

Panel Civicweb

The case of the missing forums: user voice and interactive features on youth civic websites in the UK

Dr Shakuntala Banaji, Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Institute of Education, UK

Introduction – young people, digital technologies and the civic sphere

The discussions in this paper can be located within three intersecting spheres of social science thinking: one which deals with the advent of new technologies and their interaction with social circumstances and actions; a second that focuses particularly on the relationship between citizens and politics or the public sphere and can be termed civic engagement; and third one that deals with ideas about young people, particularly in relation to learning and political or civic socialization. Each of these fields has its own peculiarities, and can be approached from a variety of directions and disciplines. The approach taken in this paper is at the intersection of Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Sociology, and advocates the need to look across texts, producers, audiences/users and contexts in an attempt to understand the field of ideas, resources and skills, political assumptions and pedagogies that constitutes the online civic sphere for young people in the UK.

Arguments suggesting that (new) technologies fundamentally alter social relationships and political landscapes are not new. As Norris (2002) and Warschauer (2002) discuss, from radio, television and the telephone to the mobile phones, and the internet, each technology, which was new in its time, has been hailed by techno-optimists as the potential solution to a wide array of social problems and decried by techno-pessimists as themselves initiating new social or political challenges. During the last decade increasing attention in both the academic and policy spheres has been devoted to the possibilities offered by the internet and digital communication technologies for involving young people in political deliberation and civic action. Of the features most stressed in such studies, 'interactivity' appears most often as the characteristic of the internet (Newhagen,

1997) which distinguishes it from 'old' media, disrupts the 'one-to-many' communication model of mass media (Lievrouw, 2002; Murray, 2003) in a revolutionary manner, and, with its apparent potential for increasing vertical as well as horizontal communication, is the main feature of the internet considered by cyber-optimists to have a significant democratising effect (Benkler, 2006).

Commentators such as Bentivegna (2002) and Tapscott (1998) have enthused about the connections between young people's skills and predilections and the role of new technologies of communication in their lives. Tapscott's work focused attention on the idea of fundamental properties that differentiate various media from each other and the abilities and predispositions that dissociate generations from each other. Television, which in his account, has shaped the consciousness of the generation termed 'baby boomers', is an irredeemably *authoritarian* and *passive* medium. The 'Net-Generation', by contrast, he sees as being wedded to the internet in democratic, creative and active ways. In this view, the internet is fundamentally an open, participatory, innovative, free, dialogic medium which is rendering the building of communities possible in myriad new ways; Tapscott moves through its apparent propensity to encourage playful learning and its interactivity, to the conclusion that it is engendering new collective, non-hierarchical forms of politics and participation which appeal to the Net Generation particularly poignantly. Among others, Buckingham's (2006: 9-11) critique of Tapscott's position identifies it as technologically determinist, and critiques its view of the internet and the world wide web as emerging from a value neutral and socially opaque context. More sweeping critics of such cyber-utopianism, Cordes and Miller (2002), for instance, deny even the mild claims to agency and novelty being made on behalf of new technologies as social and educational tools. Others examine how new communication technologies contribute to offline social difficulties such as bullying (Kowalski, Limber and Agatson, 2008).

Between these two extremes, there are a number of diverse positions that acknowledge the heterogeneity of young people and of experiences of the internet (Atton, 2002; Buckingham and Willett, 2006; Livingstone, 2007; Warschauer 2004). Some of these studies point to persistent digital and social divides as evidence that political life for young people does not change automatically following the advent of digital technologies.

Mark Warschauer problematises the notion of the digital divide expressed in terms of people's *access to the technology* as a one-off investment. Paralleling digital access with literacy, he suggests that there are varieties of literacies and different degrees of access, to the technology, to the finances that will keep that technology relevant and up-to-date, to the ideas, skills and methods that will allow one to use technology, such as the internet, in socially or personally beneficial ways. We must be careful of overstating the importance of the physical presence of computers. He argues that 'the notion of a binary divide between haves and have-nots is thus inaccurate and can even be patronising because it fails to value the social resources that diverse groups bring to the table....' Furthermore, the notion of a digital divide, he suggests, 'implies a chain of causality: the lack of access (however defined) to computers and the internet harms human life chances. While this point is undoubtedly true, the reverse is equally true; those who are already marginalised will have fewer opportunities to access and use computers and the Internet' (2004: 7). Lisa Lee (2008) confirms that while young people from underprivileged social groups may well engage for specific moments of their lives with aspects of new digital technologies online and learn specific skills and attitudes towards the technology, this does not translate into a change in their social position in later life. In fact, she cautions that a refusal to deal with the fact that internet use too 'becomes inscribed with class through practices that may be related to inclinations and/or opportunities' (2008: 150) might further harm the life chances of poorer young people. In the same vein, Hargittai and Walejko (2008: 239), examine what they term a 'participation divide' arguing that notwithstanding 'new opportunities' to engage in the creation and online sharing of digital content, 'relatively few young people are taking advantage of these recent developments'. Their analysis shows that 50% of their sample is most likely to post written content in the form of fiction – poems or stories – or videos, with other forms such as non-fiction, music and artistic content lagging far behind. The confidence in using aspects of net tools which is clearly a factor inflecting content sharing is not evenly distributed across populations of young people (Lee 2008: 137). So, bearing in mind these real-world circumstances and cautions, what if anything can be asserted about the connections between young people, digital technologies and the online public sphere in countries with high degrees of internet penetration?

Certainly, research evidence from Europe and North America suggests that a greater proportion of younger people than other generations use the internet, and in particular its

newest features, for sociable, creative and leisure purposes (boyd, 2008; Willett, 2008; Montgomery et al, 2004; Raynes-Goldie and Walker, 2008). Raynes-Goldie and Walker remind us that, as scholars such as Michael Delli Carpini have argued, 'efforts in the online civic engagement space are often more strongly suited for enabling or more deeply engaging young people who are already civic minded' (2008: 161). Crucially, new digital internet tools do enable new forms of creativity, communication and participation, but not necessarily for all young people, or for the groups who are most excluded historically in the offline sphere by socio-economic factors. However, side-stepping such significant research findings in order to concentrate on assertions of young people's technological expertise and excitement about social uses of the internet, a number of studies have attempted to suggest that the comfort and confidence some young people display around new media can be employed to better their relationship with traditional political processes and their participation in civil society. The following section outlines some of the arguments made in three representative studies.

Failing to engage – poor design, un-interactive tools or just too 'thin' democracy?

The views discussed in this section fall broadly into three categories, each of which use examples of e-democracy initiatives to examine the potentials and failings of current online spaces for youth civic engagement. The first set focuses attention on the manner and process of the design of such spaces and stresses the need for more participatory and peer-orientated design processes as a prerequisite for youth-appealing civic sites. Macintosh et al (2003: 43) examine action taken to address what they call 'young people's apathy to the democratic process and politics in general, by considering possibilities for using information and communication technology to engage young people'. While the bulk of this article is devoted to an examination of two Scottish e-democracy initiatives with young people, the theorizing of these initiatives is based on a barely explored link between politics and new media:

Despite active interest in and engagement with a variety of issues, many young people are "turned off" to adult politics by dislike of party structures, the style of debate, and the formality of communication. Nevertheless, studies of how young

people use media (e.g., Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) show that they have very broad media literacy.

The U.K. government's consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy (United Kingdom Cabinet Office, 2002) stresses the need to better engage young people and highlights that more than 80% of 16- to 24-year-olds have accessed the Internet at sometime. There is an opportunity to build on young people's generally strong uptake of the Internet as a medium for entertainment and learning and use this as a lever for democratic involvement.

(Macintosh et al, 2003: 44-45)

As in the commonsense notion that two dissimilar things or people placed side by side will 'rub off on each other', statements such as these can make it seem that some (magic) transfer is likely occur between the motivation to 'play', 'chat' or 'shop' online and the motivation to debate deliberate, protest and vote online if young people are given opportunities. As these authors' referencing of other literature suggests, they are not alone in suggesting this link. However, ultimately their analysis adds the warning that young people care about being *listened to* as much as they do about technological tools and must be included in e-design processes. Going some way towards admitting that what is at issue here is a question of motivation, as much as of opportunity, they caution that the right design and right technological tools are important in getting young people not to 'switch off' before they have absorbed enough complex secondary information to participate in online public deliberation on a given topic.

The second strand of research and analysis reviews an increasingly rich and organic online sphere for youth civic participation, but argues the need for the further use of interactive and socially orientated technological tools on civic websites to engage young people growing up in an age of social-networking, file-sharing, blogging and podcasting. In their discussion of the manner in which the internet contributes to youth civic engagement in the United States, Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles are optimistic that the internet is already and will continue to generate new forms and venues for young people to learn about and participate in local, national and global society (2006:146). They see its potential for developing *civic literacy* as one of its most hopeful outcomes.

However, they appear to link the use of certain new digital tools and applications to the potential outcome of the process of developing such engagement when they caution that 'much of the information available online is non-interactive in form' (2006: 143):

Many civic websites present valuable information, but in ways that fail to exploit the internet's potential to promote active engagement and dialogue. Frequently, information is presented as static text that could as well be found in a printed newsletter or book, underutilizing the internet's powerful technological interactivity, and, in doing so, missing out on an array of options for engaging young people more directly with civic content. (2006: 143)

But, leaving aside the complicated issue of what a more *direct* form of engagement online might look like, the question remains: does the fact that some young people may use the internet and its web 2.0 tools such as wikis, podcasts, blogs, file sharing sites and social software more than other generations for socializing, information gathering or leisure purposes (boyd, 2008) necessarily mean that they will be *motivated* to use it for equal volumes of civic or political deliberation and intervention?

The third strand in such research on civic spaces online comes from those who argue powerfully for attention to be paid not only to technological and interactive features but also to the civic and democratic models to which youth civic initiatives subscribe, either on or offline (Dahlberg, 2001; Ridell, 2002; Albrect, 2003). A major proponent of the internet as a space where young people are creatively appropriating and 'remixing' aspects of cultural content from the digital to the social, Stephen Coleman (2008: 203-204) emphasises the need for the following characteristics of online youth civic spaces: non-interference from government; total freedom of expression; horizontal as well as vertical channels of communication; dialogic links with those in authority; clear agreements about what involvement will achieve; an openness to opposing points of view; a commitment to mobilizing against social injustice; the valuing of emotion and everyday political experience; enthusiasm about technological innovation and a desire to challenge existing stereotypes about youth identities.

While Coleman's argument usefully complicates the apparently clear-cut distinction between (young people's) use of commercialised/individualised media cultural models

and efficacy at rational debate in the civic sphere (Dahlberg, 2001: 628), there are aspects of his own rhetoric with regard to what he calls the 'analog and digital models of e-citizenship' (Coleman 2008: 202-2004) which make claims for young people and politics that might seem to remove them from the sense of history and mundane reality they appear to champion:

Democracy, which has often seemed to be anaesthetized by constitutionality, is rooted in expressive, cathartic and carnivalesque practices that connect public policy to mundane culture. But the e-citizenship projects we have explored tend to be characterized by an earnest solemnity: a language and an aesthetic that allows little room for the banal sociability and cathartic frivolity that has contributed the success of some of the most culturally radical social movements in the history of democracy. (2008: 203)

But while the need to move beyond 'rational deliberation' models on the one hand 'collective solidarity' models on the other is stated in precise terms, the nature of an appeal to young people who feel that 'these institutional arrangements, this language of ideology and policy, these battles of winners and losers' are not for them (2008: 203) is left vague and, more pertinently, dependent on the enthusiastic uptake by government of the idea for the kinds of fully-funded but open, critical and uncensored online spaces outlined above. In an attempt to understand the practical implications of such suggestions, the following sections in this paper will engage with aspects of the three broad and overlapping critiques outlined via a case-study of two youth civic sites in the UK.

Civic websites for youth in the UK: methodology and broad findings

For this section, I draw on a qualitative analysis of a range of youth civic websites in the UK, covering issues of content, design and interactivity for the project Civicweb¹. This analysis provides an in-depth understanding of the different ways in which issues are represented, and in which young people who visit the site are addressed, constructed, invited to participate and to sustain their participation. Within the broader sample of sites I have analysed for the project, I compare sites that appear to be using the language of

¹ Funded by the European Union under Framework 6.

youth empowerment within more traditional civic organisations, with those that have grown out of specific historical or political circumstances and seem to be fulfilling a role for which there was a perceived need.

At present in the UK, the promotion of civic participation among young people is a priority for a number of charitable and other non-governmental organisations led by, with and/or for young people. Some of these projects have both an on and an offline incarnation, whereas others operate primarily online and were set up with the objective of reaching young people who might not have been reachable in the offline realm. Some of these projects aim to tap the potential of digital media and especially of web 2.0 features such as video uploads, podcasts and forums as new means for civic engagement (Civicweb, deliverable 6, 2007). *MediaSnackers*, for instance, has a whole array of new digital tools both for the use of young people and for training young people and adults in new media communication skills, pleasures and uses. It is their view that new media communication is not a given for everyone and that skills can and need to be taught. Other sites in the UK Civicweb study rely on what might be termed new forms of political participation such as 'ethical consumerism' to invite their young audiences. *Generation Why*, for instance, is explicit in linking pleasurable consumption to ethical and political issues in their online shopping section and on other areas of the site. But the meaning of civic communication and active participation are themselves not clearly delineated or defined things and need to be interpreted in relation to the producers' intentions, pedagogy and ideological content of the sites and users experiences. Here I focus specifically on those that engage with new digital, and particularly web 2.0, features as a central part of their invitation to young people to learn about or exercise their rights as citizens.

Among the questions and themes I address in my comparative case-study are the following:

- **Multimodality.** How does the site use different modes of communication, and for what purposes? For example, do the images function merely as illustrations, or play a more prominent role? What other things can users 'do' or 'see' on the site? How are users invited to 'read' these different modes?

- **Navigation.** How does the site direct users through the material? For instance, is the material organised hierarchically and in a necessary sequence, or can users explore more freely? How much instruction or scaffolding is given to users in helping them to navigate, and is this sufficient?
- **Address.** How is the user addressed, both verbally, visually and technologically? What assumptions are made about the characteristics (needs, interests, cultural orientations) of young people in particular? To what extent, and how, is the site teaching, selling, or engaging the user in a dialogue about democracy?
- **Representation.** In what ways does the site frame and convey the political issues with which it is concerned – in particular in relation to notions of empowerment and democracy? How are these ideas invoked in the specific act of using web 2.0 tools? How is the civic status of the technological tools established and legitimated?

The sites in the study were chosen based on several criteria, notably genre and the range and types of models of civic practice and digital communication that they incorporated and employed either explicitly or implicitly. The analysis of the design features of the two contrasting civic websites *MuslimYouth.net* and Unicef's *YouthVoice* in the following section calls upon aspects of Kress and van Leeuwen's work on multimodality. Their analyses of meaning use three functional categories for the interpretation and exploration of media texts: representational, orientational and compositional. Here I discuss the websites with reference to their orientational functions, especially attending to the ways in which young audiences are invited to interact with the websites in terms of both the website as a series of *technological tools* as well as the website as a *repository of ideology*. The deployment of these theories in Burn and Parker's (2003) work has provided a sense of the positioning of audiences by the rhetoric of websites, while Lupton and Miller's work on the connections between ideology, representation and design focus attention on: '[s]pacing, framing, punctuation, type style, layout and other non phonetic structures of difference [which] constitute the material interface of writing... and thinking' (Lupton and Miller, 1996). As a corollary, I analyse the construction of the construction of the idea of civic participation within these sites linked to the use or lack of web 2.0 features, of which User Forums will be used as a specific example.

Case studies: *Muslim Youth.net* and *Unicef Youth Voice*

The youth civic sites *Unicef Youth Voice* and *Muslim Youth.Net* prove interesting contrasting case studies of what could be termed a 'managed' and an 'autonomous' (or in this case semi-autonomous) youth civic organisation in the online sphere (Coleman 2008) while at the same time blurring some of the distinctions between these two supposed types of sites. They both aim to foster civic participation and engagement through online activities but basing themselves on differing ideological, pedagogic and technological frameworks.

Unicef is a long-established global charity with a history of Global fundraising and advocacy work on behalf of impoverished children and young people. Most of their campaigns have involved adults or famous figures raising money for or awareness about the plight of deprived children in the underdeveloped world. Evolving from a site called *therightssite*, in 2006 *Youth Voice* was started by the Unicef youth team with the aim of suggesting that there are deprived, under-educated and dis-engaged youth in developed countries such as the UK who need a 'voice' or a platform to express their 'voice' and that these youth can be 'empowered' by taking action to educate and help other young people (Wright, producer interview 2007). The site uses bright colours, numerous images, a small amount of written text (expandable by clicking on specific links), a small number of embedded videos and online games to engage young people in its pro-child campaigns and its education about issues such as the prevention of HIV transmission and the rights of the child. The site receives between 5000 and 6000 unique visitors per month, and has about 500 visitors a month to its facebook page, which is an innovation acknowledging the perceived popularity of social-networking sites amongst young people². Crucially, this is an internally-funded site that needs to meet the targets set by the Unicef board to justify its budget each year.

Muslim Youth.net, which was started in 2002 and grew out of *Muslim Youth Helpline* which started in 2001 by a single young person Mohammad Syed Mamdani, is now an independent charity run by trustees, a dedicated youth team and around seventy diverse

² The number of visitors is an issue that will be examined further later in the paper.

young volunteers working between three and eight hours a week on the site. There are some young part-time and full-time paid staff who update content on the site and look after its day-to-day running, which is funded by grant applications to local charitable trusts and to official bodies the department for education in the government as well as the national lottery's Camelot foundation. The notion of 'Muslimness' employed by the site is inclusive and more cultural than Islamic according to the sites' producers³; there are volunteers from different communities of Muslims of Asian, African, American and European descent, from Sunni, Shia and Sufi backgrounds and from different ages and genders. The site's offline work includes a sister organisation *Muslim Youth Helpline* and various outreach programmes such as those encouraging voting in UK National and local elections and one aiming to support and educate young Muslim prisoners and their families about the challenges of community reintegration after imprisonment. The site's online activities include a large array of relatively busy forums, with topical political, social and cultural issues debated, sometimes within but more typically away from a religious framework. The site has several thousand regular users and over 300,000 unique visitors to date.

Despite their rather different sets of producers *MuslimYouth.Net* and *YouthVoice* share the aim of providing young people in the UK with information about contemporary social issues and the potential for engaging with and in social transformation. They make this offer concrete via different online digital tools such as e-petitions, user generated content and forums in one instance or photographs, videos and polls in the other.). Interviews with the producers of these sites suggest that there is an overlap of ages and that children as young as eleven years old, read, contribute to and moderate content on *Muslim Youth.net*⁴ while users of *Youth Voice* might be as young as thirteen but are typically a few years older. The websites' formal characteristics show differences in the ways they attempt to inform and engage young people.

The distinct use of principles of visual design in presenting information sets out two subtly overlapping forms of engagement between young people: one is based initially on a concept of 'rational-critical engagement' and 'rational debate', rarely achieved but argued to be the most desirable mode of political engagement in the public sphere

³ Producer interview, MYN June 2007.

⁴ Civicweb, *Muslim Youth* producer interview, June 2007

(Dahlberg, 2001). The other is based on the up-front provision of space for 'emotional engagement', followed by rational, and primarily altruistic, 'information seeking' as a preface to empowerment and 'solidarity action' in the public/civic sphere. The rational element invites the audience to read, compare, evaluate and interpret information presented in the site with that found in other areas and already held by individuals. In the first case the emotional invitations are not as overt, but are embedded in the political and social pre-dispositions and views of users and in the promise of a place for the free discussion of these beliefs and feelings. In the second, the invitations to emotional engagement are based on overt forms of affective experience assumed to be connected to the connotations of images, language, colour and other visual cues; Jay Lemke's distinction (2002) between two notions of text, the semiotic-text and the meaning-text is helpful here. The semiotic-text is the sequence of signs presented by the web producers to their audience, offering implied routes of reading around the visual design of the web page. The meaning-text is an individual's personal interpretation of the semiotic-text, which determines each individual's personal interaction with the webpage and, mostly importantly, the ways that individual experiences the content (ideological and informational) of the media-text.

As suggested in the work of Macintosh *et al* on participatory design, this becomes really significant in such websites because the mediated experience of the content of the web-pages may affect a user's future decision to take part in or refrain from forms of online or offline civic participation. User focus groups Civicweb⁵ indicate that visual strategy of Unicef Youth Voice has a divided reception that appears to be based preponderantly, in this sample, on gender. While there is obviously a danger of reading too much into two groups, it is interesting that the young women's focus group was both collectively and individually more favourable towards *Youth Voice*, feeling that they were being addressed directly and in a manner to their liking by the bright primary colours and many images. They were appreciative of the design choices and felt that they would not 'click-off' the site because they would be engaged by its homepage design. While navigating

⁵ Held in Stroud, Gloucestershire, with White two separate gender groups of British 16-18 year olds on 1st April 2008. These focus groups fit into the third section of the Civicweb project, which examines both quantitatively – via a Europe-wide survey – and qualitatively via in-depth interviews with 50 users in each participant country, the opinions, practices and perceptions of diverse 15-25 year olds with respect to politics, civic action, the internet and the intersection between these. During the interviews, participants were invited to access, navigate around and comment on some of the websites covered during the projects' survey of civic websites.

around the site, they appeared to be intrigued by the proffered opportunities for helping others, moving immediately from the current news sections to the tabs for taking action and becoming involved. The previously generalised expression of a feeling that they wished they could contribute to making their society 'better' in some way found a focal point in the initial offerings of the site because they felt that it might provide them with guidance about how to actualise their concerns.

The young men's focus group, by comparison, recognised that they were (part of) the intended target audience of the Unicef *Youth Voice* site, but felt that apart from the games section and the image of a famous person, the 'child-like' design of the site would make them shy away from being pursuing its perceived messages. They felt uncomfortable with the images; yet agreed that they would not read lots of text. They were disturbed by the images of 'third world' children, because they assumed they were meant to feel pity for them; but did not want to do anything to follow up on that pity. Although these seem like pertinent responses from a design point of view, they suggest that static visual communication can be interpreted in many ways; they also need to be understood in context as a complicated snapshot of reception of civic sites, particularly the fact that using single-sex interview groups may inevitably produce findings about gender difference and that users display contradictory impulses towards sites.⁶

MuslimYouth.net's home page offers a dense and multiply-connected hyper-textual network (Burn and Parker, 2003) mainly composed of text-links. The main 'services' of the website are classified under the headings: 'guidance', 'community', 'campaigns', 'Internet counselling', 'support service' and 'events'. There are two ways in which it is possible to interact with the services and information on the site: the first is by using the text-links in the top right-hand corner (Figure 1).

⁶ The responses of mixed gender groups from different backgrounds will be explored further as part of the on-going work of the project.



Figure 1. Muslim Youth.net – March 2008

This allows entry into the first page of each level two service. The second is by using the text-links on each section of the homepage. This allows direct access to the news or the topic discussed in each category. The only photographic images on the homepage accompany the text-based links under the categories of 'Guidance' and 'Campaign' (Figure 2) marking out a seriousness of address which persists throughout the site but, as will be seen in the following section, does not rule out the expression of strong emotion in the forums, thus avoiding what might appear to be a misleading dichotomy: verbal engagement = rational while visual engagement = emotional.



Figure 2 MuslimYouth.net – March 2008

The web-pages under 'Guidance' and 'Campaigns' are indicated as the most important pages of the site by the size of their bubbletext and the amount of information. Reading-paths (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) seem strongly encouraged by the structure of the pages. Certainly individual young readers can access the information according to their own interest, but this is inflected by the structure of the pages. (Fig.3, Fig.4, Fig.5).



Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5: Suggested reading paths for *Muslim Youth . Net*.

Unicef YouthVoice aims to build a network of young people in the UK, aged 11-18, who are committed to children's and young people's rights and who are aware of their own social power. In the words of the website's editor, this knowledge and the confidence and skills needed to campaign for change are a form of 'empowerment'.⁷

⁷ Civicweb, interview with Jessica Wright, December 12th 2007

The home page is divided into three sections: the top area is the main feature of the website template. It shows the 'Youth Voice' as well as 'Unicef' global charity logo. The website uses a high proportion of images to written information. The text links on the in the righthand column under 'Latest News' or at the bottom ('Join' 'Search' Jargon Buster and 'Contact Us') can be used as alternative routes to access other areas of the site. (Fig.6)



Fig.6 Unicef Youth Voice Homepage March 2008

Turning our attention to the main area of the website, it is possible to see that the home page design for each topic: 'Home', 'About us', 'Latest news', 'Rights', 'Reality Check', 'Do something' and 'Play' is composed of photographic or other pictorial links, which are designed to attract users' attention and to signal to users that this is a site for young people. As we can see from Figure 7, there are nine photographic images on the 'Reality Check' mainpage. These images are close-ups of children from the Third World. They follow the visual conventions adopted by UNICEF in representing the work the charity does around the world to help and support children's rights as do the ones in Figure 8, reached by clicking the 'Poverty' tab.

While the photographs aim to establish a direct and personal relationship with users of the website in two ways – via the use of 'demand images', for instance of children

looking at the user and establishing eye contact – and with the use of close-ups of details, such as a little arm being injected with an anti-infection vaccine or children’s hands holding cups of milk, the emotional matrix of this relationship is, ironically perhaps, primarily built on empathy and generalised rational altruism rather than on specific personal emotional investments, as will be seen to be the case in the discussion forums of *MuslimYouth.net*.

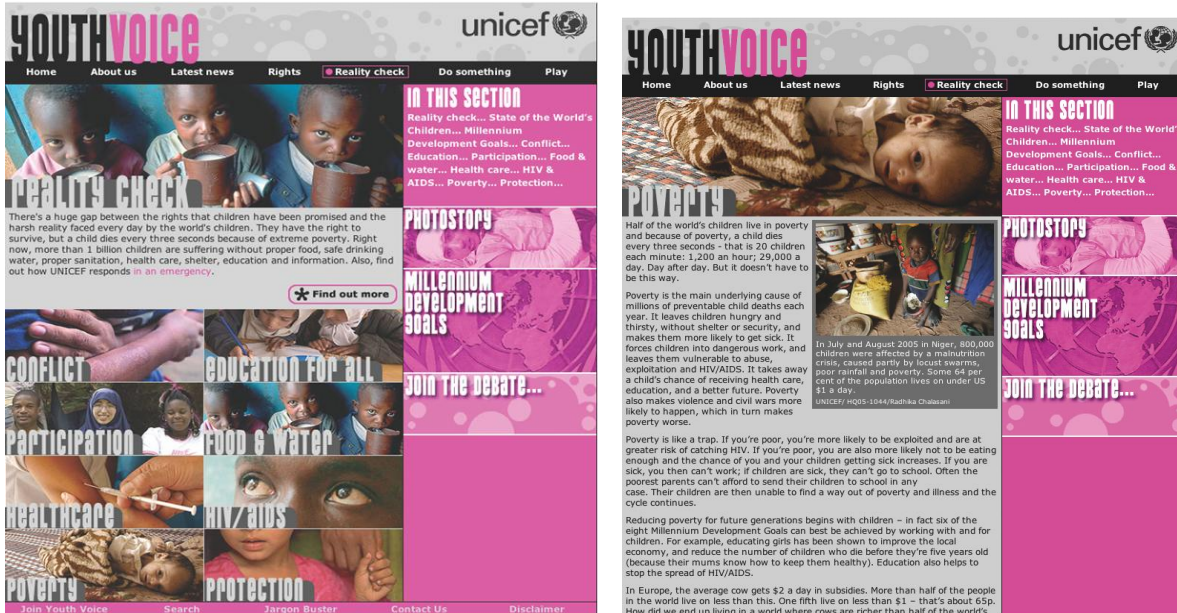


Figure 7 and Figure 8 Unicef Youth Voice March 2008

The navigation of *Youth Voice* is not as ‘guided’ as in the *MuslimYouth.net*. In fact in the light of Lemke’s distinction between two notions of text, the semiotic-text and the meaning-text, it is possible to suggest that users are presented with choices allowing them to navigate the website according to their personal emotional engagement with the visual and written cues.

In the ‘Reality Check’ session of the site it is possible to access ‘photo-stories’ via the text-links of the right column. (Fig.9. Fig.10, Fig.11). This is consonant with the use of photographic reportage as a ways of engaging the site’s young users both intellectually and emotionally.



Fig.9, Fig.10, Fig.11

MuslimYouth.net: dialogic civic action on and offline

The site encourages young Muslims to develop peer-support networks, access specialist services and care for their social and psychological wellbeing. This aim is facilitated through the design of online forums and chat rooms. Offline participation is also facilitated through the design of a calendar, which displays monthly events in which young people are invited to take part (Figure 12). Participation in these offline events is repeatedly encouraged, but only after the information has been read or scanned. This is suggested by the fact that, on the home page, they are laid out at the bottom.



Figure 12 Muslim Youth.net events

While *Muslim Youth.net* appears to call upon quite ‘adult’ religious authorities for advice on some of the issues raised (notably on ‘homosexuality and Islam’) and remains at times ideologically conservative or equivocal on individual rights in the domain of

sexuality, the site has a holistic and many-to-many approach to civic participation. It starts with discussion, focuses on topics that might be perceived as barriers to participation by the users – young people from Muslim communities across the UK – such as racism, ultra-religious dictates, imprisonment, Islamophobia, homophobia in the Muslim community and moves on to Global and local political issues inviting contributions from non-British Muslims and non-Muslim youth. Its strategy for motivating young people to return to site involves getting them to write about what their concerns are and putting up their comments, without fear of flaming, censorship, reprisal or adult disapproval. The offline civic actions of the network militate against conformism and against the conservatising influences within particular communities in that there are links with young people in prison, education and political education campaigns making different generations and types of Muslims speak to each other and via the sister site, Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH), a confidential telephone and e-mail counselling service for young people there is the option of getting advice on frightening, depressing or difficult situations.

MuslimYouth.net is entirely designed and managed by groups of young people, broadly of Muslim heritage, but from diverse parts of the globe and hence with a diverse series of beliefs and attitudes towards religion, politics and civil society as well as their own identities which are an ever-present locus of angst and debate. The website ‘speaks’ (Burn and Parker 2003) with multiple voices of young people, who are writing the articles and dialoguing in forums and chat rooms as well as the young volunteers who are moderating these forums, deciding between topics and steering content. The tone of the website is serious but conversational, unthreatening and yet respectful of the specific young people using the site and of differences between them. Take for instance the following explanation of the site’s swearing policy:

Why are swear words used in some of the articles?

Many young people, including Muslim youth, use swear words to express their feelings and emotions. Whilst we do not tolerate personal insults, abuse or graphic language, we are committed to removing barriers and censorship which restrict young people from expressing themselves and convey distorted, ‘palatable’ images of social problems.

Figure 13 <http://www.muslimyouth.net/aboutus.php>, 20th March 2008

Young people often communicate with peer groups on the internet. They do this primarily for sociable and leisure purposes via email, instant messaging, social networking and fan-fiction sites and when requesting information, for instance from sites such as *TeenageHealthfreak* (<http://www.teenagehealthfreak.org>). *MuslimYouth.Net* is a space for raising and sharing ideas that clearly do not fall into the former categories. Yet its clear acknowledgement that certain formalities deter young people from participating, even when they want to do so, by making them feel frustrated or inferior is characteristic of the young site moderators' and editors' thoughtful approach to issues of age and maturity as well as to their desire for a slightly iconoclastic approach to the realm of adult/traditional politics and religion. The fact that some swearwords are allowed on the site means that the written text becomes more closely linked with the spoken or heard text in users' minds and when reading some of the posts the 'voice' of the writer is most certainly felt more clearly than it is on sites with a parent organisation's identity to protect such as *Oxfam Generation Why* (<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/generationwhy>), *HeadsUp* (<http://www.headsup.org.uk>) or *Unicef YouthVoice*. Yet, as will be discussed, the site is highly moderated, there is no flaming allowed, and adult voices are frequently in evidence on other sections of the site. In fact, the statement about swearing which is quoted, while it might be read by older young people for guidance, appears via its vocabulary – 'barriers', 'palatable' – to be intended for an audience of adults, even potential funders, rather than young users. This mixture must serve as a reminder that there may be some truth in Chris Atton's suggestion that, in the study of alternative media exemplars such as this one:

We need to consider not only form and content, but also the processes and relations that inform them and that are in turn informed by them. The study of alternative media needs to interrogate identities and practices that are negotiated across the terrain of a third space that hybridizes practices between hegemonized and marginalized cultures. (Atton: 2003: 152)

Assuming that the forums of *MuslimYouth.net* may be considered such a third space, how do the negotiations of identity and position taking place therein inform political practices and relations?

Politics/Web 2.0 Forums: wasteful babble or informed debate?

Work by a variety of scholars on internet forums and their users (Albrecht, 2006, Olsson, 2006) suggests ways of analysing the connections between user motivations, producer choices and the content posted by both users and producers in such online spaces. The forums on *Muslim Youth.net* are divided into easy to understand and navigate categories:

Announcement:

- *Accommodation*
- *General*

Guidance:

- *Addictions*
- *Culture*
- *Mental health*
- *Politics*
- *Relationships*
- *Sexuality*

Campaign:

- *Behind the Bars*

Miscellaneous:

- *Humour*
- *Sport*
- *Chit Chat*

Investigating a level further, there are many threads posted in the forums. I skip over a few of them to show these, in the Culture and Politic Forums:

CULTURE

TV and religion 'Can religious people watch TV?'

<http://www.muslimyouth.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4118>

Ten excuses not to wear a hijab

<http://www.muslimyouth.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3800>

What is culture?

<http://www.muslimyouth.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4111>

POLITICS

Do you vote for the election of this country?

<http://www.muslimyouth.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3941&start=0&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=>

Our role in Britian

<http://www.muslimyouth.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4158>

Figure 14 Muslim Youth.net culture and politics forum threads

There are a number of different perspectives from which a ‘snapshot’ case-study of these online conversations could be undertaken: one would be to consider each single comment posted and analyse it individually for its civic content and political connotations; another would be to follow a single thread to try to understand the different discourses being used on that thread; yet another approach would be to try to understand the posts by a single young user across many threads. Having taken each of these approaches in turn during preliminary analyses, I suggest that these postings can be understood as young people’s attempts to interpret important and influential aspects of and events in their lives, to put this thinking into words, and to test it out in discussions with others members of the forums with whom they feel relatively secure. This is not a top-down or even a consultative governmental e-democracy exercise in the sense outlined by the case studies mentioned in the previous section and its effectiveness needs to be thought about in a more holistic and less goal-driven manner.

From the discussions, which are short and often phrased as ‘big faith’ or ‘heard from somewhere statements’, one gets the impression that many of the young people are going through a series of struggles in negotiating cultural, religious and political issues: with themselves, with their peers, with the notion of having both Muslim and non-Muslim peers; with adults in general; with the British media and government establishment who might want to label them in a particular way; with the religious establishment who might want to label them in some other way; with those who espouse political or even extremist forms of Islam; with those who see all Islam as political and extremist. From discussion to discussion and thread to thread, young people identify themselves differently, although there is some consistency in the postings. The result can be a

sense of confusion and circularity in the opinions stated and a lack of clarity in final positions on the topics discussed. This lack of clarity can lend itself either to political open-mindedness or to strengthening the negative or problematic assumptions about politics, religion and culture, which plague initial postings.

While the site wishes to be open and non-partisan⁸ and is not conventionally a religious site in that it does not confine itself to good works and the interpretation of scripture, religion is definitely an important element for many of the young users and for the site itself. Cultural and political issues are frequently addressed from a religious perspective, even from the perspective of local mullah's and religious leaders, albeit liberal ones. Some conversations or postings might be inaccessible to non-Muslims or those with no interest in faith because they contain references to religious 'rules' or 'statements' Nevertheless, the forum discussion threads have an array of postings rich from the point of view of citizenship or political educators. A few hundred young people from the age of eleven to thirty years old post on a regular basis trying to sort from an array of opinions and ideas on religion and politics, global, local and national issues and identities which exact ones they are going to be in favour of or against.

There is evidence of people changing their positions and altering their presentations of identities in the light of other users postings. Although the forums are moderated by young volunteers, the site's policy is generally to allow one of the more regular contributors to be a moderator on a particular day, and this seems to work well as there is very little flaming, but open and sometimes aggressive debate does take place.

One recent posting starts with one user in Manchester suggesting that Muslims should not be celebrating Easter only to have the harsh advice given taken up in a light-hearted and optimistic fashion by a poster from Southhall in London who reveal that they are both within the faith but also able to be humorous about its strictures. The entire exchange is positioned personally and socially, as well as in the realms of religion and politics:

b3l13v3r

⁸ *MYN* producer interview, June 2007, Rizwan Hussain and Adela Suleiman

Posted: Sun Mar 09, 2008 11:48 pm

QUOTE

Supreme



Joined: 18 Sep 2005

Posts: 10499

Location: manchester

Post subject: celebrating easter the muslim way

.boycott eggs for a period of 3 days from good friday to easter Sunday no eggs at all including no omelete or cadbury creme eggstell evryone easter is a festival set up by the kaafir to brainwash muslim youth into eating more eggs and forgetting to eat modestlycome out with the muslim bunny to get muslim youth back into the fold of islam

Jen

Posted: Sun Mar 09, 2008 11:50 pm

QUOTE



Elite



Joined: 06 Oct 2004

Posts: 2679

Location: southall

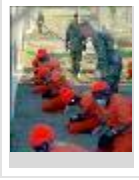
Post subject:

ah S**t...id already planned to buy all the muslims in my local masjid easter eggs!

b3l13v3r

Posted: Sun Mar 09, 2008 11:51 pm

QUOTE



Supreme



Joined: 18 Sep 2005

Posts: 10499

Location: manchester

Post subject:

they'l chuck you out

easter is haram

i remeber getting chucked out of mosque as a little kid just for wearing shorts..

Jen_

□ Posted: Sun Mar 09, 2008 11:53 pm

QUOTE



Elite



Joined: 06 Oct 2004

Posts: 2679

Location: southall

Post subject:

I got chucked out before for laughing during an urdu majlis..at a word that means

something rude in gujrati 😊

anyway, what'ss with all the easter hating...i love easter....its the start of spring...such a lovely time of year...and eating all that chocolate...yummm

[Back to top](#)

PROFILE

PM

b3l13v3r

Posted: Sun Mar 09, 2008 11:57 pm

QUOTE



Supreme



Joined: 18 Sep 2005

Posts: 10499

Location: manchester

Post subject:

i love easter too

but its imitating the kaafir and we are only given 2 days to celebrate september 11th and july 7th

Figure 15. Muslim Youth.Net Forum discussion

The last sentence of the exchange, which appears again to be a refusal of the 'integrationist'/'moderate' or pro-Easter egg position suggested by poster 'Jen', is laced with irony and a sense of frustration; but it has several possible meanings. It could be suggesting that following those events the only things that the writer thinks British

Muslims should celebrate are the destruction of people and places in the West represented by July 7th and September 11th. The comment might also suggest that the writer feels cornered into a position where non-Muslim suspicion and the attribution to them of feelings of celebration on the anniversaries of terrorist atrocities makes them cynically accept the label of 'radical'; and so they reject integration in the form of celebrating Christian Easter – which, note, they say they 'also love' because this would appear like seeking approval from the non-Muslims who despise them. The thread goes on to consider in quick succession: ways of celebrating Easter, eating chocolate eggs and what this actually symbolises, the commercialisation of Easter and the ways of bringing both young Muslims and those who just want to eat chocolate eggs back to an understanding of the authentic spirituality associated either a) with Easter or b) with the notion of being a Muslim and refusing to celebrate Easter. Either way, *religious and political seriousness* is seen as being opposed to both the *fun* and *commercial* aspects of Easter represented by the eating of chocolate eggs and bunnies.

Why is it important to have temporally-situated but also historicized accounts of civic forums?

Another two postings in the Politics forum - *Our role in Britain* and *Do you vote for the election of this country?* - serve to illustrate how interesting this site is in terms of its use of civic terminology and its approach to civic and political debates. Notably, while there are many occasional postings, the online conversations are often happening between the same three young people. Initially it was possible to feel that one had a clear grasp of the positions they were trying to sustain (one identifiable as the 'extremist/radical outsider' position within the UK; one the 'moderate' and one perhaps identifiable as 'pragmatic'). After reading the entire thread and several other threads, one may conclude that each of the positions is more complicated and can at times appear contradictory, like individuals presenting themselves through talk but in fact influenced by or taken up in opposition to the positions they perceive others to be taking.

The site tools make it possible for users to represent themselves in graphic form beside their postings, although the use of real photographs is discouraged on grounds of safety. In another example **b3l13v3r** (also present as 'Supreme', with an icon of an image from Guantanamo detention camp) has chosen a to represent herself iconically in this thread

(she is a young woman of 27 and we know about her identity from a posting in the culture thread about her protest against the obligation to wear the hijab/veil (<http://www.muslimyouth.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3800>) with an illustration of a bomb. This iconic reference could misleadingly influence a first reading of her position. I categorised her as wishing to be 'the extremist' or radical; but, following her postings through the threads it becomes apparent that she takes nuanced stances on many issues, throws off the possible extremist label and yet manages to stir up debate, suggesting an alternative reading of the 'bomb' metaphor. 'Hobbyiest', meanwhile is represented by a jockey icon of a blue blob with the head wrapped in bandages. Initially he/she could be viewed as the 'pragmatist', bringing real life examples to bear against discourses on religion and culture often managed by other young people with in-house references to religious, political and cultural beliefs, obligations or dogma. 'Newbie', the third poster in this thread, is represented by a blue heart. In a posting related to culture and TV, while 'Supreme' could have been interpreted as an 'extremist' denouncing the bad effects of TV and the fact that religious people should not watch it, Newbie was more the 'moderate', arguing the fact that TV is not bad in itself, it depends what you watch on it, a position that many non-Muslims might also hold. In the following discussion our opinions about these positions change dramatically. In *Our role in Britain* b3l13v3r starts the thread by outlining several positions, allying herself with what appears to be the most moderate or even conservative of them, at least as far as other posters are concerned:

What is our role in Britain?

Is it to bite the hand that feeds us?

To curse those who have given our family jobs?

They gave us opportunity to leave our homeland and gave us a job and home here.

Is our role in Britain to blame our government of having anti Muslim bias and feeling?

Is our role in Britain to pretend to follow British law but follow polygamy?

Is our role in Britain to boycott Israeli goods but then give our taxes to supply British armies in Iraq?

What is our purpose in Britain?

If we dislike it so much why don't we move out?

They gave us opportunity to leave our homeland and gave us a job and home here

What more do you want?

So tell me how do you give this dawah to Muslims and non Muslims?

And what have you achieved so far?

Hobbyist:

A typical moderate asks questions such as this. Explain why you have asked these questions and I'll happily reply.

My purpose in Britain is to give dawah to Muslims and non Muslims, to help work for unity, to help bring back something the British government destroyed.

Your role seems to be to suck up to the British and lick their ass, which is exactly what you're doing.

Newbie:

I don't owe anything to a country that raped my people.

Figure 16 MuslimYouth.Net Forum postings

These are the three initial positions, after this beginning a series of near-insults follow. They accuse each other of being either traitors to the queen or traitors to Islam. However, these positions reverse the trends apparently set by the same posters in other online threads on this site. In the thread entitled *Do you vote for the election of this country?* there are more participants. The discussion is based on the question: why do we vote in this country? Some of the posts mix up the civic value of voting – in its relation to the rights and duties of citizens – with the religious value of voting. The discussion moves from civic content to other mixtures of thoughts and ideas on culture, politics and religious obligations.

Thinking about the purpose of these forums as separate from the sites' other offline civic initiatives, the expectations that funding bodies have of them when evaluating their proposals, and the actual use being made of them, it is important not only to say what is

positive about this site and others with similar sorts of forums (safe places to test ideas; inviting everybody to access it; everybody can participate and state opinions) but also to ask about the limits that the medium imposes: does this online participation – which in this site seems to be about ‘depositing’ ideas which are yet to be fully clarified, and engaging in discussion about important and complicated issues with the aim of clarifying and testing individual positions – allow and facilitate offline civic participation and engagement?

Looking once more at Unicef Youth Voice one gets the feeling that the website ‘speaks’ the voice of Unicef Charity both in written and visual language, albeit in a more open, child-friendly, respectful and inviting style than the parent site. The website represents an idealised activist /role-model construction of (usually White) youth: are also often pictured helping poor children from the third world. The absence of other interactive communication tools, bar a few educational games and the odd poll is a result of the site’s budget⁹. With limited organizational space for volunteers, limited positions for interns, limited funding and the high cost of well moderated regularly updated forums, the opportunities for sustained participation online are limited and militate against a perception of the site itself as a locus for civic debate and action. To what extent the current site appeals to those who are already interested in issues of global justice is suggested by the producers’ suggestion that most of their volunteers are from high educational backgrounds and may be classified as middleclass. While this does not detract from the work they do for the organisation, or from the importance of their civic consciousness, the fact that they wish to have a career in the charities or Non-governmental sector does play a role in motivating their participation¹⁰. In the Unicef site, the ‘emotion’ used arises in a generalised manner from the visual connotations of fairly generic images of children/poverty/their joy/the success of volunteers. It also relies on altruistic/universal-symbolic emotions for its appeal. Whereas in the MuslimYouth.net there is an equal amount of emotion in the content and register of the avatars and postings (frustration, anger, humour, pride), this arises from the complex, and often self-centred, contradictory, exploratory, but nevertheless significant feelings of participants, and is nested within what could easily be misunderstood as an attempt at neutral or unemotional ‘rational debate’. On the whole, the second seems to be better at

⁹ Youth Voice Producer interview, 12 November 2007

¹⁰ Youth Voice Producer interview, 12 November 2007

maintaining continued engagement than the first which might guarantee a quicker response. On the one hand, these analyses should complicate simplistic design concepts that might overemphasise the connections between images, emotion and young people; on the other hand, it refocuses attention on the idea of motivation as a key to understanding sustained active participation in the civic sphere. But does an attempt to extend the civic potential of the internet depend on using participatory web 2.0 technologies which are absent on most websites, or only present in certain limited forms? The following section considers this question further in the light of the close analysis of sites offered here and discussions with producers.

Models for civic spaces online: web 2.0 tools, reconceptualising the youth audience or a redemocratised view of politics and civic action?

The foregoing sections suggest several key points. While some rhetorics about young people and new technologies see connections between the use of web 2.0 technological tools and young people's willingness to return and contribute to various civic websites, what is actually happening on civic websites for young people reflects a different picture. The websites in question often do not make use of the range of interactive and new media tools potentially available. Our survey of websites across the partner countries found that out of an average of ten (10) potential interactive tools for civic participation online such as photographic and video content, audio content, podcasts, wikis, blogs, file sharing, podcasting, forums, share-it function, chat-rooms and more, most civic websites for young people seem to use an average of 2.5. such tools, with a very small proportion using 4 and many more using none at all. Needless to say, the most common one was pictorial content, which is not necessarily viewed by many people as interactive at all (Civicweb, deliverable 13). But what do the missing forums and lack of other interactive tools tell us about the websites' purposes and strategies? And, equally importantly, can civic websites' success or lack of success in engaging young people be based, to any significant extent, on their use of web 2.0 technologies?

In the great majority of cases in the UK sample, on the evidence of the producers, the absence of forums, video-upload facility and podcasting is due to the limitations in budgets and funding; in others it represents a lack of interest in technology and a focus on pedagogy or communicating a specific ideology; in yet others it is a conscious choice

which relates to their understanding of the factors that motivate participation in the offline civic sphere which is a primary area of interest. The two websites used in the case-study in the previous section are in this sense representative of the sample as a whole – one uses loads of pictorial content, a few online polls and a few games, the other contains user-moderated forum discussion boards, a few images and a couple of other options such as occasional polls and the possibility of commenting on content. dana boyd notes that there are ‘four properties that fundamentally separate unmediated publics from networked publics’: ‘persistence’, ‘searchability’, ‘replicability’, ‘invisible audiences’ (boyd, 2008: 126). But the fact that these possibilities exist online and not offline does not mean that all users rely equally on all of them for their motivation to become part of an online public space. Focus group interviews suggest that the motivations for young people joining social networking sites such as Bebo when they first started were primarily social and psychological (to do with friendship, peer group issues and boredom) rather than related to the technology. And, now, these same group interviews point towards the fact that, for some, boredom and frustration has set in with social networking sites and applications and, while such sites are still used by the 15-20 year old age group, they are not used as heavily (Glaser, 2007) or with as much excitement and commitment as hype about them would suggest.

5. Conclusions

Not all young people are inherently drawn to websites that sport the latest and most cutting edge technologies. They are interested in being addressed with seriousness and they interpret this seriousness as being represented in both tone and design. On the evidence of users and of some producers interviewed for Civicweb, even static, leaflet-style websites can be useful in making participation stronger, drawing attention to key issues (for instance justice or injustice, or young people’s rights), if their mission is a potentially or actually democratic one and the language appeals and is accessible to young people. This suggests on the one hand that it is pointless to divorce the content and form of websites from each other and on the other that if the content does not appeal to young people then the expectation that technological tools will fill the gap in their attention and keep them coming back to the site is usually misplaced.

A focus on content and form combined still has to contend with the issues of pedagogy, mode and genre; for instance, a You Tube video of a youth demonstration or of a parliamentary debate on young people may be a more accessible format for disseminating the same content than lots of writing; and a blog might be less off-putting than an essay. However, this will not be the case for all young people, and while these formats can hardly be called interactive in a technological sense as users are not able to amend or upload their own content, getting users to generate and upload their own content on a regular basis requires huge input in terms of time and thought from producers.

Additionally, website producers themselves caution that we must be wary of assuming that interaction between site and users or users and each other always equates to something better than static content. Interaction can be very controlled too, over-moderated and highly policed or under-moderated and full of spam or flaming. The success – in terms of conversion from one-off to regular users – of *Muslim Youth.Net* can be attributed partly to their emergence out of a historical moment in which young Muslims in the UK felt themselves acutely to be the targets of internal community frictions, state repression and social scape-goating and partly to their thorough and vigilant but light-touch moderation of active forums and chat-rooms which serve the interests and needs of users rather than attempting to model and guide those interests. It is undoubtedly the case that for this site the presence of these web 2.0 tools do facilitate its civic activity and the loyalty of its users.

Nevertheless, the absence of forums on *Youth Voice* cannot be seen as the sole reason for the site's small user traffic, reasons which should also be sought in the constraints placed by ideological genesis and organisational structure. If one compares forums about leisure issues or television with even those of *Muslim Youth.Net*, it becomes clear that motivation to participate is linked directly to the pre-existing interest users have in an idea or issue rather than to the format per se. Motivations could have group characteristics or local, national and global characteristics or even more personal and individual existential grounds. The common thread, however, is that processes online need to be satisfying both emotionally and intellectually otherwise young people or adults, for that matter, would most likely disengage. This is the case in the offline sphere as much as it is online. However, one of the key motivating factors in either case

remains who is listening when one participates and the kind of response one gets, and only secondarily, what tools are used for the communication. Therefore we need to be aware that civic activities take place not only on obviously civic websites, let alone only via participatory technologies online. Blogs, Forums and other Web 2.0 technologies do have the potential to let people give expression to their politics in new and interesting ways, though they do not guarantee an audience of peers or a response from those in power. But then demonstrating offline does not guarantee a response, and it is still worth doing.

References:

Albrecht, S. (2006) 'Whose Voice is Heard in Online Deliberation?: A study of participation and representation in political debates on the Internet', *Information, Communication and Society*, Volume 9, No. 1, February 2006: 62-82

Amadeo, J (2007) 'Patterns of Internet use and political engagement among youth' in Dahlgren, P (ed.) *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation*, London and New York: Routledge: 103-124

Atton, C. (2002) *Alternative Media*, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage

Benkler, Y. (2006) *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* New Haven and London: Yale University Press
[http://www.benkler.org/wealth_of_networks/index.php?title=Download PDFs of the book](http://www.benkler.org/wealth_of_networks/index.php?title=Download_PDFs_of_the_book) last accessed 12th March 2008

Bentivegna, S. (2002) 'Politics and New Media'. in L. A. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds) *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs* London and Thousand Oaks, Sage: 50-61

boyd, d. (2008) 'Why Youth [heart] Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life' in *Youth, Identity and Digital Media* (ed) Buckingham, D. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press: 119-142

Burn, A. and Parker, D. (2003) *Analysing Media Texts*, London: Continuum

Civicweb, deliverable 6 (2007) *Websites and civic participation: a European overview*, available at www.civicweb.eu

Civicweb, deliverable, 13 (forthcoming) *Analysing Civic Participation Websites*, www.civicweb.eu

Dahlberg, L. (2001) 'The Internet and Democratic Discourse: exploring the prospects of online deliberation forums extending the public sphere', *Information, Communication and Society*, Volume 4, No. 4: 615-633

Glaser, M. (2007) 'Digging Deeper: Your Guide to Social Networking online' at http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2007/08/digging_deeperyour_guide_to_so_1.html, last accessed March 14th 2008.

Hargittai, E. and Walejko, G. (2008) 'The Participation Divide: Content Creation and Sharing in the Digital Age' in *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol. 11. No. 2: 239-256

Interview with Jessica Wright, Unicef Youth Voice web producer, November 12th 2007

Interview with Rizwan Hussain and Adela Suleiman, MYN site editor/ volunteer, June 2007

Kowalski, Limber and Agatson (2008) *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*, Oxford: Blackwell

Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006) *Reading Images: the Grammar of Visual Design*, Second Edition, USA and Canada: Routledge

Lee, L. (2008) The Impact of Young People's Internet Use on Class Boundaries and Life Trajectories *Sociology*, Volume 42, No. 1: 137-153.

Lemke, J. (2002) 'Travels in hypermodality', *Visual Communication*, Volume 1, No. 3: 299-325

Lievrouw, L. A. (2002) 'Introduction [to Part Two: Technology Design and Development]' *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs* in L. A. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds) London and Thousand Oaks: Sage: 131-135

Lievrouw, L. and Livingstone, S. (2002) 'Introduction. The Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs'. *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs* in L. A. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds) London and Thousand Oaks, Sage: 1-15

Livingstone, S. (2007) 'Interactivity and participation on the internet: Young People's response to the civic sphere' in Dahlgren, P (ed.) *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation*, London and New York: Routledge: 103-124

Lupton, E. and Miller, A. (1996) *Design, Writing, Research*, New York: Phaidon Press

Macintosh, A., Robson, E. Smith, E. and Whyte, A. (2003) 'Electronic Democracy and Young People' *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 21 No. 1: 43-54

Margolis, M. and Resnick, D. (2000) *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution"*, Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage

Montgomery, K. and Gottlieb-Robbles, B. Youth as e-citizens: the internet's contribution to civic engagement in Buckingham, D. and Willett, R. (eds) *Digital Generations:*

Children, Young People and New Media, New Jersey and London: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates Publishers: 131-148

Murray, J.H. (2003) 'Inventing the Medium' in N. Wardrip-Fruin and N. Montfort (eds) *The New Media Reader* Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 3-11

Newhagen, J. E. (1997). 'On hitting the agenda reset button for Net research, and getting it right this time'. Paper presented to The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, July-Aug. <http://jnews.umd.edu/johnen/research/agenda.htm>, last accessed 14th March 2008

Olsson, T. (1996) 'Active and Calculated Media Use Among Young Citizens: Empirical Examples from a Swedish Study' in Buckingham, D. and Willett, R. (eds) *Digital Generations: Children, Young People and New Media*, New Jersey and London: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates Publishers: 115-130

Raynes-Goldie, K. and Walker, L. (2008) 'Our Space: Online Civic Engagement Tools for Youth' in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth* (ed) Bennet, L. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press: 161-188

Ridell, S. (2002) 'The Web as a Space for Local Agency' in *Communications* 27: 147-169

Warschauer, M. (2004) *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* Cambridge, Mass, and London, UK: MIT Press

Weber, L. M., Loumakis, A. and Bergman, J. (2003) 'Who Participates and Why? An Analysis of Citizens on the Internet and the Mass Public' in *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 21 No. 1, Spring 2003: 26-42

Willett, R. (2008) 'Consumer Citizens Online: Structure, Agency, and Gender in Online Participation' in (ed.) Buckingham, D. *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, MacArthur Foundation Initiative on Digital Media and Learning, MIT Press: 49-69.

Websites:

<http://www.muslimyouth.net>

<http://www.unicef.org.uk/youthvoice>

<http://www.teenagehealthfreak.org.uk>

<http://mediasnackers.com>

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/generationwhy>

