



## CONSTRUCTING AUSTRALIAN YOUTH ONLINE

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## CONSTRUCTING AUSTRALIAN YOUTH ONLINE

### Empowered but dutiful citizens?

*This paper investigates whether youth-oriented websites can create new spaces for civic and political engagement. Through engagement with two areas of recent debate: the emergence of new forms of political participation through the internet and work on civic youth web spheres, it suggests that the national discursive context matters in understanding the availability of online civic opportunities. General findings show that young people are no longer labelled as politically apathetic, but have, instead, rejected institutionalized politics to focus on creating new spaces for everyday politics through local communities and the internet. However, this field tends to ignore diversity in political practices and preferences among young people and the continuing importance of official discourses in shaping opportunities for participation and engagement. In the Australian case, the state has remained a powerful actor, guiding young people into preferred forms of participation and has only had a limited foray into using innovative and interactive online mechanisms. Through content analysis of a mixture of government and community organization-led sites, that are either wholly online or tied to established offline organizations, this paper shows that a discourse and practice of managed, dutiful citizenship remains prevalent among sites aimed at the Australian youth. The sites that offer alternative, self-actualizing forms of citizenship expression and action for young people tend to be youth-led, online only, and receive advertising, rather than government-based, funding.*

**Keywords** youth participation; youth websites; Australia; citizenship

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## Introduction

When I started to write this paper, I noticed that it was the national Cyber Security Awareness Week in Australia and the federal government agency,

the Australian Communications and Media Authority, announced a number of new initiatives, including Cybersmart Hero, a new online anti-cyber bullying activity for students in the last year of primary school; a new SMS spam reporting tool; and Cybersafety Outreach – a programme to provide pre-service teachers with the skills and the confidence they will need to manage cybersafety education and awareness issues in schools today, and includes a section on e-security. Earlier in the year, we celebrated ‘Safer Internet Day’. While the Agency’s tagline is ‘communicating, facilitating, regulating’, it is quickly apparent that the discursive energy of local governance structures is mostly spent on discussing risk and safety issues to do with the internet. While there is a nascent focus on *facilitating* digital literacy, this has been overridden by a *protection* from cyber risks discourse and policy-making focus (see Osborne 2010). This focus was also seen in the high profile Australian debate about internet filtering and blacklisting of particular websites. The federal government proposed this policy in 2007, but due to widespread public and political disquiet, and innovative online campaigns, it has not yet been passed through parliament or implemented.

There is minimal policy discussion in Australia of a progressive ideal of digital democratic citizenship (see Coleman & Blumler 2009). It is this tension between a democratic ideal (that reflects how young people engage with the internet) and the discursive context (that belies a fear of technological change) that provides an important framework for understanding whether and/or how youth-based websites create new spaces for civic and political engagement. This paper presents a longitudinal content analysis of a mixture of government and community sector-led sites that are either wholly online or tied to established offline organizations, to establish what kind of citizenship practices and ideals are made available to the Australian youth.

Australia provides an appropriate base for analysis as in recent times, it has experienced a debate, similar to most advanced democracies, about the disengagement of young people from the political process (see Bean 2007). To a large extent, the debate has been hidden from the broader comparative context due to compulsory voting in Australia and high turnout rates of the general population. In other nations, especially the UK and United States, low turnout at elections by young people has created cause for concern and generated discussion on civic engagement and a democratic deficit (Furlong & Cartmel 2007, pp. 21–37). Arguably, Australia has seen a similar level of more generalized political disengagement when attitudes towards the formal political sphere are taken into account (Edwards 2007). Australia also has a government that is prepared to launch interventionist policy-making to change young people’s behaviours in general (Bessant 2004; White & Wyn 2008).

The Australian federal government’s approach to youth participation is underpinned by the idea that young people need to be enabled through ‘empowerment’ strategies to become active, ‘responsible’ citizens (based on Barnes *et al.*

2007). My earlier research found that these ideas or discourses about young people are entrenched in the thinking of high-level government and community decision-makers and shape youth participation policy practice in both community and government services. That is, the dominant idea that young people needed space and empowerment to be able to 'have a say' on both democratic matters and youth services, and that it was indeed their duty or responsibility as citizens to do so (Vromen and Collin 2010; also see Eliasoph 2009, Livingstone 2009). Overall, it was found in both the focus group discussion and a survey of service providers that decision-makers could 'talk the talk' on the need for change in institutional structures to shift participation away from a top-down approach towards the use of more interactive online technology. However, the discursive and the actual barriers to doing this are clearly too significant to overcome as there have been few real instances of decision-makers demonstrating to young people that they are heard and are, through their views and actions, able to 'make a difference' in youth policy and service delivery (see Australian Youth Affairs Coalition 2010). Changing youth participation practice necessitates a shift in thinking on the way young people are understood as 'contemporary youth participation policies do not treat young people as active political agents with existing preferences derived from their lived experience' (Vromen forthcoming; see also Horsley & Costley 2008). In this paper, I am interested in building on this earlier research to see what has happened online in youth-oriented websites for civic engagement in Australia. That is, do these websites, developed by both government and non-government organizations, and are both online only or online representations of established offline organizations, follow this generally institutionalized, top-down approach to young people's civic engagement? Or are there alternate democratic spaces that both engage with young people's everyday lives, and develop young people's capacity for political expression? (see Bang 2005; Collin 2008). For example, Harris *et al.* (2010, p. 27) found in their survey of young Australians that the internet was a significant part of young people's everyday civic lives, and that they used it 'for leisure, but also to "have a say", especially with their peers, with whom they can make shared social and political meanings out of their individual circumstances'.

This paper analyses 100 Australian civic youth websites to see if, over time, there has been an expansion in active engagement of young people through internet-based means, and whether both the style of interactivity and citizenship norms found on sites have changed.

## Online civic engagement and young people

Coleman (2008) theorizes about 'autonomous' and 'managed' forms of youth-oriented e-citizenship as ideal types. He writes:

The conflict between the two faces of e-citizenship is between a view of democracy as established and reasonably just system, with which young people should be encouraged to engage, and democracy as a political as well as cultural aspiration, most likely to be realised through networks in which young people engage with one another.

(Coleman 2008, p. 192)

This work develops a normative model for online democratic citizenship that challenges the state to engage with *new* forms of citizenship practices found on the internet. In this model, it is important for governments to fund, but not control, young people's political expression, and to ensure that there is genuine opportunity for both horizontal and vertical interaction, as well as collaboration. Innovative forms of communication on issues that matter to young people are also core to making it possible and acceptable for young people's e-citizenship to challenge the status quo (Coleman 2008, pp. 202–205). In later work, Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 116) acknowledge the inherent contradiction in expecting the government to provide more interactive online spaces, they write that '... there is a danger that in following the well-resourced and grandly publicised e-democracy projects run by governments, we will be looking in the wrong place' as it is likely that innovation is happening in the non-government sphere. Yet, grassroots autonomous action, while important, does not replace the state as it needs to find ways of going to where citizens are rather than setting up badly run sites and expecting engagement with people (Coleman & Blumler 2009, pp. 134–137). Other research has found reluctance by electoral campaigning sites to cater their messages and site functionality to younger audiences (Xenos & Bennett 2007, p. 461). Therefore, Livingstone (2009) writes that when seeking to understand civic engagement via the internet, we should note the 'communicative deficit – the gap that exists between the user as imagined by the producers, and the actual users who use the internet in their real world contexts' (p. 147).

There are several studies that have collected systematic quantitative data on the 'youth civic web'. One of the first was the survey of over 300 youth-directed websites in the US-based study: *Youth as E-citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation* (Montgomery *et al.* 2004). This study found that sites that engaged with online interaction and creative postings, and were either youth-led or youth-controlled were more appealing to participants. Young people also preferred community-related and volunteer activities to electoral-type participation, and they needed to be persuaded that public affairs and governance were relevant to them, and that their action will make a difference (Montgomery *et al.* 2004, pp. 17–18). Overall, the study argued that sites were in general failing to exploit the interactive capacity of the web (Montgomery *et al.* 2004, p. 105), and that the economy of online information is dominated by a comparative handful of well-connected sites with search engines playing a key role in the

consolidation of power of the internet's marketplace of ideas, thus limiting the vitality of the youth-oriented 'civic internet' (Montgomery *et al.* 2004, pp. 127–134). Montgomery has developed this 'youth internet as marketplace' argument in later work when she documents how commercial business sites are dominant and able to conflate youth civic identity and brand identity under the guise of digital political engagement. Web 2.0 social networking sites, such as facebook, YouTube and MySpace, are key spaces for where this kind of commercialization of youth experience occurs (Montgomery 2008, pp. 33–34).

The *Civic Learning Online* project (Bennett *et al.* 2009) developed a two-tiered approach to the study of online youth engagement based on contrasting conceptions of ideal types, or norms, of citizenship (dutiful and self-actualizing) and related civic skills (knowledge, expression, joining publics, and taking action). Broadly, the dutiful citizen has election and government at the core of democratic participation, uses traditional media to follow the news, trusts leaders and joins formal political organizations. The self-actualizing citizen has a weaker allegiance to government, focuses on lifestyle politics, mistrusts media and politicians, joins loose networks for social and political action, and uses digital media for communication (Bennett *et al.* 2009, p. 107).

This project's analysis of 90 youth websites dedicated to civic engagement found that 76 per cent of the civic learning opportunities observed a dutiful citizenship style (Bennett *et al.* 2009, p. 19). More specifically, different types of organizations tend to gravitate towards different models of citizenship. For example, 53 per cent of actualizing learning opportunities occurred in online-only sites, even though online-only sites made up only one-third of the total sample. Indeed, 70 per cent of online-only sites offered some form of expression training in contrast to conventional community, interest and government organizations, which were 'disproportionately' concerned with engaging young users in site-defined activities (Bennett *et al.* 2009, p. 19). Government and campaign sites 'offered slightly greater opportunities for actualizing civic learning skills' than other organizations, yet the authors are doubtful that this trend will continue unabated. Community and interest organizations with an offline dutiful citizenship orientation 'overwhelmingly' reproduced this orientation on their website, whereas online-only sites tended to communicate a greater mix of self-actualizing and dutiful civic skills. Both conventional and online organizations tended to offer highly managed opportunities for joining the public and taking action. It was rare for any type of site to give young people the opportunity to create and promote their own activities (Bennett *et al.* 2009, pp. 20–21). These findings also echo UK-based research on youth websites by Gerodimos (2008). He suggests that most government and NGO sites – including those with a traditional youth engagement and those with a social movement orientation – present to young users an 'unimaginative use of the internet' (Gerodimos 2008, p. 984).

Building on the University of Washington *Civic Learning Online* project, Wells (2010) analysed a subset of 36 online-only youth civic engagement websites.

A theoretical framework is created from Lance Bennett *et al.*'s (2009) Dutiful versus self-Actualizing conceptions of citizenship and Coleman's (2008) Managed versus Autonomous civic communication environments. The sample was coded for the presence of 'managed' and 'autonomous' communicative opportunities and for features that evidence 'dutiful' and 'self-Actualizing' citizenship norms. Results suggest that online-only youth websites are most commonly 'slightly managed and quite self-Actualizing' (Wells 2010, pp. 430–431). It is found that dutiful models of citizenship are correlated with managed styles of interaction but that self-actualizing models of citizenship are unrelated to the communication environment (Wells 2010, p. 431). Wells (2010) concludes that appealing to young people and delivering conventional civic training at the same time may be as difficult to accomplish in a website as it has been proved to be in a classroom (p. 435).

These studies suggest that there is an increased prevalence of self-actualizing citizenship norms emerging through newer, online-only sites, while older established offline organizations maintaining a dutiful citizenship disposition. Most sites still, however, tend to manage young people's interaction with the organization, and this is demonstrated by limited incidences of opportunities for the promotion of solely youth-led or devised forms of engagement.

## Methodology

This project coded and analysed 100 Australian youth-oriented broadly civic websites in April–May 2010, and was partly a longitudinal replication of an unpublished 2006 study and part replication of the *Civic Learning Online* (Bennett *et al.* 2009) project on mainly US youth sites. The original 2006 population of 96 sites was built from the known universe of youth-led and youth-serving organizations that had a website, partly from lists available from the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies database, and others known to the author and research assistants. The 2006 list was revisited in March 2010 and every site that was inactive, had disappeared, had very low traffic or had not been updated in 12 months (26 sites), or was considered mainly a youth research site (six sites), were all eliminated from the list. Thus in 2010, 64 of the 2006 sites were used with the addition of 36 new sites. In 2006, very few *online-only* sites existed, and these types were purposively sampled in 2010 (e.g. the new federal government's Australian Youth Forum; and Noise, a young artists network), and new organizations or sites were also included (e.g. the 7pm Project Forums – based on a youth focused TV news programme and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition). Government and political party sites were also purposively included in 2010, as they had been largely neglected in the 2006 sample construction. The 100 sites analysed in 2010 are all examples of organizations that engage young people in civic life, broadly conceived. Groups that explicitly foster political engagement (such as most interest

groups) are included here, but the promulgation of citizenship norms is not limited to these organizations alone. Youniss and Yates (1999, p. 2) argue that civic organizations are 'norm-bearing institutions' that socialize and integrate young people into society and its traditions, and they include cultural, arts, and recreation-based groups. Eliasoph (2009, p. 294) in her study of new approaches to youth empowerment says civic action is found in ongoing groups that work together to 'create some good that they define as a public one'. Also included are community service groups who use advocacy to influence decision-makers on behalf of young people, and are seeking publicly beneficial social change (see Minkoff 2002; Montgomery *et al.* 2004; Morales 2009, p. 47).

Sampling youth-oriented civic engagement sites is not straightforward (as noted by Gerodimos and Ward 2007, p. 117), and several arbitrary decisions or classifications are necessarily made. For example, even the 'online-only' category is becoming increasingly problematic as while sites are the major focus of an organization's civic engagement effort, many interest/activist groups have an offline component that may involve public meet-ups or the small activist group formation. I included a handful of sites that do not always overtly present themselves as 'youth' oriented, but are run by young people (examples include activist group GetUp and media site New Matilda) because they are influential examples of contemporary online civic engagement that young people are creating. While the three groupings of government, community, and interest groups seem straightforward, decisions were made to include youth-led news and media-type websites in the activist-oriented interest group category where they may not sit comfortably. This distinction is not always clear-cut. I would justify all of these arbitrary choices as significant to creating a sample of sites with breadth and able to tap into a very broad notion of the youth civic web in Australia. The sample of websites analysed here is described below in Tables 1 and 2.

**TABLE 1** Overview of 2010 sample (compared to 2006).

<i>Youth website 'demographics'</i>	2010 (%) (N = 100)	2006 (%) (N = 96)
Online only?	24	12
<i>Type</i>		
Government/formal politics	13	5
Community service	48	58
Interest/activist/new media	39	37
Some government funding?	80	57
Government largest funder	59	54
Advertising on site (Inc. partners)	38	23
Young people developed site	34	28
Totally youth led	25	14
No youth involvement in decisions	43	65

**TABLE 2** Top 20 trafficked Australian civic youth sites (@June 2010).

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Organizational type</i>	<i>Online only</i>	<i>Govt fund</i>	<i>Youth work on site</i>	<i>Citizenship orientation</i>	<i>Alexa linking sites (6 October 2010)</i>
Get Up!	Interest: progressive issue activist group	Yes	N	Y	Combo	489
New Matilda	Interest: progressive media commentary	Yes	N	Y	Self-act	557
Reach Out	Community: youth well-being service	Yes	Y	Y	Combo	27
YMCA	Community: youth and family charity	No	Y	?	Dutiful	67
Engage Media	Interest: social, enviro activist media	Yes	N	Y	Self-act	372
The 7pm Project Forums	Interest: media commentary forums	Yes	N	?	Self-act	48
Qnet Online Community	Interest: queer youth space	Yes	Y	Y	Combo	720
ActNow	Community: enabling youth engagement	Yes	Y	Y	Combo	94
Scouts Australia	Community: outdoor adventure group	No	Y	?	Dutiful	144
Somazone	Community: youth health information	Yes	N	Y	Combo	93
Sydney Muslim Youth	Interest: religious activist group	No	N	?	Self-act	21
Australian Youth Forum	Government: youth forums portal	Yes	Y	Y	Combo	90
Vibewire	Interest: media opinion and commentary	Yes	Y	Y	Self-act	27
Express Media	Community: youth media development site	No	Y	Y	Combo	68
Noise	Community: young artists network	Yes	Y	?	Self-act	98
Barnardos	Community: child welfare service	No	Y	?	Self-act	69

*Continued*

**TABLE 2** Continued

Organization	Organizational type	Online only	Youth			Citizenship orientation	Alexa linking sites (6 October 2010)
			Govt fund	work on site			
ACTU worksite for schools	Interest: union peak body	No	N	Y	Dutiful	392 <sup>a</sup>	
Youth Off the Streets	Community: homeless youth service	No	Y	?	Dutiful	81	
Young Care	Community: youth living in care advocacy	No	Y	?	Dutiful	53	
Orygen Youth Health	Community: youth mental health service	No	Y	?	Combo	18	
Totals	8 interest; 1 govt; 11 community	11	13	11	D = 5; C = 8; A = 7		

Note: Only YMCA and Orygen had *no* type of public expression on site.

<sup>a</sup>Links are for ACTU parent site.

A research assistant and myself developed the 2006 quantitative coding schedule originally, and two assistants did most of the coding. In 2010, a new research assistant and I revisited the original coding schedule keeping over half the questions and categories and then incorporating others from the coding schedules used in the *Civic Learning Online* project and analysed in Bennett *et al.* (2009) and Wells (2010). Note that we were limited by single periods of time for the coding and could not measure site dynamism. As we mostly coded the site background, how the site described itself and its functionality rather than, for example, user-posted content, these mostly static features were simpler to code and less likely to undergo rapid change or development. Comparison of site interactivity between 2006 and 2010 is made below, but due to the timing, I did not collect data on the citizenship norms or practices of sites in 2006. The study is also limited as its focus is on sites alone and not on users or audience; thus it is impossible to generalize about how sites are actually understood or used by young people (see Gerodimos & Ward 2007). Instead I am interested in the kind of citizenship norms that websites encapsulate to understand how these civic organizations construct their young users.

Tables 1 and 2 show that most sites overall and the most popular are those that are community service oriented and produced. Government has a very small stake in *running* civic websites; however, it is by far the most significant funder of

the organizations included in this sample who reported this type of data online (data on funding sources were not available for 21 sites). Unfortunately, most (77 per cent) organizations did not publicly reveal their *total* revenue. Online-only organizations were twice as likely to *not* receive any government funding; and nearly all of the organizations that did not reveal their funding base were well-established organizations. Community service type organizations were significantly more likely to have advertising (55 per cent of total) on their sites, but for the majority, this was of a partner or sponsoring organization.

Beyond overrepresenting online-only sites, The Top 20 in Table 2 differs on very few demographics from the overall sample. One exception was for whether they explicitly stated young people were involved in the development of the site. In the Top 20, half of the organizations had young people's involvement in site development, where this was the case for only a third of the sample overall.

The Top 20 are also interesting due to the diverse range of civic organizations that they represent, and there is no clear pattern. Some organizations are well linked into the progressive community service sector and have emerged in the last 10–15 years (e.g. Orygen, Reach Out, and Somazone), while others are well-established, traditional civic organizations (such as Scouts and YMCA). Some are very well known and well funded (e.g. the peak body the Australian Council of Trade Unions' school site), and others are mainly known to the small but active community of interest that they engage with (e.g. QNET online and Sydney Muslim Youth). The new youth-led organizations that primarily exist online in the Top 20 are mainly a mix of social movement-oriented activism (e.g. the five-year old but very high profile progressive activist organization, GetUp and ActNow) and alternative new media spaces that have precarious financial resources (e.g. Vibewire, Engage Media, and New Matilda<sup>1</sup>).

## Analysing Australian civic youth websites

This section analyses Australian sites through a focus on the three dimensions: features and interactivity; how extensively young people's engagement with sites is managed; and the types of citizenship orientation that sites promote. From this analysis, it will be possible to identify whether Australian civic youth websites differ from American counterparts, and whether they align with the structured and top-down approach of most offline, Australian youth participation initiatives.

### *Interactivity*

The coding investigated what forms of civic action and communication capacities are developed in each site. Table 3 compares 2006 and 2010 data for the scope and the use of interactive features on sites. Clearly, the level of interactivity and

**TABLE 3** Interactivity on Australian youth websites.

<i>Form of online interaction</i>	<i>2010, N = 100 (%)</i>	<i>2006, N = 96 (%)</i>	<i>2010 – top 20 (%)</i>
Feedback	53	35	70
Creative by site	53	25	70
Social networking invites	52	n/a	60
Comments	27	n/a	55*
Blogs	22	7	35
Creative by young people	20	n/a	45*
Discussion boards	17	21	25
Polls	16	9	30
Forum	15	17	35*
Wikis	5	n/a	0

Note: \* > 0.05; 2010 top 20 compared with the rest of the sample with Alexa ratings ( $N = 73$ ).

the use of Web 2.0-type features have increased on Australian youth websites. In 2010, only 15 per cent of sites did not have any interactive features (in contrast to 47 per cent of 2006 sites), the median was three features, and a quarter of sites had five or more. There was no relationship between organizational type and total forms of interaction; but online-only sites had a significantly higher median number (five interactive features as compared with two).

However, the features that the majority of sites have offered very little scope for young people's political expression. Providing feedback on site content, looking at YouTube videos posted by the site, and issuing invites to socially networked friends to view the sites' content are all highly structured and limited forms of interaction. Importantly, when the Top 20 trafficked sites are singled out, they are significantly different in the level of interactivity from the rest of the 2010 sample on three important youth-led dimensions of interactivity: making comments, uploading creative material, and participating in forums. This suggests that the young people being targeted may repeatedly engage within the site, rather than visit it occasionally to obtain broadcast style information.

An examination of the types of interactivity found on the sites in 2010 with site demographics, including organizational type and online-only status showed that both interest groups and online-only sites were significantly more likely to offer interactive features, including discussion boards, blogs, and comments sections. Government and interest groups were equally likely to include polls, and government sites were most likely to give users the opportunity to link to social networking sites, and online-only sites were significantly more likely to have creative posts by young people, and community groups were most likely to have creative postings created by the site. There were no significant differences in interactivity according to whether the main funder was the government or not.

As Table 3 confirms, very few sites that aim to shape young people's civic engagement are comfortable offering interactive opportunities for their young Australian users. Despite that, sites that have more interactive features tend to be visited more (as in the case of the top 20 sites), and all youth-aimed sites could clearly learn from the online-only sites that best understand the Web 2.0 environment. Potentially, sites can increase their popularity and profile when they offer interactive opportunities for their target youth audience and do not simply broadcast organizational-specific viewpoints. Most traditional community and government sites are constrained, and tend to rely on one-way forms of communication such as creating YouTube videos for users to watch or offering just a feedback page, rather than the more dialogue friendly comments, forums, or discussion boards.

### *Management of site users*

One of the principal ways of understanding the management of site users by the site is to judge whether users are able to *publicly* express viewpoints on the site. Taking the forms of interactivity in Table 3, three forms do not lead to young people's public expression on the site: the three most popular of sending feedback, looking at creative postings on the site, and linking to social networking. Thus, 55 per cent of sites provide young people with some space to express a point of view, and 55 per cent of those sites expect young people to login to be able to do so, mostly requiring a combination of name and/or age to register. Unsurprisingly, online-only sites are significantly more likely to give young people space for public expression ( $\Phi = 0.367$ ), with only three online-only sites not doing so; and similarly, there was more public expression when young people were involved in the site development ( $\Phi = 0.310$ ). In terms of moderation of young people's public expression, most sites had some sort of moderation, ranging from explicit filtering before posts went online, to a code of conduct for users and/or moderators. This is not entirely surprising, as for many youth-serving sites, a duty of care towards their young users necessitates some form of risk assessment and moderation. Only one site had no moderation whatsoever: the Australian Student Environment Network.

Following Wells (2010), we also examined how sites engage with their members or users. Overall, 65 per cent of sites made it possible for users to become members of the organization, only 5 per cent expected members to pay a fee. On nearly half of all sites, users could sign up to receive the organization's newsletter, and 42 per cent of sites sent out a follow-up email to users once they registered (my research assistant did this) which mainly encouraged users to be active online with the site. Only 18 per cent of sites then proceeded to regularly send emails about site updates and campaigns. Management can also be seen in what the site encourages users to do on it, the recognition of users' role on the site, and how much latitude they are given. Of the 100 sites coded

here, 29 per cent featured user-generated text or linked directly to user posts from the homepage; only 14 per cent had a customized self-representation such as an avatar; and 35 per cent let users link their involvement on the site with a personal website or social networking page. Online-only organizations were significantly more likely to allow all three of these user-led factors to occur; and sites that had young people's involvement in their development were significantly more likely to both feature user-generated text and links to personal websites. The approaches found towards site management reinforce how sites approach interactivity. That is, more traditional government and community organizations create online spaces that tend to manage young people's citizenship, rather than provide them with new, democratic spaces for civic engagement.

### *Citizenship orientations*

The *Civic Learning Online* study was directly replicated to identify the type of civic learning goal and the overall citizenship orientation sites produced. Table 4 summarizes what the four main goals are – knowledge, expression, public, and action – and shows how they manifest in either dutiful or self-actualizing ideal types of citizenship.

We looked for these citizenship orientations and civic learning goals in two main ways. First, by looking at the discursive construction of citizenship found in the mission statements of websites (usually in the 'About us' section or on the homepage). Based on the descriptive language used, we coded sites as broadly promoting an ideal model of dutiful citizenship (58 per cent) or self-actualizing citizenship (42 per cent). There are notable tendencies among the organizational

**TABLE 4** Civic learning goals.

<i>Dutiful civic learning goals</i>	<i>Actualizing civic learning goals</i>
<i>Knowledge</i> : e.g. one-way authoritative information from site producers, news sites and public officials	<i>Knowledge</i> : e.g. peer knowledge sharing opportunities
<i>Expression</i> : e.g. training to provide content aimed at institutions, e.g. write an effective letter, etc.	<i>Expression</i> : e.g. training in digital participatory media, create a podcast, video, blog, etc.
<i>Join a public</i> : e.g. membership and joining a formal organization	<i>Join a public</i> : e.g. users encouraged to define and start a peer network
<i>Take action</i> : e.g. participate in actions organized by site or affiliates or authorities	<i>Take action</i> : e.g. joining or reporting on peer-generated actions

Source: Adapted from Bennett *et al.* (2009, pp. 20–21).

websites that claim to provide civic engagement for young people through self-actualization: they are more likely to be online only ( $\phi = 0.269$ ), be youth led to some extent, and, significantly, have had young people develop the website ( $\phi = 0.315$ ), and encourage young people's public expression ( $\phi = 0.339$ ). The sites tend to mention 'empowerment' and mostly talk about a youth-led space, or network, for discussion and action. The dutiful citizenship sites tend to focus on notions of communal responsibility, ethics, and values, and connect with traditional institutions and services, including a focus on young people's efficacy in improving them. The Top 20 trafficked sites were not significantly more likely to represent themselves as self-actualizing, with a 45 per cent dutiful to 55 per cent self-actualizing split; thus, there is not a clear relationship between the sites most people visit and their citizenship orientation.

The second way we examined citizenship orientations and civic learning goals was by coding the actual presence of the four main learning goals on the websites. This leads to a useful comparison between the discursive and the idealized construction of citizenship for young people, with the actual practices of citizenship that the site adopts. Codes were made here on the basis of specific opportunities that a site offered to its users, pathways that it identified for them, or information that it gave to them. For instance, a positive dutiful 'join a public' code would have been: (a) that the site-provided information on adult managed/promoted youth activities in their area; or (b) that the site explained the roles of hierarchical/traditional groups (like political parties, interest, or civic groups etc) and reasons for joining them. The actualizing 'join a public' code was specific to information on non-hierarchical groups or groups that were not defined/promoted/managed/supervised by non-youth higher authorities. Overall, Table 5 shows that there are only three civic learning goals that a majority of websites

**TABLE 5** Civic learning goals on Australian youth websites.<sup>a</sup>

<i>Dutiful civic learning goals</i>	<i>% sites</i>	<i>Actualizing civic learning goals</i>	<i>% sites</i>
Knowledge	90	Knowledge	39
Expression: online training	20	Expression: online training	14
Expression: offline training	29	Expression: offline training	15
Expression, without training	12	Expression, without training	19
Expression <i>at least one form</i>	60	Expression <i>at least one form</i>	47
Join a public	39	Join a public	47
Take action	77	Take action	34

<sup>a</sup>Note that in the coding process, we found it necessary to create new categories to differentiate between online and offline expression training, as well as site-based facilitation of expression that did not overtly tell users how to engage in public expression.

endorse for the Australian youth: dutiful forms of knowledge from authoritative sources; expressing their point of view to authorities; and dutiful forms of action organized by the site, authorities, or public officials.

Looking at the relationship between discursive types of citizenship orientation and actual practices all went the predicted way, that is discursively dutiful sites were more likely to contain dutiful learning goals than self-actualizing sites were, and vice versa. All of the actualizing civic goals were significantly much more likely to be found on sites that spoke the language of self-actualization: about empowerment, networks, and peer-to-peer exchange. These data tell us two things: first, there is a relationship between citizenship discourse and practice for most organizations; second, a majority of sites that are self-actualizing promote distinctive actualizing civic learning goals for young people. However, it is also worth examining the mean number of learning goals: the whole sample had an average of 2.7/4 dutiful goals and 1.7/4 actualizing goals per site which still suggests that dutiful citizenship is the norm for youth websites in their approach to young people’s civic engagement.

In classifying sites by their learning goals and actual citizenship practices: 4 sites had only one learning goal present; 11 had an even combination of dutiful and self-actualizing goals; 10 sites included nearly all (7 of 8) learning goals; 20 could be classified as self-actualizing sites; and 55 as dutiful sites. Table 6 shows the relationship between the demographics and these classifications using just three categories: combination, actualizing, and dutiful sites. That sites with self-actualizing civic goals are more likely to be online and have some youth leadership in their organization is not surprising. The other two findings are of more interest. A majority of ‘combination’ sites have had young people assist in the site development; furthermore, when the sites with youth involvement alone are looked at the split is 38 per cent combination: 35 per cent dutiful: 27 per cent actualizing. This suggests that to some extent, young people themselves

**TABLE 6** Demographics with citizenship orientations of sites.

	<i>Dutiful</i> (N = 55) (%)	<i>Combo</i> (N = 21) (%)	<i>Actualizing</i> (N = 20) (%)	<i>Significance</i>
Online only	9	43	50	Cramer's V = 0.429**
Youth developed site	22	62	45	Cramer's V = 0.349*
No youth leadership	53	19	35	Cramer's V = 0.333*
Some government funding?	71	64	45	Cramer's V = 0.382*
Advertising?	31	38	65	Cramer's V = 0.427*

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

may choose to create sites that foster both kinds of citizenship orientations – dutiful for dealing with authority and power and self-actualizing for creating a peer-led space. Another interpretation could focus on resources available to organizations to invest in a youth participation programme that systematically integrates youth involvement in organizational practice and site development. Furthermore, as both a majority of dutiful and combination sites receive government funding, it could be an expectation that they include dutiful civic goals in their mandate. The organizations here arguably also differ in terms of their funding base and total revenue, but as 77 per cent did not publish this online, I can only surmise. That self-actualizing organizations are most likely to have paid advertising on their pages lends credence to Montgomery's (2008) argument about the marketization and commercialization of young people's online spaces, as well as providing an alternative funding stream from government, in a country like Australia where civic philanthropy is less institutionalized.

All of the individual forms of interaction potentially found on websites occurred significantly more often on both self-actualizing and combination sites than dutiful sites, with the exception of site-posted creative content. The following Table 7 looks at site attributes to see if there are differences among the citizenship orientations in practice. The strongest association here is between the

**TABLE 7** Site attributes and citizenship orientations.

	<i>Dutiful</i> (N = 55) (%)	<i>Combo</i> (N = 21) (%)	<i>Actualizing</i> (N = 20) (%)	<i>Significance</i>
Dutiful discourse/actualizing discourse	86/15	24/76	20/80	Cramer's V = 0.638**
Public expression on site	35	81	95	Cramer's V = 0.541**
Homepage has user-generated content	11	43	70	Cramer's V = 0.524**
Encourages users to take part in activities involving government	47	57	10	Cramer's V = 0.339*
Encourage political activity not involving government	51	86	75	Cramer's V = 0.313*
Links to government sites	73	62	25	Cramer's V = 0.306*
Some material aimed at teachers and parents	58	48	30	Not significant

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

discursive construction of the mission of a website and its practice, notable is that combination sites – that have an equal number of dutiful and actualizing civic goals – tend to portray themselves as self-actualizing sites. Overall, this finding goes against my suspicion that websites would ‘talk’ as though they were self-actualizing for their young users, but in practice give them very little scope for public expression or action. However, as dutiful sites and a dutiful discourse are found on the majority of youth civic sites, it remains a centrally important discursive construction of engagement for young Australians.

Overall, the most important point to appreciating the distinctive approach of sites that have a self-actualizing approach to young people’s citizenship, as the theorization would expect, is that site users – young people – are at the centre of the site and at the centre of political engagement. This suggests that the discursive construction and the actual practices of engagement are aligned; but also that new online spaces are being uniquely used to foster self-actualization, rather than directing young people to offline action. The vast majority of actualizing sites prioritize public expression by young people and a majority highlight user input on their homepage. Very few dutiful sites do the same, preferring to manage the experience young people can have on their site by mainly being an information source rather than a participatory space. This information tends to be presented as authoritative and links with government action and sites. A majority of dutiful websites target teachers and parents as much as young people, suggesting a latent suspicion of the internet and its interactive capacities in general.

### **Empowered but dutiful citizenship in Australian young peoples’ online experience?**

Most of the Australian youth-oriented websites studied here follow a generally institutionalized, discursively top-down and dutiful, approach to young people’s civic engagement. This reflects the government-led approach to youth participation policy where there is an expectation that young people can ‘have a say’ but only on the terms set by powerful traditional institutions. Further, only a minority of sites allow young people to express themselves on their sites, preferring instead to provide information, and at most a YouTube video or two as concession to their intended audience. This prioritization of dutiful citizenship norms with the management of young people’s online experience resonates with the results found in Bennett *et al.* (forthcoming).

However, there is clearly an emerging, albeit still minority, distinctive online experience that focuses on empowering young people in their creation of political space and encourages them to express political viewpoints. This is similar to what Wells (2010) found in his examination of online-only civic youth sites. Possibility of interactivity on websites, for example, has increased since I surveyed sites in 2006. Young people themselves are increasingly likely to have had a role in

shaping civic engagement sites for their peers. There are also some examples of more traditional community service organizations and interest groups changing their citizenship style through their online presence to further target their young audiences (e.g. Barnados, Dusseldorp Skills Forum, and Youth Affairs Council of South Australia). Some of the organizations that are fusing citizenship norms, classified as combination sites, provide food for thought about the interdependence among funding, resources, and successful appeals to young internet users. This resonates with Montgomery's (2008) cautionary message on the potential commercialization of youth citizenship experiences. As some of the newer and popular online-only organizations expand, it will be important, through case study analysis, to monitor their commitment, or otherwise, to democratic forms of communication and citizenship, as outlined by Coleman (2008).

Three areas for further discussion emerge in light of these findings. First, the relationship between youth participation discourses and the national context. In Australia, the adoption of a discourse of youth empowerment, within an overall ideal of responsibility (or duty) to be active citizens, was made possible by portraying all young people as marginalized. That is: young people have civic deficiencies, they ought to be active citizens and involved in politics, but we need to provide them with the capacities to have a say and express themselves. There has been very little shift towards seeing young people as partners in political decision-making and thus giving them the capacity to make a difference and change policy/politics. This is reflected in the findings here as a minority of sites give young people the capacity to determine (at the core of self-actualization) how they will express themselves and join with other young people to deliberate and/or take action. Further research could explore the normative dimension of contemporary civic and citizenship practices prescribed for and/or created by young people. That is, do young people want to have a say and effect policy-making; and how do they understand their own efficacious citizenship both online and offline. Recent research suggests that young people's everyday use of the internet, and social networking sites in particular, shapes all dimensions of their public and private lives, providing 'networked publics' that form 'the civil society of teenage culture' (boyd 2008, p. 121; see also Harris *et al.* 2010). How are public expectations and opportunities for engagement reconciled with these online everyday experiences?

Second, the idea of diversity and structured lived (youth) experience. Marsh *et al.* (2007) use Bourdieu's conceptualizations on the link between economic, social, and cultural capital to find that gender, race, and class continue to shape how young people understand their lives and their relationship with politics. Under explored in my data is how sites target particular groups of young people to engage with their lived experience and subsequently construct their citizenship orientation. For example, in my sample, there are sites aimed at queer youth, several sites that target religion and ethnicity (e.g. Muslim youth), and young people living in socio-economic disadvantage (in the care of the state

or homelessness). Do these groups of young people exhibit agency and are portrayed online as part of positive social change *or* are they mainly constructed as marginalized youth needing charitable intervention? Some of the most popular civic sites are those that are shaped by young people's experience of health and well-being, especially their mental health (e.g. Reach Out). Many of these sites give at least a cursory acknowledgment of self-actualization in their citizenship orientation through the availability of peer-to-peer networks and user-generated material on their pages.

Third, what underpins young people's preference for self-actualization in online political engagement? Has neoliberalism, coupled with individualization and the diminishing of traditional collective action (see Beck & Gernsheim 2001), made the emergence of this citizenship orientation more possible? That is, we are no longer duty-bound to the state, or grand narratives of mass social and political change; so we network, we DIY, we personalize the political (see Harris 2008)? What does this mean for social movements and for democracy; and how does it change collective action in general? There may be potential in the sites with a 'combination' citizenship orientation to find new experiences in the practice of collective action that can create political change. It is also possible that online-only sites, that are more likely to NOT take government funding, may provide an autonomous democratic space (e.g. linked with social networking sites). But will new, non-government funding bases make commercialization of youth experience inevitable? While an online presence often lowers the real costs for participation and mobilization, youth civic engagement spaces (on and offline) inevitably need reliable resources to be sustained over time. Having a popular facebook causes page or a well-visited YouTube may seem fleeting, but maybe they are not yet fully understood in terms of the capacity for learning, engagement, and political change unfettered by a state-led ideal of responsible and dutiful citizenship.

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## Note

- 1 Indeed, New Matilda, a progressive media site and blog, was forced to shut down due to lack of resources, not long after we conducted our analysis. At the end of 2010, there is a high-profile fund-raising drive occurring to get New Matilda back online.

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