the internet to engage in the activities mentioned before; in particular to communicate with friends and family and to search the web for facts, news or leisure:

> "Generally I use the internet for information or purposes that are just directly, like… you know what I mean? To check my bank account or to check my email [...] Or maybe, like, something in the news that's relevant but it's interesting rather than necessarily crucial…" [#4.46-TM].

> "I think my political and consumer behaviours wouldn't really affect where I go on the web because when I go on the web I normally use it only to talk to friends or research [...] I don't think that it would- I would do it actively on the internet [...] I think it's just because of my patterns of what I do on the internet" [#4.37-AM].

FIGURE 10: LEVELS OF ONLINE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q46-54:
"To what extent have you engaged to the following activities online?"
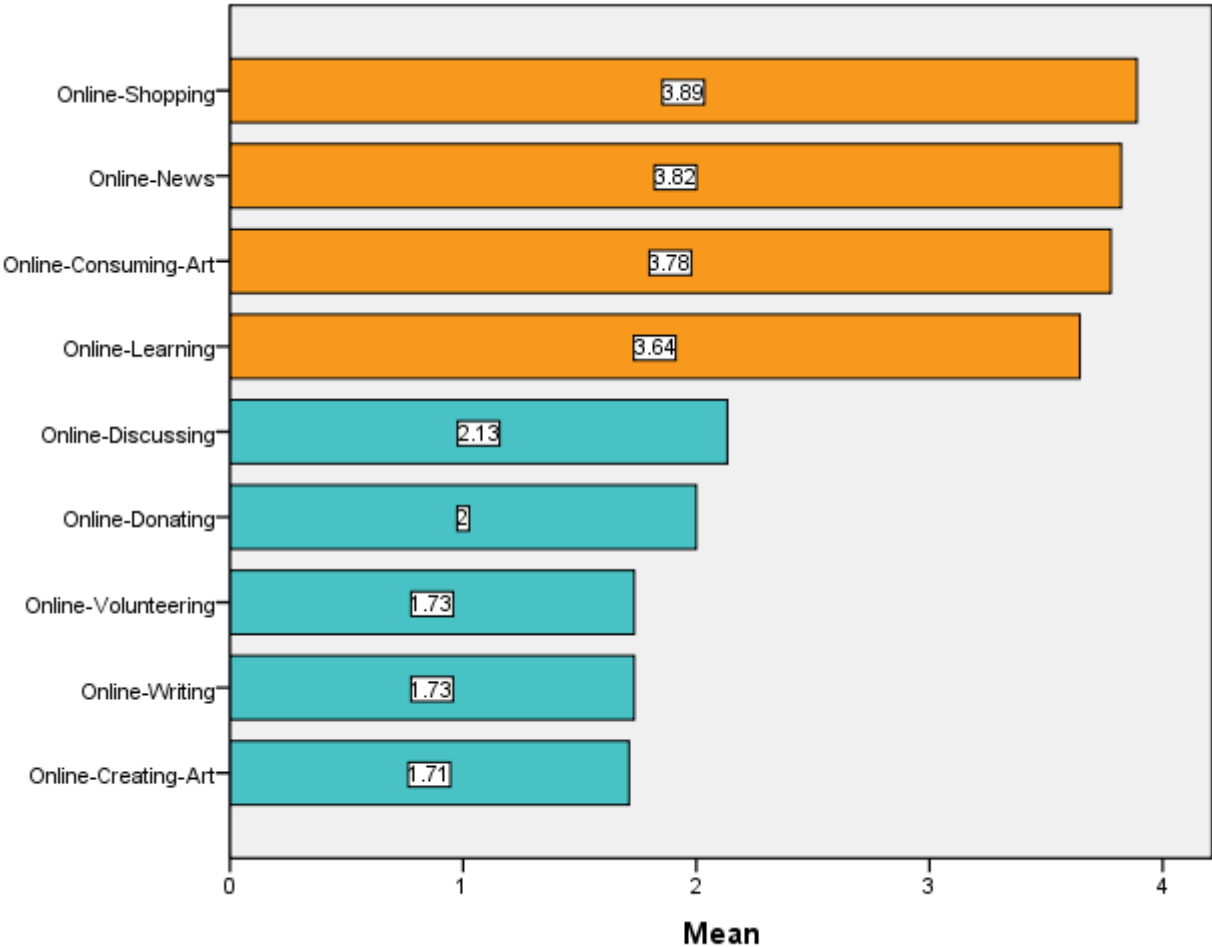
As will be shown later, convenience and awareness are dominant not only as internet motivations, i.e. *medium use* factors*,* but also as *civic motivators*; they accurately reflect the participants' attitude towards all types of interactions with online content, including public affair websites.

While the evidence presented here does not in any way invalidate the internet's potential for civic empowerment – and it, certainly, cannot be denied that a few users engage in all sorts of innovative, active and creative online activities – the emerging patterns of use do raise important questions about *the extent* to which citizens make *actual* use of what is available or potentially doable online. Park and Perry (2008: 208) argue that this gap between the theoretical potential of the medium and the actual uses that people make of it can largely be attributed to narrowcasting and the fact that information technology reinforces (as opposed to transforming) existing patterns of political participation. The following sections consider the impact of segmentation and choice on the net's potential as a pluralistic public sphere.

5.3 The (Power) Laws and Hierarchies of Cyberspace

As part of the quest to explore youth internet uses, participants were asked to list their favourite or most regular online destinations. Our findings confirm the patterns identified above, i.e. an instrumental use of the medium based on a restricted routine of limited destinations and activities. As expected, a small cluster of email providers and search engine portals (Hotmail, Google, MSN), e-shopping sites (ebay, Amazon) and the BBC, along with the Media School's own intranet at the time (Media 2), dominate the list, followed by a long tail of leisure, commerce and reference sites, each nominated by one or two users. Three important limitations of the present study should not be overlooked, namely: the small sample of the user experience study, the gender bias (most participants were female, although no major differences were observed across genders) and the fact that the data was collected before the meteoric rise of social networking sites. Still, keeping the context of the study in mind, several interesting issues and trends emerge.

Firstly, there is no reference to websites with directly or indirectly political content with the notable exception of news; our users' online "bookmarks", do not include any civic or otherwise issue-oriented websites or communities that could offer support for the view that these young people are using the internet to engage with public affairs and social problems in alternative ways. Secondly, it appears that the great majority of these sites belong to major commercial or established brands, rather than alternative, grassroots, public community, emerging or underground organisations; the former include organisations that were dominant in the public and media spheres before the rapid diffusion of the internet, such as the BBC, Guardian, Microsoft and Apple, as well as major online brands.

The existence of a small group of websites that attract a disproportionate amount of the participants' online attention vis-à-vis a very long tail of less popular sites is confined neither to our sample, nor indeed to internet use in general. It is a phenomenon known

as power laws (Adamic 2002), which appears in a host of different applications and aspects of social and natural life. Indeed, as can be seen in **Figure 11**, the list of our users' favourite and regular online destinations produces a typical power law distribution. As Shirky (2003) explains, that pattern of inequality "has nothing to do with moral weakness, selling out, or any other psychological explanation. The very act of choosing, spread widely enough and freely enough, creates a power law distribution".

A growing body of research has applied the power law model to internet applications, such as USENET newsgroups (Schneider 1996; Hill and Hughes 1997) and weblogs (Kottke 2003; Coates 2003; Ó Baoill 2004; Shirky 2004). Such studies have shown that, during the very early stages of their life, online applications allow for what looks like an interactive, equal and pluralistic communication amongst users or network nodes. As the number of users and nodes increases, a small number of outlets – such as websites, blogs, message board threads, digital TV channels etc – will concentrate a disproportionate amount of attention, while masses of other voices will not attract similar interest.

It could be argued that the same applies to Web 2.0 applications (such as Twitter), which in theory allow for an interactive and pluralistic mode of communication, but in reality have seen the rise of celebrity communicators. This distortion to the distribution of attention is particularly applicable to the web, precisely because of the virtually unlimited levels of choice and freedom that characterise "pull media" such as the internet – choice and freedom also being the two basic facilitators of inequality. Olsson (2008: 498) notes that, even in world-leading ICT countries such as Sweden, "the one-to-may broadcasting model of traditional media… has by no means made irrelevant by the interactive and participatory nature of the new ICT, at least not in terms of ordinary use behaviours".

The existence of asymmetry and hierarchies does not automatically cancel the democratic or pluralistic potential of the internet (in the same way that choice and freedom are both considered vital for any democratic condition). However, this pattern of inequality raises an important question about the *criteria* or decisive factors that lead that small minority of nodes to attract the attention of the big majority of users. While as was discussed earlier in the thesis, the internet is in theory characterised by the lack of hierarchical structure and the re-negotiation of the relationship between the centre and the periphery, in reality, hierarchies and elites do exist in the online world.

In an environment of abundant information and apparently unlimited choice such as the internet, one might expect that users would choose their favourite websites (user-consumer choices which subsequently produce online hierarchies) based on rational calculations, quality and comparison. In other words, the internet is – always in theory – the perfect environment for purely rationalised user/consumer behaviour, free as much as possible from distortions, regulation and intervention (e.g. government or editorial pressures).

FIGURE 11: DISTRIBUTION OF ONLINE DESTINATIONS

USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q10: "Please list your favourite websites or the sites that you visit / use most often"
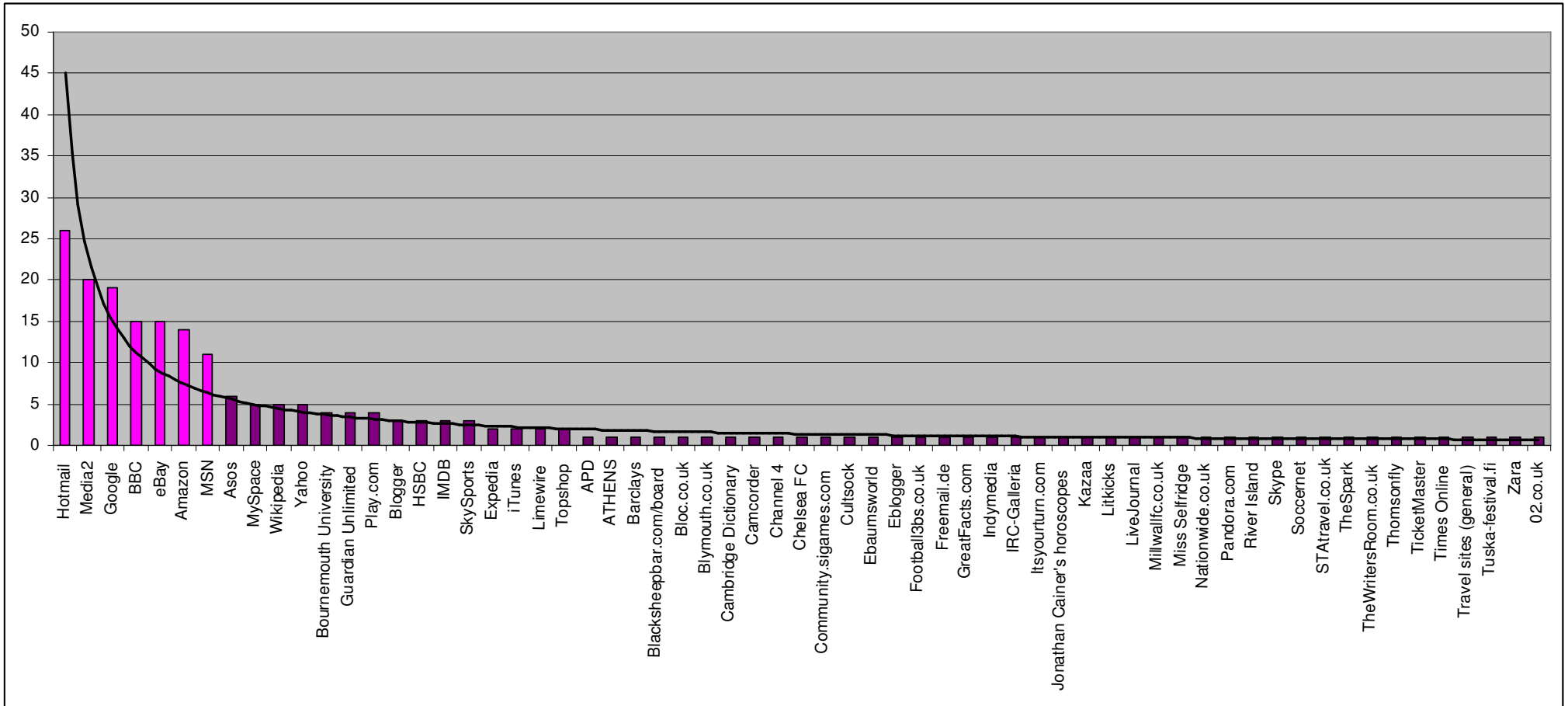
Yet, the data from our user experience study, and in particular the group discussions, indicate that it is factors such as reputation and branding that shape credibility and user trust, and ultimately shape users' choices of which websites they will visit:

> #3.22-HM: I think the only way- because it's just *so vast the information* on that kind of thing- […] is if I saw it through another medium maybe…
> #3.23-JP: Yeah, yeah…
> #3.22-HM: I saw the website in a magazine or a newspaper or in the news […] but I think if you were just looking for issues on climate change you'd get a million BBC articles, you'd get so much I just think it would be difficult to get to it.
> RG: You mention the BBC, why? Is it the first point of contact online-?
> #3.22-HM: -yeah for public affairs I find that whenever I'm searching I always get a BBC article come up…
> RG: Why's that?
> #3.22-HM: They've got a lot of really accessible articles and […] I like the way- they give you the time order of everything so you can track the story… I think…
> #3.24-KC: *You also think that the BBC is more official so you can trust it-*
> #3.22-HM: -trust it, yeah…

Therefore, greater freedom of choice and abundance of information does not seem to motivate users to "shop around" and access a variety of opinions, viewpoints and sources; on the contrary, many users find the amount of information and choice quite overpowering and fall back to choice and trust patterns based on word of mouth. The role of established carriers of authority, such as the mass media, and in particular the BBC, was a recurring theme in the narratives of our users who normally use such media as the starting point for any process of online engagement with an issue or cause. Similarly, branding and corporate reputation become vital in differentiating an organisation's site from the abyss of search engine results:

> #4.39-CS: -People need to know the site is credible, I think, nowadays *because there's so many sites out there*, I think that more I'd say to an extent that's good than bad because it- it- it gives site credibility and it makes, I think, the users maybe take it more seriously…
> RG: What you would consider a credible site? What would be a sign of credibility?
> #4.46-TM: Obviously… um, if it's like a part of a… or linked to a …charity or an organisation *you've heard of already*, something like Greenpeace, then obviously… … that's sort of one of the things I'd consider.
> #4.37-AM: I think *the brand is really important* because if I was to go on… to look up Fairtrade, I would look up the brand of Fairtrade rather than all the other Fairtrade products and companies.

Therefore, rather than making decisions based on personal testing, informed comparisons and rational calculations, these young people resort to qualities such as brand image, reputation and word of mouth – concepts that are often considered expressive of a post-modern era of public relations and "packaging", as opposed to substantive value, yet in one sense take us back to a pre-modern era of metaphysical values and oral cultures.

Hence, the realisation of the internet's democratic or empowering potential is not automatic or axiomatic. Political or civic websites seeking to thrive exist within a severely competitive, information-saturated environment; they have to find ways to balance a

professional/official-looking image with a relevant political agenda. Yet, before we move to a closer examination of the web content and design features required by young users, it is important to note that perhaps the biggest challenge facing civic practitioners online is the very first step – getting users' attention.

5.4 The Challenge of Civic Communication in a Segmented (Public?) Sphere

One of the clearest messages to come out of the focus group discussions was that these young people do not normally consider using the net for civic purposes and rarely go online with the explicit purpose of accessing civic material. Many participants were quick to explain that politically oriented or civic websites are not part of their everyday online experience:

> #1.05-JW: "In my everyday life [an issue-oriented website is] not something I would actively seek out to find - unless it came across my path… like, I don't know… some sort of advert or emailed a newsletter about it I might check it out… but I wouldn't go and Google and search it, for example".
> #1.03-ED: Maybe if I went on BBC news website…
>
> "I always wondered how people come across things like that [issue sites] […] I think you really need to be searching for things like that to find them. I don't think I'd come across them that easily…" [#4.39-CS]

It is worth noting that the websites under consideration in this discussion belonged to organisations promoting issues that participants themselves listed as amongst their most salient ones, such as environmental and consumer affairs. It is, thus, hard to imagine these users actively seeking and participating in online activities of *traditional* political institutions, such as political parties and government agencies.

Nielsen argues that "web users have always been ruthless and now are even more so… People want sites to get to the point, they have very little patience. I do not think sites appreciate that yet… They still feel that their site is interesting and special and people will be happy about what they are throwing at them" (BBC Online 2008). Nielsen also found that web users are also getting frustrated with many extra features, such as widgets and applications being added to websites to make them more appealing. Furthermore, Johnson and Kaye (2003: 321-322) found that "politically interested web users were motivated to go online for different reasons than the general public and students, and therefore they participated in different activities online".

Therefore, if there is, indeed, a social or cultural divide between civically-oriented users who actively use the net to seek political material, and the general public (including students such as the ones taking part in our study) who primarily use the internet for instrumental reasons, the challenge for policy practitioners and issue campaigners is obvious and fundamental: whereas politics and public affairs still hold a distinct, even dominant, space in broadcast news and newspapers, such issues and debates are neither a distinct, nor a dominant part of young citizens' online lifeworld. Civic messages may still be accessed as part of an integrated, converged, everyday online experience within major portals and news organisation sites. When these young people engage with

the issues and public debates of their time, the primary means through which this is happening seems to be awareness of news through portal/gateway sites (Google, Yahoo) and the BBC, and possibly participation through the occasional short-lived viral campaign via email or social networking sites.

However, an analysis of the participants' preferred news media reveals that, at least for the majority of the survey respondents, television was their primary news source (Figure N6), while a closer examination at their news consumption patterns based both on survey (Figure N7) and qualitative data, reveals that the internet has a different role as a news provider within young people's everyday lives. Our evidence suggests (albeit tentatively) that these young people use online news mainly in one of two ways – possibly both: in the background of their online environment, as an embedded part of personalised, converged pages (e.g. portals and homepages); and as a source of reference and further research for stories and issues first seen in mass media such as television and radio. The role of the BBC, especially in the latter respect, emerges as particularly salient and further research is required in order to precisely establish the uses, motivations and gratifications of young people from BBC Online, as this was not part of this study's remit.

Therefore, politics or civic participation *per se* do not seem to hold a distinct space in these young people's online lifeworlds. That still does not preclude such engagement from taking place under the radar of our analytical tools, in an even more diffused, converged way, or at specific points in time, because of a trigger, i.e. issue or event that mobilises enough people, as in the case of the Iraq war. But, if the findings of this exploratory study were reproduced across a wider sample, such engagement would probably be restricted in time and scope, i.e. it would be heavily issue-oriented and lasting for the duration of that specific campaign, a pattern fully consistent with Bimber's (1998) "accelerated pluralism" thesis.

Subsequently, catching young users' attention and getting them to access a website involves penetrating the invisible walls of a segmented media environment which allows users-citizens-consumers to choose their favourite or regular websites, newspaper columns, magazine sections, TV and radio programmes based on their personal interests without necessarily having to come across messages that do not appeal to their aesthetic, cultural or social instincts, and increasingly more often without even having to reach a website's homepage. Nielsen (BBC Online 2008) found that whereas in 2004 about 40% of people visited a homepage and then browsed through the site to the point they were originally looking for, in 2008 only 25% of people travel via a homepage while the rest search and get directly to that "deep page". This trend has profound implications for the role of search engines and major news organisations as gatekeepers of online public affairs, while also challenging the traditional conceptualisations of the homepage as the critical factor determining users' first impressions of websites.

Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson (2004) stress the need for NGOs to reach out to young people and facilitate their engagement with issues that are relevant to their everyday lives. Our findings suggest that in order to attract the attention of such groups, political, community and civic organisations and social movements may first have to gain

access to key nodes of either the "old" or the new media. Downey and Fenton (2003 highlight the danger of social movements becoming entrapped into segmented online ghettos:

> "One could argue that the internet may foster the growth of transnational enclaves of great value (for example, the environmental movement), but their value depends ultimately on how influential these enclaves become in the context of the mass media public sphere and the formation of public opinion beyond the radical ghetto" (2003: 190).

The dangers of the segmentation of the public sphere have been raised by several scholars, including Elihu Katz (e.g. 1998, 2000) who provides an eloquent and compelling critique of the impact of electronic media on national public spheres and traditional political institutions. Katz goes as far as to argue that new media are invalidating the socio-political benefits of mass media of the last hundred years, and are taking us back to a pre-modern era in which unaccountable networks held power based on charisma. Another possible side-effect is homophily, i.e. the clustering of individuals around groups of like-minded people who avoid interacting with users from different backgrounds and of different viewpoints. Holmes (2002) argues that interactive environments are "unable to constitute a 'mass' in which individuals are related together as spectral 'citizens'" because, as Becker and Wehner explain, they generate:

> "polycontextual communication structures [in which there] is no citizen who is discussing with other citizens on the Net. Rather, there are simply individuals – such as experts, old people, homosexuals, women, men, children, youngsters – who debate their particular interests on the net" (1998: 2).

It is logical to assume that individuals will be drawn to issues that are salient to them and to opinions they tend to agree with (Kim 2007), although the evidence on whether the internet facilitates homophily is mixed (e.g. Garrett 2009 found little evidence of such an effect).

Therefore, what we are witnessing may be *a combination of segmenting, centrifugal forces with homogenising, centripetal ones*: the former emerge from the ability of new media users to partly create their own lifeworlds and identities based on consumer choice (e.g. customised homepages with selected news); whereas the latter forces appear because of the inevitable clustering of social organisms around limited nodes. The significant difference between this hierarchical online environment and the traditional setting of national spheres is that dominant public service nodes that held authority and influence in the latter (such as political, religious and intellectual establishments) are being challenged in the online world by a more commodified online global elite of search engines, news organisations, portals, networking sites, and commercial providers of goods and services. Hence, understanding young users' civic motivations and online preferences becomes even more crucial in the attempt of civic organisations to compete within such an environment. On a medium built around user choice, it would not be wise to build participatory mechanisms based on assumptions about the end-users of such tools. Understanding the prospective visitors' needs and preferences is central to constructing civic websites that will succeed.

	A. CONTENT	**B. DESIGN**	**C. INTERACTIVITY**
1. Interpretation of question	Almost all responses rotate around the quality, quantity, relevance and effectiveness of *information*, as opposed to specific tools, facilities or features that participants would like to find on a website.	Most respondents focused on **ease of navigation** and **visual aspects** of design	Interesting differences in the way participants define "interactivity" (**connectivity** > **discursive interaction** > **affective relationship**). Some overlap with content (e.g. info/facts/clips) and design (easy/eye-catching etc.).
2. Variety and depth of responses	Mostly comprehensive, with several participants elaborating on their main point. Impressive range of ideas and terms employed, but clear - if not universal - **patterns do emerge**. Quantity of information and role of opinions are the only two issues on which there is noticeable divergence of views.	Responses are extensive, although quite **homogeneous**. Variety of adjectives, albeit synonymous ones. Eleven **negative definitions** (what it should not be/do).	Responses are coherent and produce clear and **consistent patterns**. Several in-depth responses.
3. Conventional / common v. Innovative / original	In some contrast to the responses on design and interactivity, there is a **greater variety of original, sophisticated ideas, albeit often given in an abstract, descriptive way** rather than in a specific feature form (e.g. site should raise controversial questions and make thought-provoking points that allow the users to make up their own minds).	Participants' discourse **does not indicate particularly innovative or original perspectives** on web design, although there is interesting **emphasis on emotive and symbolic material** (shocking images, central emblem)	Features are mostly **predictable** (e.g. links, contact details) but with a few innovative suggestions (e.g. real time Q&A).
4. Passive / consumerist v. Active / creative	As with the responses on design and interactivity, there is a noticeable **subtext of a consumerist approach to engagement**, with some participants asking for the site to "make it sound easy", "give direction" and "how I can easily / non-time-consuming make an impact already, without spending too much money". There is, however, **willingness** on the part of users **to learn more and act**, as long as they are provided with **tangible, practical and visibly effective participation tools**, as well as clear indications that their actions are **part of a broader effort** by other citizens, organisations and the government.	Almost exclusively *passive* and *consumerist* **attitude**. **Comfort**, **convenience** and **ease of use** are the dominant factor. Site should show ways through which "little effort" by the user would have "huge impact". **No reference** to design features that would facilitate *active* or *creative* user **involvement** - although several users highlighted **the need for *emotional* involvement.**	**Potential** for **active** use (**if** users feel motivated to share their feelings / act further). **No particular evidence of creativity**. Several participants want to **be led** by the site in terms of taking action (one even answering "not very interactive"). A recurring but very subtle reference to "(other / realistic / grounded) **ways**" of expressing voice and engaging.

TABLE 9: EXPECTED CIVIC MOTIVATORS OF ISSUE WEBSITES [ANALYSIS] (USER EXPERIENCE STUDY Q58)

5. Adjectives	"**informative**" (**6**), "**personal**" (4), "**real / realistic**" (3), "relevant" (3), "simple" (3), "interesting" (2), "involving" (2), "appealing" (1), "clear" (1), "conversational" (1), "direct" (1), "emotive" (1), "eye-catching" (1), "lively" (1), "open-minded" (1), "powerful" (1), "snappy" (1), "well set out" (1)	"**easy**" (**19**), "**clear**" (8), "**simple**" (8), "colourful" (6), "bright" (4), "attractive" (3), "visually appealing / oriented" (3), "accessible" (2), "effective" (2), "informative" (2), "interesting" (2), "modern" (2), "alive" (1), "bold" (1), "colour-appropriate" (1), "emotive" (1), "encouraging" (1), "engaging" (1), "eye-catching" (1), "interactive" (1), "powerful" (1), "precise" (1), "quick" (1), "thought-provoking" (1), "trendy" (1), "youth-oriented" (1)	"**easy**" (**7**), "**clear**" (1), "**easily available**" (1), "eye-catching" (1), "hard-hitting" (1), "obvious" (1), "persuasive" (1), "realistic" (1)
6. Descriptive qualities sought by participants	<u>Effective and Transparent</u>**: how can I make a difference** (**17**); who is affected and how (3); who benefits / where my money goes (3); tangible impact of my action (3); previous outcomes / campaigns (4) and available solutions (3); how it affects me (2); what needs to change (2); how others have helped (2); who to contact (2); what the government is doing (1); how to get info (1). <u>Information and Language</u>: **balanced** / unbiased / facts over opinion (8), comprehensible and easily accessible (7), brief and concise (6), not overloaded (4), accurate and truthful (3), thought-provoking (3), facts with opinion (2), allowing users to make up own mind (1), explicit political stance (1). <u>Quantity</u>: large amount of detail (8), brief outline / key bits (9), no reference to quantity (14).	<u>Easy and Emotive</u>: **easy** to **understand, navigate, use, donate, browse, scan, read, access** (**19**); **pictures** that promote empathy (9); site grabs and keeps attention (4); relevant to lifeworld or current issues (3). <u>Not</u>: "too much info", "in your face", "pretentious", "too techy", "too complex", "too formal", "too many options"	<u>Empowering</u>: Ability to **express own feelings** / **voice** (**9**) as well as seeing how others feel (6); being given options / able to choose ways to help, level of involvement etc (6)
7. Specific features	**Information** (**21**), **Facts** (9), **Pictures** (7) including "shocking/moving" images (3), Background / History (7), Figures / Stats (7), Examples and Case Studies (4), Donations (4), Opinions (4), Up-to-date news (3), Clips / movies (3), Articles (1), Discussion Area (1), Feedback (1), FAQ (1), Newsletter (1), Stories (1)	**Pictures** [that affect / persuade you] (**17**), **Quick / easy way to donate** (6), **Bullet points** / small blocks of text (3), Slogans / Headlines (3), Multimedia / Videos (3), Emblem / symbol (1), No jargon (1)	**Discussion area** [message board, forum, chat] (**20**), **Links** (13), **Contact details** (9), Online donations (8), Feedback / comments / guestbook (6), Sign-up / register [for more info, to show support, to become member] (6), Multimedia (5), Volunteering (3), Blog (2), User profiles (2), Q&A (2), Petitions (1), Letter templates (1), Counters (1), Polls (1), Questionnaires (1), Quizzes (1), Games (1)
8. Recurring themes and recommendations	The core aim of the site should be to **raise awareness** about the issue, **demonstrate its importance and relevance** to the user, as well as **provide participation tools that are visibly successful and effective**. The way the site communicates that information is the means to the end of engagement. **Layering** of information (key bits > in-depth) and clear **signposting** of facts / opinions.	Design is absolutely critical in **grabbing** and **maintaining** users' **attention** and interest. Pages should be **clean**, with small blocks of **easily accessible text** and **poignant images** that affect the viewer. Navigation should be **easy** and **simple**. The palette should be **bright** and **colourful**, without disrupting the **clean look** or the ease of navigation.	Site perceived as a tool of awareness or starting point for further action. Should provide the tools and the space for citizens to **share their feelings** (express/listen), but it must also make points **confidently**, **persuasively** and **succinctly**. The site's design must support a **plurality of ways** through which the visitor can gain awareness or actively engage.

5.5 Listening to the User: Young Citizens' Needs and Expectations from Civic Websites

The main factors that participants cite as central to their civic motivation or de-motivation were discussed in the previous chapter. They included the availability of meaningful communication avenues, accessible political discourse, practical participation tools that increase citizens' sense of civic efficacy and, finally, the relevance of issues and policies to their everyday lifeworlds. Having established the sample's patterns of internet use and attitudes towards the medium earlier in this chapter, we now focus our research lens further by exploring the intersection of these two areas, i.e. civic motivations and internet uses.

In this keynote part of the user experience study (Q58), participants were asked to think of their response to the prior question on civic motivators and de-motivators and apply those factors upon specific features that they would expect to find on an "issue website". The purpose of this question on expected gratifications was to explore the features that young people would *ideally* like to see on a website, rather than *predict* what currently exists. Hence, further probes were given to the participants by asking for specific examples of online facilities, pieces of information or other materials that would motivate them to support that cause by changing their consumer behaviour, political attitude or by contributing their time, money and effort to it. The answer box was split into three sections covering website content, design and interactivity.

It should be noted that on a converged and interactive medium such as the internet, it is not always easy to define the boundaries between these elements. If, for instance, an entire site is built around an innovative, interactive tool that allows users to contact their elected representatives, that tool would be both a strategic part of the website's agenda (i.e. content), as well as the tactical means through which that agenda is materialised (i.e. design or interactivity).

This challenge is not merely analytical or methodological; it goes to the heart of the debate regarding the nature and implications of new media, and is an issue that re-emerged throughout the distilling of the data. Thus, some users referred to the use of images in the Content section of their response, while many others made reference to pictures when completing the Design section. For the purposes of this study we assume that a website's design is the means through which that site's content is communicated to the user, i.e. the strategic approach to communicating the message on the webpage (as opposed to graphic design per se). Therefore, in the case of images, references to the placement, layout, size and presentation of pictures on the page would be classified as design-oriented. Additionally, references to images as the preferred medium through which messages are communicated to the user (over, say, text or video) would also refer to a site's design (if we accept that the site's content is the end message itself). However, references to pictures as strategic parts of the organisation's agenda, i.e. as political tools for user mobilisation, in effect touch upon the area of content.

As can be seen from the coded data (Appendix Q), the exercise of Q58 produced an impressive range of sophisticated, coherent and comprehensive narratives. It is evident

from their responses, that these young people keenly engaged with the question and had a clear idea of what they are looking for in terms of fundamental principles, although they did not always articulate these ideas in the form of tangible or innovative web applications or features. This could mean that there is a lot of space for innovation and evolution both at the strategic level of civic usability (i.e. the scope and end-product of online civic communication), as well as at the practical level of information architecture and web design.

The data has been analysed using a variety of analytical tools, looking at parameters such as the interpretation of the question, the variety and depth of responses, the originality or conventionality of features mentioned as well as the specific applications listed, the adjectives and words used to describe their needs and expectations, and the descriptive qualities sought by participants. Each of the three parts of the question (content, design, interactivity) will be examined in turn.

5.5.1. Website Content

A first reading of the data reveals that our participants interpreted the term "site content" mostly in its narrow sense of information, and in particular as facts and figures about the background and activities of the organisation, rather than in the broader sense of a civic toolbox. "Information" was the most cited content feature with 21 references (**Table 9A**). Subsequently, two core themes emerge in the users' narratives. The primary, dominant need of these young citizens is for practical information that provides them with (a) a compelling justification of *why* a given issue or civic cause is important and (b) a demonstration of *how* they can make a real difference, including evidence of how past action has brought tangible benefits. Transparency seems to be a key issue and questions such as "who is affected and how", "where does my money go" and "who benefits from my actions" reappeared in a variety of forms:

> "Facts about the issue, i.e. why it's important. Real info / statistics etc that are relevant to me - how will issue affect me, my country, Europe, the world? Needs to be tangible / real". [#4.46-TM]

> "How we can help. What the problem / issues are and how they affect me. High level of information about the issue. Who we will be helping". [#2.13-DB]

There also was another element to the quest for a persuasive rationale and effective set of tools, i.e. the question of how others (including the government) have already contributed to that cause. A possible interpretation for this need to see that others are already taking part in such an effort is related to the notion of civic loneliness discussed in the previous chapter.

The second major pattern emerging from the data was the clear preference for direct, emotive and personal communication coupled with an emphasis on easy, convenient and cost-effective ways of helping:

"NSPCC website - there are moving photos and stories which make the reader feel guilty, and want to support them. They could put how any small donation can make a big difference, making the viewer feel they'll have an effect". [#3.27-KR]

This respondent clearly articulated what is a major issue for many citizens, i.e. the need to be able to see the benefits of one's actions, which has a direct effect on that individual's sense of efficacy and can lead to a virtuous cycle of political participation. Indeed, the website of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), cited by the user, is a very good example of an organisation that is addressing some of the questions raised by these young people by featuring pages that are entitled "what we will do with your money" and using interactive donation boxes that allow the user to see the benefits of each possible donation amount (**Figures 12** and **13**). By using emotive language and giving users simple choices about their participation, the NSPCC website seems to facilitate both *awareness* through direct communication and *convenience* through practical tools.

FIGURE 12: NSPCC WEBSITE DONATION CALCULATOR

Interactive donation calculator showing the potential effect of each donation amount [http://www.NSPCC.org.uk on 10/10/2008]
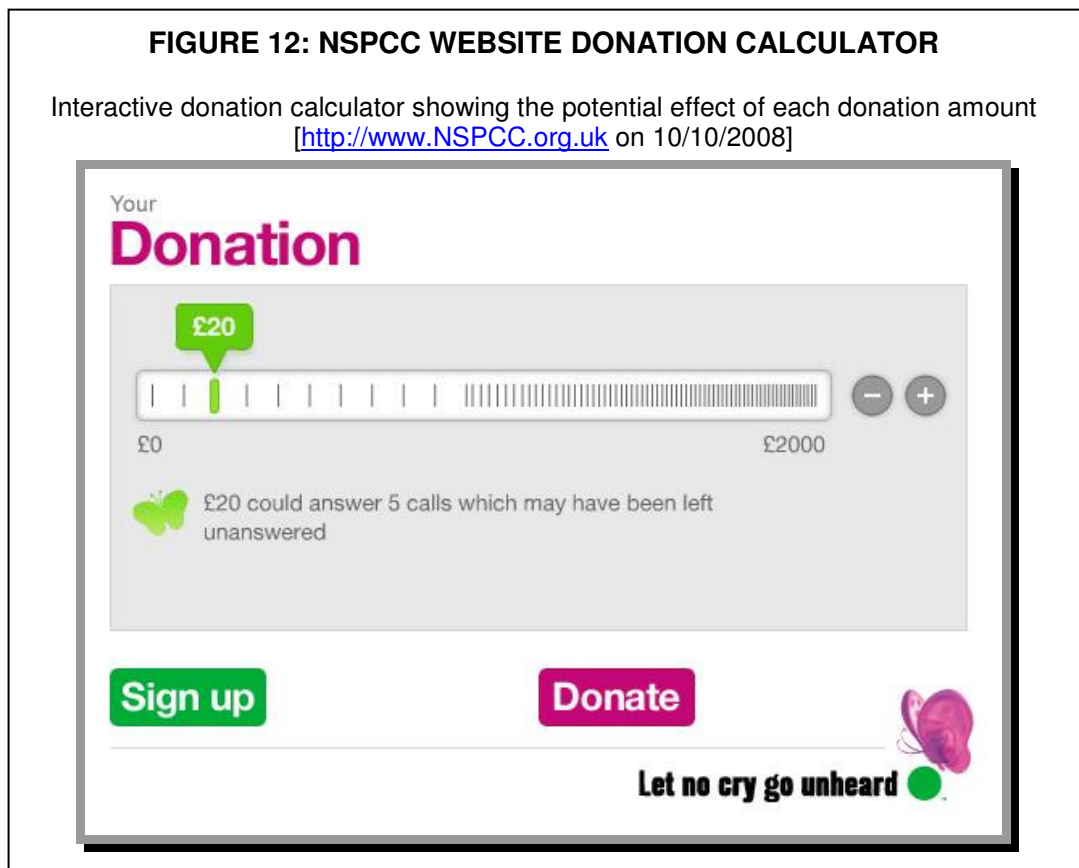
However, this pattern of responses can be interpreted in an alternative, more critical way, highlighting the fact that political participation and citizenship are fundamentally about being a part of a community and joining others in a collective democratic process. The aim of any democratic interaction is to ameliorate differences and negotiate contrasting interests; therefore, any such process is likely to lead to compromises at best, or failure to achieve one's goals at worst. For instance, civil rights are the result of long and hard-fought campaigns that turned grassroots demands to legal documents. Yet, our participants' responses produce a narrative which is closer to a consumerist approach to

citizenship, which sees civic participation as a choice that has to be marketed in appealing and beneficial terms to the consumer (citizen), rather than as a duty or ritual:

> "Clear good background information = giving me examples on how I can *easily / non-time-consuming make an impact already, without spending too much money*". [#4.45-SJ]

FIGURE 13: NSPCC WEBSITE DONATION BOX

Donation box allowing the user to choose the amount while simultaneously seeing the potential benefits [http://www.NSPCC.org.uk on 10/10/2008]
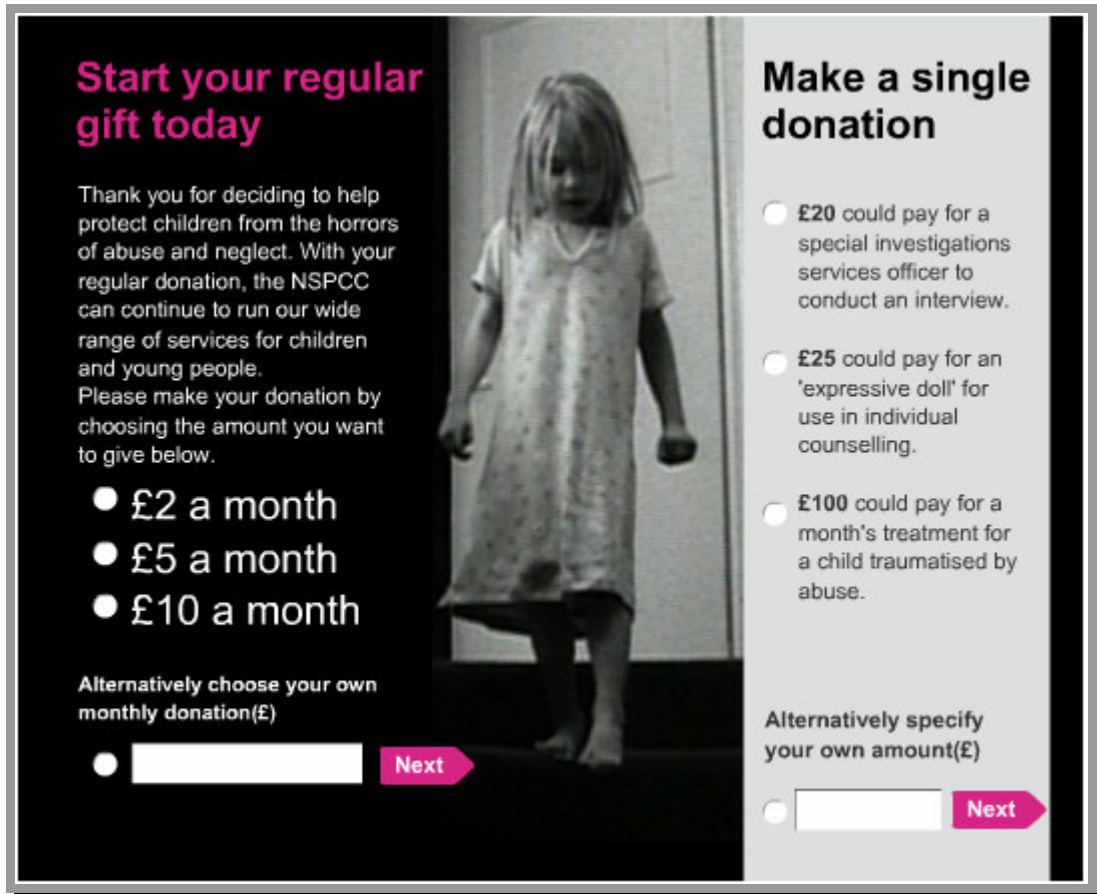
Furthermore, the link between emotive pictures and convenient solutions, i.e. the two main features sought by the users, may not be obvious; yet, a closer look at the responses would support the argument that both elements are part of an emerging perception of political messages as mere competitors in a segmented multimedia environment, a civic culture oriented towards easy solutions rather than informed deliberation:

> "Shocking or sad images (hungry children), images of how the world may look due to climate change. The problems presented to research / have been researched. The resolutions to the problems – make it sound easy; bitesize chunks. How we, as consumers can help (money, aid, support, volunteer) – make that appealing – it's easy". [#3.16-BW]

Having said that, the preference for "bitesize chunks" of information was not unanimous. The level of detail on the page was one of two areas of disagreement with eight users

expressing a clear wish for a large amount of detail and background information, and nine others stressing their preference for brief snippets and a more concise approach. The second, perhaps not unrelated, area of disagreement was the role of opinion versus objective and factual information. A range of views was expressed, with some users calling for truthful, accurate, balanced and unbiased "facts over opinion" that allow visitors to make up their own mind and others opting for thought-provoking material and an explicit political stance on the part of the organisation. These divisions could be linked to Kim's (2007) distinction between two basic information-processing goals: the need for closure (i.e. the individual's goal is to preserve their opinion) and the need for non-closure (i.e. the individual seeks maximum accuracy), with the latter group spending more time to research issues and opinions.

These findings pose significant challenges for producers of civic messages and tools on the internet: appealing to users who are attracted by catchy snippets of key facts and attracting those who seek detailed background information is a balancing exercise. One solution would be to layer the information on the site starting with key pieces on the homepage and getting to more in-depth coverage of the topic as the user moves into the site and away from the homepage (Read More option). The divide amongst those who prefer clear facts and a balanced presentation of arguments and users who opt for a more thought-provoking, possibly argumentative style may require clear signposting of what is fact and what is opinion, while at the same time avoiding the overloading of the page.

5.5.2. Website Design

The first and foremost priority for users in terms of design is ease of navigation, followed by the site's visual appeal. The plea for simplicity amongst our user sample is consistent with the recent findings of Flavian, Gurrea and Orus (2009) who note that freedom of navigation can have a decisive role in shaping users' behaviours. Many of our respondents used similar or synonymous adjectives to describe accessibility of navigation (such as "easy", "clear" and "simple") and visual appeal ("colourful", "bright" and "attractive") (**Table 9B**). Comfort, convenience and ease of use extend from the navigational aspects of web design (e.g. user-friendly menus) to the manner in which information is communicated (easy to scan) to the completion of activities such as donating online. The first step in attaining users' interest is the existence of a clear and elegant graphic design, as it has been found that users can assess the visual appeal of a website within 50 milliseconds (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek and Browñ 2006).

Interestingly, a quarter of the participants chose to use a *negative* definition (i.e. what the site should *not* be or do), such as "not too formal", "not overly complex", "no jargon", "no time wasting finding what you want", "not pretentious" etc. The manner these responses are articulated and reoccur throughout the data may give us additional insight into young people's *perceptions* of current political websites. These will be further discussed in Chapter 7 as participants were asked to compare their perceptions of, and expectations from, civic websites before and after the website evaluations.

Perhaps the most significant finding emerging from this part of the study was the importance of *emotional engagement* through visual material. Our evidence shows that affective visuals are important in catching an internet user's attention (especially in the case of first time visitors), but they are also vital in establishing a more lasting aesthetic and emotional connection between the user and the cause. As Corner and Pels (2003: 9) note, "aesthetic stylisation is an inherent and inevitable feature of mass politics, particularly in its (post)modern mediated form". While it would be tempting to disregard users' emphasis on aesthetic elements as a sign of dumbing down, a closer reading of our data reveals that this is intrinsically linked to emotions and perhaps, indirectly, to a willingness to step outside of the isolated self and connect with others in what could eventually lead to the creation of a collective identity– i.e. the stuff that political rhetoric has always been about. A clear need for online civic material that creates *empathy* was evident in our users' narratives:

> "Pictures that speak more than words to get you more involved and get involved more efficiently. A lot of things that promote empathy". [#1.06-LR]

> "Modern, colourful. Lots of photos of the issue – emotive, thought-provoking". [#3.32-NS]

> "Tries to influence you in some way i.e. pictures that may sway your view". [#4.43-MK]

> "Use of images – the PETA website really affects you". [#3.30-LC]

These responses seem to challenge the notion of young people as civically apathetic, cynical and impenetrable. These young citizens appear willing to engage with public issues and eager to be approached with material that is affective and effective.

One such example, cited by the participants themselves, is the website of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), an international non-profit organisation and the largest animal rights group in the world. The PETA site does indeed make extensive use of poignant images and videos showcasing captured, injured and tortured animals (e.g. **Figure 14**). However, the strategy of using emotive material to affect and mobilise citizens can be a double-edged sword: further evidence presented in Chapter 7 will show that some of these participants consider NGOs and charity organisations as "pushy" and explicitly state that they find such practices of aggressive campaigning to have a de-motivating or alienating effect.

5.5.3. Website Interactivity

Firstly, it is worth noting that there are probably as many definitions of interactivity as studies. Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese (2005) highlight the multiplicity of scholarly typologies and models of interactivity, as do Leiner and Quiring (2008) who also note the lack of empirical evidence on users' perception of interactivity. In contrast to that view, Richards argues that there has been *too much* focus on users' perceptions and asserts that "interactivity is a contextualizing facility that mediates between environments and content and users and enables the *generation* of further content" (2006: 532, italics in the original). While a semantic debate about the conceptualisation of interactivity is outside

of this discussion's scope, our analysis captures a range of functional aspects of interactivity (user-to-user, user-to-interface, user-to-producer, e.g. see Warnick, Xenos, Endres and Gastil 2006), as well as discursive elements that relate to the broader notion of contingent communication (Sundar, Kalyanaraman and Brown 2003).

FIGURE 14: PETA WEBSITE HOMEPAGE

Homepage of PETA's international website [http://www.peta.org on 10/10/2008]
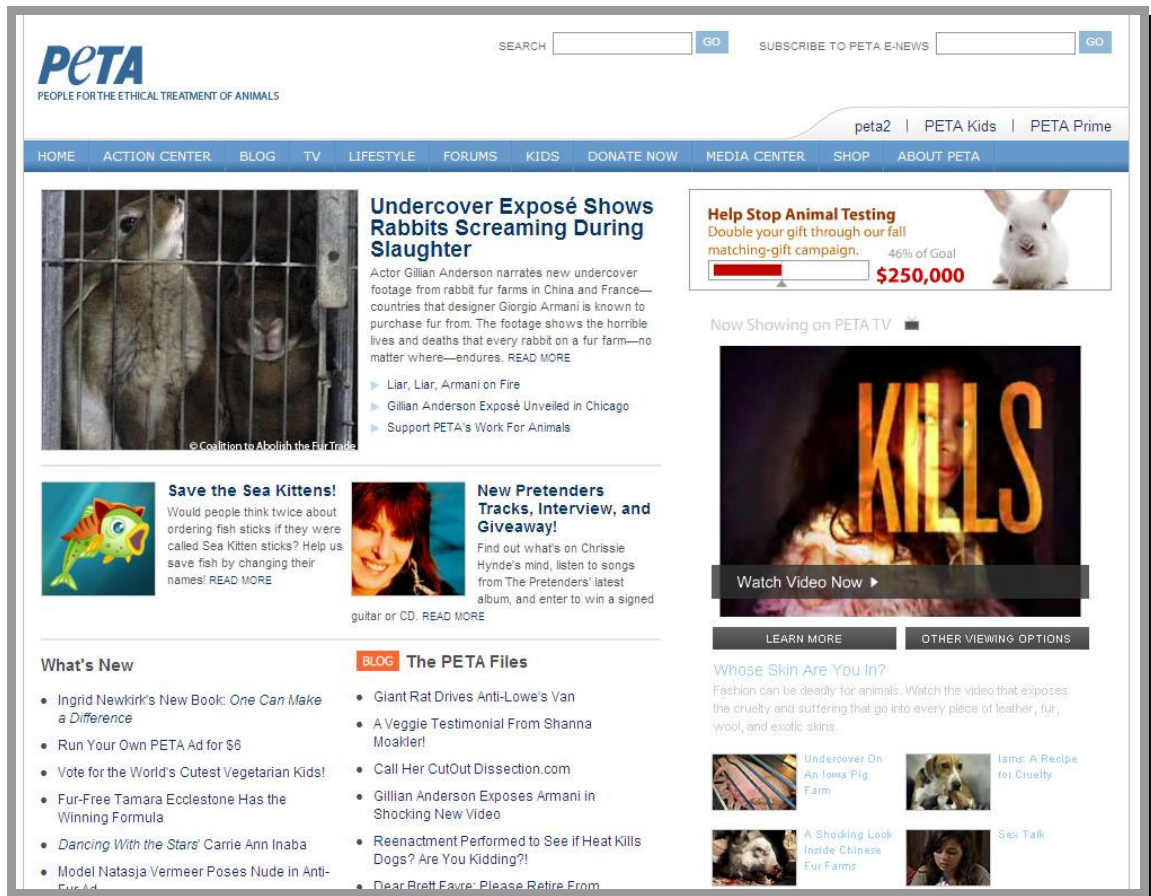
Interestingly, our participants defined interactivity in many different ways, ranging from mere *connectivity* to simple discursive *interaction* to a more substantial affective *relationship* with other users and/or the cause reaching the level of community. However, it also emerged that increased or maximum interactivity should not be considered as an end in itself or as a panacea. Our participants' responses to this question (**Table 9C**) offer some interesting insights that perhaps challenge the perception of interactivity as an *a priori* attractive element, with one participant (#3.20-CW) going as far as to opt for sites that are "not very interactive". These users' narrative revolves around the concept of the visitor being able to *choose* the level of interaction with the site, its producers and other users:

"A *choice* of whether the participant wants to be more interactive, they may just want to browse yet if it is interactive it should support all other info". [#1.04-JP]

"*Choices* of different ways to engage, be effective and would encourage people to look deeper into the site – audio, downloads etc all add interest and another way to get information across". [#2.17-SH]

> "*Options* for the user to find more info - maybe a 'links' page or contact details to become involved. Forums are a great way for users to get involved". [#4.41-JO]

Furthermore, our evidence suggests that the main quality of a website should be its ability to empower users to express their own feelings or voice, as well as to see how others feel. Although this part of the study was completed before the peak of content-sharing applications, the emerging trend could partly explain the success of such tools amongst younger users. The expressions used by the respondents were oriented heavily towards the notion of sharing ideas and voices; a narrative of emotional connection with others is indirectly, but consistently, present:

> "Being able to put forward your own ideas and *feelings*. Whilst also being able to see how other people *feel*". [#4.42-JS]

> "Message boards to tell others of movements / protests / marches. Aids interconnectivity and *community unity*. Easy to update info through steady stream of comments". [#3.31-LW]

Added to the emphasis on emotive pictures and visual material that promotes empathy discussed earlier, the theme of *emotional engagement* appears to be a salient one throughout the study. It may be the case that, rather than being disengaged, apathetic or cynical, young people in Britain today need a more direct mode of communication that affects them personally and leads to an emotional connection with public affairs, other citizens or political leaders leading to a more fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship between citizens and government, i.e. what Richards (2007) calls "emotional governance".

In terms of specific facilities, the most popular suggestion was a discussion area (such as a message board, forum or chat-room), while other suggested features included links, contact details, online donations and a feedback or comments facility. While their responses produce a clear picture of what qualities they would seek on a civically oriented website, these qualities are descriptive and do not translate into particularly innovative or original facilities or applications that could be on the cutting edge of interactive technology (or political participation). One idea that is worth considering further is the inclusion of "live help" through human web assistants:

> "Be able to chat to other users / customers of that website. To be able to chat to someone straightaway who is involved in the issue website and who can give answers to questions real-time". [#4.45-SJ]

The use of Q&A avatars, interactive support systems and human customer service assistants is a common practice in e-commerce, aiming to address the shortcomings of search engines and to increase sales. A good example of the use of live help in a non-profit, public service setting is the Enquire facility of the People's Network (http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/), which is an online network delivered by England's public libraries, managed by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and supported by lottery funding.

FIGURE 15: ENQUIRE (PEOPLE'S NETWORK)

The Enquire (Ask a Librarian 24/7) welcome page, including the user interface on the right-hand side of the screen (highlighted by the author)
[http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/ on 11/10/2008]
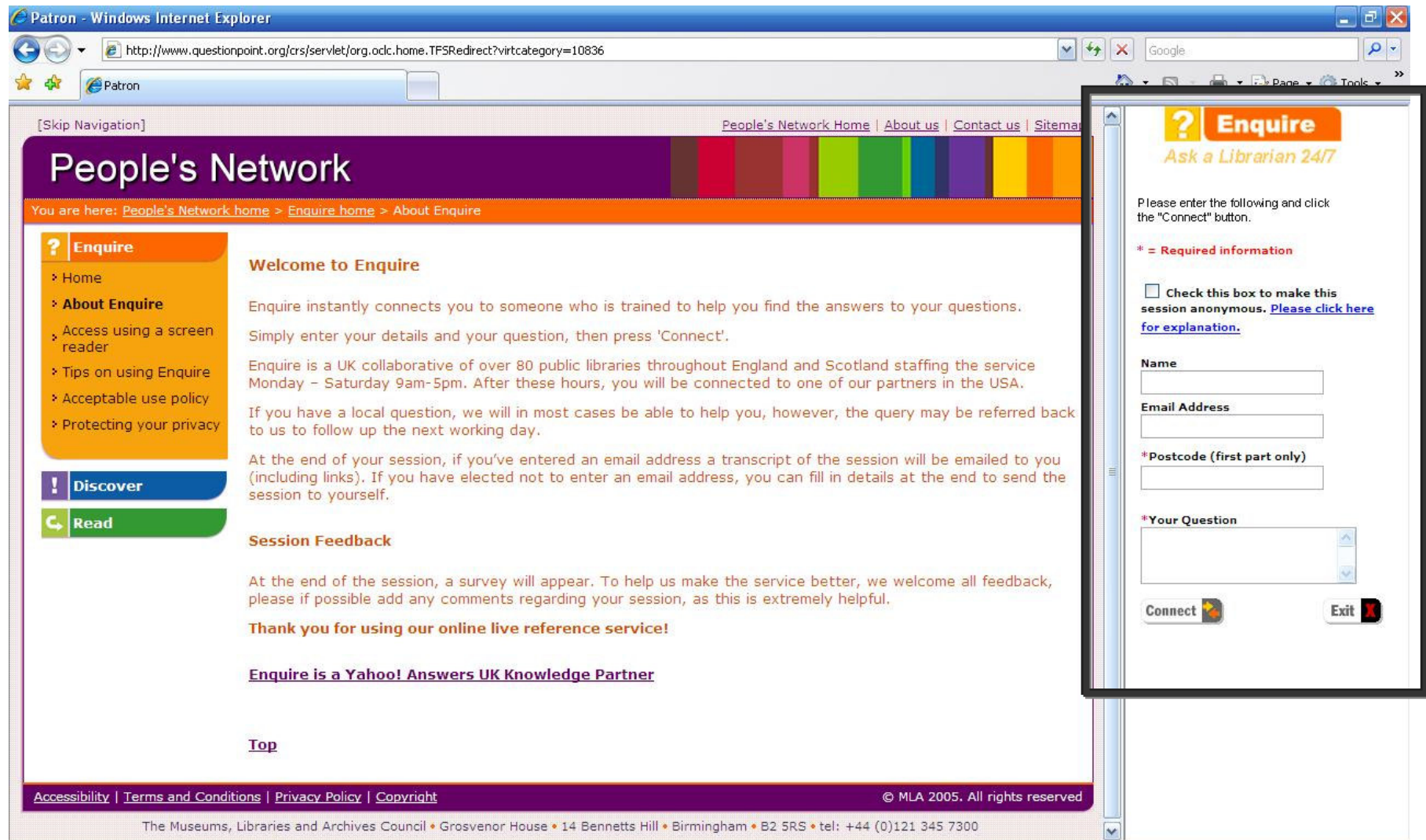
The Enquire service is a UK collaborative of over 80 public libraries in England and Scotland. Its homepage (**Figure 15**) provides the visitor with the opportunity to communicate with trained staff 24/7 via a simple user interface. UK-based librarians are available during working hours, while queries are automatically forwarded to US partners during all other times.

Åberg and Shahmehri (2000) highlight the need for online organisations to provide services that can reach individual computer users with different information profiles and levels of expertise. Multimedia convergence facilitates the design of intelligent and adaptive services that identify and address individual users' needs. In recent years, many online companies have incorporated live help features on their websites, which provide site visitors with the opportunity to contact customer service representatives or receive advice via text messaging.

Recent research has shown that employing text-to-speech (TTS) voice and 3-dimensional (3D) avatars in the user interfaces increases consumers' cognitive and emotional trust toward the customer assistant (Qiu and Benbasat 2005). Such tools and facilities may be too resource-intensive or costly for many civic organisations, issue movements and NGOs funded by small donations or membership fees. However, the utilisation of synergies created through collaborative networks and the mobilisation of the organisation's volunteer base through innovative design could lead to a sustainable model of live help-desks and interactive support systems.

In conclusion, the site is seen as a gateway to further awareness and as a potential starting point for further action. It should provide the tools and the space for citizens to share their feelings with other affected citizens/consumers, while also making its case confidently, persuasively and succinctly. It must be designed in such a way as to support a plurality of ways through which the visitor can gain awareness or actively engage, i.e. offering the user the ability to choose their desired level of information depth, emotional engagement and interaction with others, rather than "pushing" these elements onto all visitors indiscriminately. The following section reflects on the implications of the findings presented so far and considers the challenges (and opportunities) facing online youth civic engagement.

5.6 Challenges to the Internet's Empowering Potential

The hopes about the democratising potential of the internet are based on the medium's capacity to provide citizens with greater choice of information, news and opinion sources, as well as the tools to become active content creators. The assumption is that users will actually make use of that capacity so as to cross-check news stories, search for a variety of viewpoints, learn about public affairs and actively create content. Few dispute the internet's capacity to offer that level of choice and interactivity, yet when it comes to registering which online activities and facilities real users engage with, and to which extent, the evidence is more mixed, as is the case with the present case study.

However, there is a further note of caution to be registered regarding the internet's potential for civic empowerment. The rise of Web 2.0 and the social web, which has allowed users to build social networks and potentially become active nodes of message production, has important implications regarding the originality, meaningfulness and socio-political gravitas of that user-generated content. Stutzman (2008) argues that users are ultimately constrained by the architectural constructs of web designers; their interactions and content creation usually take place not in publicly owned civic spaces but within privatised, commodified structures (e.g. social-networking sites or online news media) that have been constructed deliberately to serve the interests of their architects, such as attracting advertising revenue. Bialski (2008) even goes further by questioning the value, if not the meaning, of these interactions and materials: "The dangers of the social web is the fact that users are generating content that is not truly exploratory and is not a result of their expression of […] their true powers".

Still, even the critics acknowledge that emerging internet applications have been part of a cultural shift in which users are much more equipped to share, interact and communicate openly (Ingo 2008). The young people taking part in this study were perhaps less creative and active online than expected, given especially their field of study. They also, consistently, emphasised their need for convenience and a quasi-consumerist approach to civic engagement. At the same time, however, they also appeared keen to learn more and prepared to emotionally engage with other citizens and public affairs as long as the terms of that engagement are accessible and consistent to their lifeworld.

Perhaps a more potent challenge to civic organisations attempting to gain the online attention of youth is the profound shift in the public's perception of the citizen's role and civic responsibilities within democratically organised societies. The traditional ideological, social, ethnic and religious cleavages that determined political action for decades have been retreating in favour of individualised prosperity and consumer choice. Youth notions of citizenship, civic engagement and politics – and the motivations, fears and needs upon which they are based – are equally important as the traditional conceptualisations upon which the political system and civic culture of liberal democracies, including Britain, are based. Coleman (2004: 1) reminds us that "the lament for old, localised solidarities fails to resonate with twenty-first century citizens whose interpersonal networks are increasingly a matter of choice rather than a consequence of geography".

The narrative of choice and convenience is explicitly dominant throughout our participants' responses; conversely, the roles of collectivism, duty and civic rituals are obscure. The terms and conditions that need to be met for these young people to engage online are evident: the benefits of civic action must be highlighted and they must be tangible; the reasons for engaging in such action should be clear and relevant; the act of participation itself should not stress the individual's resources; the user-citizen-consumer should be able to choose why, when and how they will engage with a public affair or cause.

It could be argued that the concept of civic duty is incompatible with the setting of "terms and conditions" to one's civic engagement. While citizens' notion of collective

responsibility may, indeed, be changing, an alternative form of individual responsibility could be emerging around the notion of empathy. Civic organisations might be able to tap into citizens' moral codes by highlighting, not necessarily the tangible or material benefits of each civic action, but the emotional and aesthetic pleasure that individuals can receive through mobilising on issues that they feel passionate about. Schudson (2007) notes that, as political behaviour can be both public-spirited and egocentric, consumer behaviour can also be public-interested as well as self-interested.

These shifts in the civic culture are coupled with similar changes in the media culture. While the internet is generally embedded in the everyday life, these young people are essentially instrumental users of the medium seeking convenience and practical solutions to their everyday problems. Rather than browsing aimlessly, enjoying the process of surfing and coming across people, material, issues and opinions that they would not normally encounter, these users are largely focused on keeping in touch with existing friends and family, using the net as a reference tool for their work, study and private interests, and completing specific everyday life tasks, such as banking and shopping. Public affairs, established institutions and democracy itself are now competing for these users' attention against a wealth of other everyday opportunities, issues and interests.

The fundamental tension between the medium's culture of instant, individual gratification and democracy's painstakingly long-term, collectivist exchange of ideas appears to be quite salient in this discussion. However, the challenge facing political institutions and civic organisations is not, primarily, a technological one – it is a political one. The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that, should we wish to employ the internet as a means of youth engagement, then some of the assumptions and principles upon which our understanding of democratic participation is based may need to change. That is not to say that existing structures and conceptualisations of democracy are flawed or misguided, but, merely, that as they currently stand, they may not be able to survive or succeed in that specific media environment as an autonomous, insular even, area of human practice.

Modern, indirect democracies depend on the aggregating, mediating and scrutinising roles of the media. Yet, the simultaneous multiplication, segmentation and convergence of channels, genres and platforms challenge the influence and role of political leaders and institutions; not necessarily, as it has often been argued, giving way to empowered active users/content creators, but also to commodified media platforms serving private interests. Thus, political organisations have to decide whether they wish to concede their special place in the national public sphere and engage with that new environment in the first place; and, if so, the extent to which they are prepared to perceive of their values, ideas, issues and policies as products that need to be sold in a competitive market populated by demanding consumers. The next chapter will examine whether youth organisations and NGOs are achieving civic usability and the extent to which they are utilising the net in order to effectively reach younger citizens within this highly saturated and segmented environment.

Chapter 6

Addressing Users' Civic Needs?
A Comparative Evaluation of Civic Websites

"Any attempts […] to reconnect with young people would appear to require democratic institutions and practices to restyle their political communication in such ways as to be commensurate with the interests and discourse of contemporary youth culture in an increasingly deinstitutionalised and personalised social world.

As the generation whose lifestyle most encompasses the use of digital communications it should be no surprise that the creative adoption of new media […] to engage young citizens would be an essential element of this restyling strategy. But it also necessitates an acknowledgement of the wider changing social conditions and political culture within which young people must now operate and how this relationship is mediated by ICTs"

(Loader 2007b: 17)

Chapter 6 Overview: Themes v. Data

Objective 3: to evaluate the civic material available to young people by assessing the websites of youth and non-governmental organisations using a range of content, design and interactivity benchmarks

Data: study 2 – web content analysis

Evaluation of site purpose and overall strategy across youth sites

⇓

Evaluation of content across youth sites
Comparative analysis of participation tools and promotional material
Identification of key flaws and weaknesses of youth sites

⇓

Contrast with youth portals, best practice examples
Comparative analysis of information provision

⇓

Evaluation of strategic approach and content of issue websites
Outlining of the consumer-aware approach / contrast with youth sites
Role of personalisation

⇓

Evaluation of approach to online donations
Comparative analysis of transparency features and donation tools

⇓

Evaluation of design across youth and issue websites
Comparative analysis of accessibility and navigation features

⇓

Evaluation of interactivity and use of multimedia
Comparative analysis of community and interactivity features
Follow up study (comparison across time)

⇓

Case studies of best practice and innovation

⇓

Issue websites' approach to media relations
Comparative analysis of media relations features

⇒ Chapter conclusions: emerging repertoires of mobilization, lack of user awareness

In the previous two chapters we explored youth attitudes towards civic participation in general and online engagement in particular. The participants' civic narratives and internet uses emphasised factors such as choice, convenience and a focus on the individual's lifeworld. It was argued that the underlying needs and motivations are indicative of a somewhat consumerist approach to civic participation, possibly reflective of broader structural and cultural changes to the public sphere. These conditions pose a significant challenge for organisations aiming to reach and mobilise young citizens via the internet.

Subsequently, this chapter addresses the third objective of the study, which is to evaluate the extent to which some of the UK's main civic organisations are utilising the web to meet these emerging challenges; i.e. to look at the "supply side" of online civic engagement in the UK today and assess the extent to which it conforms to set benchmarks of civic usability. This part of the empirical discussion draws on a content analysis of twenty websites of youth-oriented and issue-oriented (non-governmental) organisations. The sample included a diverse range of websites from across the UK: youth parliaments and forums (Northern Ireland Youth Forum - NYIF, Scottish Youth Parliament - SYP, Funky Dragon – the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales, UK Youth Parliament); youth engagement projects (HeadsUp, DoPolitics, WIMPS – Where Is My Public Servant, Kikass); youth portals (TheSite, YoungScot, Connexions-Direct); a Brixton-based independent e-zine (Urban75); anti-poverty campaign organisations (Live8, Make Poverty History, Global Call to Action Against Poverty – GCAP); consumer-oriented food and farming organisations (Fairtrade Foundation, Soil Association, The Meatrix); and environmental campaign organisations (Friends of the Earth UK - FoE, Greenpeace UK).

Coding took place between June 2005 and July 2006, while the sites were visited again between December 2008 and April 2009 in order to establish whether (and which) major changes had taken place in terms of design, structure or scope. Particular attention was paid to the introduction of multimedia, interactivity and any other innovative features, which might be linked to the meteoric rise of social networking sites and user-generated content since the original visit.

The chapter starts with a discussion of the main findings regarding site content, focusing especially on the problems of purpose and philosophy identified across most youth-oriented sites. This is contrasted to the consumer-oriented mobilisation approach taken by issue websites, looking in particular to issues of efficacy and online donations. The discussion then moves to the areas of design, interactivity and reach. While the websites of NGOs and issue campaigns are visibly slicker and more professional than those of youth organisations, three common patterns are identified, which appear to be both strategic and problematic. Our findings are then revisited in Chapter 7 in order to compare them to participants' own evaluations of four of the sites sampled here.

6.1 Contextualising Participation: the Strategic Deficit of Youth Sites

A number of content and design issues were diagnosed across most youth-oriented sites and especially on those sponsored by established political institutions, such as youth parliaments, forums and engagement projects. Yet, the most fundamental weakness was the lack of a sense of purpose or strategic message communicated in a clear way. This could be due to a substantive problem in the terms of reference and conception (i.e. scope and aims) of these projects, and/or a lack of understanding of the reasons for which many young people choose not to engage with formal politics.

FIGURE 16: WIMPS 'GOT AN IDEA'
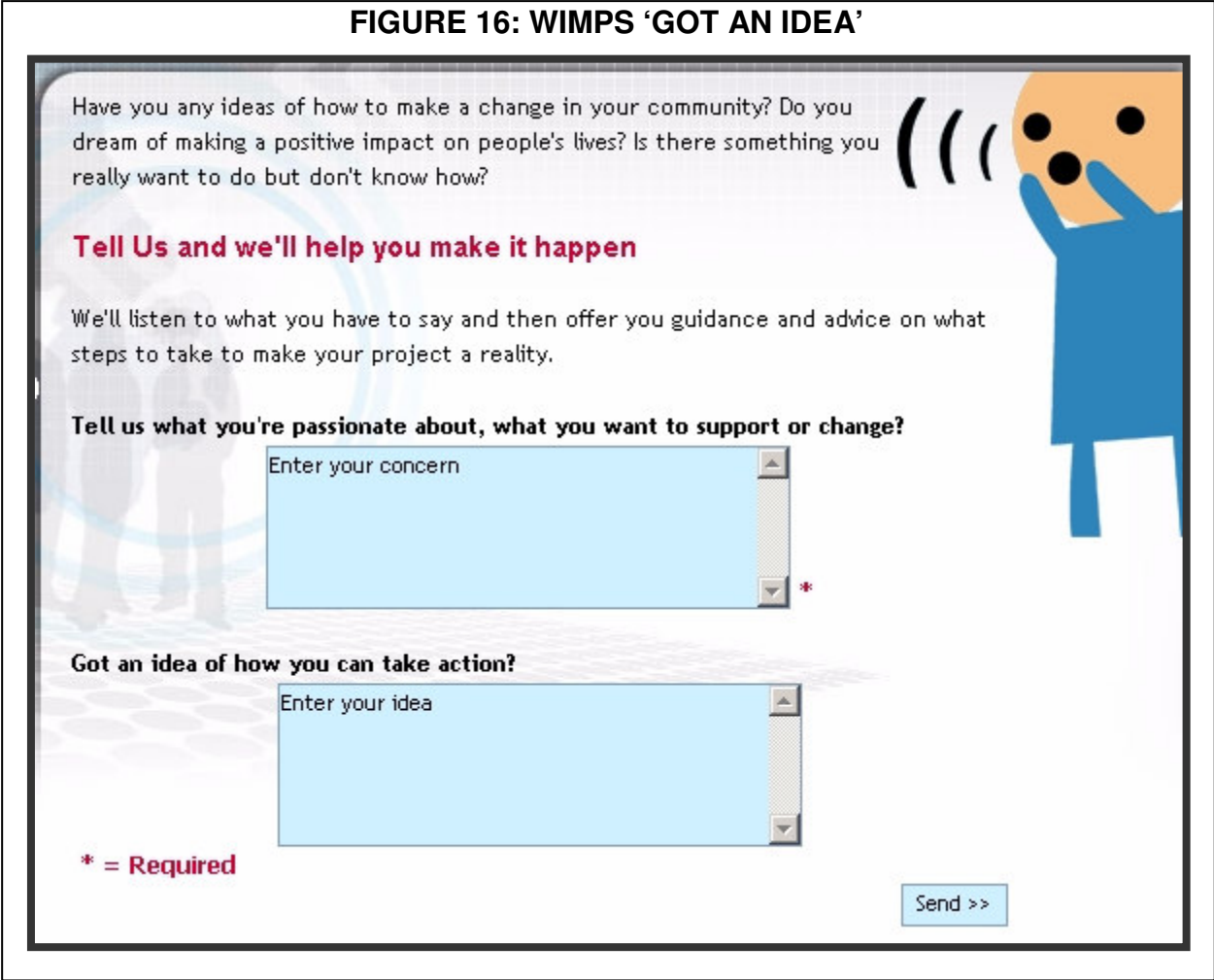
There were many instances of websites calling on young people to "get involved now" (e.g. NIYF, Kikass) without providing any in-depth background about the organisation's mission or any particular reason why young users might want to get involved and what the result of their involvement might be. One such example is the SYP site, the 'About Us' section of which read as follows:

"*How does the Scottish Youth Parliament affect me?*
Whether you're in education, employment or otherwise, the Scottish Youth Parliament deals with issues which directly affect you and have an impact on your life."

No further explanation is given about what these issues might be and what the actual impact would be on citizens' life. Similarly, according to the UKYP's web mission

statement, "It is the UKYP's aim that by 2006 young people in the UK will be aware that they have their own Youth Parliament, and that […] they have the right to vote for an MYP, and the right to stand as an MYP if they so wish". This was typical of other youth websites, the actual contribution of which is unclear to the user; rather, it appears as if the primary aim is to make people aware of their own existence almost in a cyclical way (i.e. "we exist so as to let you know that we exist"). Yet, one of the fundamental principles of site usability is emphasising what a website does that is valuable from the user's point of view (Nielsen and Tahir 2001).

Our analysis of these websites suggests that there may be an assumption on the part of youth organisations that young people are already motivated to participate, have a clear idea of what they want to achieve and how to achieve it, and are merely looking for the right forum to do so. For example, WIMPS invites users to join the team "if you want to get involved in any way at all" without any examples of what that would entail. According to its mission statement, WIMPS aims to "develop an interactive website run by and for young people aiming to inspire and empower young people in Northern Ireland…". Yet, inspiration and empowerment are not contextualised in reference to specific public affairs or social problems.

This philosophy underlines the entire website, including facilities that, had they been better grounded in real life situations, might have had an empowering potential. For example, in the 'Got an idea' page of the WIMPS site (see **Figure 16**), users are invited to submit an idea on "how to make a change in your community" without being given any guidance about what an idea might look like or what that change might involve. As Segall notes (2005: 370), "when forms of participation do not have a 'point' to them, they may actually do more harm than good, as they end up causing frustration and a sense of futility when it is realised that participation was 'about nothing'".
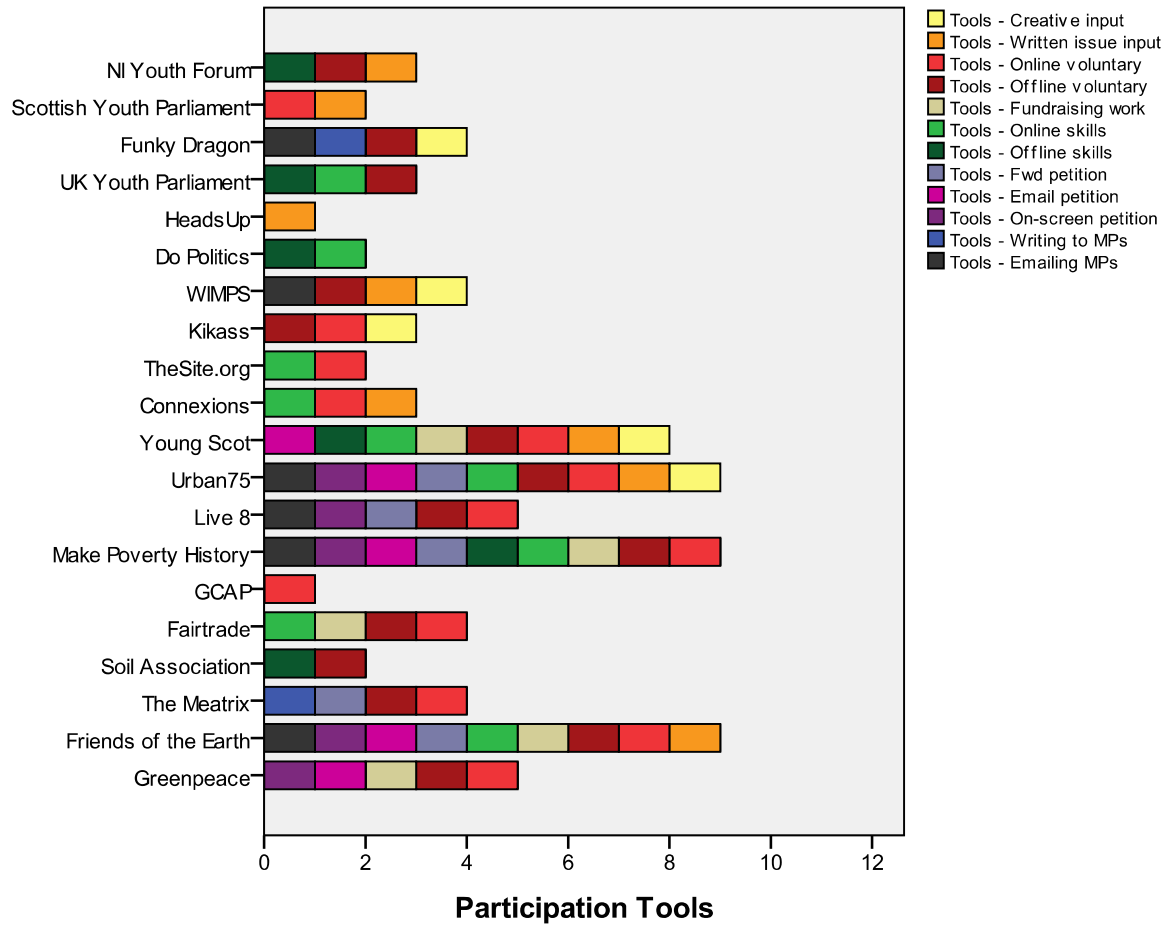
The lack of participation incentives, clear objectives and overall sense of purpose evident across youth sites may indicate a distance between those who are involved in producing online participation tools and the actual target group. Further evidence for that gap is the extensive use of jargon that fails to communicate the relevance of debates and public affairs to people's lives. A key item in the NIYF's Latest News section (2009 visit) refers to "participative structures", while another one calls on site visitors to take part in the online consultation on "intergenerational practice". The pitch of the online material on youth participation could be attributed to the pedagogic scope of some youth parliaments and online projects. For example, the Funky Dragon website (2009 visit) focuses its participation webpage on "what participation actually means" and analyses the words associated with participation featuring a video clip of Grand Council members talking about what participation means to them as young people (**Figure 17**). While a reflection on the nature of participation may be a crucial part of youth organisations' mission, this kind of material is fundamentally generic and self-referential in that it does not invite users to engage with substantive civic action, but to participate in a discussion about participation itself.

Even in the few instances in which youth participation websites attempt to link politics to youth everyday life, this is also done in a way that highlights the gap between producers and users. In the DoPolitics leaflet entitled "How Politics Affects… the music you listen to" (one in a series of leaflets linking politics to everyday issues), politics is framed in a completely regulatory and punitive manner e.g. "prevents DJs playing songs with explicit lyrics on the radio", "limits how loud music in nightclubs is played", "prevents illegal raves from happening", etc.

FIGURE 17: FUNKY DRAGON 'PARTICIPATION' SECTION
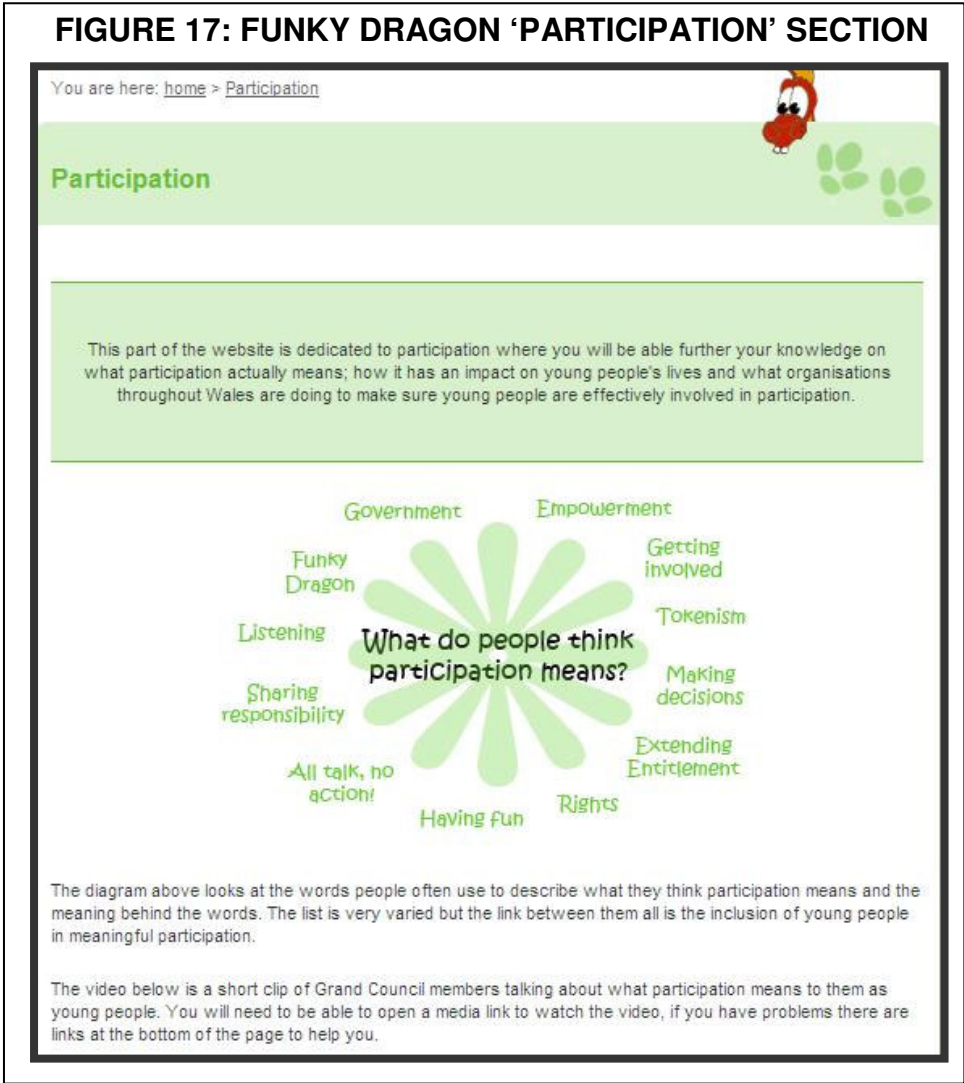
These findings are consistent with Vanderbeeken and Visciola's (2006) study, which concluded that the websites of public institutions lack a clear role, participation tools and accessibly articulated policy priorities. Bessant (2004) attributed the failure of institutional youth websites to engage with young people to a misconception by government of *both* youth *and* participation. A notable exception to this pattern was the Hansard Society's youth consultation forum, HeadsUp, which aims to facilitate the delivery of citizenship education and youth engagement with public policy (Ferguson 2007). The project's agenda, purpose and target group were quite clearly communicated, while the site also features a comprehensive library of briefing materials on a range of potentially relevant issues, as well as tools such as "jargon busters" and avatars.

FIGURE 18: PARTICIPATION TOOLS - COMPARATIVE

Participation Tools

Legend:
- Tools - Creative input
- Tools - Written issue input
- Tools - Online voluntary
- Tools - Offline voluntary
- Tools - Fundraising work
- Tools - Online skills
- Tools - Offline skills
- Tools - Fwd petition
- Tools - Email petition
- Tools - On-screen petition
- Tools - Writing to MPs
- Tools - Emailing MPs

FIGURE 19: PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL - COMPARATIVE

Promotional Material

Legend:
- Content - Promo
- Content - Word / PDF Docs
- Content - Web Docs
- Content - Video
- Content - Audio
- Content - Images
- Facilities - Sub SMS
- Facilities - Free SMS
- Facilities - Sub Email
- Facilities - Free Email
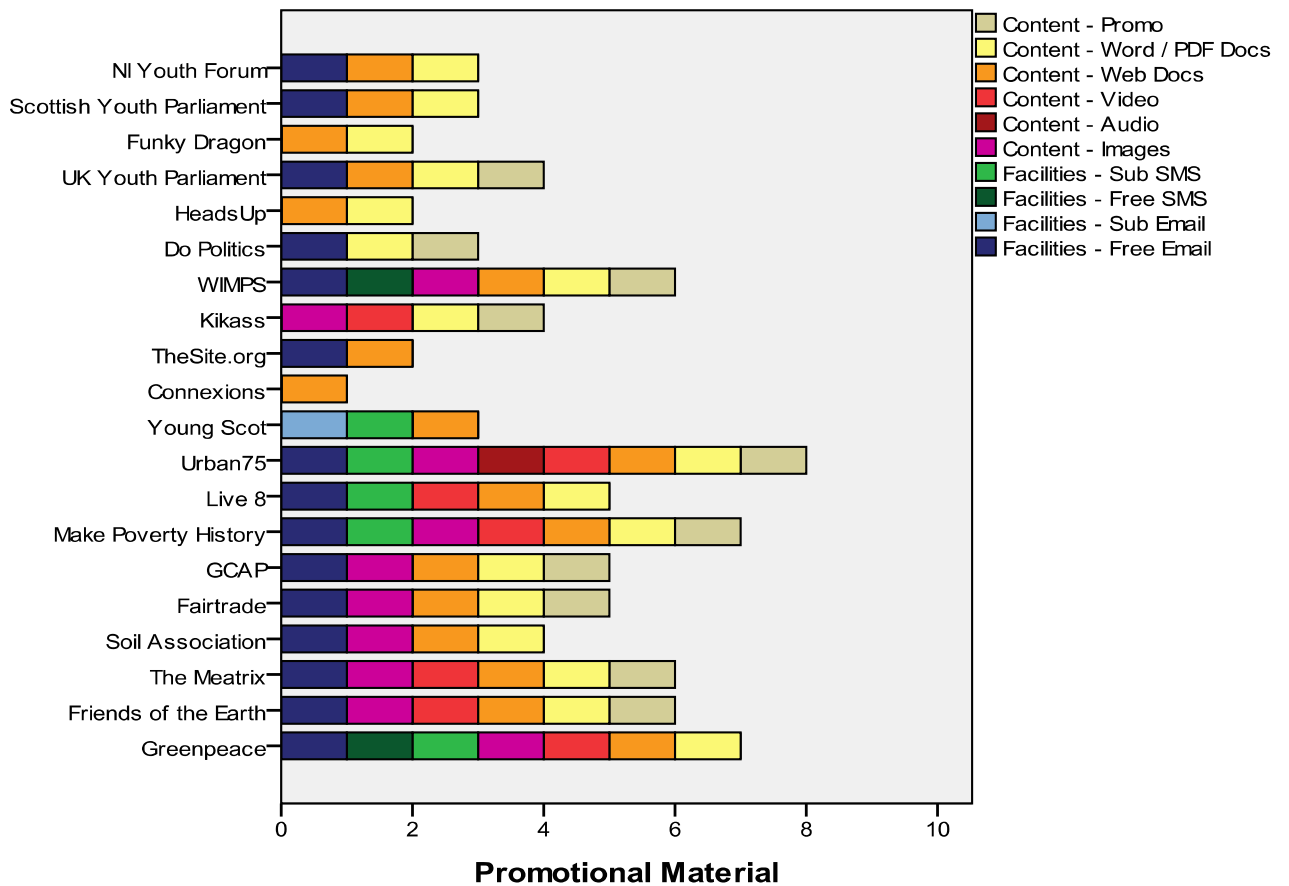
6.2 Generating Content and Use: Youth Sites or "Ghost Sites"?

In addition and possibly related to the afore-mentioned lack of purpose, a shortage of meaningful content, downloadable material, news, updates and actual use of interactive facilities was also observed amongst many of the sampled cases of youth websites (see **Figures 18** and **19**). Burt and Taylor (2008) evaluated voluntary organisations wishing to act as democratic actors on the web; their framework of benchmarks included "guidance on how to engage with the formal institutions of government and with private enterprise, through the exercise of 'consumer democratic rights'…", along with links, participation tools and emotive imagery. While the websites of youth parliaments and engagement projects analysed in this study included dedicated news, events and forum *sections*, the actual *content* posted on these pages was sparse and usually included internal management documents and few past events flyers. There were very few online participation tools, while a review of the various discussion boards and forums produced little evidence of use by site visitors.

Examples include the news archive of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (which featured approximately 3-4 items per year) and the Scottish Youth Parliament website, which did not feature any items in the News sections, while the "past news articles" search engine was not even working (although it has since been redesigned). At the time of the original coding in particular, the SYP website gave the impression of a "ghost site" lacking maintenance: the copyright date read 2001, the About Us section was dated 2003 and the last event mentioned in the Past Events section had taken place in the summer of 2004.

FIGURE 20: DOPOLITICS LATEST NEWS (JULY 2006)
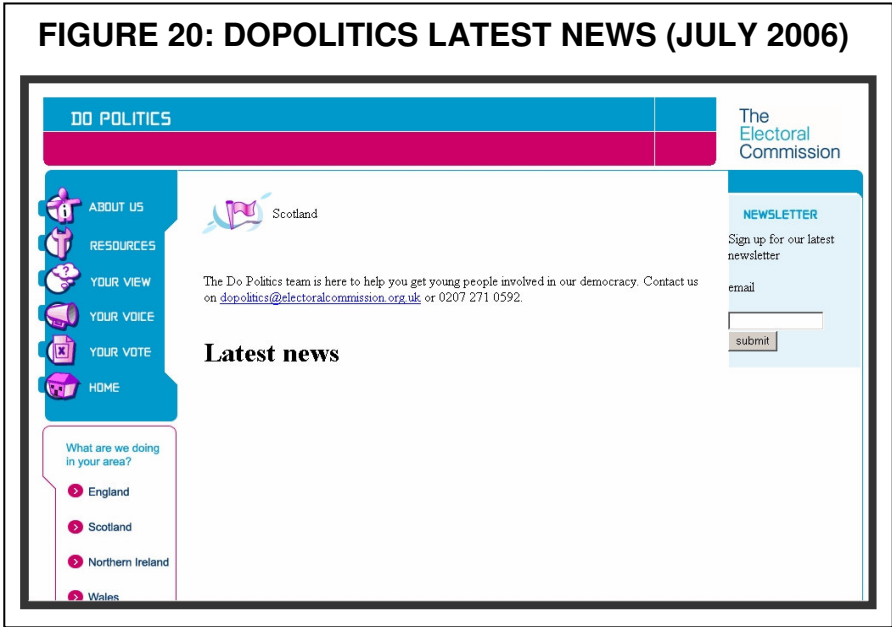
The lack of activity on youth websites by either producers or intended users was evident in the various discussion pages. The SYP Discussion Board did not have any discussion topics or threads, while very few messages were posted on the Discussion Board of Funky Dragon. Some of FD's Local Forums were blank, while the "Stuff you Send Us" section also did not contain any user-generated content at all. Similar problems were observed across the websites of the three youth engagement projects. A few typical

examples include: DoPolitics' Scotland Latest News page being completely blank in both visits (**Figure 20**) and the WIMPS Events calendar not featuring any events at all (**Figure 21**). Kikass recently terminated its physical operations and dramatically scaled down the scope and content of the website, which even in the original coding did not show signs of active use by young people.


FIGURE 21: WIMPS EVENTS (APRIL 2009)
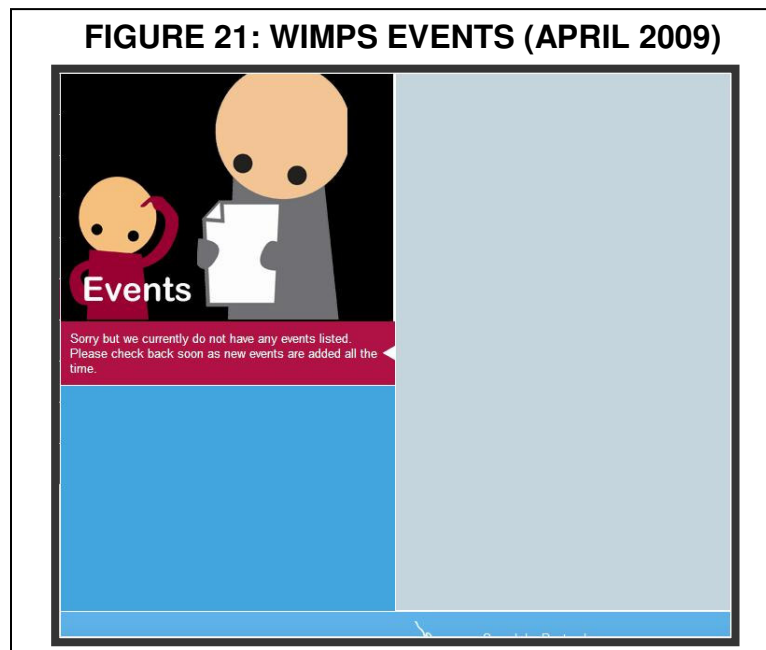
An interesting – albeit tentative – pattern emerged from the comparison of these three youth engagement sites across the two periods of coding: a certain shift of focus was noticeable from a general audience of young users to a more specialised target group of youth workers. Hence, while the discourse of the DoPolitics website's original homepage ("Remember, if you don't do politics, there's not much you do do... We want you to Do Politics") and menu options ("your voice", "your view", "your vote") directly addressed the youth population at large, the redesigned website is oriented towards "people and organisations working with young people". While the limitations of content analysis discourage assumptions about the site producers' intentions, it is worth noting that the coding of the DoPolitics site in 2006 produced minimal participation tools and even less user input, which may be linked to the shift of the site's strategic scope.

In marked contrast to the sites of youth parliaments and engagement projects, the three youth portals analysed (TheSite.org, YoungScot and Connexions-Direct) feature a range of comprehensive and accessible set of online facilities, information about democratic processes, institutions and public issues (**Figure 22** and **23**), as well as practical tips covering many areas of young people's daily life and culture, from health and education to relationships, music and creativity. YoungScot, in particular, also features a range of participation tools (**Figure 18**). Finally, the youth portals also incorporate extensive input by users themselves: the real stories (TheSite.org), the 'Your Life, Your Views' and 'Ask Yourself' pages (Connexions-Direct) and The L@b (YoungScot) are all user-led sections. Importantly, there is strong evidence to suggest that these facilities are actually being used by young people: TheSite.org's Discussion Boards had 63,824 threads, more than one million posts and hundreds of users online at the time of coding.

FIGURE 22: INFORMATION / DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS – COMPARATIVE

Information - Democratic Institutions
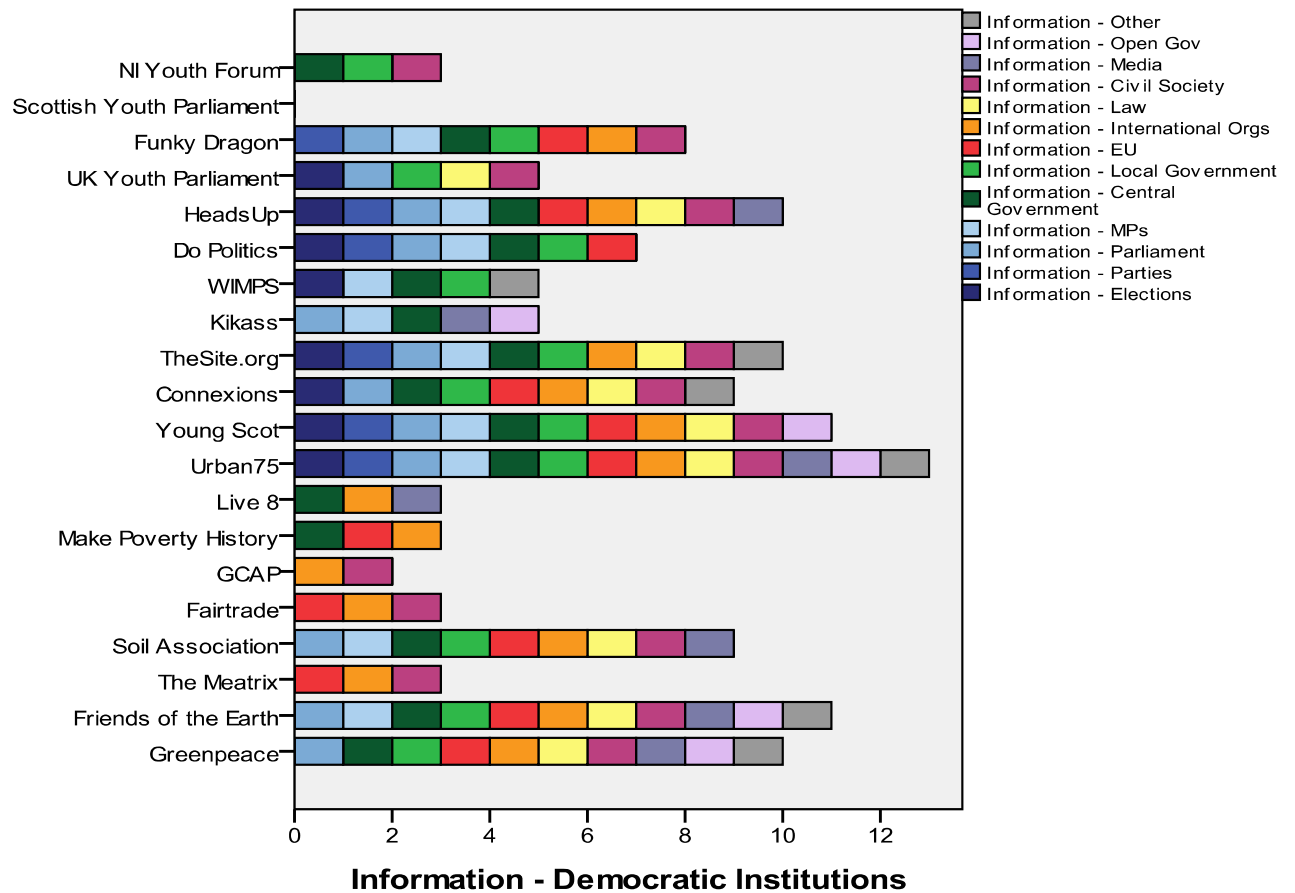
FIGURE 23: INFORMATION / ISSUES – COMPARATIVE

Information - Issues
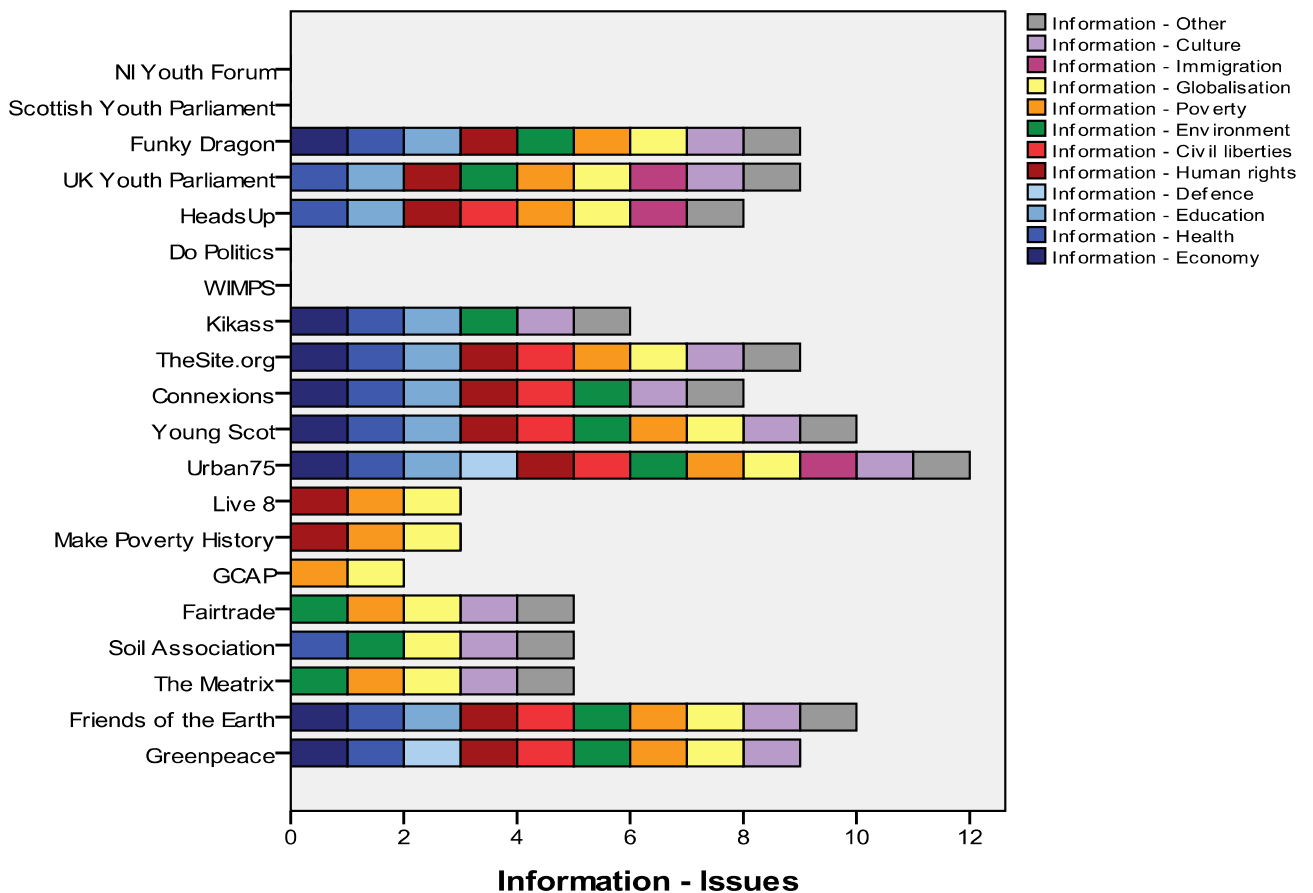
This divide between youth engagement projects and youth portals raises the question of whether youth participation sites are limiting their own chances of success by overemphasising the abstract "participation" aspect of their agenda, as opposed to focusing on tangible issue-, locality- or, even, social reality-oriented aspects. In other words, there seems to be a divide between youth sites focusing on the *discourse* of participation and others working on the *substance* of participation. Moreover, by employing converged applications, youth portals resemble major portals and social-networking sites with the potential of acting as starting points of the user's browsing experience.

6.3 Mobilising the Citizen-Consumer: Linking Issues to Lifeworlds

In contrast to the approach taken by most youth-oriented sites, NGOs promoting specific issue agendas adopt considerably more user-friendly and consumer-oriented online strategies. These range from the narrow sense of promoting specific practices of consumption (e.g. fair trade and organic products) to the broader sense of emphasising the link between issues and the individual consumer's daily routine, which can be a significant facilitating factor according to our participants. An example of the former would be The Meatrix, a site which uses flash-animation short films and intertextuality (parody of the popular film The Matrix) in order to educate visitors about the practices of industrial agriculture (intensive farming, use of antibiotics, unhygienic conditions, animal suffering) and promote the consumption of free range and organic products. Another example is Pants to Poverty, an organisation set up by youth members of the Make Poverty History campaign which sells underwear supplied by ethical and independent producers, promoting the cause of trade justice and human rights.

The websites of organisations such as Make Poverty History, the Soil Association and the Fairtrade Foundation were also found to link macro-political issues such as trade justice, sustainability and environmental protection to individuals' micro-political actions. A good example of this approach would be Make Poverty History's pamphlet entitled "How You Can Help Defeat World Poverty in Seven Easy Steps". This embodies the consumerist approach to mobilisation in three different ways: it brings the issue of poverty alleviation down to the grassroots level of the individual ("How You Can Help Defeat World Poverty…"), while also attempting to boost the citizen's efficacy by claiming that this can be achieved through a series of easy and specific tasks ("…in Seven Easy Steps") and, at the same time, links participation to a specific act of consumption ("Buying this book is Step One"). In this case, the act of purchasing the book is important, not only for the modest financial benefit it brings to the organisation, but because it signifies an act of commitment on the part of the citizen-consumer. The act of paying even a small amount of money symbolises not just a utilitarian transaction in return of a product, but an act of voice through which the individual can build their own civic identity.

Therefore, the consumerist paradigm of civic participation can, in principle, incorporate a series of rituals and notions about the role of the individual consumer that emphasise

civic action as an embedded part of everyday life, as opposed to highlighting the "extra-ordinariness" of political action through reference to collective identities, formal institutions and broader ideological narratives. While the gravitas of such consumer action in terms of social change and public policy output can be contested, it has been shown that socially conscious consumption has a positive influence on online political participation as well as offline civic engagement (Ward 2008).

In terms of specific web applications, the website of Make Poverty History featured another noteworthy manifestation of consumer-oriented mobilisation tools: a flash-based tool allowing site visitors to choose the ways in which they want to engage based on issue and/or locality (see **Figure 24**). This tool enables the user to choose the campaigns, issues and geographical areas that they are interested in; it then produces details (updates, web links) on the chosen campaigns; and subsequently asks for the user's contact details so as to follow up with news updates, and so on. Mobilisation operations are thus integrated into a menu of options allowing the visitor to build a "portfolio" of campaigns they want to get involved with, as opposed to pushing an inflexible agenda onto the user. While being a functional example of user-to-site interactivity, this interface also addresses users' need for choice and control.

FIGURE 24: MPH CAMPAIGN SELECTOR ('MATCH ME' TOOL)
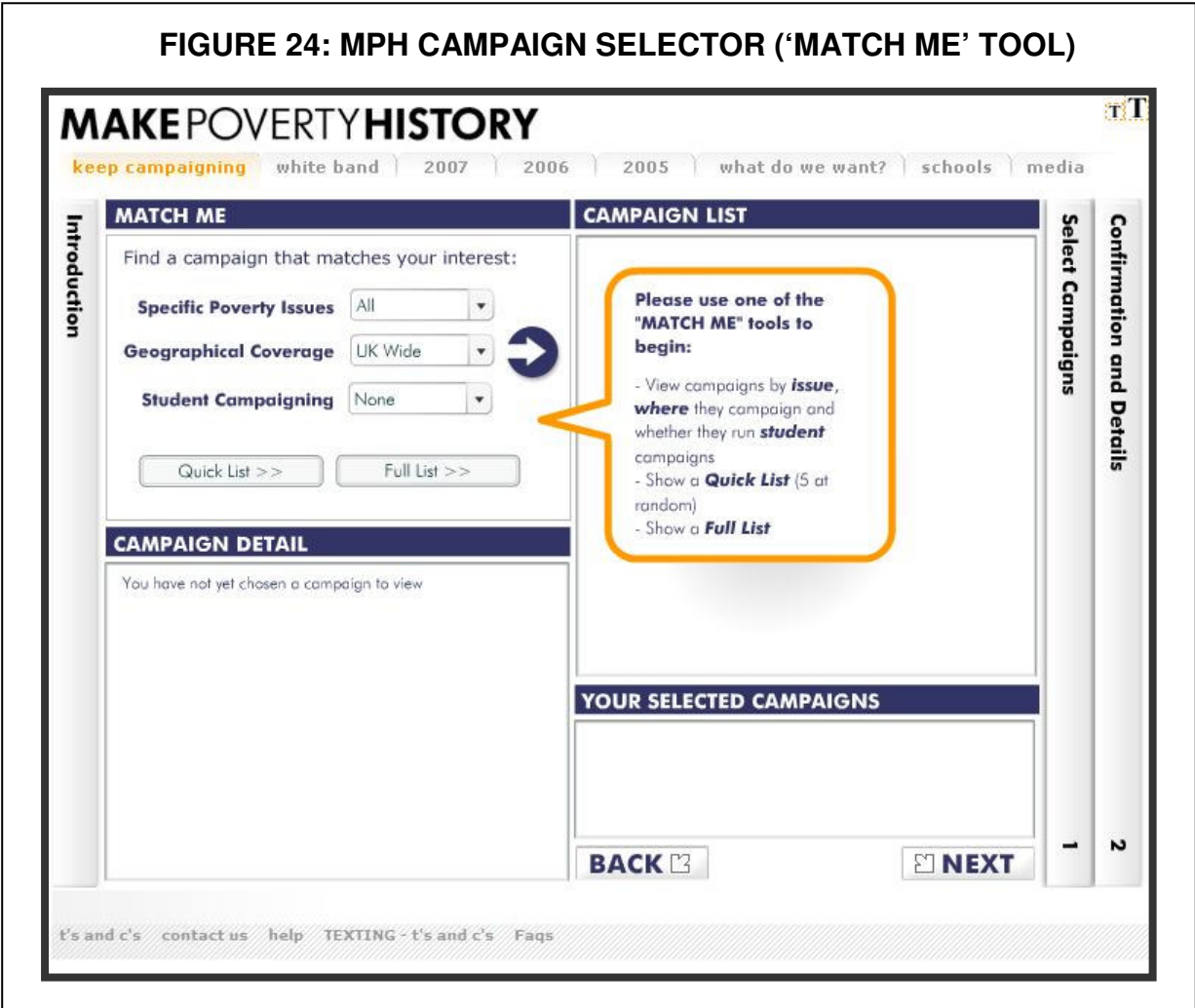
An alternative approach to mobilising citizens is to make them stakeholders of the cause or issue campaign. This is one of the aims of the Fairtrade Foundation's website, a core section of which is devoted to enabling users to promote Fairtrade in their own

communities through campaign information and promotional material (downloadable leaflets, posters, order forms for free material). Interestingly, this section was originally titled 'Convert your…' (school, university, workplace, place of worship etc), which at the same time focuses on the user's lifeworld and also implies that the individual has the power to cause change. This was later changed to the more generic and widely used section title of 'Get Involved'.

FIGURE 25: GREENPEACE 'THE CHEMICAL HOME'
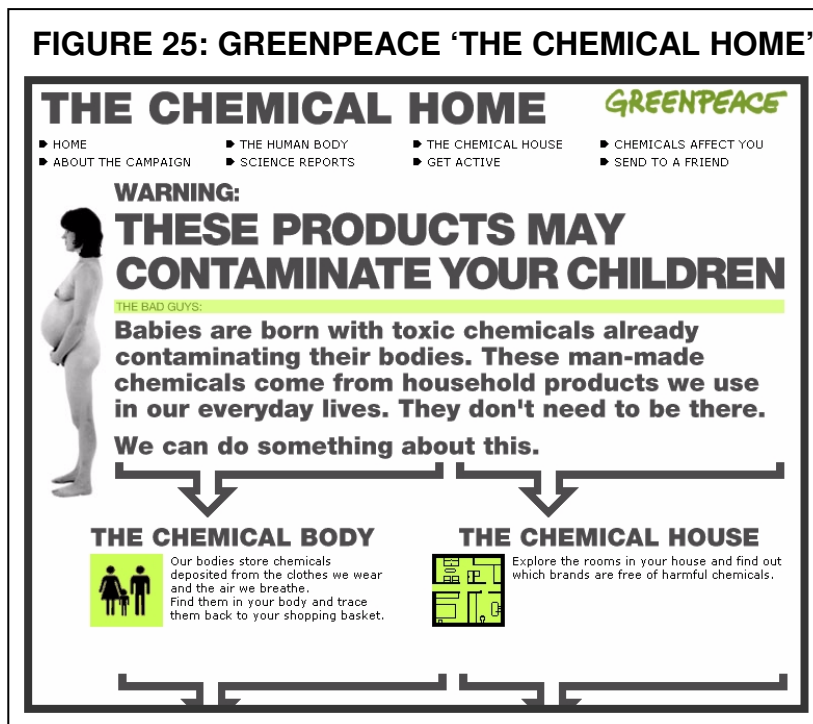
Finally, there is some evidence that established campaigning organisations which have traditionally been associated with more traditionally political action (such as lobbying) are also embracing the shift towards a more consumerist approach to civic mobilisation. This was the case with the sites of both Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, which featured online tools and guides bringing environmental awareness to the level of the individual household through pages such as Greenpeace's Garden Furniture Guide and The Chemical Home (**Figure 25**). The discourse of their campaigns also tended to be more consumer-oriented as they appear to shift civic responsibility to the level of consumer behaviour.

An implicit acknowledgment that consumer behaviour has public consequences could arguably be discerned in the online discourse of these organisations, which is consistent with Schudson's (2007) "post-moralist" conceptualisation of consumer culture. This is further distilled below as another aspect of this paradigm is a closer association between civic action and policy outcomes.

6.4 Boosting Efficacy through Participation Objectives and Outcomes

In addition to demonstrating the relevance of political debates to citizens' lifeworld, it was argued earlier in the thesis that setting clear objectives and tangible outcomes to the participation process can play an instrumental role in motivating young people. This is

crucial from a *civic* efficacy perspective (i.e. providing citizens with the means to take meaningful action), but it is also a fundamental principle from a *user* efficacy perspective. That is to say, emphasising what the site does that is valuable from the user's point of view (Nielsen and Tahir 2001) and building an information architecture (IA) around specific steps or goals that lead to an outcome can enhance the user experience. This may sound like a truism but the evidence shows that many of the sampled youth websites did not have a clear sense of purpose, let alone set goals or outcomes.

The principle of having to link civic participation to specific objectives or outcomes could be criticised on several different levels. For example, the concept of civic duty is based on the idea that citizens have a responsibility to participate in political processes regardless of outcomes. Democratic politics involves negotiation, compromise and co-existence within a broader community of people with conflicting interests and limited resources. The notion that each individual should be "rewarded" for their participation through policy change or material benefits is clearly unsustainable. However, the products of online civic participation do not have to be material; they could be moral, symbolic or aesthetic. Hence, what is required of civic organisations is not to reward each act of civic engagement with evidence of life- or world-changing consequences, but to offer citizens a sense of acknowledgment – after all, this feedback loop is the point of political communication in its true sense.

FIGURE 26: LIVE 8 / MPH OBJECTIVES

TO:

The 8 most powerful leaders in the world

50,000 people are dying, needlessly, every day of extreme poverty.

At this year's G8 summit meeting, it is within your power to put an end to this tragedy. It is an extraordinary opportunity which it would be shameful to ignore. We urge you to take these 3 steps to make extreme poverty history...

1. double the aid sent to the world's poorest countries,
2. fully cancel their debts,
3. change the trade laws so that they can build their own future.

FROM:

Please provide your name and country if you would like it to be added to the Live 8 List.

Your Name *

Country * Choose country

Add my name

A good example of a goal-oriented civic mobilisation project is the Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign, a coalition of NGOs whose action peaked in the run-up to the 31st annual summit of G8, which took place in July 2005 at Gleneagles in Scotland. The content analysis sample included the main website of the campaign (www.makepovertyhistory.org), the website of the Live 8 concerts (www.live8live.com) and that of GCAP, the Global Call for Action against Poverty (www.whiteband.org), a worldwide alliance which is the umbrella organisation for the national coalitions on the anti-poverty campaign. The MPH campaign focused on three specific objectives: (1) more and better aid ("to double the aid sent to the world's poorest countries"), (2) debt cancellation ("fully cancel their debts") and (3) trade justice ("change the trade laws so that they can build their own future") (**Figure 26**) within a finite timeframe, which was the Live 8 concerts and the G8 summit.

Furthermore, the MPH sites reinforced a common set of six key actions that the user could take, including "email Tony Blair", "join us now", "get a white band", "go to Edinburgh", "films to watch" and "send in your picture". Of particular interest is the G8 Gallery, which consisted of thousands of photos that citizens had sent via the Live 8 website and which were posted along the railings of the Edinburgh rallies. According to the organisers, "this visual statement will show that you and millions like you want our leaders to use the power they have to end poverty – for good". This feature could be seen to embody three important elements previously identified as key motivators for online engagement based on our participants' narratives, i.e. citizen/user input (user-to-site interactivity), emphasis on the visual aspect of online engagement and emphasis on the emotional and collective aspect of civic engagement, i.e. by creating a sense of community and collective effort.

An alternative way of highlighting the result of civic action would be to showcase examples of previous successes or case studies of how the organisation's work is affecting real people and communities. One of the strongest features of the Fairtrade website is precisely the presentation of farmers and workers ("inside stories") accompanied by a gallery of photos (in 2006, **Figure 27**) and video clips (in 2009). This feature personalises the issue allowing the citizen to (a) put a face to the producers of the products, (b) read more about the day-to-day lives of the producers, (c) be educated about the effect that Fairtrade is having on local communities and, subsequently, (d) to see the tangible benefit of choosing Fairtrade products, i.e. link their own consumer behaviour to specific outcomes. This enables users to emotionally engage with the issue and the organisation, as well as feel that their actions are making an impact.

A notable exception to the lack of civic outputs amongst youth websites was the HeadsOn section of the HeadsUp website. This feature is based upon the concept of "What happened next", i.e. it follows up the forum debates with responses from Parliamentarians and evidence of action taken in response to the consultation process. As Ferguson (2007: 160) notes, "HeadsUp's direct impact on policy-making and scrutiny may be modest, but it is tangible", including youth input into the Electoral Commission's report on voting age, as well as the role of the Children's Commissioner. Such a feature

can effectively tackle the lack of external efficacy as it acknowledges citizens' contributions and it provides them with evidence of systemic responsiveness.

FIGURE 27: FAIRTRADE GROWERS PHOTO GALLERY (2006)

6.5 The Potential and the Challenge of Online Donations

Donating is not just one of the many possible civic actions or means of online mobilisation; it is the life-blood of NGOs, issue campaigns and social movements, which may not have a steady flow of income from government or corporate sponsors. Recent cases of grassroots mobilisation especially in the United States, such as the presidential campaigns of Howard Dean (2004) and Barack Obama (2008) and websites such as MoveOn.org, showed that even small amounts of donations can have a profound impact if the campaign attracts a critical mass of citizens (Chadwick 2005). Scholars such as Bimber (2003) and Park and Perry (2008) have highlighted the significant positive effect of campaign website use on financial contributions to civic campaigns. Therefore, a positive user experience can act as a catalyst for fundraising.

The few existing studies of the websites of non-governmental organisations / non-profits (e.g. Burt and Taylor 2008, Nielsen 2009a) stress the importance of transparency about an organisation's mission and funding in establishing a relationship of trust with potential supporters. Benchmarks include the existence of background information on the organisation's history, structure, regulatory regime, funding sources and key officers.

Burt and Taylor's evaluation of voluntary organisations (2008: 1060) found almost no information on the sites' membership profile, financial accounts and legal or regulatory environments governing their activities. Our findings partly concur with Burt and Taylor in

that most of the websites sampled for the purposes of this study did not provide users with crucial pieces of information that could facilitate the donation process. Most of the twenty websites analysed did meet some very basic criteria of transparency: they featured pieces of background and corporate information, such as "About Us" sections, mission statements and contact details (**Figure 28**). However, none of the nine organisations that asked for online donations in the original coding period (2005-06) provided the visitor with useful details, such as the target amount for the campaign (if applicable), the minimum amount recommended for donation, the amount already raised or the breakdown of donations and donors (**Figure 29**). It was also noted that most of these nine sites referred the visitor to an external or affiliate site (or to an offline postal process) in order for them to actually complete their donation, which places additional hurdles to the browsing experience.

Two other standards commonly used to assess clarity and the potential for efficacy regarding online donations are (a) a clear statement about the organisation's objectives on the actual donations page and (b) indicative examples of how donations might be specifically used (such as the afore-mentioned interactive tool on the NSPCC website, which allows the user to see the potential impact that various amounts of money might have). The follow-up (2009) evaluation of the four consumer-oriented NGOs' online donations pages (Fairtrade Foundation, Soil Association, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth) showed that none of them featured *both* elements.
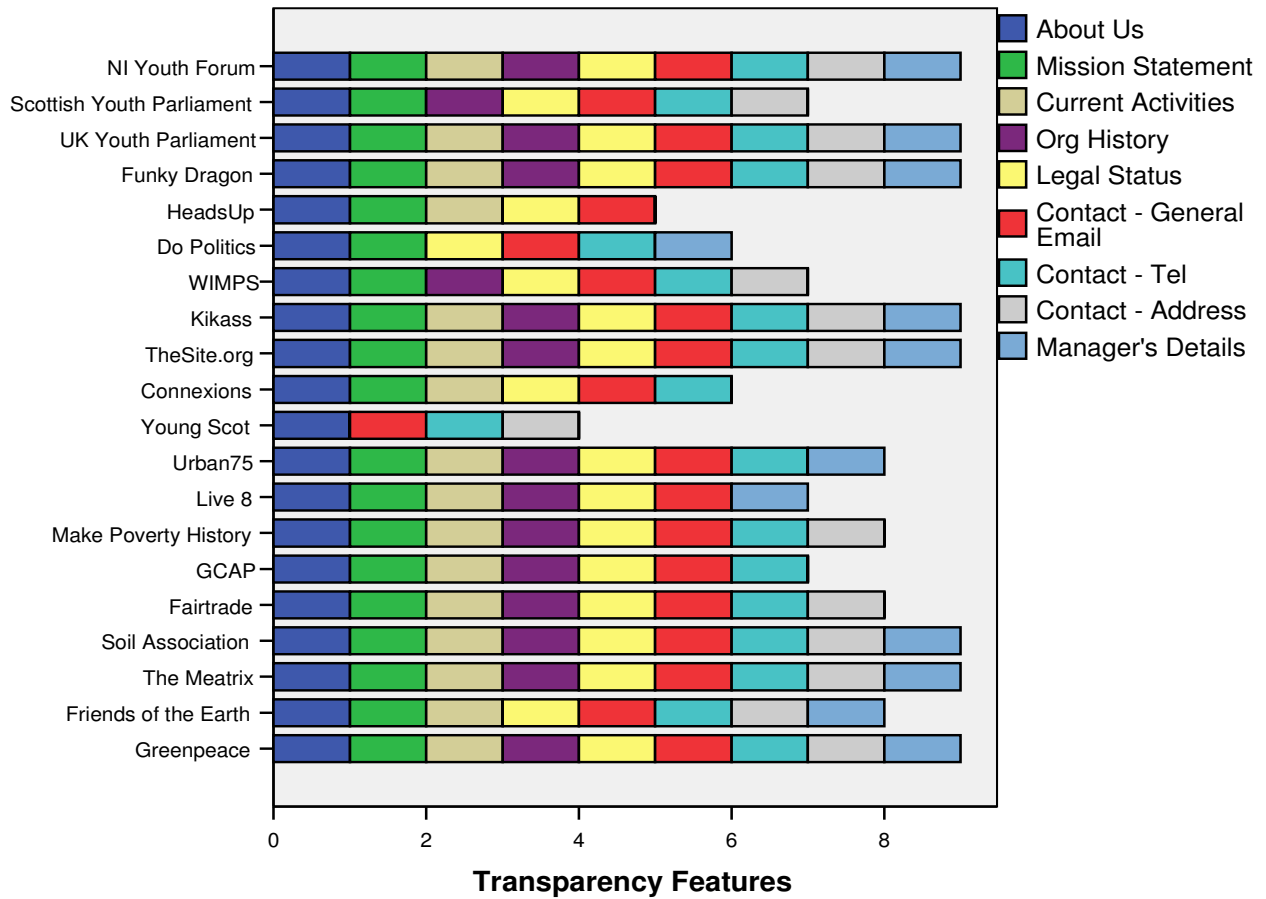
Insofar as the first standard is concerned, in his evaluation of non-profits' donation pages, Nielsen (2009a) found that many websites fail to answer the one question that is most often in users' minds, i.e. how the organisation proposes to help. Clarity regarding the organisation's objectives and operational strategy is important in persuading citizens that their contribution can make a difference. In our sample, the Fairtrade Foundation's website was the only one clearly stating its operational objectives:

> "Your financial support is urgently needed to help with:
>   - Increasing the public's awareness and understanding of Fairtrade,
>   - Lobbying and influencing key players across society in commerce, government and campaigning groups,
>   - Investing in the development of new Fairtrade products such as cosmetics and jute."

The reverse was true for both Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth: their donations pages featured useful illustrations and specific examples of how the money would be used and of the benefits they might bring, but did not offer even a brief statement of the organisation's core priorities and objectives (**Figure 30**). Finally, the website of the Soil Association failed to meet either criterion; the information on their Donations page was limited to two sentences: "As a charity, we urgently need your support to fund our campaigning work and help build a sustainable future for the British countryside. Make a donation below or call us on [phone number]".

Having explored the sampled websites' strategic purpose and mobilisation approach, we now turn to the evaluation of the sites' design, structure as well as particular features and applications through which these strategic directions are realised.

FIGURE 28: TRANSPARENCY FEATURES – COMPARATIVE

Transparency Features

Legend:
- About Us
- Mission Statement
- Current Activities
- Org History
- Legal Status
- Contact - General Email
- Contact - Tel
- Contact - Address
- Manager's Details

FIGURE 29: ONLINE DONATIONS – COMPARATIVE

Online Donations

Legend:
- Donation - B/Down Donors
- Donation - B/Down Donations
- Donation - Already raised
- Donation - Minimum
- Donation - Target
- Donation - Offline
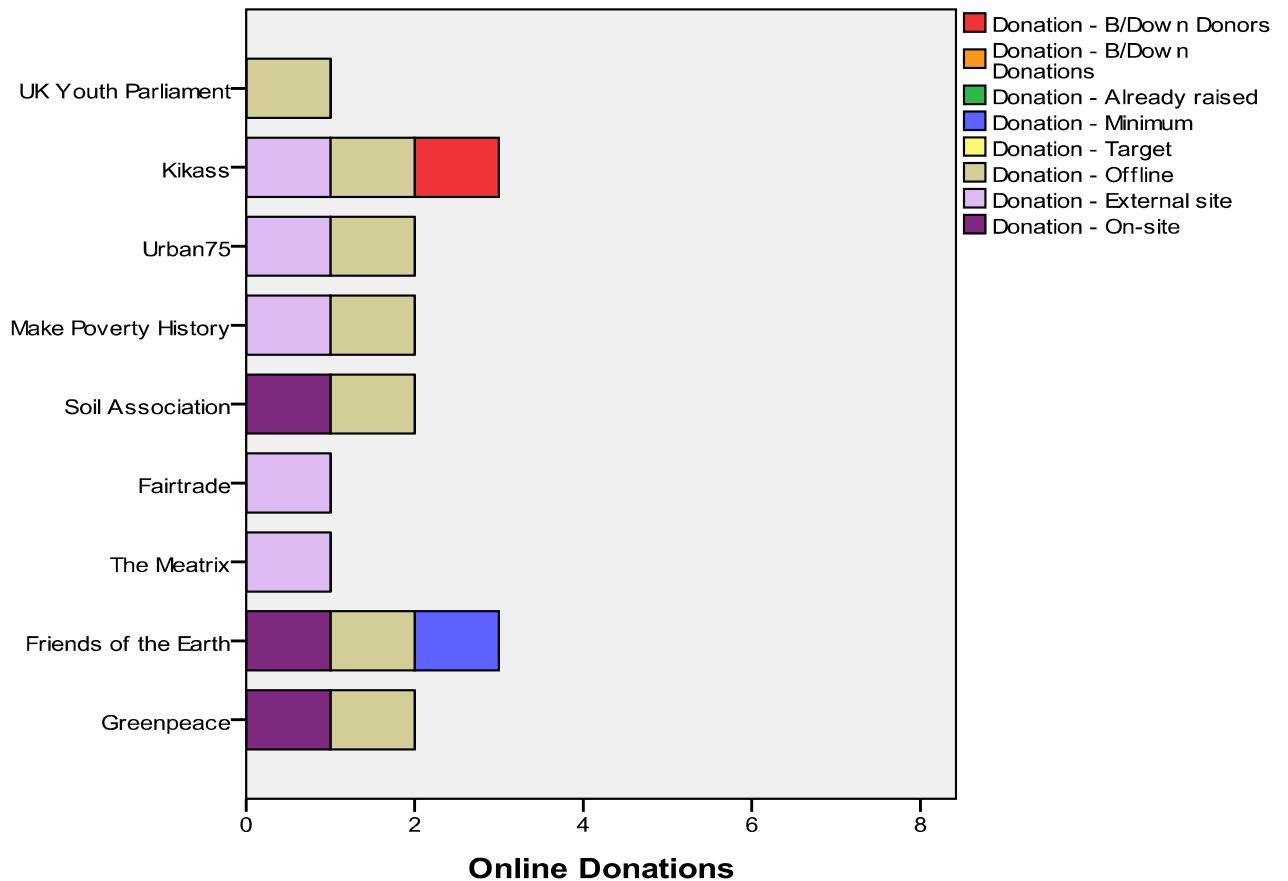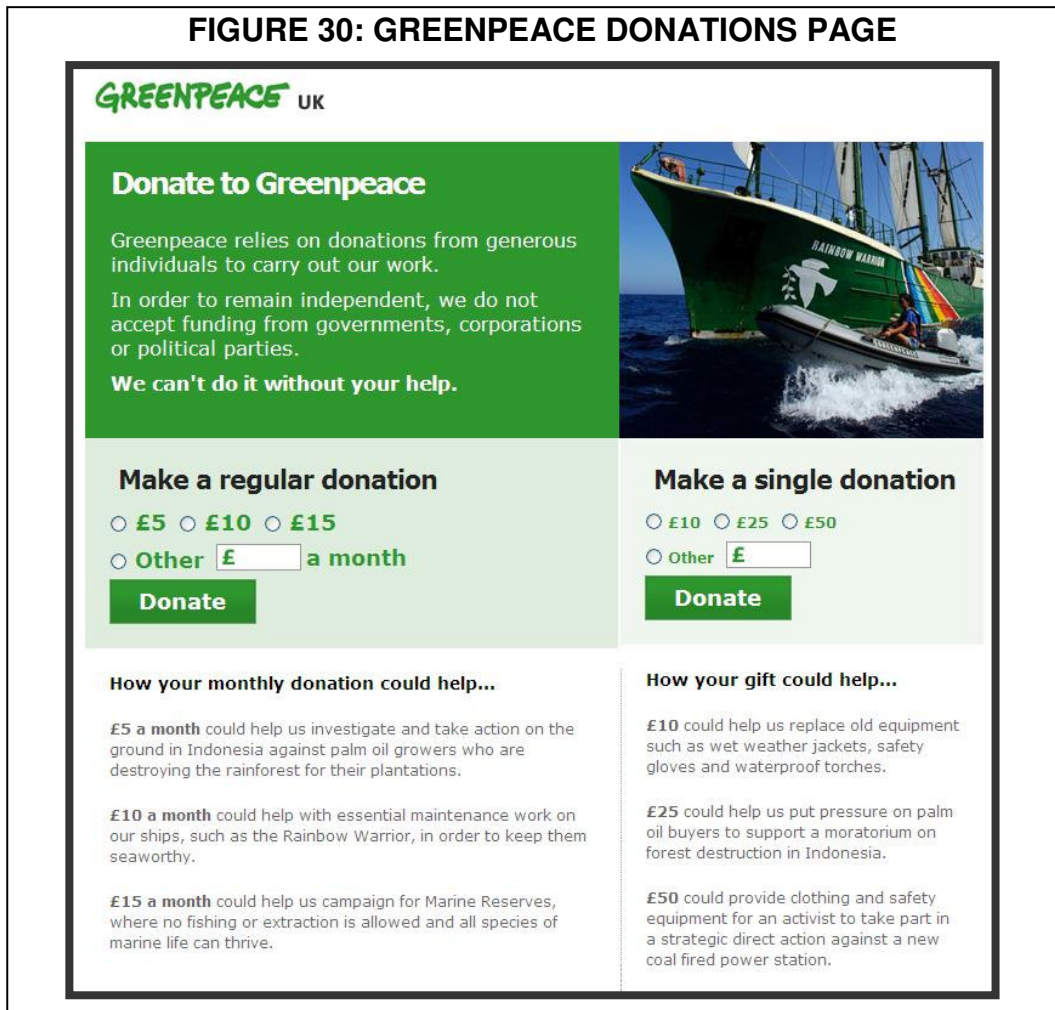- Donation - External site
- Donation - On-site

FIGURE 30: GREENPEACE DONATIONS PAGE

6.6 "The Design is the Message": Accessibility, Navigation, Visual Appearance

Due to the nature of the medium it is often difficult to delineate the boundaries between design and other substantive or contextual elements of web communication. However, for the purposes of this discussion we focus on three core aspects of design: accessibility features (enabling users, including those with special needs, to access the material), site architecture / navigation (e.g. menus, quantity of text) and visual appearance (colour palette, fonts, use of pictures). The use of multimedia and interactive features is examined further in the following section.

The sample of websites analysed in this investigation included a diverse range of cases and the evaluation of their design produced an interesting mix of practices. Nevertheless, divides emerge primarily *within*, as well as *across*, the two broad groups of youth and issue sites. Interestingly, this emerging pattern of design strengths and weaknesses mirrors that of content and purpose discussed earlier. That is to say, those youth sites that are marked by a strategic deficit in their content and purpose (such as youth parliaments, forums and some engagement projects) are also plagued by problems of design and accessibility; on the contrary, youth portals are much stronger in both counts. Issue sites are generally slicker and more sophisticated, but even within that group there is considerable variance. The more consumer-oriented sites (such as Fairtrade and Make Poverty History) invest more in making their case to non-committed or first time

visitors, whereas the more traditional campaigning sites (FoE, Greenpeace) appear less user-conscious.

The other major finding in terms of design was the tangential role given – almost universally – to the visual, aesthetic and symbolic elements of communication. This is exemplified by limited (and unimaginative) use of photos and an over-reliance on text-based content, which could indicate a limited understanding of how internet users access, consume and interact with online content. This was demonstrably true for most youth sites, but also evident amongst some of the issue sites.

6.6.1 Youth Websites

The content analysis of youth websites identified structural and navigational problems across all three of the design areas mentioned earlier. Youth parliaments and forums, in particular, lacked fundamental accessibility features, such as text-only versions or other tools for visually impaired and disabled users, which is the minimum that one would expect from projects run or funded by democratic institutions. None of the four youth parliament / forum websites featured any of the specific tools assessed at the time of the original coding, while many of the other sampled cases also failed to meet these criteria of accessibility (**Figure 31**).

FIGURE 31: ACCESSIBILITY FEATURES – COMPARATIVE
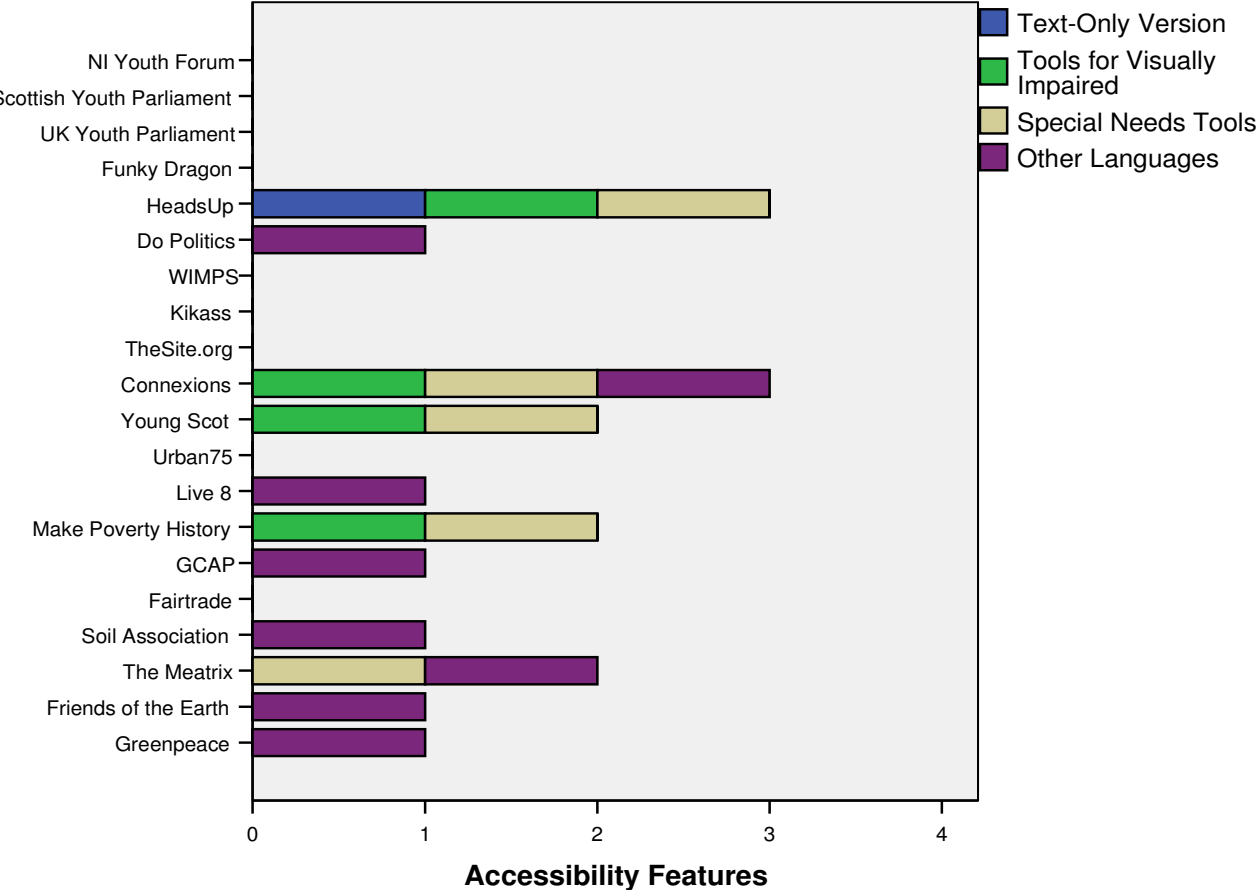
Furthermore, almost all youth websites had usability problems and design errors, such as truncated menu headings (UKYP), displaced text (NIYF), truncated polls (WIMPS), incoherent sorting of material (WIMPS), inconsistent font sizes and types (DoPolitics) and an abundance of typos (DoPolitics). A telling illustration of the design problems facing youth websites was the original DoPolitics homepage, which featured four usability links. Three out of those four links ("Access Key Enabled", "CSS", "XHTML") were followed and found not to be working. Moreover, we submitted the DoPolitics website itself to the fourth link, which was a usability evaluation service ("Bobby"), and it found that the Do Politics site had "defects".

In addition to these specific errors, there is evidence of a broader problem with the overall approach of these youth sites. Despite some isolated glimpses of innovation, their design was excessively text-based featuring long lists of links and uninterrupted blocks of text. A striking example of this problem is UKYP's left side menu, which consists of a long list of submenus the text of which is truncated (**Figure 32**).

FIGURE 32: UKYP – PART OF THE LEFT SIDE MENU
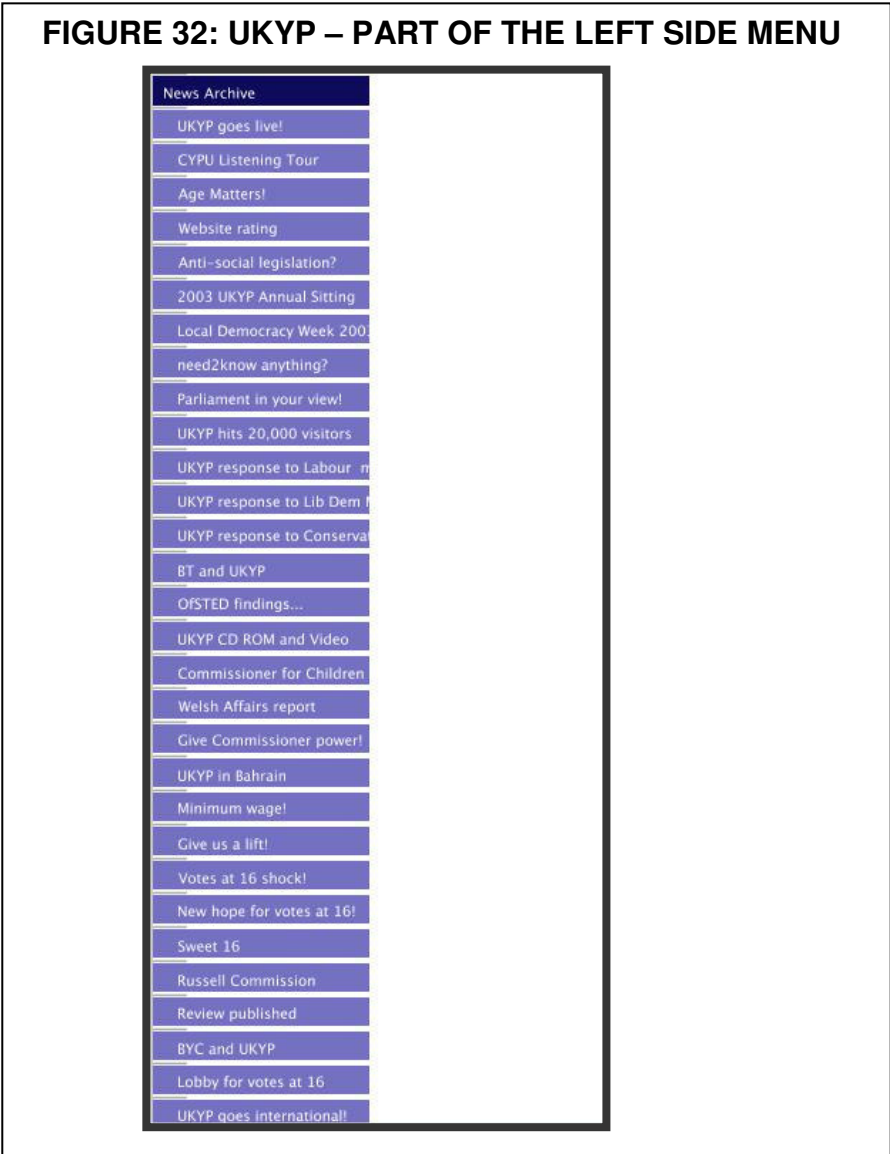
Four of these youth sites have now engaged in a process of redesigning. These include the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, the Scottish Youth Parliament, DoPolitics and WIMPS. However, problems of usability, visual appeal and design can still be identified,

such as distorted, pixelated and broken photo thumbnails on the new NIFY photo gallery. However, other youth sites (such as HeadsUp, UKYP, FunkyDragon) have not addressed various design issues and appear almost identical after three or four years, which in the world of web communication is a very long time. While these weaknesses could be due to a number of factors – limited resources in particular – they illustrate the challenge facing small civic organisations which have to compete for the attention of users against professionally designed corporate websites.

In direct contrast to the youth sites mentioned above, all three portals sampled for the purposes of this study scored highly in terms of design and navigation. Connexions-Direct is particularly strong in terms of accessibility, featuring a dedicated section on "Disability Content" with step-by-step guides and helplines (see **Figure 33**). The follow-up visits showed that none of the three portals had made any substantial changes to their design or site architecture since the original coding dates.

FIGURE 33: NAVIGATION FEATURES – COMPARATIVE
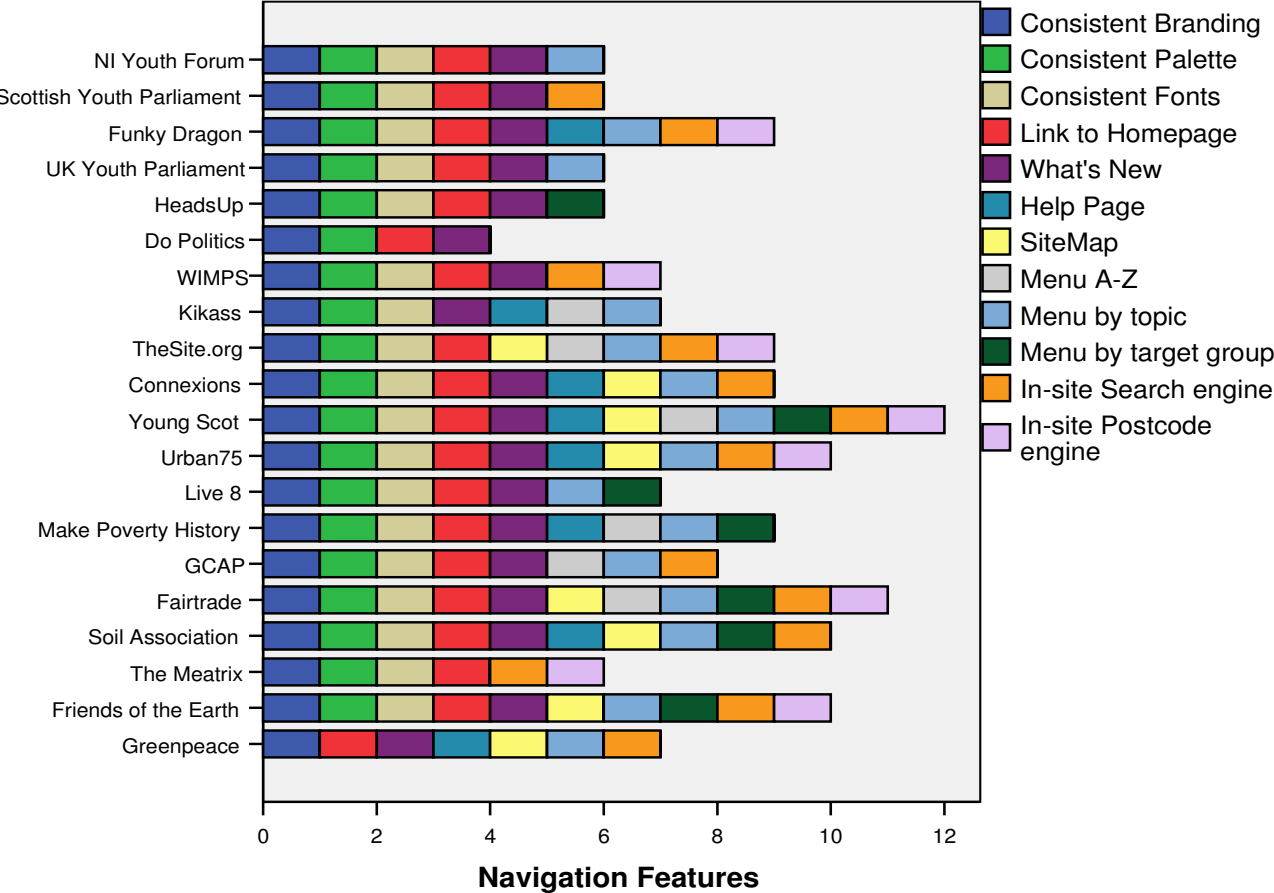
6.6.2 Issue Websites

The websites of NGOs and issue campaigns were considerably more accessible, professional and glossy than most of the youth sites, which could be attributed to a number of factors, such as resources, competition, mobilisation strategy and market awareness. They featured a wealth of information and applications, which poses a

different challenge, i.e. of sorting, presenting and promoting this material in a coherent way.

In spite of the increasingly fundamental role played by the internet in every aspect of these organisations' operations, very few of the cases examined achieved a truly distinct visual identity and user-friendly site architecture. Only two of the issue sites analysed (Fairtrade Foundation and Make Poverty History) combined style with substance in an accessible way. While both sites met most of the criteria assessed through the formal content analysis such as navigation tools and attention to users' needs (e.g. see **Figure 33**), we posit that the key to their accomplished design is that they refrained from overloading the pages, something demonstrably *not* avoided by the sites of Greenpeace, the Soil Association and Friends of the Earth.

Homepages cluttered with menus, links, features and sections is actually one of the commonest pitfalls in web design. Nielsen (2007a: 4) argues that websites should scale back their features and dramatically simplify the user experience for initial use: "after all, to progress to the deeper engagement levels, prospective customers must first successfully pass through the initial use phase". While producers are usually keen to promote the rich material of their websites, prioritising messages, being selective about which features are truly central and highlighting those in a visually bold way may be much more effective a strategy. This is the strategy followed by the Fairtrade website, which focuses on a select few examples of its work (background to specific fruits or real life stories of communities and people) and uses visual links that take the user directly to the detailed page rather than the generic category, which simplifies the user experience (Nielsen and Tahir 2001).

In contrast to that, the sites of Greenpeace, Soil Association and Friends of the Earth are more text-oriented, feature long lists of not adequately distinguishable menus, options and links (the Soil Association website featured six different menus on the homepage alone), while the role of style and visual material is peripheral to the site's architecture. There is limited use of photos, which are used as generic background filler, while the colour palettes are underscored. In brief, these sites lack a distinct visual identity that would not only make for a more enjoyable visit, but also for a more memorable one, potentially establishing an affective and symbolic relationship between the user and the organisation. As for the follow-up visits, whereas the designers of the Fairtrade improved an already strong website by changing the colour scheme and simplifying the menus, changes to the websites of Greenpeace, Soil Association and FoE were marginal and did not tackle issues such as page overloading.

Overall, the findings of this investigation concur with the notion that a site's design is not merely a means of communicating messages online, but an integral part of the organisation's actual, substantive message; or, to misparaphrase McLuhan in a rather deterministic fashion, the design is (part of) the message. Interestingly, however, what may have emerged from this discussion is an additional pattern which also potentially sees the design, and especially a comparison across time of whether and how the design has evolved, as a *mirror* of the site's broader philosophy, strengths and

weaknesses, purpose (or lack thereof) and reach (or lack thereof). That is not to argue that web content analysis can lead to inferences about the intentions of producers or eventual uses of site visitors. Yet, each page of a website is a *de facto* cultural artefact (Brügger 2009) that carries interesting insights about the state of the organisation at a given moment – i.e. it constructs a reality in, and of, itself. This theme is further explored in the following sections, which examine whether and how the sampled organisations utilize interactive, multimedia and innovative features.

6.7 Outsourcing Interactivity and Convergence

The issue of how civic organisations utilise the unique properties of new media, such as interactivity and convergence, is of particular interest as it can indicate whether we are witnessing the emergence of a more symmetrical, inclusive mode of civic communication or merely the reproduction of top-down, close-ended messages. Our analysis indicates a definite lack of user-to-user and user-to-site interactivity and a limited sense of online community across the sample with the exception of the three youth portals and Urban75.
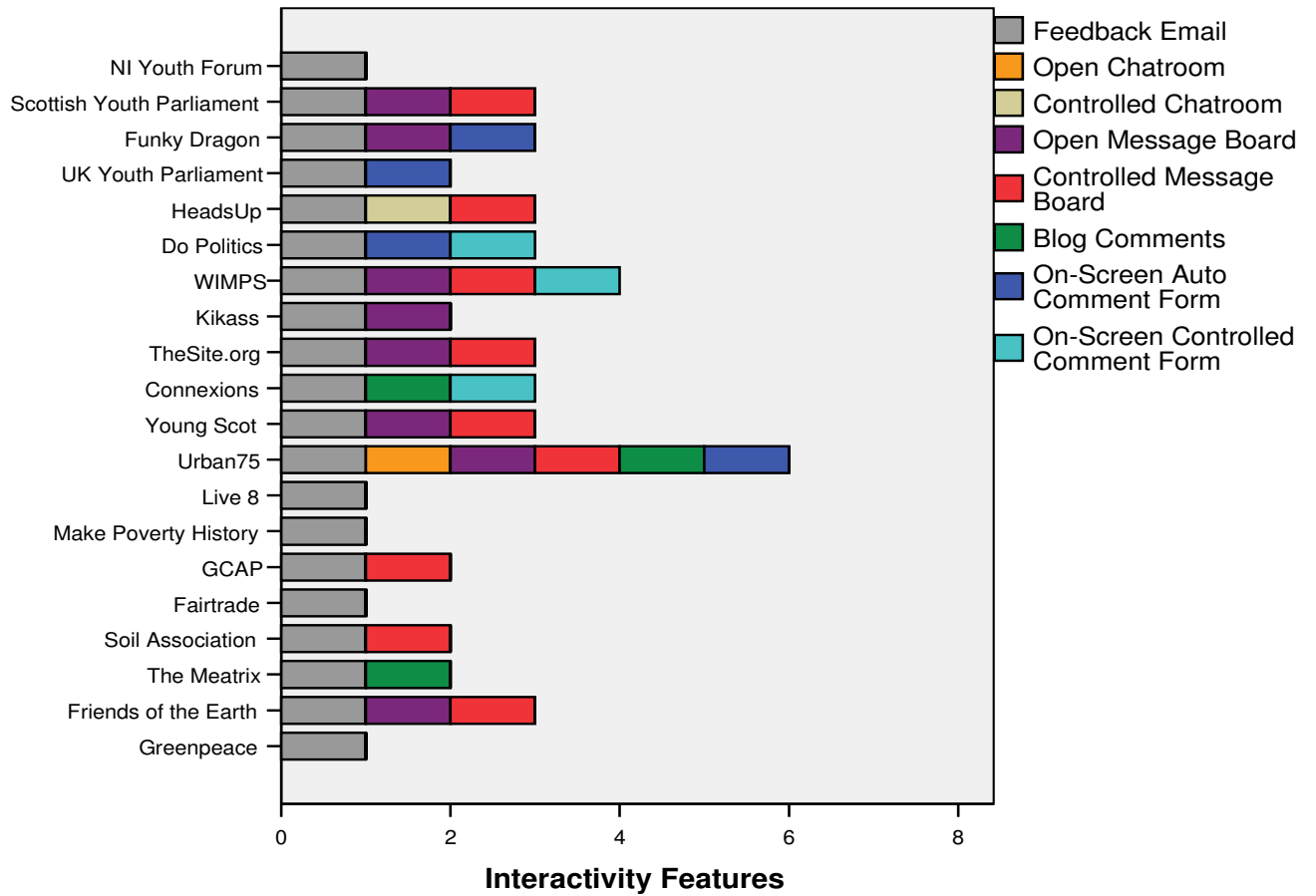
Perhaps surprisingly, this deficit of interactivity was particularly marked amongst issue websites, which were found to opt for a predominantly one-way mode of communication. It should be noted that this finding does not contradict the earlier point made about a more consumer-oriented user experience based around choice (of issues, products, participation tools or methods). Issue websites give users choice of content, but there is a limited capacity for feedback, user input, creative contributions and virtual debates amongst users. This may be linked to the different engagement modes that youth and issue organisations aim for: the analysis of their core aim showed that, apart from 'awareness' and 'involvement', which were universally applicable, youth sites are oriented towards consultation and deliberation (at least nominally, given the lack of actual interaction on some of these sites), whereas NGO websites promote activism or protest.

This finding is consistent with Ward's (2008) conclusion that civic organisations are opting for a strategic approach to online political communication (i.e. goal-oriented, persuasive and transactional), rather than a reflexive one (i.e. goal-modifying, responsive and coproductive). The content analysis during the first period (2005/06) showed that websites did not utilize many feedback/interaction features– an email address was universal and a discussion board of some kind was featured by half of the cases, but few websites went beyond the very basics (**Figure 34**). Similarly, while most organisations facilitated offline meetups and some limited user-to-website interaction, very few cases organised virtual meetups or gave site visitors the chance to become integrated contributors (**Figure 35**).

Given the recent emergence of Web 2.0, content sharing applications, user generated content and social networking sites (SNS), it was important to establish whether the twenty civic websites that made up our sample had shifted their online strategy to encourage interactivity as well as use of multimedia features, such as videos.

FIGURE 34: INTERACTIVITY FEATURES – COMPARATIVE

Interactivity Features

Legend: Feedback Email, Open Chatroom, Controlled Chatroom, Open Message Board, Controlled Message Board, Blog Comments, On-Screen Auto Comment Form, On-Screen Controlled Comment Form

FIGURE 35: COMMUNITY FEATURES – COMPARATIVE

Community Features

Legend: Set Up User Profile, Set Up Contributor Profile, Bios for Team / Contributors, Virtual Meetups, Offline Meetups, Contributors / Users Details
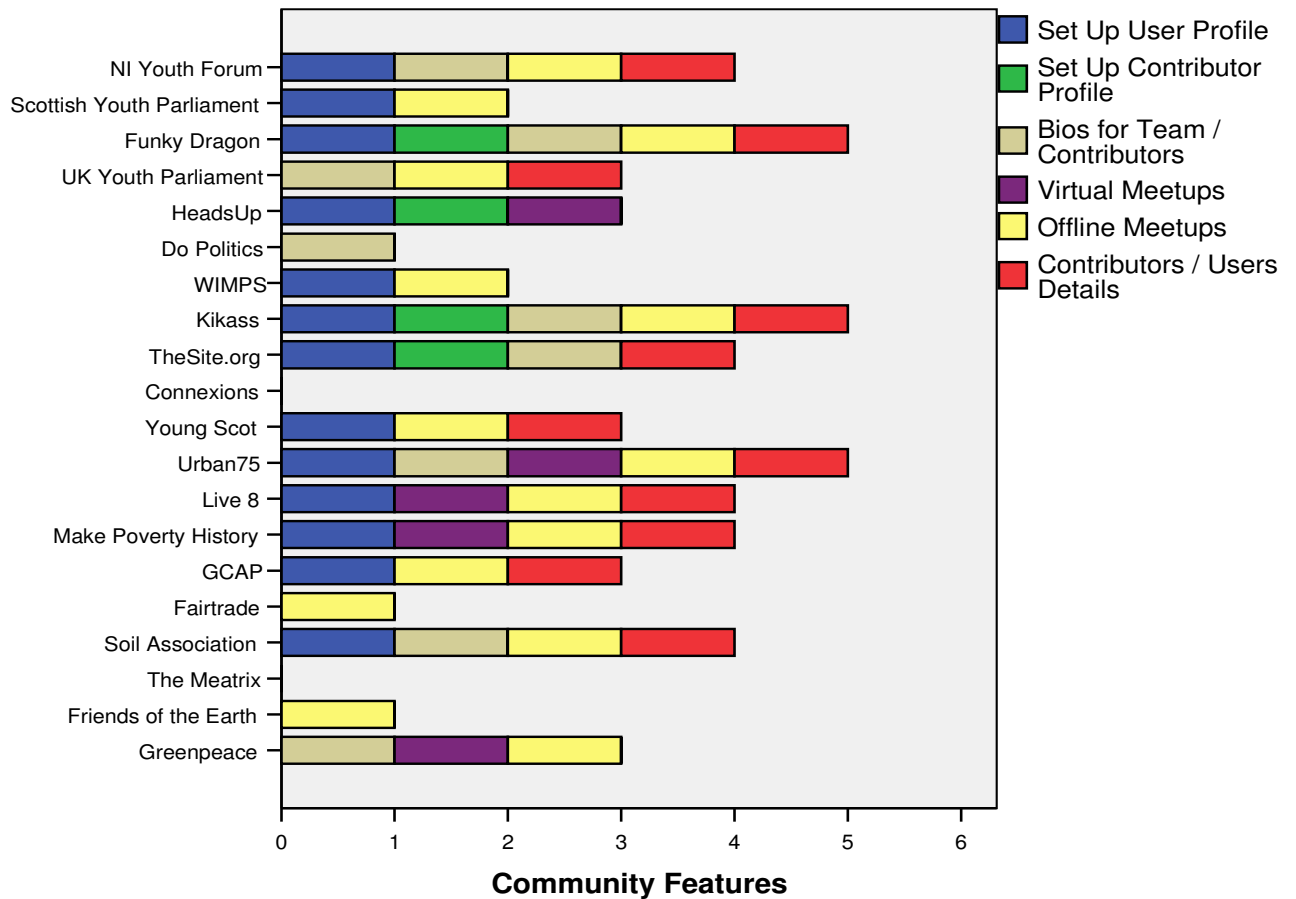
The follow-up visits (2008/2009) clearly indicated what we could call the *outsourcing* of interactivity and multimedia convergence, i.e. the use of external resources to cater for a website's needs in terms of user interaction and site promotion. This trend was evident amongst several of the websites sampled, which referred their users to social networking sites (such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace) and bookmarking / content-sharing tools (such as Digg and Delicious) or ebmedded their videos from external providers (such as YouTube) rather than building such applications in-house. Such cases include TheSite.org, the Scottish Youth Parliament, Funky Dragon, Young Scot, Greenpeace, the Soil Association and the Fairtrade Foundation, which had the most comprehensive page of such links.

In some of these cases it was quite obvious that the organisation was making an effort to catch up with the evolving trend (i.e. trying to be seen to embrace widely used applications or treating interactivity as a necessary evil), rather than taking an active part in leading that trend towards a more user-led internet. For example, the Greenpeace website includes a "blog", which featured prominently on the homepage and menu during the follow-up visit. Yet, this blog serves more as a "latest news" feed rather than as a truly interactive space, as commenting on the blog requires registration; it was noted that from the 10 blog items that were visible on the day of the visit, nine had no comments and only one post had received two user comments.

A couple of attempts amongst youth websites to develop in-house multimedia could be seen as moving in the right direction provided that end-users were to feel that the material provided is interesting. Yet, both showed weaknesses: the UK Youth Parliament's ukypTV, which broadcasts short videos made by young people themselves, featured dated clips of UKYP's Annual Sitting; the Young Scot Online Magazine provided visitors with virtual access to the full text of the magazine, but the flash technology used gives users almost no choice and control over the actual browsing of the magazine. These examples underline the dominant perception of the internet as a library of ready-to-consume material and the assumption on the part of many web producers that users will be interested in that material.

A notable exception to the general lack of real interaction and convergence outlined here was the Connexions-Direct portal, which provides site visitors with a rich menu of user-to-site interaction options, including an Adviser OnLine, which is an instantly available confidential online service (**Figure 36**). Another noteworthy feature of this portal is the "Talking Heads" section, which presents short videos of young people talking about specific youth issues and arguing for/against topical statements (**Figure 37**).

However, the general pattern established throughout the sample was one of reluctance on the part of civic organisations to embrace interactivity and to integrate different media. This approach may well be due to a lack of resources, such as budget and know-how, affecting the various stages of the process (usability, design, maintenance); or it may be due to a lack of will to shift to a different paradigm of communicative practice. In other words, organisations may *wish* to engage with ongoing developments but may be severely restrained by resource limitations; or they may not realise the potential benefits

of changing their mobilisation practices (or the dangers of not changing them!). Hence, our findings concur with Burt and Taylor's (2008: 1063) analysis that the reluctance of voluntary organisations to utilise the medium's capacity for democratic dialogue and deliberative interaction may be symptomatic of their preferred relationship with supporters and citizens.

This is an important question that should be addressed through future research, especially via interviews with site producers. If it is the case that resource limitations (rather than lack of will or lack of understanding) are containing civic organisations' ability to utilise the medium and catch up with recent practice, then that would further challenge the theoretical potential of the internet as an egalitarian, pluralistic medium. Therefore, rather than levelling the playing field for social movements and civic organisations, it may well be creating and widening divides.

Having said that, our investigation did identify some examples of innovative and consumer-friendly applications with empowering potential across several websites. Even taking into account resource limitations, a comparison of practice across the sector shows that factors such as user-aware mentality, prioritising and having a coherent communication strategy can go a long way in creating best practice.

FIGURE 36: CONNEXIONS-DIRECT CONTACT TOOLS
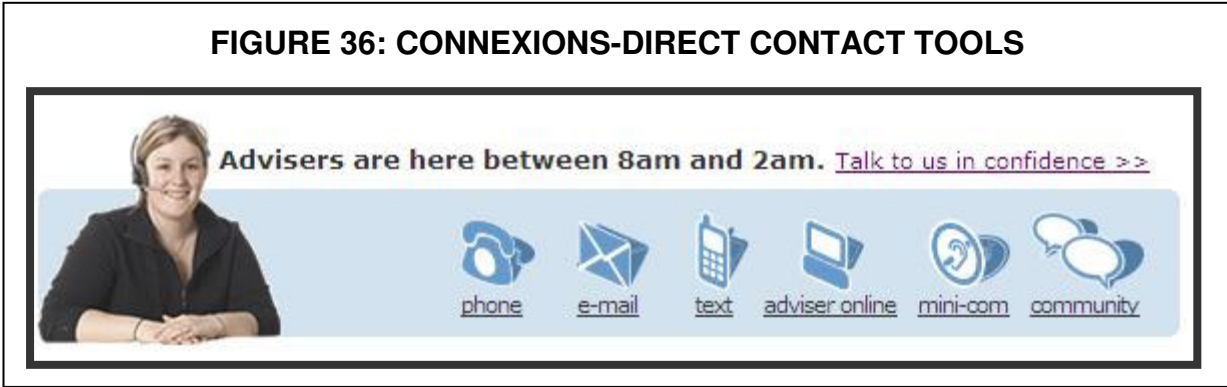
FIGURE 37: CONNEXIONS-DIRECT 'TALKING HEADS'
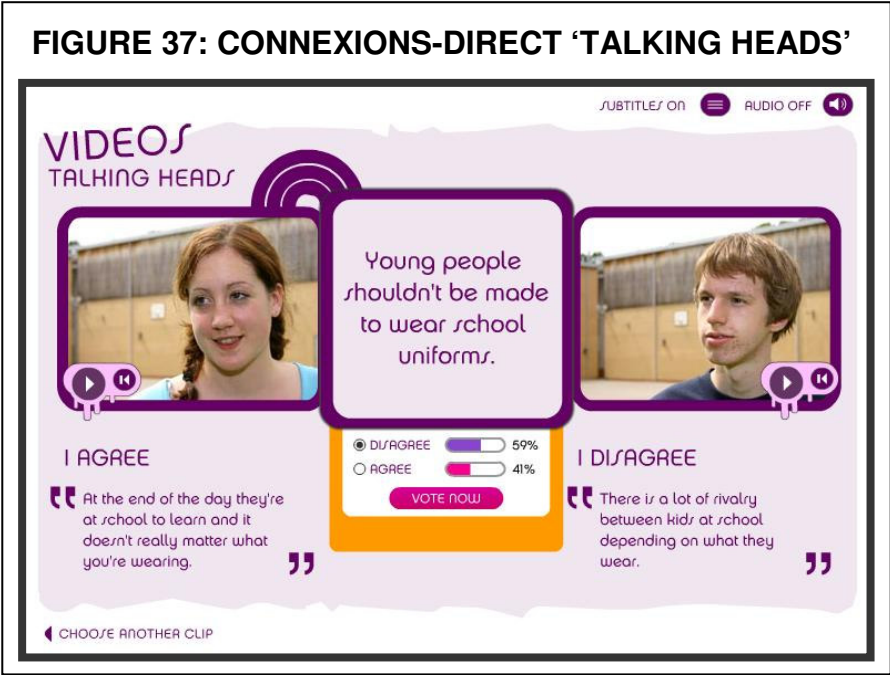
6.8 Underselling the Innovative Elements

So far in this chapter we have argued that, overall, the civic organisations sampled have not utilised the internet to its full potential. Many youth websites lack a clear mobilisation strategy, meaningful content and accessible design, while some issue-oriented civic organisations have not yet managed to find the balance between rich content, appealing site architecture and user-oriented activities. Still, despite these shortcomings, several instances of best practice and innovation were identified during both stages of the content analysis: the afore-mentioned "Match Me" tool of Make Poverty History (**Figure 24**); TheSite's "askTheSite" emergency email form, and Local Advice Finder facilities; the Scottish Youth Parliament's "Being Young is not a Crime" campaign; Funky Dragon's clickable map of local forums; the entire framework of disability support on the Connexions-Direct website (**Figure 38**) as well as its cxd-i section; the follow-up ("HeadsOn") section of the HeadsUp website; the Soil Association's Consumer Guide; and Fairtrade's growers' profiles are indicative examples.

FIGURE 38: CONNEXIONS-DIRECT DISABILITY SUPPORT
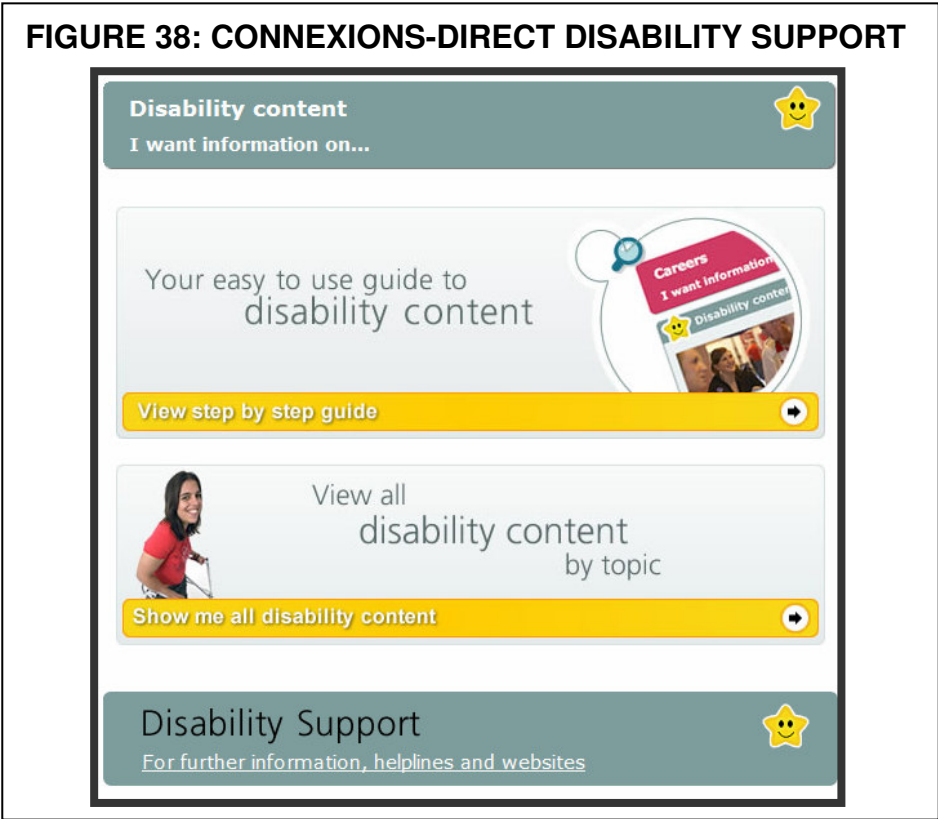
However, it was also found that most organisations, in fact, fail to adequately *promote* these existing innovative features on their homepage or core menus, preferring instead to place them deep into their sites. Yet, it is these visually bold, emotionally or symbolically engaging, interactive and lifeworld-relevant features that have the potential to draw and keep new visitors on to the site, and which should be showcased, rather than the conventional blocks of text or lists of menus. As Nielsen (2009b: 3) notes, "any feature that users can't see might as well not exist; invisible navigation is thus nearly as bad as no navigation. Uncovering navigation shouldn't be a major task".

One such case is the Greenpeace website, which features some potentially engaging and informative features aiming to appeal to the daily behaviour of citizens-consumers, such as the Garden Furniture Guide and The Chemical Home (**Figure 25**), the Clash of the Consoles and, in particular, the Efficiencity (**Figure 39**), which is one of the very few examples of multi-layer interface design in our sample (Shneiderman 2003). These are bold and well-designed visual guides on how our lifestyle affects the environment and contain practical tips on altering our energy or natural resource consumption patterns. Such guides and campaigns frame complex and abstract scientific or political issues in ways that can be easily processed and applied by the average user, drawing connections between major environmental problems and that individual's household. Yet, all of the aforementioned guides and materials are buried deeply into the site and are not visible on the homepage (they were found to be at least three clicks away from the homepage).

We argue that an alternative design strategy, focusing on, *and highlighting on the homepage or the core menu*, a select few features of the website only (e.g. the Efficiencity interactive map) might be far more effective and appealing. This interactive and visually sophisticated material might be more appealing to first-time or non-committed visitors and attract them to explore the website further. This would be different to the current strategy, which requires the visitor to navigate their way through two or three layers of text/menu-oriented pages until they reach the glossier material. This theme is revisited in Chapter 7, as our user evaluations confirmed the argument that these websites are underselling their most dynamic features. Furthermore, an alternative approach based around prioritisation and coherence could be tested with future usability research.

FIGURE 39: GREENPEACE 'EFFICIENCITY'

Before moving on to the user evaluations, it should be noted that what emerges from the content analysis irrespective of resource limitations or intentions, is a *de facto* pattern of organisations limiting their online presence to a mode of communicative/campaigning practice which is quite conservative in its scope and perhaps quite tied to traditional ways of sorting material and building supporter relations.

6.9 Preaching to the Converted (and to the Media)

A final question addressed through the content analysis was the extent to which these websites attempted to reach beyond the boundaries of their core base and try to attract non-activists. This is, after all, one of the main arguments in favour of the net's democratising potential; yet, this potential is only theoretical until an organisation deliberately and strategically decides to extend its reach.

It was mentioned earlier that some of the youth-oriented sites are shifting their focus towards target groups of users who are already civically active, such as youth workers. The content analysis suggests that issue-oriented sites are also more preoccupied with mobilising or informing citizens who already participate in public affairs, rather than going out of their way to engage with younger users, especially those who due to socio-economic or other reasons are less inclined to participate. This is evident from the broad lack of reference to youth issues in issue-oriented websites and concurs with the findings of a study of US NGOs and civic organisations by Xenos and Bennett (2007: 65), who found a "puzzling paucity of appeals made by major actors in electoral politics [including NGOs] to a substantial segment of those going online to seek political information". Our evidence also supports Ward's (2008) finding regarding Greenpeace UK's strategic decision to focus on its core supporters (in their 30s and 40s) rather than on potentially new (and younger) groups.

Furthermore, the actual content and tools featured on these sites also indicates that their strategies are still oriented towards fairly traditional and institutional modes of participation, such as lobbying, volunteering and petitions, rather than civic innovation and aesthetic or emotional engagement. This approach appears to be particularly salient in the case of organisations with an established campaigning brand, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. While these two websites were amongst the most comprehensive in terms of information regarding democratic institutions, processes and political issues, the architecture and visual design of the sites, as well as the discourse in which the material was presented, required a certain amount of prior knowledge, interest and determination in order to locate relevant material.

Nielsen (2008a) demonstrated that organisations targeting a broad audience should be very economical with the amount of words put on their webpages, as visitors (especially unfamiliar ones) only tend to scan pages and read a small proportion of the actual text. Therefore, while the issues discussed and the actions promoted in the sampled websites fit the model of the "citizen consumer", the communication strategy appears restricted to

motivated visitors who are prepared to navigate their way through the site until they find a relevant resource or participation tool.

A related issue is the role of user segmentation, which is particularly marked on the websites of FoE, Greenpeace and the Soil Association. In the microsites of the FoE campaigns the material is sorted not according to topic area or activities, but according to user groups: there are sections for campaigners, experts, general readers and the media. One interesting question is whether users' self-perception would match that of the site's designers (e.g. whether would-be campaigners might identify themselves as general readers). Another question is whether that segmentation of content might be having an adverse effect on the time spent on the website, i.e. it would be interesting to examine whether the act of distinguishing the average user from campaigners, experts and the media and labelling them as "general readers" might put them off progressing into that section.

FIGURE 40: MEDIA RELATIONS FEATURES – COMPARATIVE
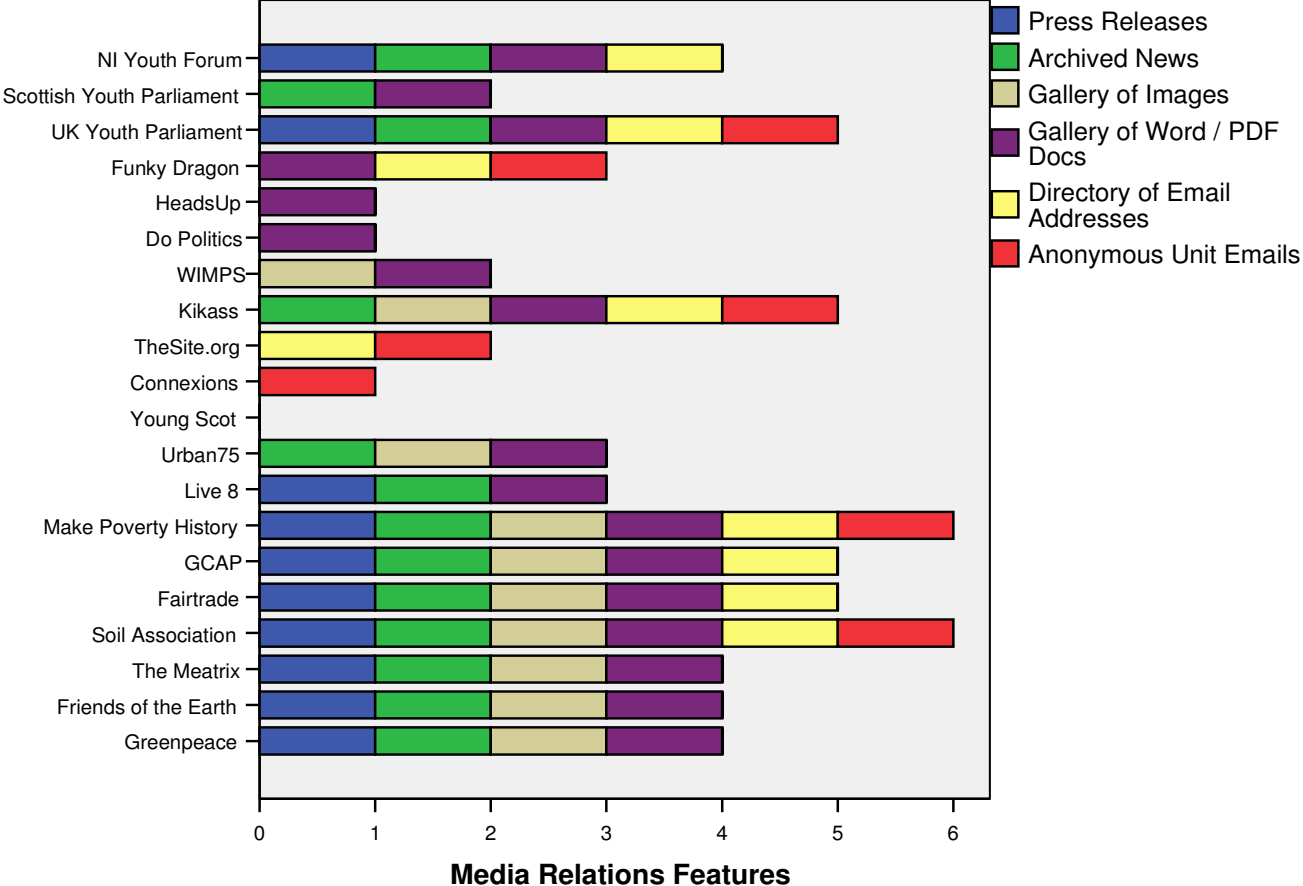
The other pattern that clearly emerged from the analysis of the NGO websites was the prominence given to media relations, one expression of which is the attention paid to galleries of press releases, promotional images and reports as well as the availability of contact details with press officers and key staff (**Figure 40**, **Figure 19**). It is striking that the press releases menu of FoE is given more priority on the homepage than the Get Involved section, while every campaign page has a dedicated media section with briefings, press releases and reports. One cannot overlook the paradox of NGOs using

new media (which are supposed to by-pass gatekeepers) in order to approach "old media", especially given that NGOs and activist groups have traditionally accused the media of misrepresenting their purpose and agendas to the general audience (Kenix 2007).

Similarly, in the case of the Make Poverty History campaign, we can conclude that the internet was used only partly as a tool of direct action (namely the Live 8 concerts and the various petitions); the primary focus of the sites was on the marketing and promotion of the cause and of the events. Gorringe and Rosie (2006) stress the importance of the media's support in the case of the MPH campaign. They argue that MPH adopted broad and uncontroversial aims, depoliticised the issue of poverty and made use of celebrity endorsements, all of which helped gain the sympathy of journalists, which was crucial in promoting the campaign and differentiating between MPH and "rogue anarchist elements".

These practices may indicate that new social movements and grassroots organisations still largely depend on the mass media of the national public spheres to push their messages so that they can appeal to a critical mass of supporters; and that they are using the web as a way of catering for journalists' needs – or as a follow up for citizens who initially access their message offline. This would concur with recent cases of online activist movements accumulating considerable online resources (donations, subscriptions, attention) only to divert them to the mass media (e.g. in both US presidential election campaigns of 2004 and 2008, grassroots campaigners for the Democratic Party, such as MoveOn.org mobilised their online donor base in order to pay for TV advertising airtime during the Super Bowl – see Wolf 2004).

6.10 Emerging Repertoires of Online Mobilisation and Lack of User Awareness

In this chapter we set out to examine the extent to which some of the UK's main youth and non-governmental organisations are making use of the web's potential so as to meet the emerging civic challenges. On the whole, and despite some instances of innovation and best practice, the websites analysed in this study do not appear to fully appreciate the fundamentally different nature of the internet to other mediums of communication and mobilisation; they often overlook the visual and emotional aspects of communication and do not avoid common pitfalls in terms of user awareness, information architecture and web design.

However, clear differences emerged amongst different groupings of cases. Institutionally-oriented youth sites (such as youth parliaments, forums and engagement projects) were found to lack participation incentives, meaningful tools, clear objectives and overall sense of purpose – a consistent picture to the one recently drawn by Ward (2008: 160) who argues that "youth organizations are aware of young people's shifting political selves, but struggle to match this understanding with their aims and goals". They were also plagued by usability problems such as inaccessible menus, broken links and elementary design.

Issue-oriented NGO websites are fundamentally different: they present a clear sense of purpose and a specific mobilisation agenda, are visibly slicker, more sophisticated and more comprehensive. However, variance was also observed within this grouping. On the one hand, websites such as Fairtrade and Make Poverty History were found to be more user-conscious, better designed and putting forward specific participation objectives and following these up with tangible outcomes, effectively combining style with substance in an accessible way. The Meatrix was an interesting case of a site building its message around a visually bold and culturally charged animation video. On the other hand, the websites of established environmental organisations, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, are richer in content but have not yet acquired a distinct visual identity and efficient site architecture.

A shift towards a consumerist paradigm of online civic participation was also evident to various extents amongst the NGO websites. This ranged from the encouragement of specific practices of consumption to linking political issues to everyday life to building web tools that are more market-oriented. Along with the preoccupation of NGOs with media relations, this trend is particularly interesting as it is further evidence of what Chadwick (2005) called "hybridization", i.e. the borrowing and adaptation of online mobilisation repertoires that have been typically associated with political organisations, interest groups and new social movements, but are now becoming part of a much more fluid and dynamic online civic culture.

Still, our analysis concurs with Xenos and Bennett's (2007: 52) observation that while digital media provide some promising means for the mobilisation of younger generations, "a number of important elements of this terrain must still be negotiated if that potential is to be fully realised". They found a "pattern of adaptation to the digital media environment that, while making important strides, appears to lag behind the efforts of other political [and, we would add, commercial] actors to capitalise on the network potentials of the Internet".

This line of findings concurs with earlier studies of online mobilisation (e.g. Pickerill 2001, Jackson 2003) which had concluded that the use of the internet by political and civic actors was, at the time, "unimaginative". It seems that little has changed since then, given also that the comparative analysis of our sample across time (2005/06 – 2008/09) did not produce evidence of significant shifts in online civic practice.

Recent studies on the production of youth and issue websites (Banaji 2008b, Ward 2008) are consistent with some of the emerging findings regarding the mobilisation approaches of youth web producers. They observed structured and strategic rather than creative and reflexive communication as well as a series of challenges facing these organisations, with funding being by far the greatest. Banaji argues that funding is

> "an absolute key to survival of websites and organisations in this section Its effects cannot be over-emphasised for they range from those on the set-up of teams who manage and update websites to those on the ideological and political stances that websites feel that they can be seen to take in the public domain" (2008b: 151).

While the issue of resources is a crucial one – and it really does challenge continuing utopian discourses about the revolutionary impact of every new web application – some of the changes needed in order to cater for younger users' needs are not always resource-intensive. What is required instead is an understanding of the highly volatile and instrumental nature of citizens' online *and* civic behaviour. Adapting to the medium's nature, which, for better or for worse, is user-led, may well require prioritising needs, key messages and visual cues and – possibly – sacrificing some breadth and depth of content for a more engaging and efficient web design.

Having established the main approaches to online mobilisation by youth and issue websites, the following chapter focuses on a sub-sample of the issue-oriented websites examined here and presents our participants' own responses to this material through an extensive user evaluation study. Gauging users' own assessments of available online civic material is crucial in establishing these sites' strengths and weaknesses, and essentially realising the extent to which these organisations are able to address young people's online civic needs. The four websites chosen for that part of the study (Fairtrade, Friends of the Earth, Soil Association and The Meatrix) represent comparable but slightly different approaches to online mobilisation, as they differ both in their visual design and in the articulation of their agendas.

Chapter 7

Listening to Young Citizens
User Evaluations of NGO Websites and Implications for Civic Usability

> Participant #2.11-BS: I think if people really can actually make a difference, like with voting… if you can vote on a website I'd probably be more inclined to actually go and think that I'm actually making a difference rather than just read and yet you're thinking "ok…" – you know what I mean? So, I suppose it's like… *interacting* with the… website.
>
> Participant #2.10-AB: Yeah I'd like to know *how*… how… how it's gonna make a difference, what I do… as well, that would be important. Sometimes you can just think "well… it's just me on my own, what difference am I gonna make?"

Chapter 7 Overview: Themes v. Data

Objective 4: *to analyse users' own evaluations of sampled civic websites and, through that, compare and contrast participants' civic motivators and de-motivators to the online civic text.*

Data: *study 3 – user experience study*

Overview of user evaluations
Overall attitudes towards sites (quantitative data)
Key strengths and weaknesses across content, design, interactivity (combination)
Comparative analysis of content, design and interactivity (quantitative data)

⇓

Comparison of users' expectations to actual evaluations
(qualitative data and focus group discussions)

⇓

User evaluations of different mobilisation approaches
⇒ use of fear and shock tactics
⇒ rationale for action
⇒ mobilisation tools and applications
⇒ role of personalisation
⇒ examples of best practice and wish list of features
(written evaluations and group discussions)

⇓

User evaluations of information architecture and design
⇒ role of homepage
⇒ amount of information
⇒ role of visual elements
(written evaluations and group discussions)

⇓

The relationship between the user and the site:
⇒ attitudes towards different forms of interactivity (qualitative data)
⇒ likelihood of following up and key factors in retaining users (combination)
⇒ key factors attracting users (group discussions)

⇒ Chapter conclusions: praising substance of messages, criticising the way these are currently put across

This chapter presents and analyses the findings of the last section of the empirical study, i.e. the user evaluations of issue websites. In Chapters 4 and 5, we established our participants' online civic attitudes. It was argued that these young people are willing to engage with public affairs via the internet as long as a series of terms and conditions are met that would demonstrate the relevance and importance of civic issues, as well as the utility of their civic action. These broad patterns were translated into specific "rules of engagement" with civic websites, covering many aspects of mobilisation strategy, content and design. In Chapter 6, a range of civic websites were evaluated using both features analysis and a more in-depth examination of their usability, mobilisation approach and appearance. Considerable variance of practices was identified both amongst and within genres of sites. Overall, however, it was shown that the UK's online civil society may not be making the most of the internet's potential for interactive political communication and issue mobilisation.

Given the medium's nature and the particular thesis' remit, no such analysis can be complete without integrating the users' perspective on the existing material. Surprisingly, given the flourishing of the usability industry, with the exception of Coleman, Lieber, Mandelson and Kurpius's (2008) US study, there are no known, published, scholarly accounts of users' assessments of civic websites to date, and certainly no empirical studies of young people's evaluations of UK civic sites. In this chapter we explore the participants' own experiences with four of the sites analysed in the previous chapter. This part of the discussion draws on the third main study, i.e. the in-depth user evaluations (n=46, March 2006) that took the form of individual written reviews (using structured and open-ended questions) and post-visit group discussions. These data allow us to apply the participants' afore-mentioned preferences, needs and expectations onto specific, real-life examples of civic NGO websites.

The chapter starts with a short, comparative overview of the four sites' evaluations by the participants. These "naked eye" observations provide us with an initial understanding of the sites' perceived strengths and weaknesses, as well as the comparative importance of content and design factors. That overview is followed by an in-depth discussion of the key motivating and enabling factors that users themselves put forward, as well as the challenges that these online civic attitudes pose for producers of such websites. Rather than presenting the findings on a case-by-case or criterion-by-criterion basis, we have chosen to extract patterns of online civic engagement that may transcend these four specific sites. That is to say, while our analysis did produce extensive user feedback on the sites' functional issues (and these are outlined throughout the chapter and detailed in the appendices), the timeframe and remit of the study lead us to focus on key aspects of civic usability emerging from this material, such as personalisation, emotional engagement, convenience, interactivity and the challenges of "getting there" and "going back".

We posit that these patterns – these "terms and conditions" which reoccurred again and again throughout the thesis – constitute a coherent mode of a consumerist (as in market-oriented, rather than socio-consciously consumerist) approach to online civic engagement that is subject to caveats on the part of the user/citizen/consumer. By no

means do we claim that the paradigm outlined in this chapter is exhaustive or exclusive, and there were instances of disagreement even within our fairly homogeneous, purposive sample. However, the implications of this emerging paradigm are significant and are examined both in this and in the final chapter of the thesis.

7.1 A Comparative Overview of Users' Evaluations of the Four Issue Websites

One of the main reasons for selecting the four websites under user evaluation was that they represent four somewhat different approaches to online civic mobilisation. The website of the Fairtrade Foundation is a consumer-oriented, visually bold site that makes extensive use of images. By focusing on products and suppliers it aims to showcase the benefits of choosing Fairtrade. The Soil Association is a more information-heavy site that promotes organic food and farming and aims to cater for producers, consumers and the media through tips, guidelines, events and listings. The Friends of the Earth site is more typical of environmental NGOs in that it promotes more traditionally political modes of mobilisation, such as lobbying MPs, with only a recently emerging consumer aspect. Given the site's size (which extends into thousands of pages) and the organisation's wide agenda, participants were asked to only visit and evaluate the Climate Change campaign microsite, so as to aid comparison with the other three single-issue sites. Finally, The Meatrix is a smaller but much bolder and more visually-oriented international site. Its focal point is the introductory animation clip, which subverts a very popular cultural text (The Matrix) to raise awareness about intensive farming techniques, food quality and animal welfare. While users in the four sessions were split into three subgroups and assigned to evaluate one of the first three websites, due to the particular features of The Meatrix it was deemed useful that all users evaluate that website afterwards so as to have a common basis for comparison.

Our data clearly indicate that the overwhelming majority of participants enjoyed browsing all four sites and would consider revisiting them (**Table 10**). Fairtrade, Friends of the Earth and The Meatrix were praised by a considerably high number of participants (9 out of 10 or more), while feedback for the Soil Association's site was more mixed, but still positive overall. This is reflected on the adjectives used by the participants in their written responses, which were almost universally positive for Fairtrade and Friends of the Earth, mostly positive for The Meatrix and mixed for the Soil Association (Appendix R).

TABLE 10: OVERALL ATTITUDES TOWARDS SITES			
	Participants	**Enjoyed Browsing**	**Would Revisit**
Fairtrade	Subgroup A (n=18)	88.9%	83.3%
Soil Association	Subgroup B (n=14)	71.4%	71.4%
Friends of the Earth	Subgroup C (n=14)	100.0%	85.7%
The Meatrix	All (n=46)	97.8%	87%

The fact that in the group discussions that followed the evaluations respondents recalled quite specific details from their site visits (such as citing the names of Fairtrade producers) as well as the richness of the write-in responses indicate that these young users engaged with the sites in a substantial way. The user evaluations were also highly consistent with the content analysis presented in Chapter 6, to the extent of highlighting identical details, features and errors.

A comparative snapshot of the user evaluations (**Table 11**) shows that none of the websites managed to receive consistently positive evaluations across every one of the major areas examined, e.g. some sites were praised for their content while being criticised for their appearance and vice versa.

TABLE 11: OVERVIEW OF QUALITATIVE USER EVALUATIONS						
	Content		**Design**		**Interactivity**	**Overall**
	Informative	Engaging	Appearance	Architecture		
Fairtrade	+	+	+	o	-	+
Soil Association	o	o	-	o	-	o
Friends of the Earth	+	+	o	+	o	+
The Meatrix	o	+	+	-	-	o
+ consistently positive evaluations **o** mixed evaluations **-** consistently negative evaluations						

Furthermore, there was considerable variance across the four sites in terms of specific key strengths and weaknesses as highlighted by the participants (Appendix R). That is to say, the single best and worst features were quite unique to each site:
▪ Fairtrade was praised for the appeal of the featured information and its use of photos; and criticised for its navigation menus.
▪ The Soil Association was praised for the currency of its stories and criticised for the overload of textual content and cluttering of pages.
▪ The Friends of the Earth website was praised for the accessibility and relevance of its information; it was criticised for its bland look and lack of visual identity.
▪ Finally, The Meatrix was praised for its ability to convey ideas in an engaging way, but severely criticised for its inaccessible information architecture (IA).

It is interesting that all four top strengths rotate around the concept of relevance of the featured information to young people's everyday life, whereas all four key weaknesses relate to site design. In a study of students' (academic) website evaluations, Mitra, Willyard, Platt and Parsons (2005) found that the relevance or fit of the information on the site was the most important criterion for young users' evaluations of research websites. It would be reasonable to attribute this to the goal-oriented nature of student research browsing and to expect that other factors may be more salient when it comes to different genres of sites. However, as it has been argued elsewhere this approach to online material is directly linked to young people's civic attitudes.

Importantly, the limitations and shortcomings identified did not stop users from enjoying visiting the sites and engaging with their content. That was true for all sites, including that of the Soil Association, to the extent that participants reported "getting excited" (#1.08-NR) while others engaged in unprompted, substantive interaction with site content, such as registering for newsletters during the evaluation visit (#3.36-TR).

What we can infer from this overview is that users took into account a wide range of features and factors, but none of these appears to be a sole determinant of their evaluation – and certainly not the website's appearance (or look), which is considered as instrumental in keeping visitors to the site in the crucial first few moments of the visit. Before developing this thought any further, we should note that the study took place in a lab setting, which means that the participants may have been more patient and tolerant with the sites than in their everyday life. In a real life situation, users might have been put off by, say, cluttered homepages or weakly structured menus and, therefore, might have not even reached the point of understanding what the site is about. Or, given their patterns of internet use and perceptions of civic organisations, these users might not have even gone to these websites in the first place. These are very important considerations and are examined in depth later on, as the study of user experience needs to capture the entire "natural history" of a site visit from getting there to going back.

However, the fact that these young people fully engaged with these sites and found the information in them relevant and appealing – even after a perhaps more considered and reflective visit than usual – is an important finding in itself as it shows that the positive and usable elements of existing sites can actually engage young citizens. This is consistent with the findings of the Coleman, Lieber, Mandelson and Kurpius (2008) who found that users' perceptions of a website's content and appearance were significantly higher for websites designed with maximum usability. Subsequently, their experimental websites, which were designed to conform to users' wants and needs in content and appearance, had a significantly greater effect in fostering positive attitudes towards civic engagement than the control ones.

Coleman et al. (2008) also found that story content mattered even more than site appearance. This is particularly significant and promising given that site "packaging" is considered a resource-intensive make-or-break factor in an environment of virtually infinite user choice and freedom of constant exit. Given that their study also took place in a structured lab setting, the role of "first impressions" should not be underestimated, especially in engaging first-time or sceptical users. A comparison of the users' response to The Meatrix and the Friends of the Earth site illustrates the difference between two different types of gratifications and potential uses. Virtually all users enjoyed visiting and browsing both of these sites. It was clear from all four group discussions that The Meatrix's animation clip was the one feature that they most enjoyed accessing throughout the sessions and sites. Many considered the clip to be highly informative and emotive. Furthermore, that website's bold colours and catchy palette made it a point of contrast with the sites of FoE and the Soil Association. Also, The Meatrix's clip was the

only feature that (without being prompted, and across different group sessions) many participants stated they would share with a friend.

However, a closer reading of the data shows that, with the exception of – and in spite of – its shortcomings in terms of appearance and limited use of colours/photos, the FoE site received considerably higher rankings in the evaluations of content and navigation (**Table 12**). Moreover, the open-ended responses and discussions indicate that those who evaluated both FoE and The Meatrix thought that, ultimately, the former was more informative and empowering than the latter. That is to say, user responses regarding The Meatrix tended to be more superficial and recall less of the substantive issues and arguments related to the issue, whereas evaluations of FoE regularly made reference to specific aspects or tools of the campaign, such as The Big Ask campaign to lobby MPs. In a way, the two sites complemented each other in that they each had something essential that the other was missing. Interestingly, when asked to state what changes they would make to the FoE site (before being asked to evaluate The Meatrix), respondents gave descriptions that show a remarkable resemblance to the latter:

> "Maybe some form of video link or computer generated movie link, just make it a bit more appealing to younger people. Very good site, but lacks 'life' a little." [#4.46-TM]

> "Make it a bit more 'high tec'. Multiple images which change, flash up on screen etc. Highlight the key features e.g. the MP stuff - too much white / lines." [#4.44-NH]

TABLE 12: COMPARISON OF POSITIVE STRUCTURED EVALUATIONS					
		Fairtrade	**Soil Association**	**Friends of the Earth**	**The Meatrix**
CONTENT	Information (Interesting)	83.3%	78.6%	92.9%	87%
	Information (Good Quality)	77.8%	78.6%	92.9%	80.4%
	Information (Right Amount)	72.2%	50%	92.9%	76.1%
DESIGN	Accessibility (Fully Accessible)	94.4%	42.9%	78.6%	52.2%
	Easiness of Navigation (Good)	66.7%	50%	85.7%	43.5%
	Overall look (Very Appealing)	83.3%	35.7%	28.6%	69.6%
INTERACT-IVITY	Sense of Community (Max)	50%	14.3%	21.4%	32.6%
	Interactive Spaces (Max)	22.2%	35.7%	42.9%	39.1%
	Organisational Transparency (Max)	27.8%	28.6%	23.9%	26.1%
These numbers indicate the percentage of participants giving the highest evaluation in each category. Shaded cells highlight scores below 50%.					

Finally, Coleman et al (2008) found that perceptions of navigation did not differ amongst experimental and control websites and, therefore, did not have a significant effect on

civic engagement. The authors attribute this to the fact that "the usability component of navigation has been mastered more quickly by real-world web designers, than the components of content and appearance" (2008: 194). Our data would partly support this argument in that every single reason given by respondents for *not* wishing to return to these sites was content- and more specifically information-related. However, basic navigation and information architecture issues, such as locating pages, unusable submenus and excess presence of links dominated their suggestions for changes to the sites; feelings of frustration about such matters were rife during the group discussions, so the importance of navigation should not be disregarded.

Therefore, our working argument – to be refined further as the chapter progresses – is that in the case of civic engagement websites, the elements that we loosely group under the content category (such as relevance of information and efficacy of civic tools) are more important in shaping users' eventual evaluations; yet, design factors, and in particular the utilisation of images and the moderation of the amount of text, are crucial in establishing the interaction between the user and the site in the first place. While our recurring distinction amongst content, design and interactivity is somewhat schematic and not without its problems (see Chapters 3 and 5), our participants' own evaluations and narratives validated this as a salient distinction (e.g. **Table 12**).

Having established in broad terms the participants' overall evaluations of the sampled sites, we now take a step-by-step approach in deconstructing the "natural history" of their user experience.

7.2 Challenging Perceptions: A Comparison of Users' Expectations to their Actual Evaluations

As was mentioned in Chapter 5 (5.5), before being assigned a website to evaluate, participants were asked to reflect on their civic motivations and de-motivations and apply those upon specific features that they would expect to find on a civic issue website. The purpose of that section of the study was to explore the features that young people would ideally like to find on a site, rather than predict what currently exists. Having completed their first site visit (i.e. Fairtrade, Soil Association or Friends of the Earth), users were asked to compare their actual impressions to their initial expectations of the specific site. It was assumed that, having been given the opportunity to reflect on what motivates them to engage via the internet, and to make a "wish list" of features, participants would have an additional set of benchmarks by which to evaluate the sites, apart from the obvious and direct assessments emerging from their live experience.

Two crucial findings immediately emerge from these data: several of the young people taking part in our study had very negative perceptions of charities and civic NGOs to start with; importantly, however, these negative expectations were challenged by the actual site visits, which in many cases pleasantly surprised them. This was true for all three sites but particularly true for Fairtrade and Friends of the Earth. Two-thirds of participants made favourable comparisons between initial expectations and post-visit impressions

(**Table 13**), with half of those stating that they were either (pleasantly) surprised or that the site exceeded their expectations:

> "I think the site exceeded my expectations – there was more on it that I'd expected. I didn't expect the site to be as colourful as it was which made it more visually interesting." [#3.28-KS on Fairtrade]

> "The site met them and exceeded them as I found it was not forcing you to make a decision. It had an informal feel to a key issue in the news." [#4.38-BP on the Soil Association]

> "Yes - I was actually surprised at how informative it was. It had all the right content, the layout was a bit boring." [#4.44-NH on Friends of the Earth]

Subsequently, one could almost sense a feeling of relief emanating both through the written responses and the group discussions:

> #1.01-AW: I thought it was a really good website, perhaps a bit better than I expected it to be, because I didn't know that Fairtrade was such a big organization
> #1.04-JP: I agree with [#1.01-AW]. I thought it would be a lot more negative. I thought it would be a quite pushy website but I really liked it.

TABLE 13: COMPARING ACTUAL IMPRESSIONS TO EXPECTATIONS					
	POSITIVE COMPARISON			NEGATIVE COMPARISON	
	Better than exp	As good as exp	Mixed	As bad as exp	Worse than exp
Fairtrade (n=18)	8	3	4		
Soil Association (n=14)	3	3	2	1	2
FoE (n=14)	3	10	1		
Deduced from the qualitative written responses, if such comparisons were explicitly made by the respondents					

Youth perceptions of civic NGOs are significant and worth probing further for a number of reasons. Firstly, charities and NGOs are supposed to be major agents of emerging and alternative forms of youth civic engagement, such as volunteering and donating, which, according to many scholars, are replacing more traditional forms of political participation such as voting and joining political parties (e.g. Henn, Weinstein and Wring 2002, Bell 2005). Therefore, a pattern of negative attitudes by young people towards such NGOs could compromise the thesis that such engagement is flourishing and/or socially conscious. Furthermore, the narratives emerging from our data can further illuminate youth feelings towards civic engagement altogether (i.e. what is it that they find de-motivating about these organisations? And what does this tell us about their attitudes towards participation?). Finally, given the "pull" nature of the medium and the emerging mode of political communication, the reputation of individual organisations, as well as of the civil society as a whole, is crucial in attracting users to their websites.

It is therefore significant that several participants expected civic websites to be "pushy", "patronising", "negative", "depressing", "inaccessible" and "boring". These recurring

adjectives indicate a consistent perception of issue organisations as using aggressive tactics, transmitting depressing messages, putting unrealistic demands on citizens and featuring inaccessible discourse that is directed at experts [interestingly, these same allegations are usually directed against politicians]. Furthermore, a link was established between such negative perceptions and being forced to donate:

> "Surprisingly met most of [my expectations]. I was expecting to be "pushed" to give money or join a club, but they are more trying to raise awareness." [#2.16-KK on Friends of the Earth]

> "Definitely better looking than charity websites tend be, with the focus on information rather than sob stories and donation boxes" [#1.02-CB on Fairtrade].

As online donations constitute a resource of fundamental importance for NGOs, and given some young people's ambivalence towards this form of engagement, organisations need to find the balance between making online donation tools/pages visible enough while avoiding to put users off. Nielsen (2009a) found that, despite the obvious and vital importance of donations for NGOs and non-profit groups, many users are turned off by bad information architecture (such as not being able to locate the donations page), while many others are dissuaded from donating because of unclear, confusing or missing information. It is an interesting paradox that a few of our participants considered not being able to immediately find the donations page as a *positive* feature of the websites visited, as that absence led them to think that the organisation is not pushing visitors to donate money:

> "I didn't think it was pushy at all, because I couldn't actually find the donations bit for a while. And then when I did it was like "you can but you don't have to". If you donate less than 20 pounds then do it by this and I like that. They were not expecting me to like …donate loads" [#1.02-CB on Fairtrade].

While it is obvious that online donation pages should still be highly visible and easily accessible, such responses highlight the importance of handling the issue of fundraising with great care and, in particular, of using a positive discourse of encouragement, rather than one of forceful persuasion. Furthermore, young people welcome alternative ways of participating:

> "Didn't expect data about every product that is supplied and so many ways of how you can help other than giving money." [#4.43-MK on Fairtrade]

Another major factor shaping their negative perceptions of issue movements is the use of aggressive mobilisation tactics on the part of charities, although their definition of such tactics was often so extensive that it reached a blanket rejection of issue-oriented political communication per se: "a lot of things to do like with strong issues, like um… I don't know to do with like…fox-hunting and stuff like that… people get so extreme about it that it makes you sort of wanna stay out of it" [#3.24-KC]. Even The Meatrix was thought by some to have "an activist approach to it" (#4.39-CS), which they considered incompatible with maintaining a credible brand.

Perceptions of the trade justice movement as "pushy" seem to have been taken into account in the case of the Make Poverty History campaign. Gorringe and Rosie (2006)

note that the organisers of the Live 8 demonstrations made an active effort to avoid being considered overtly political, although:

> "paring away difficult questions risks trivialising the issues… Swathes of 'protestors' echoed 'pants to poverty' in an unthinking critique of issues demanding a more considered and *active* response. Devoid of nuanced analysis the moral crusade attacks a 'bad thing'; a unifying concept brushing uncomfortable questions under the carpet" (2006: 11.6).

If the views expressed by our sample are shared by the broader demographic that they are a part of, civic organisations are facing a huge challenge in changing these perceptions and mobilising younger citizens. This is not just a matter of branding exercises, but of understanding how civic engagement may be changing – not just for political organisations at the centre of government, but for those of the broader civil society, too. A shift towards a more media-savvy, professional-looking mode of civic communication poses a conundrum for social movements and NGOs, which need to demonstrate the urgency and importance of their affairs without resorting to "pushy" tactics but also without watering down their agenda for social change.

The role of websites in challenging and changing such preconceptions is important and our study does suggest that the views that many participants held about consumer-oriented civic charities became more favourable following the evaluation of their websites. This is consistent with the finding of Flanagin and Metzger (2007) that site attributes such as site design can overpower external factors such as branding. However, the interaction of individual users with civic websites should be considered within its particular social and cultural context. A subtle difference was observed between the individual written evaluations, which tended to be more explicitly favourable towards the sites, and the follow-up group discussions, which highlighted more reservations and barriers. That subtle but definite gap between individual and group responses in our case may throw some light on the role of group dynamics in the formation of public (and particularly youth) perceptions of civic organisations.

One interpretation of the observed difference could be that participants' initial, write-in evaluations accurately captured their impressions of the sites, including their own positive and often enthusiastic feelings towards that material, whereas the discussions that followed gave prominence to more reserved and socially conventional expressions of civic attitudes. [An alternative interpretation would be that the group discussions allowed the participants to engage in a freer reflection on the sites as agents in the context of a social reality, as opposed to a decontextual live evaluation of their specific features, which is more prone to temporary enthusiasm].

In either case, further research is needed in order to establish whether young people's perceptions of civic engagement institutional agents not only inform their *expectations* of websites, but are as salient as to also predetermine their actual user *experience* to the extent that it becomes all but impossible to challenge these notions. Furthermore, the context within which youth attitudes towards such civic structures are formed also needs to be considered, as it may be the case that the lack of opportunities (or social context, Couldry 2006) for the development of positive attitudes towards collective engagement

may moderate or normalise individual users' experiences of civic websites. While only an isolated incident within the sessions, it is interesting to note that one of the participants who made frequent use of the word "pushy" to describe her pre-visit perceptions of Fairtrade (#1.04-JP), reverted from using past tense in the written evaluations and at the beginning of the group discussion:

> "I *thought it would be a lot more patronising, i.e. more pushy*, but *it was not* and I felt encouraged to read on. It had a more positive feel rather than negative, which I did not expect",

to using present tense after a while:

> "I mean the way *I see it, I see it as very pushy*. Not all the time obviously I think it's a good cause and everything. But I think that sometimes *the way I see it they can be really pushy*. "You've got to do it". I think they need to generally remarket themselves to appeal…" [our emphasis].

This might indicate that, despite the unexpectedly positive user experience, her actual perceptions of that particular organisation (and, perhaps, of other similar institutions) had not shifted substantially. The afore-mentioned perceptions certainly highlight, and are directly linked to, the role of emotions in shaping young people's attitudes towards specific agents and modes of engagement. As it will be shown in the next section, affect can be a crucial motivator (and de-motivator) of mobilization.

7.3 "Me, On My Own": Fear, Hope, Efficacy and Civic Loneliness

One of the main threads emerging through all stages of our primary data has been young people's need to establish an emotional connection with civic issues, organisations and means of participation. Our participants' extensive references to emotive content and personalisation as a means of establishing an affective bond, which then acts as a cognitive trigger for civic action, renders the traditional distinction between rational (cognitive) and emotional (affective) stimuli deeply problematic.

A number of studies have explored the difference between cognitive or utilitarian motives, which stress a user's information processing activities, and affective or value-expressive ones, which stress the individual's feelings (e.g. San José-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Cillán and Gutiérrez-Arranz 2007). However, the severe limitations of this distinction become evident when researchers attempt to operationalise it in terms of informative, textual (and supposedly emotion-free) content versus emotive, graphic (and supposedly escapist) design. In fact, a text-only website can still produce emotions (such as boredom and apathy), while a visually rich or animated page can still have an educative or informative effect on top of the emotive one, as was, for example, the case with The Meatrix clip, which many participants found genuinely informative.

While many users praised and called for more emotive content, there was considerable disagreement over the use of shock tactics, fear and graphic pictures, which means that using guilt to engage young people may be a risky strategy that can alienate as much as mobilise. Fairtrade was praised for avoiding "sob stories" and a few of the participants

thought that The Meatrix (which only used computer-generated imagery) was too strong or even "too shocking". These responses would seem to concur with the widespread aversion to being "pushed" or emotionally blackmailed, which was mentioned earlier. Yet, many other participants criticised the sampled websites for not being affective or emotive enough and stated that they "didn't feel really pushed to get active now" (#2.16-KK). Indicative examples include:

- proposing that the Soil Association use "shock tactics – elaborate more on what GM food can do to the body" (#3.19-BW).
- suggesting that Friends of the Earth should use images of disasters such as "icecaps melting": "pictures are sometimes more powerful. You see a picture maybe like a disaster or something like that caused by climate change but there wasn't…that's what I was expecting" (#1.06-LR).
- suggesting that The Meatrix should feature pictures of dead animals (#1.09-JS).

The variance of views amongst participants regarding the use of aggressive campaigning techniques, such as graphic photos and fear, could be *tentatively* linked to gender, as such messages were predominantly (though by no means exclusively) favoured by male participants. This would be consistent with broader differences in the ways men and women choose to engage politically. Despite the received, albeit very debatable, wisdom of gender differences in civic engagement (women are traditionally considered to be less interested in politics than men), Brooks (2009) reviews recent research showing that younger females are more inclined than males "to favour social movement-related activities and less likely to be attracted to more radical and confrontational forms of political engagement".

Alternatively, this divide could be linked to how different individuals react to guilt-oriented messages. There is rich scholarship on the role of guilt as a mobilisation motivator: guilt indicates the capacity to feel or anticipate the suffering and distress of others and subsequently attribute responsibility to the self for that suffering (see Lindsey, Yun and Hill 2007). The traditional model of negative state relief (Baumann, Cialdini and Kenrick 1981, Lindsey, Yun and Hill 2007) argues that people will seek to reduce the unpleasant emotional effects of guilt by performing an action that is likely to increase positive affect. Yet, in the online context of almost absolute freedom of choice (e.g. the user can mentally "switch off", leave and never visit a website again), using guilt is a risky strategy that can alienate certain users, while perhaps motivating others.

Our participants' aversion to "pushy" messages could also be interpreted as a blame-avoidance strategy, i.e. as an inability to assume the fractional share of responsibility that falls upon each individual citizen, or as aversion to commitment and civic duty – i.e. as evidence of a consumerist stance to civic engagement in which the individual chooses if, when and how they will engage:

"It wasn't too pushy that you need to change your entire life to make a difference." [#4.39-CS]

"They weren't, it doesn't seem like that they were forcing you, you could just read it and then get about it if you wanted to, it didn't really say that 'you've got to do this or you will die!'"[#3.35-TM]

However, a closer reading of these narratives reveals that the main factor for this attitude is not so much the need to avoid blame, as the anxiety to find positive, suitable and effective ways of helping; in other words, these young people are not so much afraid of taking responsibility, as being keen to produce a useful outcome:

"[The Fairtrade website] didn't make you feel like it was your responsibility- like it was your fault but that you could take some responsibility in helping" [#4.39-CS].

Positive messages of hope and encouragement then become crucial motivators of civic action. Over and over again in the written evaluations and group discussions, practical advice and specific information on how the individual can help (albeit in individualistic rather than collective ways) are contrasted to apocalyptic messages of fear and disaster. In fact, participants themselves often made that direct link between hope and efficacy:

#1.04-JP: I liked the [Fairtrade] case studies as well. They are a lot more positive and encouraging the user to read more about it, not just to think "no I'd better get to my mind I'm gonna die"…

"[Friends of the Earth] did meet expectations as I would expect that rather than just scaring users with the outcomes of climate change, it gives practical and useful advice. [I expected but didn't observe] something that stops me thinking that it's too late, there's nothing I can do, so I won't do anything" [#3.22-HM]

Previous studies in public health campaigns and risk communication have shown that unless accompanied by a strong sense of efficacy, the use of fear through scare or shock tactics can have a "boomerang effect" or unintended consequences, as it can lead the public to denial about the threat to their lives (e.g. Kleinot and Rogers 1982; Cho 2003). Similarly, researchers have warned that alarmist messages about climate change can not only lead to denial and inaction, but also provoke scientific controversies that ultimately dilute the message (e.g. Moser and Dilling 2007). Campaigners are, thus, faced with the challenge of having to draw public attention to a problem or issue and highlight the emanating threats or negative consequences without making the public feel helpless and civically paralysed.

We argue that this sense of helplessness emerging in our participants' civic narratives may well be linked to the afore-mentioned broken cycle of political socialisation and the perceived lack of subjective norms around civic participation. In practice, this means that younger generations may not be equipped with the belief or trust in collective forms of engagement – they do not see the relevance of collective action, nor do they refer to it at all in their own narratives – but they also do not feel motivated or socially driven by the behaviour of others. What emerges, therefore, is a feeling of civic loneliness:

"Yeah I'd like to know how… how… how it's gonna make a difference, what I do… as well, that would be important. Sometimes you can just think 'well… it's just me on my own, what difference am I gonna make?'" [#2.10-AB].

There is some tension between the evidence presented here and the view of youth as materially-minded self-oriented consumers (e.g. Rahn and Transue 1998). Individualism is definitely present, and even dominant, in their civic attitudes, but it largely appears to be a natural response to an individualistic civic culture that does not provide young people with the necessary social context for the development of trust in broader social and civic structures.

This shift towards the need for reassurance regarding the benefits of individual action can be very challenging for governmental and non-governmental organisations trying to change people's everyday behaviour in order to, for example, combat global phenomena that constitute real threats, such as climate change. As Etkin and Ho (2007: 623) note, it is "not a rational decision for most individuals to take actions to reduce risk from climate change in the absence of collective action, yet collective action is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. The benefits of risk reduction also fall primarily upon future generations, while uncertainties mean that differences in perspective, and problems of poor communication, misinformation and unstated assumptions tend to cloud the social discourse".

It is in (re)building that link between the individual and the collective or global that the use of affective and emotional means of engagement can be particularly crucial. In that sense, the internet is a uniquely appropriate channel for personalised and affective political communication. This association between individualism and efficacy appears to be a crucial element of civic usability and is examined further in the following sections.

7.4 "Solutions for Real People": Social Change through Civic Individualism

The role of efficacy as a key civic motivator was highlighted earlier in the thesis, following the analysis of young people's own perspectives on civic engagement. This theme also dominates users' evaluations of issue websites: being provided with accessible tools that help the individual user/citizen/consumer make a tangible difference *on their own* – what one participant called "giving the consumer the chance to do something for themselves" (#1.01-AW) – is the most important empowering and motivating factor. Users demand an emphasis on what the individual can do, not in relation to others but in their own lifeworld. The reverse is also true: the importance of an issue ought to be demonstrated not with reference to its impact on society at large, but to the individual person:

> "Like the page I'm looking at now, which is about what you need to know about factory farms and how it affects you doesn't *ever* actually say how it affects you! It says, you know for, like, the antibiotics thing it's quite dangerous to humans but they just mention that it will raise healthcare costs… and if you didn't care… you just wouldn't keep reading, would you…" (#1.02-CB on The Meatrix).

In this particular case, not caring about high healthcare costs could be due to either a selfish disregard for the broader community, or – more likely – to a lack of a cognitive and affective link between higher healthcare costs (abstract macro-political concept) and e.g. higher taxation or lower quality healthcare (tangible micro-political effect). If this lack of interest in the broader social impact of specific issues were found to be broadly shared, it would support the notion that young people today are facing a lack of political

socialisation in that they do not see the interdependence of their individual lifeworld with the broader society.

Furthermore, our data suggest that this individualistic approach to civic engagement is not necessarily driven by utilitarian or selfish motives, but by a genuine conviction that the individual domain is the only visible one and, subsequently, that individual action is the only possible option. "Making a difference", "feeling you can do something" and being given "practical advice" were almost universally cited as crucial elements of experiencing civic websites and there was a widespread and genuine need for efficacious online tools.

It was noted in Chapter 4 that our findings support Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior in highlighting the role (or, in this case the lack of) subjective norms or expectations of the immediate social environment as civic motivators. Yet, there is another dimension of that theory which directly maps onto our data, i.e. young people's perceived lack of control over public affairs and their subsequent scepticism about their own power to change anything (low efficacy).

In light of this evidence, it could be argued that what appears as apathy and disengagement on the part of younger generations is actually a fundamental scepticism about the effectiveness and relevance of collective forms of participation. In the tens of thousands of words of the users' written evaluations and group discussion transcripts, there was only *one* clear reference to collective engagement – a lone voice going beyond the individualist mode of participation:

> "Although gives good advice on what we can do as individual, it needs to include more collective ways so people feel 'part' of something positive." [#4.44-NH on The Meatrix]

This argument is further supported by a clear divide that many participants drew between political actions and non-political actions that individual consumers can engage in. Online tools facilitating political activities such as lobbying MPs were praised, as was FoE's role as a watchdog of government's progress in relation to its promises. However, this sphere of activities was largely perceived as remote from young people's realities. In contrast, applications that support small, everyday individual action were considered more relevant and effective.

The mobilisation approach adopted by Friends of the Earth was criticised by several users who otherwise liked the site. The way in which the following participant articulated that distinction is both revealing and typical of the broader narrative:

> "Because they place a lot of focus on […] whether we think the government is doing enough for climate change, and that's quite a key issue… and they've got a lot of press releases […] which link the climate issue with what the government is doing. I think there was a key focus on the homepage on the political side of it, rather than…- that's what *I* was looking for, the solutions that *real people* – what *real people* can do and there was a lot on the political side of it." [#3.22-HM]

This view is consistent to responses from participants in other group sessions (e.g. #1.06-LR "it says like about how the government wants to attack and cut CO2 emissions

by 2010 but it doesn't say *how* like they're gonna do that, it doesn't say 'you can do this'"). The implication is clear: the role and capacity of the government to tackle this issue is questioned, as is the relevance and efficacy of collective action. Representative politics is perceived as almost irrelevant to "real people's" lives.

The distinction between political and consumer action reflected a broader distinction between large-scale "changing the world" action and small steps that individuals can take in their daily routine. This was expressed through scepticism – verging on pessimism – about citizens' ability to bring about social change:

> "Also, they were very much you know like... bringing down conglomerates and bringing down- changing the world... but they weren't- they didn't have any sections about on turning lights off when you leave your house, you know [extended laughs by group] there was no... there was *no* - it was very much like taking action *for the whole of the world!*" [#4.37-AM on FoE]

Therefore, the perceived problem with large-scale collective action is that it transcends the individual's lifeworld and is, thus, automatically considered unrealistic. Hence citizens opt for small-scale practical solutions, "really simple practical things that you can do to contribute, not like unrealistic things that put people off" (#3.22-HM). This civic attitude is associated with two dominant needs: convenience and personalisation. As we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, these were deeply embedded into both users' civic narratives and into their internet uses.

7.5 Personalisation, Convenience and the Consumerist Approach to Participation

It is not surprising to find that ease of use was one of the most important factors in the user evaluations of the sites' architecture and navigation. However, convenience also appears to be a factor determining their *civic* behaviour. That is to say, users expressed clear preference for interfaces and applications that allowed them to complete actions in a minimal amount of time and effort and appeared averse to resource-intensive modes of participation or what we could call "deep engagement":

> "I liked it had this bit about um... writing to your local MP- it had a link where you could type in your postcode and then find out who your local MP is, because I think a lot of us think 'if I didn't have the name of my local MP I wouldn't do anything'..." [#4.44-NH on Friends of the Earth]

They are, therefore, unwilling to engage in activities that require them to, as it were, go out of their way; they prefer to opt for actions that are not "too taxing" (#1.05-JW). They expect facilities and tools to be supplied to them and are only prepared to invest finite amounts of energy, provided that they can discern the benefits of those actions. This is a fundamentally consumerist approach to civic participation, not in the sense of preferring to engage through material consumption, but in that of perceiving of the self as a consumer who *chooses* when, how and even whether to engage; and in a perception of the means of participation as products that ought to be marketed within an environment of myriad other private or non-civic activities and choices.

Yet, this stance towards participation is not limited to traditionally political forms of participation, such as writing to MPs or taking part in political rallies, but seems to extend to individualistic and consumer-oriented civic actions that require a certain amount of effort on the part of the citizen. One such action encouraged by The Meatrix is for consumers to put pressure on restaurants and supermarkets by handing out cards that promote sustainable farming and local produce (**Figure 41**). This was deemed to be laughably unrealistic by our participants:

> "The things they were saying like print cards and hand them out in restaurants and stuff, and I'm like "who's gonna", like, - *I* wouldn't! But then they're like "*excellent*, you can print out the card and hand it to the manager of the restaurant" saying like "where did your meat come from?!" [group laughs]." [#4.44-NH]

FIGURE 41: THE MEATRIX – TEMPLATE CARD
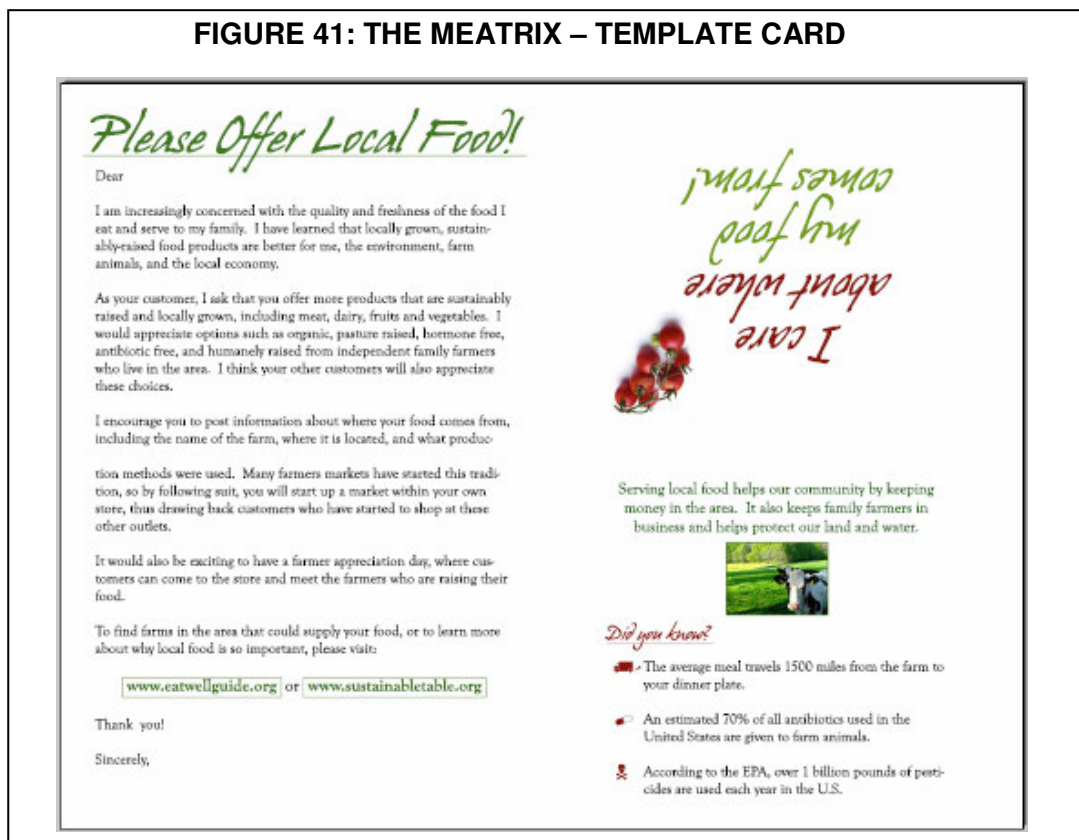
The fact that several users picked up this suggestion, and it being only one item on the page with the list of possible actions that the consumer can take, shows that they may have been actively looking for practical suggestions on how to make a difference and critically distanced themselves from what they saw as an unfeasibly demanding – and also, possibly, socially unconventional – action. The issue of going to one's local restaurant raised the problem of scale with one participant commenting that "on the scale of things, [The Meatrix] is trying to achieve quite a lot…" [#4.39-CS].

This brings us to the second major need expressed by our sample – personalisation – which has implications both for civic and for online practice. Framing a public affair or social issue with reference to specific cases, communities or "real people" helps individuals develop an affective relationship with it. The best example of personalisation

in the sampled sites was the profiles of product farmers and growers featuring on the Fairtrade Website (**Figure 42**), which were praised by almost all users:

> "It allows you to read how Fairtrade is helping real people and making their lives better, i.e. Carlos, orange farmer." [#1.04-JP]

> "It was like this family, the farmer and all that and it makes you realise that it's – they're *real lives*". [#3.32-NS]

> "It kind of makes you kind of want to find out more – it's more of a *personal touch* to the website." [#2.11-BS]

FIGURE 42: FAIRTRADE GROWERS' PROFILES
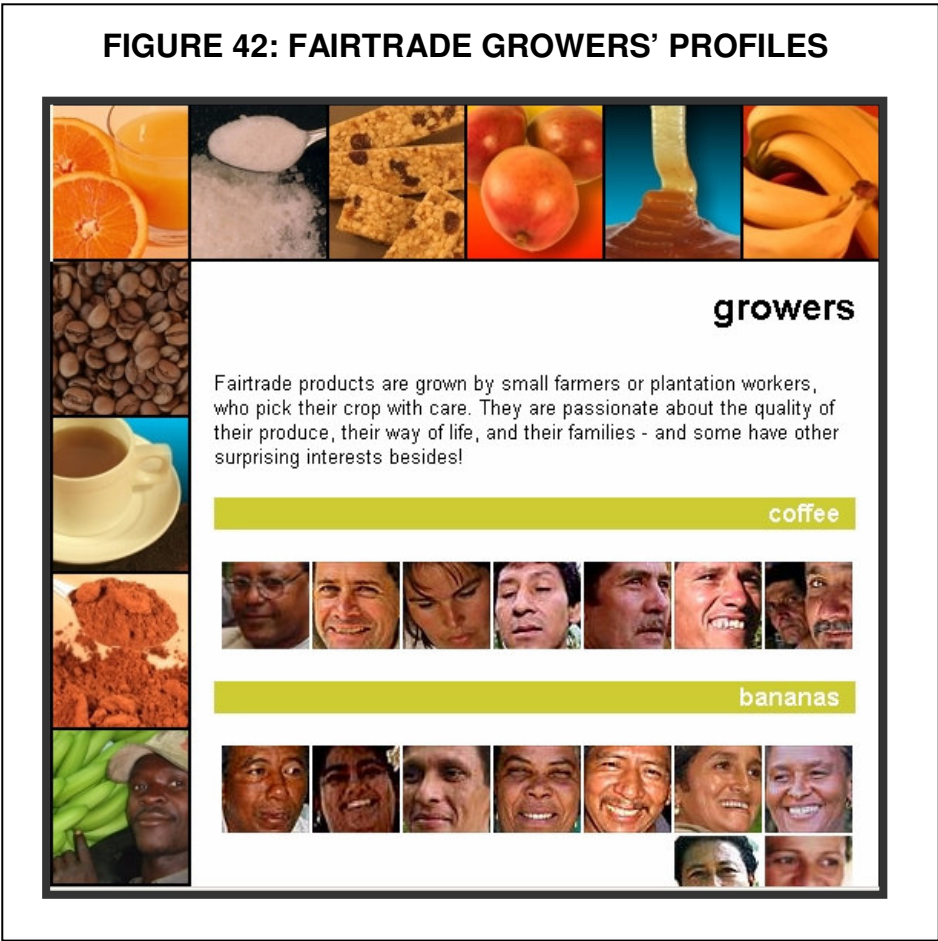
Apart from connecting emotionally with the site's mission, case studies help users see the tangible benefits of the organisation's work. Webb (2007: 5.8) takes this point further and argues that Fairtrade labelling builds the symbolism of a critique of commodity chain relationships between growers, retailers and consumers into the materialism of a pack of coffee, "with the 'fair trade' product imputing a connection between the lives of low-income farmers and those of affluent consumers" (also see Raynolds 2002). Once again, this was related to the problem of scale by the respondents themselves, who thought that the case studies personalised the issue "so that the focus on an issue is not so *overwhelmingly big*…" [#3.30-LC].

The themes of convenience and personalisation are ingrained in the users' preferred site features and applications. As part of the evaluations, participants were given the opportunity to nominate their favourite site elements and those features that pleasantly surprised them (**Table 14**), as well as others that they would have liked to find – a wish list of sorts (**Table 15**). These responses are very useful in gaining a more applied understanding of young people's preferred means of online mobilisation. Users' favourite features and wish list rotate primarily around material consumption (e.g. recipes, menus, restaurant guides, listings of retailers and local producers) and secondarily towards micro-social action (e.g. tips for individual consumers). In addition to the afore-mentioned case studies of product farmers, Fairtrade was praised for showcasing its products individually and visually.

TABLE 14: SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE AS IDENTIFIED BY THE USERS		
Site	*Feature or Application*	*Motivating Factor*
Fairtrade	Case studies and profiles of producers	personalisation
	Images of products	visual engagement
	Recipes	everyday life / consumption
	Listings of retailers	convenience / consumption
Soil Association	10 Reasons to Choose Organic	specific benefits / accessibly succinct
	Listings of local producers	convenience / consumption
	Celebrity supporters	personalisation
	Information on Bird Flu	everyday life / relevance
Friends of the Earth	Vote feature	interactivity
	The Big Ask / "Find your MP"	convenience / tangible action
	E-petitions	convenience / tangible action
	"Did you know?"	accessibly succinct
The Meatrix	Animated clip	visual engagement / accessibly succinct
	Postcode search engine for local farms	convenience / consumption

Furthermore, the embedded role of major supermarkets, such as Tesco, ASDA and Sainsbury's, in these young people's daily lives becomes clear. Realising that Fairtrade-labelled products are available in major supermarkets created a feeling of reassurance amongst participants in that the product or civic action was within the individual's reach and lifeworld. Users pinpointed The Meatrix's postcode search engine of sustainable food producers (albeit only covering the US) and the Soil Association's listings of local farms as particularly empowering features. Some users went as far as to ask for photos of Fairtrade products on the shelf or of their packaging, so as to make in-store product recognition even easier. It is very important to note that these repeated references to supermarkets ought not to be interpreted merely as an apolitical materialist approach.

Major retailers emerge as crucial spaces that act as mediators between individual consumers and civically-oriented consumer brands:

> "they're actually telling you to do it in, like, Tesco's and Sainsbury's and things; so you can actually make a difference - it's not just a general site." [#2.11-BS on Fairtrade]

TABLE 15: 'WISH LIST' OF FEATURES PROPOSED BY THE USERS		
Site	*Feature or Application*	*Motivating Factor*
Fairtrade	Detailed info on product availability	convenience / consumption
	Photos of product packaging / on the shelf	convenience / consumption / visual
	Self-assessment questionnaire	personalisation
Soil Association	Insight into farmers' life	personalisation
	Online Menu	convenience / consumption
	Restaurant Guide	convenience / consumption
	Real time chat tool for contacting SA	interactivity
	E-petitions	convenience / tangible action
Friends of the Earth	Campaign-related photos / videos	visual / affective engagement
	Tips on reducing CO2 emissions	tangible action / accessibly succinct
	Actions that individual consumers can take	everyday life / tangible action
The Meatrix	Expand individual country pages	relevance
	Examples of animal cruelty	affective engagement

This brings us to the final point about the consumerist nature of these young people's online civic behaviour. A careful reading of the group discussion transcripts reveals a consistent cognitive link between consumption and participation / power. When responding to questions about empowerment, participation or engagement, which did not contain references to consumption in any form, participants often translated getting involved as buying or consuming, e.g.: "I think it had loads of interesting stuff on there and stuff that you could do yourself, like where to buy things so you can get involved." [#1.01-AW on Fairtrade]. One participant thought that The Meatrix was more empowering than the Friends of the Earth site because:

> "when it said "don't *buy*… sort of… factory meat" sort of… and it said, like, "*buy* organic food" or "*buy* food from family farms" or "*buy* food from local butchers" or "*buy* local" …and it's just little things like that, little things like that even [that can help]" [#2.13-DB – our emphasis].

This response embodies the emphasis given by young people both on micro-level action ("little things") and on the civic potential of purchasing action (as opposed to FoE's more political agenda). Clearly, the context and scope of the sites evaluated should be taken into account. That is to say, as noted in Chapter 6, consumption in one form or another is becoming a core element of what these civic organisations are offering. Yet, it is important and interesting to find that end-users, in our case young citizens, are *themselves* focusing on the consumerist elements of these sites, as opposed to other more collective, political or active forms of engagement.

Having examined content-related factors that affect users' civic experience of a site, we now consider some of the key structural issues that emerged from the user evaluations. These are directly linked to the afore-mentioned needs for convenience and personalisation and can be instrumental in shaping a site's civic usability.

7.6 Less is More: a Succinct Site Narrative as a Solution to Information Overload

It was noted earlier that while the information featured on the four sites was generally rated favourably, several problems were identified in the area of design, such as homepages cluttered with menus and sites overloaded with textual information. Despite the exceptions, it appears that the civic organisations sampled generally failed to communicate their message in a simple and usable enough way. It is striking that even though our participants often expressed their preference for bold colours and appealing palettes/visuals, simplicity, use of clear space and succinctness were deemed to be even more important.

By far the most crucial factor in users' evaluations, along with relevance of information, was ease of use. Our findings concur with previous studies (Mitra, Willyard, Platt and Parsons 2005; Burton and Chadwick 2000) highlighting the role of ease, convenience and accessibility – of content, as much as of design – as the key factors in students' evaluations of websites. The importance placed by users on ease of use cannot be overemphasised and becomes clear through the extensive qualitative evidence across sites and sessions, which would require a chapter on its own to present (see magenta-coded passages in transcripts Appendix J). A very basic content analysis of all the words used in the written evaluations (**Table 16**) shows that "easy/ease" comes second with 50 references. This is obviously a very schematic rendering of the data and it would be dangerous to draw extensive inferences, but it does indicate our users' preoccupation with ease of use.

TABLE 16: TOP 10 OF WORDS MOST FREQUENTLY USED BY PARTICIPANTS (WRITTEN EVALUATIONS)		
1	**Information / Info**	118
2	**Easy / Easier / Ease**	50
3	**Interesting / Interest(s)**	47
4	**Link(s)**	46
5	**Find / Found**	44
6	**Issues**	41
7	**Good**	31
8	**Photo(s) / Picture(s) / Image(s)**	27
9	**Informative**	22
10	**Design**	18
Excluding connectives, articles and generic words		

A more careful reading of the data shows that, when referring to ease of use, participants did not limit that to the narrow definition of browsing or navigation (e.g. through appropriately labelled menus and buttons). They also included aspects such as discursive accessibility (e.g. not using jargon) and even breaking the text into easily assimilated bullet points. Indeed, textual overload seems to affect *both* users' browsing experience *and* perception of content as inaccessible or boring. It is in such aspects of user experience that the boundaries between site design, site content and civic efficacy are blurred: without accessible page architecture, users may not make the effort to process the message that is being communicated. Therefore, the implications of site architecture are fundamental for the efficacy of online civic tools.

Scanning text is very common for high-literacy users and Nielsen (2008a) found that users will only read 20% of the text on the average page. More importantly, the average user will only spend an extra 4.4 seconds for each additional 100 words, while after a certain point text length discourages the user, which means that organisations should avoid cluttering the page with text as it is bound to have an adverse effect. This seems to have been the case with our participants' experience with the Soil Association website (**Figure 43**). They often used words such as "cluttered", "packed", "crowded", "overwhelming" and most frequently "too much" to describe it.
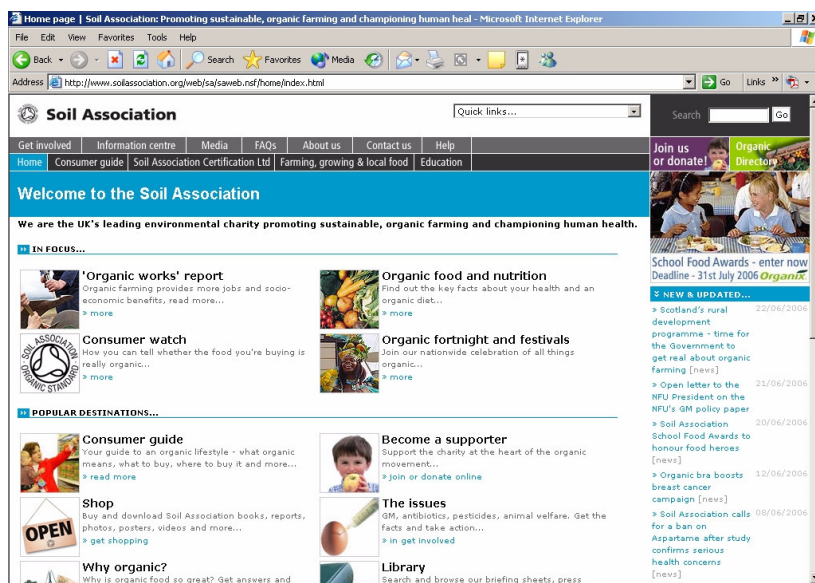
**Figure 43:
Soil Association –
Homepage and Main
Adjectives in User
Evaluations**

*'Too Much', 'Useful',
'Cluttered', 'Packed',
'Interesting', 'Crowded',
'Confusing',
'Disorganised',
'Overwhelming',
'Comprehensive',
'Digestible', 'Accessible',
'Mumsy', 'Strong',
'Traditional'*

Nielsen (2007a) highlights the adverse effects of including too many features on a website: screens get busier, menus get longer, browsing the site takes longer and there is more likelihood of the visitor using the wrong feature. Gibbs (2008: 141) found that "upon entering a page users briefly performed an overall visual scan of it and then scrolled down while being highly focused on the screen" – periodically interrupted by closer scanning of text. The pattern of users' browsing was "breadth-first".

There was a clear preference amongst our users for visual, rather than textual or menu-loaded homepages. This explains why Fairtrade was so extensively praised for its

homepage, which made minimal use of text and showcased its individual products visually instead (**Figure 44**). Our evidence supports the guideline put forward by Nielsen and Tahir (2001) that examples should be used to reveal the site's content and that links should go directly to the detailed page rather than the generic category:

> "I liked the fact that when you first sign on to it it's just pictures that you can click and everyone prefers to click pictures and not a list of words. So you click on a picture of a mango and it tells you *everything*, like how you can get a Fairtrade mango, where it grows and how it's grown and a bit of trivia." [#1.02-CB]

**Figure 44:
Fairtrade – Homepage and Main Adjectives in User Evaluations**

'Easy', 'Interesting', 'Informative', 'Colourful', 'Attractive', 'Eye-catching', 'Appealing', 'Vibrant', 'Bright', 'Vivid', 'Emotive', 'Professional', 'Persuasive', 'Modern', 'Inviting', 'Engaging'

Furthermore, it is particularly interesting that 10 out of the 14 individuals evaluating the Friends of the Earth website made an almost identical (unprompted) point in their initial written evaluations, i.e. that its pages were at the same time concise *and* informative (**Figure 45**, Appendix R).

**Figure 45:
Friends of the Earth – Homepage and Main Adjectives in User Evaluations**

'Informative', 'Easy', 'Useful', 'Simple', 'Interesting', 'Well Organised', 'Relevant', 'Knowledgeable', 'Short', 'Powerful', 'Usable', 'Bare', 'Boring'

The abundance of information available online is a much greater problem than it may be thought by designers (Gibbs 2008). Mitra et al. (2005) noted that lack of critical thinking and source evaluation skills was observed in younger users – what Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) call a "second-level digital divide" that exists precisely because of differences in users' online skills. It may not be far-fetched to argue that, contrary to received wisdom which sees older users as digitally excluded, younger people may actually be the ones in danger of exclusion due to not having developed appropriate information-processing structures, which are arguably possessed by newspaper readers or radio listeners.

While this argument may appear to verge on technological determinism (Greenfield, 2003, has argued that technology is changing the way we think), it is true that different media enable the creation of different media cultures. Nicholas (2009) argues young people are being disenfranchised by the internet as they are "not able to benefit from the fruits of an information society because they don't know how to handle that vast amount of information which they have to make sense of" as they have not been socialised with a framework of understanding, measuring and evaluating different information sources.

While the educational background of our sample (media students) means that they are likely to be more digitally literate, participants made the very same point themselves. Some went as far as to say that the internet has no effect on civic behaviour or on an individual's patterns of engagement precisely because of the vast amount of available sites and information, "because I think a lot of people might feel that they get into the point of, like, over-saturisation and the sense of all this…" [#4.37-AM].

It is precisely because of this chaos of messages available on the internet that civic websites need to present a simple and coherent narrative, starting with a clear introduction of what they are about. Users criticised the websites of the Soil Association and of the Meatrix for lacking a clear sense of purpose or mission; typical comments included:

> "I didn't actually understand what it was, to begin with… I didn't think it was very clear. And there is just like so much information on the first page... you know it's too much." [#1.09-SJ on Soil Association]
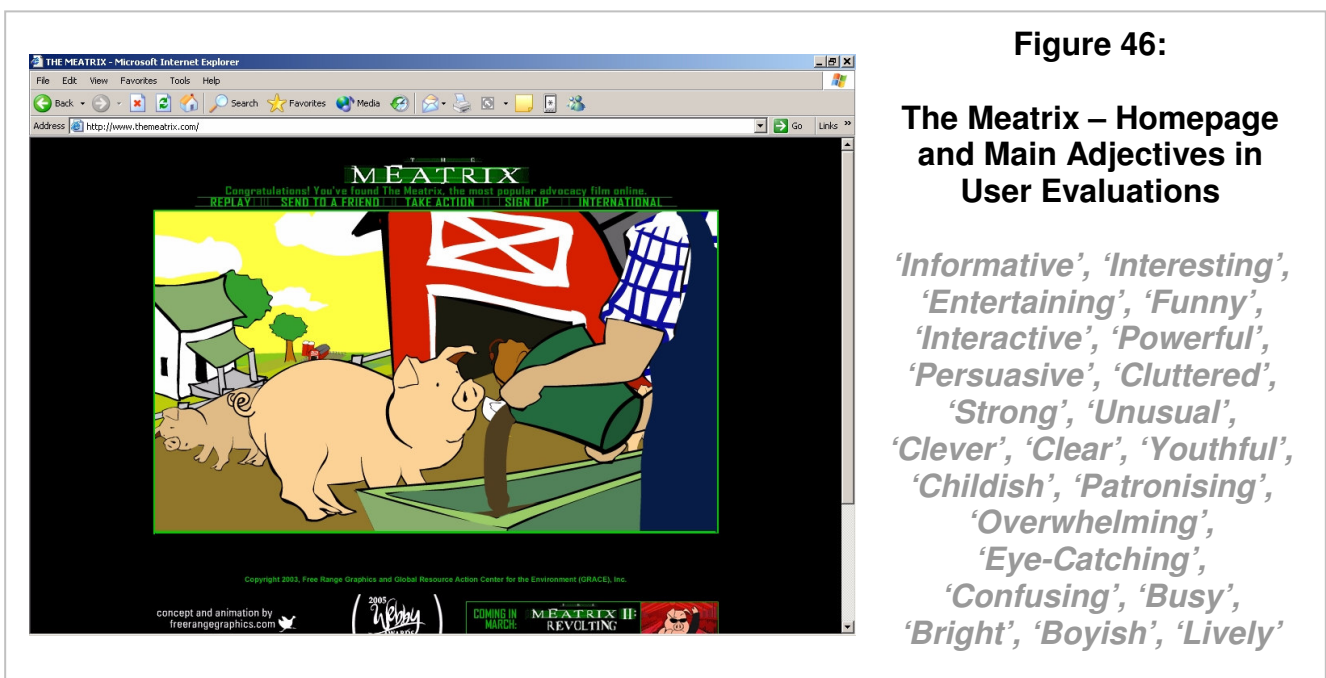
> "I didn't think that the actual purpose of this site was that clear" [#1.08-NR] and "it needed a bit more about the point that the website was about" [#1.05-JW] on The Meatrix.

These comments actually reveal a significant gap between site designers and users, as well as touching upon the issue of going beyond citizens who are already motivated to engage. All four of the sites sampled included mission statements, About Us sections and details of their track record. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that a reasonably skilled user who is keen to engage with the organisation would click on such pages in order to learn about that organisation's agenda and the site's purpose. Yet, if we consider Nielsen and Loranger's (2006) finding that users spend an average of 31 seconds on a homepage before moving on (and about 1' 49'' on the entire website), it becomes obvious why organisations trying to reach beyond their core base should make a greater effort to signpost their mission online. Virtually all of the users evaluating the site of the Soil Association criticised its homepage for excessive cluttering (**Figure 43**).

Breaking up the text, introducing visual signposts and reducing the number and size of menus and links were recurring suggestions.

While the homepage is absolutely critical in engaging the user in these crucial first moments, evaluating the homepage alone is not sufficient in order to assess a site's usability or clarity of purpose (Hackett and Parmanto 2009: 83). For instance, the opening video clip of The Meatrix (**Figure 46**) could be considered an ideal way to grab the user's attention while introducing the site's agenda and making a substantive point in an emotive way. However, the subsequent browsing experience marred the good impressions created by that flash clip. Many participants criticised the site's architecture and navigation, had great difficulty in locating The Meatrix blog and the international action pages (two tasks assigned to users during the evaluation) and thought that pages were incoherent and excessively bloated with text and external links:

> "I also thought it sort of introduced too many issues at once… like it had the bird flu, and then had organic food without being overly… sort of- it was just too much to take in all at once, which is *information overload*. So they should have sort of *sectioned* it better maybe and put, like, organic food, bird flu, sort of current issues…" [#3.19-BW on The Meatrix]

Figure 46:

The Meatrix – Homepage and Main Adjectives in User Evaluations

'Informative', 'Interesting', 'Entertaining', 'Funny', 'Interactive', 'Powerful', 'Persuasive', 'Cluttered', 'Strong', 'Unusual', 'Clever', 'Clear', 'Youthful', 'Childish', 'Patronising', 'Overwhelming', 'Eye-Catching', 'Confusing', 'Busy', 'Bright', 'Boyish', 'Lively'

Hence, once again it emerges that prioritising and guiding the user through the site's key features is essential. A succinct, bold and coherent narrative combining text, visuals, seamless navigation, layering and a consistent branding should be used in order to tell a simple story. Flavian, Gurrea and Orus (2009) is one of the first scholarly studies to propose guidelines based on users' perceptions and from a demand perspective. It highlights the decisive role of web design in shaping users' and online consumers' perceptions and behaviours. The two main principles put forward by Flavian et al (2009) are simplicity and freedom of navigation. Requiring users to register in order to access parts of the site (e.g. Soil Association), featuring inaccessible text and small fonts (highlighted by several participants) and not communicating the organisation's or site's

purpose clearly enough all act as barriers to the user experience and, therefore, constitute potential exit points.

While this emphasis on convenience and ease of use may sound as a truism, the premium put by our users on simplicity, and the subsequent frustration with a lot of the pages that they evaluated (and which they otherwise genuinely wished to engage with), means that there is certainly a gap between current practice and users' needs. This may, in part, be due to the genre of these sites, which do not follow the conventions of traditional commercial/corporate online communication, but instead view the website as a necessary evil or as a library of promotional or supporting material.

An alternative explanation is given by Mitra et al (2005) who note that a tension may exist between what web designers consider to be state-of-the-art applications in web design and what users actually consider to be attractive, given the increasingly ubiquitous preference for simplicity and an emerging sense of frustration with cluttered, inaccessible and confusing designs. Gibbs also highlights the misperception amongst many designers of information systems, who wrongly perceive a design problem as *information scarcity* rather than *attention scarcity*: "consequently, they build systems that excel at supplying more and more information to people but in actuality what is needed are systems that filter out unimportant or irrelevant information" (2008: 130). The question of gate-keeping is a crucial one and extends to the core of the debate on the democratising and pluralistic potential of the web vis-à-vis the natural information-processing and resource limitations facing ordinary individuals in their everyday life.

Overall, our findings for the UK-based organisations are also consistent with Kenix's conclusion that US non-profits do not demonstrate a high level of sophistication or understanding of what users really need or that they are interested in who is listening (2007: 82). This brings us to the crucial issue of interactivity, which is much broader than a set of site tools or technological applications, but extends to the relationship between the civic organisation / website and the citizen / user.

7.7 Seeking an Interactive Mode of Online Civic Communication

Interactivity has the potential to alleviate problems such as the information overload mentioned earlier: layering (user-to-site interactivity) can provide users with more choice over the amount of content that they access, as well as the level of depth/detail that they reach to. Moreover, interactivity can be conceptualised in a broader way, i.e. as the establishment of an affective bond between the user and the site, issue or organisation and can, thus, be a very empowering and effective mobilisation strategy.

It was shown in Chapter 6 that the civic organisations sampled are not utilising the internet to its full potential in order to engage (with) users. The findings of the user evaluations concur with this view: participants perceived all sites as low on interactivity (see **Table 11**), although there was significant variance in the way that users understood, interpreted and defined interactivity. This coincides with considerable confusion in the

scholarly literature about the scope, definition and typologies of interactivity (see Leiner and Quiring 2008, cf. Richards 2006). Our participants' notions of interactivity ranged from the mere use of multimedia features, such as video clips, to segmentation of content according to target group, to user-to-user interaction on message boards and forums, to user-to-producers interaction using real time chat tools. This variance is in itself interesting and telling about the catch-all nature of the concept of interactivity, which has occupied scholars for as long there has been online interaction (see Newhagen and Rafaeli 1996).

While factors such as ease of use and relevance of content dominated the written evaluations and group discussions, interactivity was a subtly recurring theme, not least in users' favourite site elements (**Table 14**) and wish list of features (**Table 15**). It is particularly interesting, however, that participants rarely, if at all, referred to interactivity as a stand-alone concept per se. They usually approached it by proxy, i.e. through talking about other major *civic* factors and in particular efficacy. That is to say, users made a direct link between online interactivity and civic efficacy:

> "I think if people really can actually make a difference, like with voting… if you can vote on a website I'd probably be more inclined to actually go and think that I'm actually making a difference rather than just read and yet you're thinking "ok…" – you know what I mean? So, I suppose it's like… *interacting* with the… website" (#2.11-BS).

> "I liked [the Soil Association website] but I didn't think there was, like, *interactive* enough, it didn't really- it presented the issue to me, but it didn't like encourage me to take it any further, if you know what I mean" (#4.38-BP).

Previous studies (e.g. Sundar, Kalyanaraman and Brown 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres and Gastil 2006) have shown that "increased interactivity is associated with increased satisfaction, a greater sense of self-efficacy, and higher memory, among other things" (Sundar et al. 2003: 35) and users' responses fully reiterated these causal links. Furthermore, Vyas, Heylen, Ellëns and Nijholt (2007: 7) note that providing users with an opportunity to be creative and active and to go beyond just receiving information enhances their aesthetic experiences, which was also confirmed by our data, as users thought that interactive features were both more enjoyable and more engaging.

Finally, participants expressed a preference for user-led interactive spaces, such as forums and message boards, which allow for the creation of user review reputation systems, e.g. by giving feedback on sustainable farmers so as "to see who does what – are they actually doing anything that is recommended on the page? Are they actually buying from local suppliers? What are they feeling about it?" (#2.16-KK on the Meatrix). Such spaces can act not only as mechanisms of scrutiny but also as civic communities with spill-over benefits on political socialisation and sophistication.

Despite these benefits and user preferences, a comparison of users' feedback on major aspects across the sampled sites shows that interactivity was by far the weakest element of all four sites (**Table 12**). This was despite the existence of isolated interactive tools, such as Friends of the Earth's vote feature and various postcode-based search engines. Fairtrade's somewhat higher score on the sense of community could possibly be

attributed to the personalised case studies mentioned earlier. If confirmed, this could constitute a very interesting finding because it might indicate that a sense of community can be achieved not only through resource-intensive technological applications, but through a more personalised and individualised discourse.

The observed lack of interactivity on these four sites is consistent with previous studies, such as Burt and Taylor (2008: 1058), whose evaluation of environmental, civil rights and other voluntary organisations' websites showed "little evidence of inclination to nurture the 'Habermasian' public sphere" although in theory such an approach should be consistent with the philosophy of these organisations. A typical example of this paradox is The Meatrix blog: several users commented negatively on the fact that the blog's posts were not followed by any comments (e.g. #2.16-KK: "nobody would respond to it – nobody talks about it"). One user thought that it was "quite impersonal… like just a news story" (#3.35-TM), while another remarked that "there wasn't actually any real, personal comments… it was just like campaigning" (#3.22-HM).

This raises a crucial point that emerged earlier (Chapter 5) and resurfaced in this part of the study, namely, young people's wish to listen to both sides of an argument, especially insofar as civic issues are concerned. Having browsed through the four sites, and having processed the arguments in favour of practices such as fairtrade, organic farming and sustainable energy, participants probed the organisations' messages noting, for instance, that "there wasn't the other side of the argument, so it was very one-sided, because obviously if we all would now go to family farms we would not have enough meat" (#2.16-KK).

This issue is particularly crucial and concurs with Warnick et al (2006) who found that "end-users of political websites are just as likely to perceive the rhetorical features of site content as they are the feature-based aspects as *interactive*". That is to say, while a balance between fact and opinion or the consideration of counter-arguments may not be traditionally considered as relevant to the established notion of website interactivity, real-life users in fact make such a connection. This illustrates the difference between traditional usability per se and *civic* usability and could indicate that a solution to the problem of online community is not necessarily a technological one. It could be argued that a more dialectical approach to online political communication would be more favourably received by younger users. Our data strongly indicates that addressing the counter-argument head-on can be a much more effective way for organisations to persuade and mobilise citizens, as opposed to ignoring the opposition altogether.

The importance of including the other side of the argument for an organisation's own legitimacy, as well as for the deliberative health of the online public sphere, is also noted by Burt and Taylor (2008). In their model for the evaluation of voluntary sector / NGO websites, they note that reports, briefings and case studies allow organisations "to publish arguments and evidence that challenge their claims and to respond to these within the 'public space'" (2008: 1053). Such practice is not good only for the health of the democracy in an abstract way; it actually empowers citizens to engage cognitively

with an issue, as well as providing them with arguments that they can then exercise in their own conversations with their immediate social environment.

Furthermore, a number of studies have shown that too much interactivity can distract users from the substance of the message that the site is trying to put across. Warnick, Xenos, Endres and Gastil (2006) showed that the co-occurrence of both campaign-to-user and text-based (rhetorical) interactivity can have a sensory overload effect that distracts users from the text of the site and has a negative impact on users' recall of issue stances. Sundar et al. (2003: 49) add that "there exists such a thing as too much interactivity. Participants in the high-interactivity condition of our experiment consistently gave lower ratings than their counterparts in the other two conditions on a number of impression formation items". This could be attributed to the fragmentation of information, which requires greater clicking effort on the part of the user.

Therefore, interactivity does not have be as resource-intensive as it may be feared by resource-pressed charities and NGOs. A more open-ended discourse incorporating visual elements and an emphasis on specific individuals and localities may be more effective in engaging users than a taxing set of flashy gadgets that can end up having an adverse effect. Acknowledging counter-arguments and featuring stories of real people are both considered as key elements in developing an interactive relationship between the site and the visitor. The existence of a genuinely interactive mode of civic communication seems to be a decisive factor when it comes to following up a site visit with action (what is also known as goal conversion) and also in bringing users back to the site.

7.8 "Following Up" and "Going Back"

While, as it was explained earlier, our participants expressed broadly favourable views of the four sites, there is an important gap between liking a site and completing actions or revisiting. It is true that a few of the users in our sample engaged in action during the actual evaluation visit (e.g. registered for newsletters, assimilated information etc). A comparison of the quantitative data across sites shows that Friends of the Earth was more successful in motivating our participants, as the mean likelihood of following up the visit was higher for that site across almost all civic activities measured (**Table 17**). This could be attributed to a number of pre-existing factors, namely familiarity with the FoE brand and interest in the issue of climate change, or it may also be due to the range of participation and follow-up tools available on the FoE site.

Moreover, a comparison of the mean likelihood of following up across civic activities shows that sites were generally more successful in raising long-term awareness and interest for the causes that they promoted, rather than persuading users to complete specific short-term site tasks, such as donating or registering (**Table 17**).

Still, the qualitative responses on the likelihood of returning to the sites were mixed and there were some instances during the focus group discussions of participants admitting

that they would not go back to these websites. Even so, users themselves acknowledged that even a one-off visit can have benefits both for the individual and for the organisation. The possibility of engaging in small-scale action during a one-off visit is considerably more likely if the site provides the visitor with accessible online tools that allow them to complete that action easily there and then.

In an online culture of potentially infinite choices, short browsing periods, content sharing and remixing, civic organisations ought to be more receptive about young people's patterns of internet use, and subsequently to be more imaginative about the engagement options that they provide. Electronic petitions and template letters to MPs were only two regularly cited examples of actions that users would consider completing even if they were not planning to return to the site. As one participant put it, "[even if] you didn't care enough to go back, you could have still made a slight contribution like that" (#4.46-TM).

TABLE 17: FOLLOWING UP				
Mean Likelihood of Following Up Site Visit (Min=1, Max=5)	**Fairtrade**	**Soil Association**	**Friends of the Earth**	**The Meatrix**
Research more into the issue / learn more about it	3.00	3.29	3.57	3.41
Talk about the issue with other people	3.28	3.07	3.57	3.67
Change my **consumer** behaviour	3.06	2.93	3.43	3.39
Change my **political** behaviour	2.61	2.57	3.00	2.80
Consider **subscribing** / registering	2.50	2.57	3.14	2.60
Consider **donating** / contributing	2.56	2.00	2.86	2.32

This leads us to consider an important distinction between one-off, short-term and perhaps more superficial browsing, which could at best lead to e.g. sharing a link on a social networking site, and site visits that are more in-depth and may lead to a longer-term relationship between the user and the organisation. Our data indicates that The Meatrix is the typical example of the one-off site. Interestingly, the only category on which that site had a higher mean likelihood of following up was that of talking about the issue with others (**Table 17**). This was further explored during the group discussions and it was found that the main, if not only, reason that users would talk about The Meatrix with others would be in order to show them (or refer them to) the introductory animated video clip. Yet, the entertaining value and universal appeal of that clip could not compensate for the site's weaknesses in information architecture and content.

"Yeah because even if it's like really flashy and really appealing or it seems easy to navigate if the content… if there's nothing useful there then you'd perhaps look at it once, then you wouldn't go back to it" (#2.10-AB).

"I wouldn't go on it again. I might want to show someone that animation bit because that was quite funny but that's about it but I would've never, ever, come across it in any way…" (#1.06-LR)

The question then arises of whether the success of that clip could lead to a memorable, educative and meaningful user experience. While the political gravitas of a more playful cultural discourse can be debated, that particular clip has a stronger potential of attracting more visitors and, subsequently, spreading the site's core message and even leading to brand familiarity. These benefits should not be disregarded, but there seems to be a trade-off between universal appeal and substantial engagement. On the latter side of that axis, our user evaluation data indicates that the websites of Fairtrade and Friends of the Earth offer more substantial and relevant content, as well as online tools allowing for a more meaningful mode of engagement.

Insofar as "going back" – i.e. returning to the site after the original visit – is concerned, currency and personalisation emerged as the two crucial factors. The existence and signposting of up-to-date information is obviously vital in attracting users back to the site: "you need to know that every time you went back there would be something new for you to read" (#1.01-AW). It is particularly interesting that both in the written evaluations and during the group discussions, several participants expressed unprompted interest in the issue of bird flu (which was in the news headlines at the time of data collection). The extensive references to bird flu on the Soil Association website were highlighted by users as a strength and unexpected feature.

While our research did not examine this aspect in great depth, there is evidence to suggest that a more media-savvy and news-oriented online discourse would benefit civic organisations not only in catering for the needs of *journalists*, but also in attracting news-oriented *users*. Having read a relevant news story and given the minimal time and effort it takes to switch from a news website to a search engine and then to another website, many users may wish to look further into an issue that attracts their interest. Therefore, organisations are facing the challenge of linking their ongoing work to day-to-day news headlines in a way that demonstrates their relevance to people's everyday life.

A second major factor in bringing users back to the site is personalisation both in its narrow sense of link-structure personalisation, and in the broader one of a discourse that penetrates the user's lifeworld. Insofar as the former is concerned, Jenamani, Mohaparta and Ghose (2006) found that link-structure personalisation is key to retaining visitors for a considerable length of time. Personalisation schemes are based on user behaviour modelling and could include anything from displaying the end-user's name on the page to providing recommended features based on that user's profile. As for the latter, calendars of local events and emotive visual material are ways in which users can feel that what they are accessing online is relevant to their everyday life.

Further research would be useful in establishing the extent to which broader changes in political participation (i.e. issue politics, accelerated pluralism and partisan de-alignment) have a *temporal* expression. That is to say, assuming that citizens are inclined to adopt more fluid social and political identities within the context of a 24/7 online news cycle, civic organisations might benefit from framing their campaigns in temporally finite terms of (online media) events so as to make them compatible with emerging modes of online uses.

So far in this chapter we have set out a series of conditions that need to be met for young people to engage with online material such as the four sampled sites. Yet, in order for this process to take place altogether, users first have to arrive at such civic sites, which brings us to the last issue, i.e. the obstacles and facilitators of youth accessing civic material on the internet.

7.9 Reputation, Credibility and the Challenge of "Getting There"

While not part of the actual online *mise-en-scène*, being attracted to, or coming across a website (henceforth called "getting there") is an obvious prerequisite for engagement with online civic material; it is the first step in the natural history of user experience. Yet, the significance of "word of mouth", i.e. the positive experience of previous visitors, in building a site's reputation and referring other users to, means that the *mise-en-scène* becomes a crucial link in the process of reaching new audiences.

It was argued in Chapter 5 that the participants engage in mostly functional (goal-oriented) uses of the medium, based on a lean routine of fairly limited destinations and activities. Civic websites are not a significant part of that online life (if at all) and traditionally political sites even less so, although, arguably, the fact that young people may not usually come across such online material does not mean that they cannot enjoy and engage with it to a considerable extent. It was argued that power laws and infinite choice constitute the role of reputation and branding more prominent in shaping credibility and user trust, and can to a large extent shape users' choices of which websites they will visit.

The role of established carriers of communicative authority, such as the mass media and in particular the BBC, as starting points for any process of online engagement with an issue or cause was a recurring theme in the group discussions:

> #3.24-KC: You need to make sure- like [#3.22-HM] was saying- like if it's backed up by like officially recognised like trustworthy things, like the BBC and other stuff like that then you can make something that's fun and still quite useful without having too much on it.

Our findings are consistent with Flanagin and Metzger (2007) who found that news organisation sites were perceived as more credible than all other genres of sites, such as e-commerce and special interest ones. Therefore, in order to attract the attention of internet users such as the ones sampled for our study, political, community and civic organisations and social movements may first need to gain access to the established public spheres of the "old" mass media.

The majority of the users admitted that *either* they would have not come across these four issue sites in their daily life at all *or* that they would have done so only if they had seen the site mentioned in an offline or online mainstream news story:

> "I always wondered how people come across things like that [issue sites] […] I think you really need to be searching for things like that to find them. I don't think I'd come across them that easily…" [#4.39-CS]

The BBC was by far the most-oft cited referrer to issue websites, although to that we could now add social networking sites (such as Facebook) and bookmarking applications (such as Delicious). Thus, apart from media relations, SNS-literacy also emerges as important for civic organisations, i.e. they need to design pages in an SNS-friendly way so that the right bits of content (e.g. messages or images) are showcased in the application. This goes back to the importance of prioritising web content and framing the online message with an awareness of the current media culture's practices.

More importantly, the decisive role of "old" mass media attention for the success of even exclusively online civic/issue campaigns may indicate the internet's inherent incapacity to constitute a viable and unifying public sphere that could attract critical masses of citizens for a little longer than momentary and superficial viral campaigns. However, it may be more than that: as early as 1996, Castells noted that the increasing aptitude of NGOs and social movements to adapt to the media's needs in order to secure publicity and reach is reinforcing existing hierarchies and practices of civic culture, rather than articulating an alternative mode of operation. In that context, users face the challenge of judging which sources are credible and civic organisations face the challenge of appearing credible:

> #3.35-TM: I was gonna say with the Fairtrade one, if you hear about a trade issue though, Fairtrade is one of the key slogans… so you're likely to find out… if you type Fairtrade into Google or a search engine the Fairtrade website is gonna come up-
> #3.21-HB: -But how do you know yourself which ones are *valid*? I mean it would take a while probably to search through and find out because that Meatrix one you know it says it belongs to GRACE and then you've got to go and see what *that's* all about and it's just from New York- you've gotta try and *trust*… you think whether that's something valid or not…

This exchange illustrates the very challenge that internet users are facing as part of their daily routines in trying to establish the credibility and validity of online messages and the heuristic devices that they employ (e.g. locating the organisation's patrons or geographical base), which has led some scholars to speak of a "second-level digital divide" (Hargittai and Hennant 2008).

Gaining user trust may be more straightforward for well-established organisations, such as those with an offline or geographically rooted element than for exclusively online start-ups, which have to almost self-induce their credibility by creating the impression of success so as to create a virtuous circle of trust. A typical example of such practice is The Meatrix, which devotes an extensive part of its online space to showcasing critical acclaim and press credentials. Many participants criticised the site's self-promoted acclaim as distracting from the actual point of the site and, once again, referred to traditional gate-keepers:

> #3.22-HM: I think credibility would come from – unfortunately because it's difficult with a website because there's so many issues going on – cultural references by other mediums, like television, and magazines and newspapers and other websites as well, like

more official websites, like the BBC website … I think… I think that it shouldn't just stand on its own with that film.

Our participants' irritation with The Meatrix's self promotion is consistent with Nielsen and Tahir's (2001) word of caution i.e. that sites should not waste space crediting the firm or the technology behind the science and should exercise restraint in displaying the awards won by the site, as an excessive emphasis on success can be seen as an indication of insecurity and anxiety on the part of the producers.

In spite of the key role that environmental factors, such as word of mouth and media attention, play in the relationship between users and websites, recent studies have shown that a site's own attributes can potentially overcome that "chicken and egg" dilemma of attempting to appear credible (**Figure 47**). Van der Heijden (2003 cited in Mitra, Willyard, Platt and Parsons 2005: 4) established a relationship between perceived attractiveness of a given site and perceived usefulness. In addition, they found that "perceived attractiveness influences perceived ease-of-use, enjoyment and actual usage". Therefore, attractiveness can lead to a higher perception of both usefulness and usability. Fisher, Burstein, Lynch and Lazarenko (2008: 477) in turn found that site usability, interface appeal and easiness of navigation all had a direct impact on the levels of user trust towards a site: "ensuring web sites are easy to use contributes to the level of trust users have in a web site". Even purely presentational features such as font size (albeit linked to ease of reading) had a statistically significant impact on trust. These findings are consistent with Flanagin and Metzger (2007) who found that site design can be an important element of perceived credibility.

Figure 47: The Relationship between Site Attributes and Trust

ATTRACTIVENESS $\Rightarrow$ USEFULNESS + USABILITY $\Rightarrow$ TRUST

ATTRACTIVENESS $\Rightarrow$ USEFULNESS + USABILITY
(van der Heijden 2003 cited in Mitra et al 2005: 4)

USEFULNESS + USABILITY $\Rightarrow$ TRUST
(Fisher, Burstein, Lynch and Lazarenko 2008: 477)

Therefore, site attributes can potentially ameliorate, underpin or even rival the role of external branding factors. Flanagin and Metzger (2007) argue that credibility is not a property of the information or source but a quality judged by the receiver of the information. In fact, they found that site attributes (such as depth of content and design features) were more central to credibility assessments than familiarity with the website's sponsors. That is to say, under conditions where web sponsors (or site brands) are unfamiliar to the user, "design elements can potentially boost perceptions of site credibility to levels equal to those for familiar sponsors" (2007: 334). Our data support this view as our participants used heuristic devices that included both a background check of sorts (i.e. sponsors, history of the brand etc) and a critical evaluation of actual *mise-en-scène* (i.e. site attributes such as palettes and navigation).

In conclusion, structural and contextual factors, such as reputation and branding, can act as impediments to the democratic and pluralistic potential of the net by limiting the likelihood of citizens coming across civic websites. However, there is evidence, both from this study and from others, that this "walled garden" of young people's online routines can be penetrated.

In this chapter we applied youth attitudes towards civic participation and the internet onto real-life civic websites of four issue NGOs examining a range of civic usability and user experience elements. These evaluations produced a dense narrative of motivators and de-motivators, best practice and mistakes. Our participants engaged with the four sites in a substantial way: they enjoyed visiting them, identified with the civic issues featured and expressed strong feelings over a range of online and civic practices employed by these organisations. Importantly, despite their initial reservations and feelings about issue NGOs and civic charities in general, they felt that the sites broadly met or often exceeded their expectations.

One of the main conclusions of this exercise was that civic websites were praised for the substance of their messages, but criticised for the way they put those across. Users found most of the web content that they evaluated to be highly informative, relevant and useful, yet they felt that information architecture, navigation, interactivity and the visual presentation of that information were often inadequate or poorly designed (exceptions, such as Fairtrade's strategic use of photos and colours were highly praised).

It is important that, despite the limitations of the civic sites evaluated – and the constraints and pressures placed upon civic organisations by the nature, structure and emerging culture of the web – there is a lot of space for improving site attributes, claiming the attention of users and, ultimately, engaging with them. Our study reiterates the point recently made by others (Kenix 2007, Kujala 2008, Coleman et al 2008) that the lack of actual and perceived interactivity is not only a matter of resources, but also of mentality and ambivalence on the part of civic organisations on whether they wish to strategically engage with their constituency of users or merely sell an inflexible message. The final chapter of the thesis summarises the main patterns and threads emerging through our primary data and reflects on the subsequent challenges facing civic communicators.

Chapter 8

Conclusions and Reflections
Emerging Patterns of Online Youth Engagement and the Limits of Civic Consumerism

"The solution lies in our own hands. *We need to rethink the choices we make on a day-to-day basis: the ways we use our time, the family lives we live, the sorts of goods and services we consume, the quality of democracy we are able to exercise*. The individual, the local, and the global are inextricably intertwined, in positive as well as in negative ways" (Ginsborg 2008).

"It seems clear that in human society, despite the best intentions, *technology has alienated people to such an extent that they mistake technological and symbolic action for social/political action*. This is the commodity stance. You buy a certain product, and you've made a political statement. You buy a car that runs on salad oil. It's still a car! Or make a documentary. Where did we cross that line where we forgot that making a documentary about how everyone would like to have a food co-op is not the same as having a food co-op? I think some people have lost that distinction" (Hakim Bey in Bleyer 2004).

The purpose of this chapter is to bring together the main strands of the empirical research, summarise the key findings and, in light of those, reflect on the emerging challenges and opportunities facing civic organisations that aim to reach young citizens online. The presentation of the findings started with broad brush strokes on young people's democratic and participatory behaviour as well as their patterns of internet use. It then focused on civic motivators and de-motivators and on how these translate into specific online preferences and attitudes towards online civic material and mobilisation approaches. We then examined a range of existing online civic messages and compared those to young users' own evaluations, thus applying the participants' abstract civic motivators, expectations and online preferences onto real life material – weaving a dialogue of sorts between (online civic) text and users.

Through summarising the main conclusions of the primary research, this chapter further refines the core argument of the thesis, which is the existence of a *fundamentally consumerist* attitude towards participation on the part of young people. In practice, this is expressed through various "terms and conditions" that need to be met in order for young citizens to consider engaging with a public affair or civic organisation. We then consider the tensions, paradoxes and challenges posed by this paradigm of civic consumerism, as well as its limitations and implications for democracy within a context of globalisation and liberal individualism.

It should be reiterated at this stage that a large part of the findings was based on purposive sampling, i.e. exploring the civic needs and attitudes of one youth community. While our sample's baseline responses on a range of civic indicators (such as electoral turnout) were very similar to that national 18-24 age group, simply generalising the findings of this study across the UK's youth population would be a flawed strategy, given especially the gender imbalance of our sample. However given the academic and demographic profile of the sampled community outlined in Chapter 3, this can be treated as a useful case study producing insights that may well be applicable to broader social demographics.

In spite of the use of various quantitative and structured measurements, this study is essentially qualitative in that it deliberately opts for covering a breadth of issues, questions, attitudes and practices within a single youth community, rather than the reverse (i.e. focusing on a narrow set of questions over a broader demographic). The rationale for this approach was partly based upon the need to bring together two bodies of literature (civic engagement, patterns of internet use) crossing the narrow boundaries of disciplines. A series of findings consistent to broader socio-cultural patterns emerged and were highlighted throughout Chapters 4 to 7; their implications will now be projected with reference to the scholarly literature.

8.1 Conditional Engagement in a Context of Individualism

It was noted earlier in this thesis that the levels and depth of youth civic engagement have been a matter of debate, especially since the widespread diffusion of the internet in

their everyday life. The evidence produced by our study does not support the view of a completely disengaged, apathetic, cynical or ignorant youth; nor, however, is there evidence to confirm the notion of young people as fully and actively engaged citizens who utilise the internet to create content, keenly participate, interact, express opinions and "remix citizenship" (Coleman and Rowe 2005).

The young people taking part in our study appear willing to engage as long as a number of terms and conditions are met that would make engagement meaningful to them. They value democracy, civic duty and participation (albeit at the abstract level); they care about a range of public issues (albeit for some, such as public services and global affairs, more than others); they cognitively link related issues and are broadly knowledgeable about current affairs. Furthermore, far from ruling out engaging, they substantially engaged with the civic materials that they evaluated for the purposes of this research and subsequently developed informed and sophisticated discursive narratives.

However, there was a clear sense of civic loneliness within these narratives, as well as widespread scepticism about the ability of the individual to make a difference. Interestingly, despite that lack of efficacy at the level of the individual citizen, there was also universal lack of any reference to collective agencies and identities, subjective norms, historical landmarks or any other form of social agency or action that transcends the individual. Participants stressed the importance of relating issues and acts of participation to everyday life and to the individual, although two activities that have recently been nominated by scholars as indicative of an emerging and alternative mode of active engagement (shopping and volunteering) were not considered particularly political or efficacious by our sample.

This emphasis on the individual and their lifeworld is consistent with previous studies of young Britons' sense of identity. For example, Grundy and Jamieson (2005) found that friends, family, job, partner and education (in that order and ranging from 94% to 72%) were considered as very important or important to young Britons' sense of self. In contrast, nationality and citizenship (e.g. being English, Scottish, British or European) were far less important.

We argue that these terms and conditions which occurred throughout the various stages and elements of our study constitute a coherent paradigm of a consumerist approach to online civic participation. The use of the term "consumerist" in this instance does not refer solely or even mainly to the concept of socially conscious consumption of goods, as much as to a mode of engagement that appears to conform to the laws of the market and to be structured around demand and supply, citizen (consumer) choice and competition.

It is important to note that, as far as we can see from the findings of this particular study, this paradigm of civic individualism and consumerism is not based on an active or explicit rejection of collective forms of participation by young people (collectivism having arguably withdrawn to some extent from political discourse over the last three decades). Rather, it implies a more implicit acceptance of a structured status quo and, in particular, scepticism towards large-scale efforts to "change the world", which our participants

clearly considered as unrealistic. It is also consumerist in the sense of seeking messages of hope and encouragement and linking hope to efficacy in the same way that contemporary material consumption is based upon empowering narratives constructed and communicated through advertising and public relations.

Our findings broadly concur with studies of youth engagement in other European countries, such as the large-scale survey of Greek youth conducted by Demertzis and Stavrakakis, who note that youth identity has "a considerable potential for protest but, also, lack of support; [it is an identity] of hope and sorrow; 'open' and 'closed', yet ultimately unpredictable and at the same time, challenging" (2008: 227). Friedland and Morimoto attribute these patterns to the pressures and uncertainty facing today's younger generations due to the contemporary way of life, including expectations of career achievement and material wealth: "the lifeworld of young people today is shifting towards one of higher stress, greater uncertainty and risk (although coupled with opportunities for some), and looser connections among family, friends, and communities" (2005: 5).

The role of duty and responsibility is also noteworthy in this discussion of youth civic consumerism. While not rejecting the concept of duty or civic responsibility per se, these young citizens put caveats (to do with the efficacy of their actions and so on) that, ultimately, are in some tension with the very meaning of the word "duty" i.e. that individuals engage in certain types of action because they "have to". Therefore, the cycle of political socialisation that facilitates adolescents' civic integration and participation in political rituals appears to have become a matter of personal choice dependent on individual needs. This is explored further in the following section, which examines the role of emotions and personalisation as facilitators of political socialisation.

8.2 Political Socialisation as a Lifelong Process

As mentioned earlier, political socialisation, i.e. the integration of the (adolescent) individual into the civic structures, norms and rituals of a society, is one of the main factors of political engagement. A key part of the process of political socialisation is the realisation of *interdependence* of public resources, demands, policies, institutions; of the effects of decisions by political leaders on the life of individual communities and, vice versa, of the potential impact of civic action on broader social and environmental structures. Emerging global affairs, such as climate change, further illustrate the phenomenon of interdependence at the international level. As O'Leary (2008) notes, governments are increasingly being asked to manage the public consequences of private decisions:

> "From the costs of people's healthcare through to the impact of lifestyle decisions on the environment, the wealth and wellbeing of different individuals in society has become increasingly hard to disentangle. One person's actions have consequences for another. The annual cost to the NHS of treating type 2 diabetes is £2 billion. The annual cost of alcohol-related crime and public disorder has been estimated at £7.3 billion; the cost to employers has been put at £6.4 billion. Plans to phase out the traditional lightbulb by

2011 would save five million tonnes of CO2 a year. Private decisions have public consequences".

Our data suggests that while young people are generally apt at linking related public affairs at a cognitive level (and occasionally affectively link those issues to their own lifeworld), they may not be as aware of their own (collective) power and interdependence. They simply do not see the relevance of collective action. Kiousis and McDevitt (2008: 496) found that caring and having a strong opinion about an issue acts as "a portal into the political system" as it motivates adoption of a "more global ideological identity". They adopt a conceptualisation of agenda setting that is considerably different to the traditional (effects-oriented) model and define it as "an intrinsic process within political socialization that affects orientations to political objects and events, ideological allegiance, and actual participation" (2008: 483). Therefore, according to Kiousis and McDevitt, agenda setting (or issue salience) contributes to the crystallisation of political predispositions, which then leads to electoral participation: "An understanding of how an issue is situated within a larger belief system represents a crucial step for an adolescent to ascertain what his or her orientations and loyalties are with respect to politics" (2008: 488).

This study partly concurs with Kiousis and McDevitt (2008) in that the participants demonstrated a basic understanding of how an issue "fits together with other issues", i.e. the interdependence between areas and issues of public policy. However, contrary to their thesis that issue salience has an "integrative dynamic in political identity construction" (2008: 488), we did not find adequate evidence of coherent ideologies amongst our sample. Our findings leave no doubt that the young people taking part in this study not only care for a comprehensive range of issues, such as the Iraq war and the environment, but that they also have crystallised criteria or cognitive and affective heuristics which they use to decide whether they will get involved or not. However, these "skills" or indicators of political socialisation *do not amount to explicit and consistent value-oriented ideologies* and do not demonstrate a need to identify with collective agents of such ideologies, both of which have been considered crucial to the process of political socialisation.

Establishing the root causes of this "pathology" in contemporary political socialisation is outside of this study's objectives, although a number of factors may be at play, such as the segmentation of the public sphere, the decline of grand narratives and the privatisation of everyday life, all of which are constitutive elements of late modernity. However, two commonly held misconceptions ought to be addressed at this point. The first one regards the implicit but often expressed link between an individual's political socialisation and their personal engagement with microeconomic issues (such as paying taxes), which only occurs after adolescence; the ensuing argument being that we should not expect young people to engage with politics before they get a job. As Smith et al (2005: 428) note "[p]erceiving of citizenship narrowly in terms of economic independence gained through waged employment conceals the myriad ways people contribute to their communities and society". It is somewhat troubling that such artificially constructed (and highly gendered) perceptions of civic engagement were occasionally observed in the narratives of the young people taking part in our study. Key to exposing the severe

limitations of such narrow conceptualisations of citizenship is the recognition of social interdependence, i.e. the highly interactive relationship between the broader social environment and the individual citizen at different life cycles.

This brings us to the second issue, which is the traditional conceptualisation of (political) socialisation as a transition from childhood or adolescence to (civic) adulthood. We argue that the relationship between the citizen and society is much more dynamic and fluid, or as Smith et al (2005: 426) put it, "transitions to citizenship are negotiated throughout the life-course". Therefore, political socialisation should be treated as a lifelong process requiring resources that will empower citizens and help them integrate – and remain integrated. The limits of the traditional perception of political socialisation may be one of the reasons for the response of the government and of the political system to the issue of youth disaffection being mainly responsive rather than preventative. McKendrick, Scott and Sinclair (2007) note that there is tendency in the UK to link or equate youth disaffection with non-participation in formal education, employment or training and to direct resources as a response to symptomatic violation of moral codes (such as work ethic), rather than working to prevent the development of the conditions that lead young people to feel disaffected.

8.3 Personalisation and Emotional Engagement

The element of conditionality in young citizens' narratives, as well as the subsequent framing of this discussion not in terms of young people actively participating in a bottom-up manner, but in those of democratic institutions having to make their case to citizens, demonstrate the changing nature of political socialisation. One of the strongest indications of a gap between young people and collective stimuli of civic mobilisation is the importance they attribute to personalisation in civic communication. They appear unwilling (or perhaps unable?) to engage with messages that frame or refer to society in an abstract way. Being reached and emotionally touched requires a narrative that reduces policies or social affairs to narratives about individuals, such as case studies of farmers, stories of people adversely affected by social problems or others positively affected by civic action, or indeed the presence of celebrities. The showcased individuals thus act as intermediary agents of political socialisation – "in their familiarity, in their apparent possession or embodiment of the public sphere, they represent society itself" (Richards 2007: 38). Rather than becoming politically socialised through ideas, values, civic rituals or institutions, "[a]t this primitive, infantile level of experience of the social, it is the physical individuality of other persons [e.g. public figures] which constitutes society" (Richards 2007: 38).

It has been established that personalisation has a very special role in contemporary political discourse – within a culture that assigns particular value to celebrity and reputation of the private individual. This includes, amongst other things, the increased focus on the personality and private life of political leaders, the emphasis on the performance of "mediated personae" and the narratives of heroes and villains. What is particularly interesting about the findings presented here is that the role of

personalisation appears dominant not only in traditionally political / mass media settings, but in the context of a different mode and means of political communication, i.e. that of issue-specific civic mobilisation via the internet.

However, the cognitive and affective functions of, and civic gratifications obtained through, personalisation should not be underestimated. Corner (2003: 83) notes that:

> "the terms of the persona also reflect and then help shape the norms of political life and, indeed, what 'politics' particularly means. They help regulate the way in which the personal is related to the political, providing a focus for democratic engagement and investment, a resource for political imagination and implicit criteria for judging both the ends and means of political practice".

It should also be acknowledged that neither conditionality, nor personalisation, is limited to younger generations. Shifts in the factors that motivate citizens to participate may be observed across the generational board and are part of much broader shifts in civic culture, although it could be assumed that older citizens will have experienced at least some levels of collective engagement and that civic rituals will have been more prominent and embedded in their everyday life.

Furthermore, even if we were to accept as a starting point that younger citizens *ought to* go through a particular process of political socialisation with specific features (and that they currently are not) then the responsibility for that quite clearly does not lie with young people themselves. The very notion of socialisation is that one is entering a pre-existing social structure. That individual may be able to renegotiate their own relationship to that structure, or even change that structure itself, but if both the structure itself and the process of initial integration to it are already problematic then the individual may, for example, be unable to recognise the options available to them.

The prominence of affective and symbolic stimuli in our participants' civic narratives is not at odds with a somewhat functional civic mindset and instrumental approach to the internet. Despite the tendency of scholars to treat rational and affective considerations as unequal, and often competing hermeneutic models, this study indicates that the relationship between the two is much more organic. Individuals may employ cost-benefit calculations in order to judge whether a political issue is worth engaging with (as per cognitive mobilisation model), and resource factors (e.g. electoral registration or availability of time and money) may affect that calculation, yet it appears that emotions are the crucial means used by young citizens to reach that cognitive end, i.e. the triggers of a cognitive response. Therefore, "emotions make a substantive contribution to political and social life… they are not simply the *consequence* of thought or action but are also a crucial *determinant*" (Clarke, Hoggett and Thompson 2006: 162, our emphasis).

Hence, it may be the case that focusing our scholarly and practitioner energies on purely technological or resource issues, such as making participation even easier – while potentially useful – may be missing a broader point, i.e. the need to *affect* young people with regard to a given civic affair and giving them substantive (as opposed to processual) reasons to engage. Their need for emotional engagement is evident throughout their evaluations of civic websites and, importantly, their quest for affective material goes

beyond the aesthetic level to building a lasting emotional connection with the cause or the organisation behind it. Clarke, Hoggett and Thompson (2006: 167) draw attention to the "powerful role of pre-discursive but nevertheless organised structures of [emotional] experience". Given the structure of web experience – e.g. reaching a judgement about a site within milliseconds – it would not be farfetched to argue that the affective elements of web design may have been underestimated, at least insofar as civic websites are concerned. Once again, this is another potential area of tension between the traditional notion of usability as practiced in industry and the concept of civic usability, emphasising the socio-political drivers of internet use.

However, our understanding of the affective in political communication, and more specifically civic web design, should go well beyond the arguably superficial and impulsive aspect of sensory stimulation. Richards (2007: 34) argues that the aestheticisation of everyday life and the shift towards greater expressiveness has a deeper dimension, i.e. the quest for self-discovery and self-fulfilment indicative of a "therapeutic culture". Such a quest may certainly be regarded as evidence of individualism within late modernity, but it also offers the opportunity for meaningful engagement: "[it] has potentials for growth in compassion and in reflexivity as well as for selfishness and contrivance" (2007: 41).

In conclusion, our study underlines the role of emotions in civic engagement and political communication and would agree with Richards (2007) that "the long-standing neglect of the emotional dimensions of the public by politicians, public authorities and professionals is no longer sustainable" (2007: 11-12). An "analysis of the emotional meanings of policy choices and communication strategies, and of what these meanings imply for the life of democracy" is clearly required. Based on that line of thought, it could be argued that rather than being disengaged, apathetic or cynical, young people in Britain today are in need of a more direct mode of communication that affects them personally and leads to an emotional connection with public affairs, other citizens or leaders. Yet, this seems paradoxical in an age of customised communication and intensified connectivity; it is one of several paradoxes emerging from the civic and online narratives of our participants examined in the next section.

8.4 Motive, Means, Opportunity: The Paradox of Online Youth Civic Communication

It was argued earlier that our participants' "terms and conditions" for online engagement constitute a coherent paradigm of civic consumerism that is consistent with broader socio-cultural trends. Be that as it may, it is hard to overlook a quite fundamental paradox emerging from these findings, namely the existence of a deficit of civic motivation, efficacy and political socialisation within an environment of surplus information and unprecedented technological connectivity. It was established through the analysis of youth civic attitudes, and in particular of civic motivators and de-motivators (Chapter 4), that young people express a need for civic encouragement (internal efficacy) and a need for systemic acknowledgement (external efficacy). Both of these needs could be linked to

a broader need for, or lack of, accessible, meaningful and interactive (civic) communication in the true sense of the word. This was also confirmed by our analysis of the civic material that is available online (Chapter 6). Yet, it is widely accepted that we live in an age of intense interconnectedness producing an output of communication messages of unprecedented volume.

This paradox can be developed further. Some of our participants attributed their non-participation to lack of information. Yet, this is an age of over-saturated and professionalised political communication with abundant material available on policies and institutions. Also, a sense of civic loneliness was evident in their qualitative responses to various mobilisation stimuli and they expressed a wish that they could see more of their peers caring for such issues. However, ubiquitous social networking and community-building applications have made sharing ideas and values easier than ever before. Moreover, while the respondents called for more contextualisation of news and public affairs, their user evaluations of actual material (Chapter 7) showed that they clearly opt for text-light webpages and bite-sized messages. Interestingly, while they expressed overwhelming preference for visually-driven narratives (such as the introductory animation clip of The Meatrix) as opposed to more textual ones (e.g. Friends of the Earth pages), recall and engagement were more superficial for the former and more substantial for the latter.

These tensions may indicate that young people themselves misdiagnose and subsequently misreport, not only the rationale for their civic behaviour, but also their own patterns of internet use. Or, this paradox may indicate that there is, in fact, a problem with the mode of civic communication that is emerging on the internet – the balance or trade-off between quantity and relevance (or efficacy) of information being one of the prime suspects. These two explanations are certainly not mutually exclusive. In either case, we argue that part of the problem may well be with the increased reliance and emphasis placed on technological factors, as opposed to a better understanding and tackling of underlying socio-cultural problems.

In an environment of abundant information and virtually perfect rational choice with the potential of a comparative analysis of each website's or political message's pros and cons, these users evaluated the sampled material using heuristics that were occasionally quite "pre-modern", i.e. based not on any kind of excessive instrumental rationality but on word of mouth and implicit respect for established carriers of authority (such as the BBC). Our sample did not engage in particularly active or interactive uses of the medium, such as content creation or the development of innovative narratives. Their diet of web destinations appears extremely restricted to functional activities, consumerist habits and mainstream portals, while civic websites are in no way part of their online lifeworld. Therefore, in spite of the internet's theoretical features (unlimited freedom of choice, lack of structure and re-negotiation of central and marginal), mainstream and often privatised hierarchies, elites and structures emerge in the online sphere.

An example of a practical implication of this argument is that increased or maximum interactivity should not be considered as an end in itself or as a panacea – several

participants felt distracted or intimidated by overcomplicated or interactive applications. They prefer to have the choice over whether they will engage with such applications. Discursive accessibility and the ability to empower users to express their own feelings, as well as see how others feel, were seen as much more important – once again, taking us back to the issue of emotional (dis)connection.

Our thesis that the root cause of the problem lies not with technology but with the support structures of the underlying civic culture, and in particular with the mechanisms of political socialisation that facilitate civic motivation, concurs with the recent findings of the Public Connection project (Couldry 2006). The project found total lack of *social* opportunities for the development of civic talk or action. It did not find any case where the sense of collective connection through the media connected with any discussion, action or thought about issues of public concern. This lack of social opportunities should not necessarily be interpreted in the narrow sense of establishing formal channels of political communication (e.g. consultation projects); Couldry is making the point that citizens' everyday life does not currently afford a *context* for such interaction. Apart from being socio-cultural this issue is also fundamentally political: the act of reclaiming the public nature of participation and of creating a nurturing public sphere carries specific ideological connotations and political implications.

Hence, the missing element appears to be not necessarily the *means of voicing* civic opinions, but the socio-cultural dynamics of motivating citizens to *produce* them, as well as the normalisation or "mainstreaming" of such civic action in their everyday culture. The challenge, then, for civic organisations wishing to embed their (online) civic spaces into users' lifeworlds is to build that cognitive and affective link between political issues and everyday cultural interactions. In the context of the focus group discussions but also of the individual user evaluation sheets that preceded the discussions, our participants demonstrated informed views on a range of current affairs, including ethical consumption and the environment. More importantly, their wish to see others engage was a recurring theme of their responses.

Therefore, an integrated civic engagement strategy should feature: (a) a strong motive (compelling rationale demonstrating the importance of a civic cause); (b) the means for the average citizen to make a difference (with the emphasis being on the efficacy of the civic tools rather than their technological supremacy); and, finally, (c) opportunities within the cultural context of everyday life that enable individuals to become politically socialised.

These three core elements map fully onto Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991), which attempts to predict the conditions under which an individual will engage in volitional action. However, our data adds an interesting twist, as there was no sense whatsoever of subjective norms "pushing" these young people towards participation (if anything, the observed subjective norms went the other way). It was interesting that the participants themselves expressed the wish to see more people in their immediate social environment engaging with public and global affairs.

8.5 'Mind the Gap' Between Users and Producers

Our evidence also concurred with the findings of recent studies (e.g. Coleman et al 2008) arguing that user-friendly civic applications can engage young citizens. Furthermore it was shown that site attributes can potentially ameliorate or underpin external branding factors. However, there appears to be a gap between producers' *perceptions* of users' needs and users' *actual* expectations. An investigation of web producers' intentions and strategies was not part of this study's research design. Yet, both our own primary data from the content analysis, and the secondary data on the production of civic websites (e.g. Olsson 2008, Ward 2008) indicate considerable reluctance on the part of civic organisations to engage in meaningful interaction with their audiences.

Civic websites continue to communicate in a very structured, top-down way that favours close-ended narratives, complicated menus and textual content while disregarding the importance of visual design and emotional interactivity. Users praised the substance of the messages communicated but criticised the ways these were put across. Content was often rated as highly informative and relevant, but navigation, information architecture and visual presentation were widely inadequate or poorly designed. A similar pattern was established by Kenix (2007: 86) in a study of US-based non-profits' websites: "[t]here was little space for marginalized voices on non-profit Web pages and while information certainly was in abundant supply, it remained static and disconnected from the rest of the World Wide Web… Taken in sum, it does not appear that the Internet has fulfilled many earlier hopes of a democratic and deliberative utopia". Our analysis also concurs with a similar study by Burt and Taylor (2008) who found that "performance by these selected voluntary organizations… was highly variable. None of these voluntary organizations is an exemplar of citizen engagement, legitimacy or accountability on the web. Prominent voluntary organizations… are under-exploring their websites in respect of their pursuit of democratic goals".

This mode of communication may indicate an implicit assumption that young people are determined to participate, have a clear idea of what they want to achieve and are merely looking for the right forum to do so, which is far from reality – or, at least, from the realities of these young people. Moreover, and despite isolated instances of innovative practice, civic websites do not exploit the potential of the medium, nor do they appear to appreciate its differences to other media and the different ways in which citizens access political narratives online. While a careful reading of these sites' content might eventually empower users, only few motivated citizens would actually ever reach that stage.

This was certainly the case with the websites of youth organisations (with the exception of youth portals), which lacked a sense of purpose, but it was also true for a number of NGO websites. While slicker and much more developed, they often lacked a sense of a distinct visual identity and placed most of their emphasis on already motivated users and journalists. Make Poverty History was an exception to that pattern in that it put forward a set of tangible objectives, set a specific timeframe, promoted six key actions, embraced citizen input, emphasised visual expressions of engagement and attempted to create a sense of broader community; all of which were nominated as important motivators by the

users in the unprompted part of the study and could be considered as central to civic usability.

One might think that, given the somewhat surprising finding mentioned above regarding the conventional and somewhat passive uses of the internet by young people, civic producers' preference for a top-down model would be appropriately catering to users' demands. That is to say, the lack of particularly innovative and interactive applications in the supply side of civic web production might be seen as consistent with the current mode of demand by users, as described earlier. The problem with this argument is that the current provision of online civic messages still overlooks the users' actual preferences (e.g. for more personalised and visually engaging content) and appears to implement a "push" mode of communication within a "pull" medium.

Our study supports the argument made recently by Nicholas (2009) that web designers tend to think of the problem as one of information scarcity, which leads them to overproduce tools and applications; in contrast, users' actual problem is attention scarcity and the lack of a cognitive framework that would enable them to effectively process big volumes of information. While the user evaluations certainly reaffirmed the importance of what could be collectively called the "online *mise-en-scène*", the motivational and emotional aspects of the user experience emerge as far more instrumental than the purely technological ones. Also, the apparently deterring impact of "too much" choice or information re-affirms the important role of gate-keepers (e.g. editors) in filtering messages and constructing hierarchies that facilitate user involvement.

Overall, the observed patterns of internet use appear fully consistent to those of civic engagement, with choice, convenience, awareness, utility and consumption being central to these citizens' behaviour. As the next section argues, these findings are characteristic of a process of marketisation of political engagement, whose implications are examined below.

8.6 The Marketisation of Civic Participation and the Politics of the Everyday Life

The empirical evidence presented in this thesis supports the argument that we have not really moved beyond a "sales" model in online civic communication. On the contrary, if anything, it looks as if the ideology or principles of the market are increasingly permeating the online civic culture. This is based upon an observation of, on the one hand, a pattern of civic behaviours that simulate consumer behaviours and, on the other hand, the subordination of the political and civic sphere to the rules of the market, partly due to increased competition and choice created by media segmentation and digitisation. Dutil et al. (2007: 77) predict that, despite the opportunities created by new media for citizens and long-term client relationships, "the market-inspired customer image is likely to emerge as the most powerful way in which service recipients are characterized and addressed".

The two trends of consumer behaviour (demand-side) and politics as a product (supply-side) are directly linked and essentially constitute the two sides of the same coin of marketisation. For instance, private corporations, such as major retailers and supermarkets, are deeply embedded in young people's lifeworld and in the physical space of their communities. As such, and given the rise of ethical consumption practices, they emerge as crucial agents of political socialisation and participation, sidelining traditional channels such as political parties and trade unions. At the same time, politics is losing its protected role and space in people's everyday lives. Political communicators – such as civic organisations – have to compete within a *de facto* market of communicators against a myriad of other products. The distinction between the literal use of marketing terminology and the analytical metaphor then becomes increasingly problematic.

Dutil et al note that "the choice revolution underpinning the expansion of information and the empowerment of individuals … may also render *democracy* a mere choice among many – particularly for younger generations increasingly gravitating to online activity" (2007: 87 citing Cherny 2000, our emphasis). This may not be as far-fetched as it sounds given that our participants appeared averse to resource-intensive modes of participation or to any particular sense of commitment, long-term loyalty or "deep" engagement. Making participation easy was a primary concern. Thus, it seems we have shifted from a state in which citizens mobilised, united and engaged actively, often sacrificing their life, liberty or everyday welfare, in order to claim rights from more or less democratic regimes to a situation in which governments themselves have to "market" and "sell" democratic participation as an appealing product to sceptical consumers (former citizens) who choose which issues they may engage with and to which extent (see also Couldry 2006: 335 and Coleman and Rowe 2005).

This whole discussion may be symptomatic of a post-industrial society, which has moved beyond claiming a minimum set of democratic and social rights, now seeking to tackle debates and areas of political practice that have emerged during the last few decades (e.g. identity politics, ethical consumption) and that may be more relevant to the welfare of contemporary publics (Inglehart 1997). Bourdieu argued that everyday acts carry significant political, social and cultural meanings both for the individual's identity and for social structures: "consumption practices become important in maintaining the basic structures of power and inequality which characterize our world. Such a perspective helps to illuminate why we invest so much meaning in consumer goods – for the middle class its very existence is at stake. And it suggests that people who care about inequality should talk explicitly about the stratification of consumption practices" (Schor 1999). More recently, thinkers such as Ginsborg (2008, in the opening quote of this chapter) have made the case for the politics of the everyday life, illustrating the relevance and interconnectedness between individuals, consumer behaviour and political issues.

Even more specifically to this thesis' subject matter, it has been argued that websites of consumer organisations can play a critical role in the process of symbolic negotiation and virtual interaction between producers and consumers (e.g. Callon et al 2002). Webb (2007: 5.8) argues that "[t]he qualities attributed to products, and their status as 'goods'

or 'bads', are not inherent in the artefacts, but are subject to negotiation, and struggle, between market actors, who may include economists, producers, consumer groups, scientists and international governance bodies".

While it is important to acknowledge the role of consumption in the process of identity construction, it may be useful to adopt a slightly more critical stance towards the marketised and highly individualised mode of civic engagement outlined so far. Such a critique could aid the development of appropriate civic interventions and structures that avoid the pitfalls created by the fusion between democratic practice and market consumerism.

8.7 The Limits of Civic Consumerism

In addition to creating opportunities for greater inclusion and empowerment of citizens and civic actions, the emerging model of civic consumption faces limitations and raises questions about its impact on democracy. While civic consumerism has very diverse, and possibly some contradictory, expressions and consequences, we are in a position to identify some key factors that may limit that democratic potential. The first such issue is the disputed significance of symbolic action. The case of Make Poverty History is particularly interesting in that respect. Gorringe and Rosie (2006: 9.3) note that demonstrations "entail symbolic rituals highlighting the cohesion of protestors and communicating their objectives… MPH voiced concrete demands but relied on heavily symbolic and expressive acts [e.g. white wristband, a minute's silence etc] – foremost amongst which was the evocative, expressive invocation to *Make Poverty History*".

Based on that observation, one could discern the potential for considerable tension between the symbolic nature of expressive actions such as these and the instrumental, goal-directed civic behaviour of young citizens such as those taking part in our study. Yet one more paradox is emerging here: the critique of institutional politics has partly been based on the premise that the link between individual actions and social change has become invisible or even questionable altogether, due to structural or communicative democratic deficits. Yet, the same could be argued for the political gravitas of consumer or cultural actions that are predominately symbolic and do not have a clear policy outcome due to political limitations or structural barriers. That is to say, one of the main reasons young people are seen to be rejecting established political institutions is the latter's apparent irrelevance to youth everyday life; it was also shown earlier that clear objectives and efficacious civic tools are key to mobilising them. Yet, the absence of tangible policy outcomes does not stop them from choosing to express themselves via symbolic actions (e.g. wristbands). This leads us to wonder whether, rather than – or in addition to – failing to offer citizens tangible policy outcomes and beneficial civic options, established political institutions are failing to offer the other part of the civic engagement "package", i.e. the aesthetic and symbolic narratives that are crucial in establishing a relationship of trust between structures and citizens.

In any case, the actual importance of symbolic and expressive action is heavily contested by a school of thought which argues that technological alienation has made us

lose the distinction between commodity- or culture-oriented actions and end results. Bey (in Bleyer 2004) argues that one-off civic protests, such as the anti-war marches of 2003, tend to be forgotten soon after they have ended: "All [the protesters] are doing is assuaging their conscience a little. At best, it's symbolic discourse and it never goes beyond that."

A sweeping rejection of the wealth of civic activities that take place through symbolic, expressive or even consumerist outlets probably disregards the many positive and empowering spill-over effects that such action can have – not least for citizens' own political socialisation and social capital. However, it is true that such actions tend to have a very short lifespan and rarely lead to concrete and long-term social change. Also, there is little evidence to suggest that such one-off, consumerist activities lead to the creation of *collective identities* or to the formation of viable collective agents.

Observing civic interactions in Holland after the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, Herme (2005 cited in Couldry 2006: 323) commented that there was "curious emptiness at the heart of everyday political talk". Rhodes (1994) famously described the "hollowing out of the state" and governance in Britain following the waves of privatisation and deregulation of the 1980s and 90s. It may not be inappropriate to suggest that we are witnessing the "hollowing out of citizenship" and political engagement in that individuals are expected to be motivated and feel efficacious within a context of individualism and privatisation of the public sphere. Consistent to the school of thought which argues that it is democratic institutions that have disengaged from young people rather than vice versa, Edwards (2007) concluded that political, structural and social barriers are preventing young people from participating, arguing that they actually wish to participate. This view would be consistent with the phenomenon of "forced alienation" described by Olsen (1969).

The extent to which some of the barriers Edwards mentions are new can be questioned; we need to consider whether previous generations who fought for crucial civil, political and social rights were facing less barriers than young people are today. However, Edwards makes a crucial point noting that young people's "perceived participatory flaws are considered in the context of an individualist framework where the impetus to participate is deemed the prerogative of individuals, and where failure to do so is considered an individual deficit" (2007: 543).

Moreover, studies on recent campaigns of grassroots mobilisation, such as the afore-mentioned one by Gorringe and Rosie (2006) on Make Poverty History, have identified an attempt to neutralise or "water down" the ideology of civic causes in an attempt to make them more appealing to the average citizen-consumer. This raises the question of whether there can be such a thing as ideology-free civic action. According to one of the producers of civic engagement websites interviewed by Olsson (2008: 505), "too much focus on obvious ideological content would 'scare the users'… MUF ultimately seeks to attract new and future voters through catchy web content, inspired by media logic, rather than ideological information and/or debate".

It would be easy to criticise such approaches to online mobilisation for their potential lack of political awareness and attention to social change. However, it is also difficult to blame individual organisations for the political emasculation of the online civic culture (if that is, indeed, the case), given their need to survive in an exceedingly competitive and chaotic media environment based increasingly on a narrow diet of mainstream user preferences. Olsson found that the internet is "open enough to allow the production of various kinds of civic resources; the internet does not impose a uniform civic model upon the producers" (2008: 510).

Therefore, it could be argued that, while the medium itself may not impose a singular mode of civic engagement, the ensuing civic culture of online civic engagement structured around that medium could have a homogenising effect on political culture and civic expression. As the next section argues, in addition to questions around the political gravitas, democratic legitimacy and ideological identity of post-representational civic action, political economic factors are particularly potent in creating new forms of inequality and exclusion or accentuating existing ones.

8.8 The Political Economy of Online Youth Civic Engagement: Emerging Forms of Social Inequality and Civic Exclusion

Proponents of civic consumerism have argued that consumers use their increasing wealth to construct their own lives (Reeves 2008). That is to say, increased affluence gives citizens more choice and power in making important decisions. The blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private spheres may be producing a range of positive effects, such as empowering individuals to tackle issues that have traditionally been detached from the public domain (e.g. domestic abuse – see Nancy Fraser's critique of the traditional public sphere model, Fraser 1992). However, Reeves' argument makes a very contestable assumption about the resources available to citizens, especially those of a lower socio-economic status.

The case of Fairtrade is an excellent example of this debate on the merits and dangers of civic consumerism. Webb (2007) criticises the simplistic notion of consumers as passively seduced by the power of marketing and advertising and puts forward the argument that the significant growth in the sales of Fairtrade coffee is consistent with a "developing politicisation of consumption" and proves the "market impact of collective consumer agency" (2007: 2.2). She argues that Fairtrade labelling "builds the symbolism of a critique of commodity chain relationships between growers, producers, retailers and consumers into the materialism of the pack of coffee, with the 'fair trade' product imputing a connection between the lives of low-income farmers and those of affluent consumers" (Webb 2007: 5.8, also see Raynolds 2002).

On the one hand our primary data supports Webb's point about the potential of Fairtrade to establish a politically charged relationship between foreign suppliers and domestic consumers – users clearly enjoyed reading the case studies of farmers and reported feeling an emotional connection that also facilitated their cognitive understanding of the

more substantive issues. On the other hand, our participants' civic narrative contests Webb's quite optimistic view in that it indicates considerable tension between the theoretically empowering products available to citizen-consumers and the economic realities facing youth groups such as students living on limited means. **Table 18** draws together some of the main lessons emerging from the content analysis (Chapter 6) and user evaluations (Chapter 7) of the Fairtrade website and uses them as a metaphor about the key barriers to online youth mobilisation. While the site successfully addressed several of the items on young people's agenda regarding Fairtrade, it did not engage with the issue of product pricing.

TABLE 18: BARRIERS TO ONLINE YOUTH MOBILISATION – CASE STUDY: FAIRTRADE		
	Key issues emerging from content analysis (Chapter 6) and user evaluations (Chapter 7)	Satisfactorily addressed by the Fairtrade website?
1	**Negative perceptions** of Fairtrade as a "pushy" NGO	**Yes** – users were pleasantly surprised and found the site welcoming, positive and appealing
2	Lack of **awareness** of, and interest in, the **substantive issues** behind Fairtrade (e.g. trade justice, lives of farmers)	**Yes** – users liked the personalised content, which allowed them to establish an emotional and cognitive link between the abstract issues and "real people"
3	**Price difference** between Fairtrade and non-Fairtrade products; subsequent perception of Fairtrade as an expensive brand that students cannot afford	**No** – Barbara Crowther (Director of Communications and Policy) acknowledged that consumers still perceive fairly traded goods as more expensive, although there is no evidence of a slow-down in the growth of ethical consumption due to the recent economic recession (Boyle 2009: 39)
4	Lack of **awareness** about the availability, presentation, packaging and range of Fairtrade **products**	**Partly** – many participants were surprised by the range of products and level of information available; others requested more specific consumer details
5	**Site navigation** problems (floating menus, invisibility of homepage link)	**Yes** – these have now been dealt with via the redesigning of the Fairtrade website (see Chapter 6 and Figure 48)
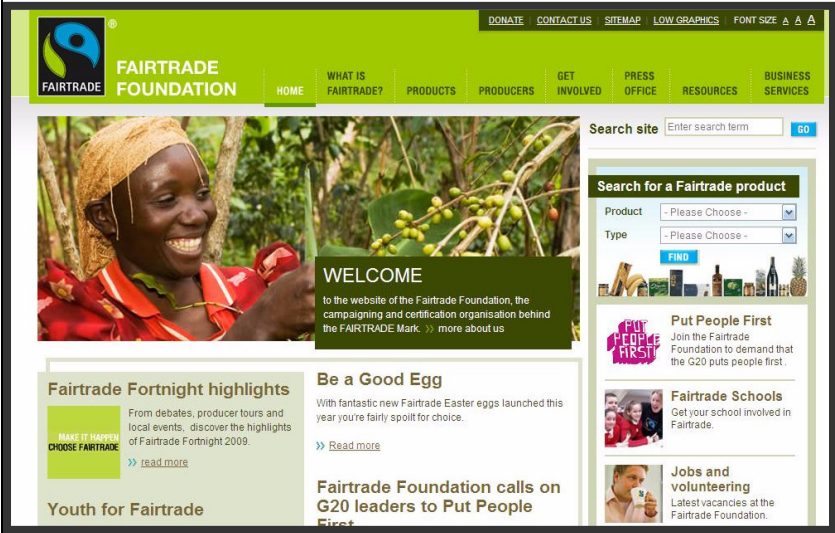
Figure 48:

The redesigned homepage of the Fairtrade website (April 2009)

At one of the most crucial and substantive moment of all the focus group sessions, participants took over the discussion and expressed informed scepticism about the price of Fairtrade products vis-à-vis young people's resources, as well as the recent attempt of major retailers to "jump on the bandwagon" of ethical trading:

> #4.37-AM: There's loads of companies that are now being questioned because they're actually getting into Fairtrade because they're gonna make that much profit - they just got "right, it doesn't really matter what we did beforehand because we're gonna make this much profit". Another thing is not just buying these Fairtrade products but maybe trying to bring these Fairtrade prices down… as in… if they try to say not just "buy this" or "tell your MP", maybe if you have, like, "how can we get the prices down"-

> #4.46-TM: -both Fairtrade and food produced more, like, overpaying the employees and keeping the animals better, the prices are always gonna be pushed up, they're always gonna be dearer […] Because if the companies aren't making the profits through how they manufacture it, they're gonna make it through how much we pay, so the company shouldn't be allowed, as you said, it shouldn't be allowed to just force the price up just to keep their profits up, so that they're losing money on their employees- they shouldn't be allowed to push them up…

> #4.39-CS: I think that is the main barrier though… for students… it is the price difference, when you know you can get something… um crisps or mints or something like that, when you know you can get something cheaper then morally you think "I should buy that", but that one is half the price, and I think that's the main barrier for lots of people from buying…

Therefore, one of the problems with the libertarian and marketised models of self-empowerment is that "they may impose new costs and demands on disadvantaged service users, who have to acquire new skills in order to interact successfully with service delivery systems" (Collin 2008: 539-540), as well as to disenfranchise those who are in need of intensive personalised support. . Another relevant example would be the differences of web skills observed by Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) amongst younger users, which constitute a second-level digital divide. Thus, online participation strategies that do not cater to disadvantaged groups of young citizens may be aggravating, rather than ameliorating, the gap between those who are already engaged and those who are socially disenfranchised.

Crucially, the capital required for young people to participate in emerging and online civic rituals is both economic and socio-cultural. North, Snyder and Bulfin (2008: 895) recently concluded that "the link between cultural capital, habitus and cultural form produces a socially entrenched digital inequality rather than an economically entrenched digital divide". That is to say, emerging digital inequalities have not only an economic expression (e.g. lack of access to advanced facilities because of poverty) but also a crucial habitual aspect, i.e. lack of motivation (in our case online civic motivation) that can be linked to the particular contexts of individuals' socialisation. North et al. rightly criticise the economic determinism that permeates the mainstream scholarship on social inequalities arguing that it "creates a base-superstructure model where economics has the capacity to affect all other spheres of people's lives", while in reality greater access to material wealth does not always equate with greater access to cultural and social capital (2008: 896).

Thus, the limitations to youth civic consumerism are not just economic but political-economic. Significant barriers, such as familial rituals and micro-cultural norms, are at play and can, indeed, be found in our participants' online civic narratives. These are, arguably, partly charged with differential deposits of trust, civic education and political socialisation. Subsequently, while avoiding the pitfall of excessive constructivism, we need to acknowledge the role of cultural and social barriers to online youth civic engagement.

One such case of social exclusion caused by increased consumerism is the phenomenon of "style failure", i.e. the inability of many young people to maintain a style identity that conforms to social norms. Croghan et al (2006: 463) argue that "the link between styles and branded and designer goods makes the maintenance of a style identity economically costly… [while] there are also social costs associated with failing to maintain such an identity". Given the instrumental role that consumption has come to play in establishing youth legitimacy within social and peer groups, "poverty and limited access to material resources can severely limit young people's opportunities to fully take up the identities potentially available to them – a form of exclusion that implicates the self concept as well as material or physical well-being" (Croghan et al 2006: 474).

The phenomenon of style failure is not strictly speaking of a civic nature. Yet, it could be seen as an expression of a broader pattern linked to the "entry costs" of socialisation – including political socialisation – i.e. the resources required of individuals in order for them to be accepted into the broader social environment. There is also another dimension – an opportunity cost of sorts – in that the increased emphasis and social norms on consumption and style are draining citizens' resources (e.g. time available) that can be spent on civic engagement. Friedland and Morimoto (2005: 17) argue that if the normative connections to community that have characterised civic engagement in the past are, in fact, becoming "hollowed out" because of pressure to achieve or attain a certain socio-economic status, then this could have negative effects on the transmission of social and civic capital across generations. This could be linked to the low prioritisation of political participation within the range of daily activities, in that civic engagement may be considered by many as a non-essential activity or as an activity that brings little benefits in terms of social standing or cultural capital (which again links to the lack of subjective norms).

In light of these issues raised by the rise of civic consumerism and the ongoing evolution of online engagement, the following section examines the opportunities and challenges facing civic organisations aiming to mobilise young citizens.

8.9 Online Mobilisation in the Global Public Sphere: Opportunities, Challenges and Recommendations for Civic Organisations

This thesis outlined a pattern of youth civic attitudes and internet uses that are symptomatic of a changing civic culture in which choice, consumption and segmentation have a prominent role. In addition to the effects that these trends have on established

institutions and forms of democratic participation, civic organisations are also facing two other major challenges both of which are linked to globalisation. The first challenge revolves around the changing structure and nature of civic movements themselves, while the second one concerns the virtual gap between the local and the global, the micro-level of the individual and their community and the macro-level of global affairs and decision-making processes.

8.9.1. From Movements to Networks: the Changing Nature of Civic Mobilisation

As early as 1998, Bimber predicted that the rise of the internet coupled with the shift to the politics of issues would lead to an environment of "accelerated pluralism" in which issue publics come together for short-term, *ad hoc* campaigns. The level of contribution and entry costs are lowered blurring the line between members and non-members; formal organisation and strict hierarchies are giving way to fluid identities and viral campaigns (e.g. Shumate and Lipp 2008).

A major dilemma emerging from that shift is the trade-off between homogeneity and reach: in an environment of loose ties and online networks, social movements are increasingly facing the challenge of having to balance their collective identity and ideological clarity with the vital resources (publicity, attention, donations, membership and volunteering) brought by new media. As it was noted earlier, the catch-all approach adopted by Make Poverty History allowed it to reach beyond the "usual suspects" and to mobilise vast groups of individuals not previously involved with the issue, as well as raise publicity and ultimately educate citizens about a range of important issues.

Yet, within an online environment of brutal competition and choice, alliances amongst movements and campaign groups become crucial in strengthening the message, overcoming the "noise" of other messages and reaching across target groups. Given the often antagonistic dynamics between different types of NGOs (e.g. generalist and specialist organisations), this may be more of a challenge than it may initially appear. As Downey and Fenton (2003: 194) note, "unless powerful efforts at alliances are made – and such efforts have been made successfully, especially in the area of environment, globalization and ecology – the oppositional energy of individual groups and subcultures is more often neutralized in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism, or polarized in a reductive competition of victimizations".

In practical terms building alliances and reaping the benefits of synergies would range from promoting consistent branding and logos to constructing intra-network links. While previous research has demonstrated the importance of intra-network links for the visibility and coherence of the NGO issue networks (Shumate and Lipp 2008), this study's findings suggest that external in-links, especially from established mass media such as the BBC, are also crucial for attracting non-activists. Featuring links to related organisations and information gateways has also been shown to enhance a website's credibility (Flanagin and Metzger 2007).

The challenge of building alliances between diverse social movements and civic organisations can also be seen as an opportunity for what Webb (2007) calls *globalisation from below* "articulating connections between issues such as fair trade, human rights, ecology and well-being, and crafting common sense", subsequently increasing public awareness about global issues such as poverty.

8.9.2. Linking the Individual (Local) to the Political (Global)

By far the biggest challenge facing civic communicators is the need to engage audiences with issues that they may not initially care about, or see the relevance of, including having to frame global issues in micro-social terms. This is particularly difficult due to the democratic deficit created by the globalisation of governance. Coleman, Morrison and Svennevig (2006) have argued that "local specificities of social and cultural practice are displaced by institutional and regulatory modes which are unaccountably distant in time and space, and cultural identities are flattened as they are irresistibly subsumed by dominant sources of global meaning". They found that there is a link between the breakdown of local attachment and an explicit sense of political inefficacy as young citizens feel they are unable to influence developments beyond their microcosm. [This feeling of disconnection and inefficacy is also partly linked to increased fear of 'the other' expressed through the rise of far-right parties in Europe and phobic attitudes towards religious and ethnic minorities – Todorov 2008].

It has also been shown that social complexity and specialisation leads to the creation of issue publics (Zolo 1992 cited Couldry 2006), which accumulate domain-specific knowledge and can usually only be mobilised via crises. That is to say, a state, or discourse, of crisis is becoming almost a vital condition for the mobilisation of citizens, who need to be shown both the urgency of the issue and the efficacy of their potential civic actions. Richards (2007: 95) notes that unless governments manage to emotionally engage electorates, managing major global issues such as climate change, population growth and economic crises could have severe implications for democracy. Our findings indicate that grounding civic discourses and applications in real communities (as was the case with Urban75, Fairtrade and to a lesser extent Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace) might facilitate such emotional engagement.

However, rejecting both Castells' (1996) and Virilio's (1997) defence of local public spaces and of the need to reconnect global politics with the everyday lifeworld, Stevenson (2006: § 5.1) argues that "there can be no local solutions to global problems" and that "the pernicious effects of globalisation cannot be resolved by localism" (§ 5.6). Stevenson, amongst others, makes the case for a move away from the local into the global arena through the establishment of a cosmopolitan consciousness and global institutions.

Yet, this notion comes into direct conflict with our participants' civic attitudes, which were expressed through a very explicit narrative of localism and preoccupation with the individual lifeworld. Despite their self-reported interest in global issues such as climate

change and food quality, building links between global developments and local lifeworlds would be a tough challenge as it is – let alone if one had to actually shift the institutional and political narrative of citizenship away from the local and into the global domain.

This brings us back to the instrumental – and continuously reaffirmed – role of the "old" mass media. The need to secure media coverage for even exclusively online civic and issue campaigns may be an indication of the internet's inherent incapacity to constitute a viable and unifying public sphere that could attract critical masses of citizens for a little longer than momentary and superficial viral campaigns (e.g. Hari 2009). Castells (1996) offers an alternative interpretation and attributes the continued predominance of the mass media to the ability and adaptability of NGOs and social movements to always cater to the media's needs in order to secure publicity and reach. He argues that this aptitude is reinforcing existing hierarchies and practices of civic culture rather than articulating an alternative mode of operation, although it is quite difficult to think of an alternative model of a global public sphere – or, indeed, of a way out of the "catch 22" facing social movements (i.e. if they use the mass media then they are feeding the existing paradigm of civic mobilisation – if they don't then they will probably fail to gather adequate public support that would be needed to create a new paradigm).

8.10 Seeking Civic Usability: User Involvement *and* Political Involvement

This thesis has highlighted a series of challenges facing online political communicators. While the means through which civic communication and mobilisation take place are important, it has hopefully become quite clear through this discussion that technology cannot be the only, or indeed the main, solution to these problems. There is definitely a role for technology and if political organisations wish to re/engage with citizens via the internet, they will eventually have to engage with the realities and complexities of users' everyday routines and social contexts – seeking civic usability. As with traditional usability, user involvement will be crucial to building effective civic tools.

The benefits of user involvement in the development of websites are well documented in terms of quality, efficiency, commitment and buy-in. Furthermore, Kujala (2008) showed that engaging with users at the early stages of product development can lead to even better results as it allows designers to understand and embed users' values and needs into the core web design. Getting user feedback and understanding user preferences is an established practice and international standard in the corporate sector (ISO 13407, 1999), yet there is little evidence that citizen- or participation-oriented organisations engage in such a process. Engaging with users does pose a resource challenge, especially for not-for-profit civic organisations, such as youth projects that run on a finite budget.

Failing to understand the needs and values of end-users risks compromising the viability of the project altogether. Therefore, NGOs need to be more open-minded in their interactions with target groups. In addition to understanding users' needs, it is also important to explore different ways in which users can access and process information.

Stibel (2005) calls for an holistic approach using principles of psychology, economics and marketing so as to dissect users' cognitive processes and develop alternative models of information architecture. Reflecting on, acknowledging and integrating the heuristic devices employed by users when assessing a site's credibility and quality is also important.

User involvement would also be crucial in developing layering practices that empower citizens – especially those of disadvantaged backgrounds. The aim of multilayer interface design has traditionally been to promote universal usability by addressing divides of access and literacy (due to age, special needs etc) (Shneiderman 2003). The use of layered design could also be considered as a means to addressing issues of motivation and lack of attention, as long as the addition of layers simplifies (as opposed to further complicating) the appearance of the page and of the human-computer interaction process.

Our study identified several best practice examples and case-specific recommendations that were presented in the previous chapters. These range from simple design measures (such as breaking up textual content, introducing visual signposts) to more substantive ones (building a visual narrative of individuals affected by the issue or by the organisation's work). Prioritising features and focusing on a select few emerged as one of the most fundamental and urgent recommendations. This would include designing webpages that are aware of the conventions of content sharing that users are widely engaging in through social networking sites. A list of ten recommendations based on some of the study's key findings is presented in Appendix T, which is then used as a model for the evaluation of two recent issue campaigns (Appendix U). A set of specific recommendations for future research following up on points made throughout the thesis is also given in Appendix S.

Finally, a more open-minded, flexible and meaningful approach to interactivity will probably have to be an integral part of any successful online civic strategy, with the emphasis being put on *political* rather than technological interactivity – a dialectical approach that embraces engagement with the substantive arguments behind the issues. Richards (2006: 546) emphasises "the interconnection of architectures that support generation *and* the user's motivations for being in/with those moments of interactivity".

This thesis has also highlighted interesting tensions between the theory of online youth civic engagement and the reality emerging from the empirical data. For instance, while the theoretical potential of the internet as a means of civic empowerment is undeniable, our findings identified several limitations to this potential, such as habitual and instrumental uses of the medium, close-ended browsing, power laws and segmentation, the major challenge of attracting and maintaining young users' attention to online civic material, as well as fundamental resource implications, both for civic organisations and for citizens. These challenges do not invalidate the democratising potential of the web, but certainly mark the need for paying greater attention to the needs of end-users and the priorities of organisations.

Similarly, it is essential to ground the scholarly discussion on macro-social civic engagement – which can occasionally be insulated from the realities of citizens' daily lives – with reference to specific communities, applications, materials and messages. Our evidence shows that, despite the afore-mentioned challenges, there are messages, emotions, issues and arguments that young people can meaningfully engage with via the internet. But that engagement is not guaranteed. Therefore, in some contrast to both pessimistic and optimistic narratives about the impact of the internet on the political sphere, this thesis argues that the future of online youth engagement is neither predetermined, nor actually dependent on the technology itself. Rather, it is directly linked to the broader civic culture and social environment; and, as such, it remains the subject of a political process.

It is hard to overemphasise the importance of political and socio-cultural factors – in synergy with technological ones – when it comes to empowering young people and promoting civic engagement. Institutional engineering, civil rights, representation, pluralism and enfranchisement have all been deeply and fundamentally political battles, not technological ones. As Street (1996: 510) argues, "[t]he recognition that citizenship and public space are constantly being constructed and reconstructed does not absolve us of the need to address the political arguments about democracy". For all the navigational or technological factors identified by the content analysis and user evaluations, it was the broader political rationale for civic action that these young people considered to be the paramount motivator.

Postscript: New Media, Old Truths

To those who say people wouldn't look;
they wouldn't be interested;
they're too complacent, indifferent and insulated,
I can only reply:
There is, in one reporter's opinion, considerable evidence against that contention.

But even if they are right, what have they got to lose?

Because if they are right, and this instrument is good for nothing but to entertain, amuse and insulate, then the tube is flickering now and we will soon see that the whole struggle is lost.

This instrument can teach, it can illuminate;
yes, and it can even inspire.
But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends.

Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.

There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance and indifference. This weapon of television could be useful.

Edward R. Murrow on television,

RTNDA Convention Speech, 1958

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