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ONLINE YOUTH CIVIC ATTITUDES AND THE LIMITS OF CIVIC CONSUMERISM
The emerging challenge to the internet's democratic potential

This paper examines young people's civic motivations in conjunction with their expected gratifications from, and evaluations of, civic websites. Fourty-six young people took part in this qualitative study, which included individual written evaluations as well as group reviews of the websites of four civic organisations (Fairtrade Foundation, Soil Association, Friends of the Earth, The Meatrix). The key finding of the study is that young people are willing to engage with civic websites as long as a series of 'terms and conditions' are met that would make that engagement meaningful to them, such as a link between the issue and the individual's lifeworld and the benefits of civic action. These conditions constitute a coherent paradigm of civic consumerism, although the evidence strongly suggests that this is due to a sense of civic loneliness and widespread scepticism about the relevance of collective action. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of the emotional dimension of civic engagement, which recurred consistently in these young people's narratives. The implications and limitations of this paradigm of civic consumerism are examined, along with the ensuing challenge to the internet's democratic potential.

A narrative of civic apathy and political disengagement has become increasingly prevalent in the UK, among other liberal democracies. Phenomena such as low electoral turnout, declining party membership, mistrust in government and

contempt for politicians, have been cited as indicators of a crisis of participation, particularly marked among younger people who appear sceptical towards the formal institutions and processes of politics (Pattie *et al.* 2004; Stoker 2006). A sense of disconnection between political leaders and younger citizens is a particular symptom of this crisis.

However, given the role of the media in the process of political communication and the increasingly embedded presence of the web in youth everyday life, the potential of the internet as a facilitator of youth engagement has been the subject of a growing body of scholarship (Loader 2007). The internet's unique properties for symmetrical and interactive communication, but also as a means of actual participation (through donations, petitions, etc.) make it a potentially ideal tool for youth empowerment. Coupled with a broader conceptualisation of civic action – to embrace activities as diverse as ethical consumption and charity concerts – two broad questions have emerged: whether the internet has become the driver of a different paradigm of political communication and participation, one which is more fluid, flexible and inclusive; and whether the medium is facilitating the participation of citizens, especially young people, that would not normally consider engaging with 'offline' or traditional politics (Livingstone *et al.* 2007).

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

However, there is still a lack of research directly linking young people's civic needs and motivations not only to their internet uses in general, but also to specific civic websites. In particular, there are no known studies featuring qualitative civic site evaluations by young users. Coleman *et al.* (2008) linked youth engagement to internet Uses and Gratifications and subsequently applied that framework to an examination of civic websites' usability, although their research employed an experimental design within the context of United States case studies. The aim of this paper is to address this gap by bringing together the study of youth civic motivations along with young people's experience of civic

websites and consider the implications of the emerging mode of civic consumerism for the democratising potential of the internet.

Objectives and research design

In order to link young people's civic motivations to their evaluations of civic websites, the following objectives were set:

> *RO1:* to explore the factors that would motivate young people to (or would de-motivate them from) becoming more active citizens
>
> *RO2:* to establish how these motivating factors translate into specific website features that might facilitate awareness and engagement
>
> *RO3:* to examine users' evaluations of four civic websites and compare those to their prior expectations.

Data for this study were derived from four user evaluation sessions, each lasting for one and a half hours, in which a total of 46 young people took part. A purposive sampling strategy was chosen for this research with the aim of exploring how highly internet-literate but politically disengaged young people evaluate online material on emerging civic issues; the hypothesis being that such a community would offer a considerable margin for the internet to constitute a potentially effective means for civic empowerment (as opposed to demographic groups that are both internet literate and already engaged, or those who are neither mobilised, nor digitally literate). Hence, following a preliminary survey of media students' civic attitudes and online habits within a vocationally oriented university confirming the suitability of this community (Gerodimos 2005), a cohort of second year undergraduate students were invited to participate. While the collection of a range of views and backgrounds is important, the aim of the sampling strategy was not to gather a representative sample of a population but to explore the narratives and interactions of a specific target group.

The process followed in each of the four sessions was identical. Participants initially completed a series of questions on demographic data, civic motivations (RO1) and expectations from civic websites (RO2); they were then offered the chance to rate three current issues (fairtrade products, organic food and farming, climate change) according to their interest in these causes. Each user was then allocated one of three identical evaluation briefs for the websites of the Fairtrade Foundation, the Soil Association and the Friends of the Earth (FoE). The allocation of the briefs was based on two criteria, namely the participants' pre-stated preferences and the need to distribute the briefs as evenly as possible, although no notable differences in evaluations were observed based on the level of pre-existing interest. The choice of these three sites was based on a number of factors, namely their

central role in the UK's online public sphere (as established through a preliminary hyperlink network analysis), as well as their high profile and presence in British civil society at large.[1]

Having completed the review of the first site, users were shown a short animation clip that featured on the homepage of The Meatrix – the fourth website sampled in this study. This short film is the focal point of the website and introduces the visitor to its agenda. The inclusion of The Meatrix in the sample of websites was deemed useful as the web content analysis preceding this study had shown that its online presence and mobilisation approach is markedly different to that of established civic organisations' websites (Gerodimos 2008). After the screening, participants were asked to review the site using an evaluation sheet. Having completed the process of individual written responses, all users then took part in group discussion, the purpose of which was to complement the questionnaires and further explore questions of motivation and internet uses with the added advantage of group dynamics and interaction.

Focus group discussions are particularly useful for triangulation purposes when employed in conjunction with other data gathering techniques, such as the individual written evaluations. Such group sessions are used for the 'study of audience interpretations of cultural and media texts' (Bryman 2001, p. 348) and are especially appropriate for research questions relating to consumers' own uses and gratifications. Central to the utility of focus groups are the patterns of interaction among participants and the joint construction of meaning via disagreement and argumentation. Jansky and Huang (2009) highlight the benefits of employing a multifaceted approach to soliciting end-user input, which includes the use of focus groups.

Hence, this study combines elements of group usability testing (GUT), task-based focus groups (TBFG) and multiple-user simultaneous testing (MUST) (Downey 2007; Nielsen 2007): it involved many participants individually but also simultaneously evaluating the chosen sites. The structure of the sessions was similar to the protocol followed by Downey (2007), i.e. initial user profile survey, followed by the basic task of individuals reviewing the site, followed by a usability issues (group) discussion. This approach alleviates the danger of co-discovery, which is common to usability focus groups (Nielsen 2007) as users convened to groups after having experienced websites on an individual basis. The actual evaluation was largely unprompted and near natural (Nielsen 2008) with only a couple of minor tasks being given towards the end of the evaluation of The Meatrix, so as to test certain navigation problems that had been identified during the original content analysis. Furthermore, Macefield (2007) notes that qualitative techniques (such as the post-evaluation semi-structured group discussions) can provide indications of causation mechanisms, i.e. of the mental models users have of the interface and how that affected their response to it.

The structured (close-ended) variables from the four sheets were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). That data were analysed using frequencies, crosstabulations, composite variables and the visual comparison of small groups or sets of variables. The qualitative data, i.e. the open-ended responses that the participants handwrote on the sheets totalling more than 26,000 words, were typed manually into Word for each participant separately. They were treated both as self-sufficient narratives highlighting common themes, patterns, outliers and questions, as well as supplementing the group discussion transcripts. These responses were also matched to individual participants' close-ended answers and discussion contributions so as to create profiles for each participant.

The four group discussions were transcribed into Word and went through a process of distilling, which included repeated readings, notes on the margin and the development of codes (themes), which were revised throughout the analysis (Creswell 1998, pp. 140–141), thus combining the flexibility of an open-minded approach with the pre-existing research agenda in order to create a process of reflexive analysis (Croghan *et al.* 2006). The transcripts were then colour-coded based on those 10 themes, which included: site content and empowerment tools; site design, navigation and page layout; site interactivity and community-building; efficacy and encouragement/positive framing of issue; use of fear or threats/negative framing; donations; 'getting there' and 'going back'; trust, reliability and branding; expectations versus perceptions; clear purpose or overall point of the site.

'Rules of engagement': youth civic motivators and de-motivators

For the first part of the study, participants were asked to reflect on the things that motivate them to, and de-motivate them from, becoming more active citizens. One of the aims of this open-ended approach was to establish how young people themselves conceptualised active citizenship. The written responses were then reduced to nine motivators (Table 1) and nine matching de-motivators (Table 2), which can broadly be classified under three categories: efficacy and relevance; accessibility and appeal; system and society.

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

TABLE 1 Civic motivators (codes).

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

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

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

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

The appearance of information/communication at the top of the list of (de)motivating factors seems paradoxical given that we are witnessing an abundance of political messages almost to the point of over-saturation, yet at the same

TABLE 2 Civic de-motivators (codes).

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

time many citizens find it difficult to follow the public debate. This gap between production and reception could partly be attributed to different agendas: Coleman and Rowe (2005) argue that the agenda set by political parties and the media has been too remote from the interests of ordinary voters; young citizens' disinterest should not be conflated with a disengagement from politics altogether.

Furthermore, our study concurs with the view that young people today are facing a considerable lack of efficacy, which is linked to their scepticism about the ability of the individual citizen to make a difference. Efficacy, in its various articulations and expressions, is the keyword that recurred most often throughout the various parts of this study. Many young people reported feeling simply powerless:

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

Directly linked to efficacy, is the relevance (or irrelevance) of political discourses and messages to these citizens' everyday life; according to one participant's quite typical response:

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

Hence, the onus lies with the political communicators who have to 'sell' not just their cause or issue, but also – and perhaps this is a relatively recent development – appropriate tools for action which have capacity for change. These young people do not reject democratic politics, public affairs or civic participation as such; there was very little evidence of apathy or systemic rejection in the data, although frustration and scepticism were quite common. Kirshner *et al.* (2003) argue that young people are 'critically aware of their social and political environments' and keen to engage when presented with the opportunity to influence positive change. However, critical awareness is not enough on its own and can, in fact, act as a double-edged sword. If such opportunities for meaningful participation are lacking, awareness can lead to withdrawal and apathy rather than empowerment.

If there is one major contrast between the participants' civic narratives and the established norms of democratic participation, then that would be the absolute lack of any reference to collective action. Collective identity, membership to organisations of collective action or simply references to collective mechanisms for participation are nowhere to be found in their responses. Coupled with the afore-mentioned deficit of efficacy, it almost appears as if these young people have diagnosed that as individuals on their own they are unable to 'change the world', yet that frustration does not lead them to take the initiative, integrate with others, join groups and participate in collective efforts, but to withdraw to the realm of their own lifeworld and express what can only be described as civic loneliness. Several participants wished they could see other young people caring about similar issues (Code 8, Table 1), i.e. knowing that others have similar beliefs or face common issues would act as a motivator:

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

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

Seminal models of persuasion and behavioural intentions (such as Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action (1980) and Ajzen's updated model of Theory of Planned Behaviour (1991)) have highlighted the role of subjective norms as

catalysts for action, i.e. individuals take seriously into account what others – especially those in their immediate social environment – expect them to do or not do. However, it is fascinating that in the case of civic action, there was no reference to peer pressure or established social norms about participation and, in fact, the reverse was true as participants called for the establishment of such norms.

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

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

It is quite obvious that these factors are not independent of each other. Rather, it could be argued that they all constitute symptoms of the same phenomenon: the distancing of the citizen from the public sphere, and the economic and socio-cultural shift towards the private realm habituated by segmented individuals who are increasingly treated and act as consumers. The implications of this theme are further explored below with reference to specific examples of youth attitudes towards online material.

Applying civic motivations to the web: young people's needs from civic websites

Having reflected on key motivators and de-motivators, the participants were then asked to apply those factors upon specific features that they would ideally expect to find on an issue-oriented civic website. Further probes were given to the participants by asking for specific examples of online facilities or other materials that would motivate them to support that cause, by changing their consumer behaviour, political attitude or by contributing their time, money and effort to it. The question was split into three sections covering website content, design and interactivity in order to further facilitate the analysis. The data were distilled using a variety of analytical tools, looking at parameters such as the interpretation of the question, the variety and depth of responses, the originality or conventionality of features mentioned as well as the specific applications listed, the adjectives and words used to describe their needs and expectations, and the descriptive qualities sought by participants.

The first theme emerging from the data is young people's need for practical information that provides them with a compelling justification of *why* a

given issue or civic cause is important, and a demonstration of *how* they can make a real difference. Almost half of the participants cited information as a key factor, with more than a third referring specifically to pieces of information that would make them feel that they can make a difference, such as evidence of how past action has brought tangible benefits. Transparency seems to be a key issue and questions such as 'who is affected and how', 'where does my money go' and 'who benefits from my actions' recurred in a variety of forms:

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

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

The quest for a persuasive rationale and effective set of tools also includes the question of how others have already contributed to that cause, which could be linked to the afore-mentioned need to see that other people are already participating.

The second major theme was the clear preference for direct, emotive and personal communication coupled with an emphasis on easy, convenient and cost-effective ways of helping. 'Easy' was by far the commonest adjective used by participants, while one out of five respondents specifically mentioned images that promote empathy:

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

This respondent clearly articulated what is a major issue for many citizens, i.e. the need to be able to see the benefits of one's actions, which has a direct effect on that individual's sense of efficacy and can lead to a virtuous cycle of political participation (Bowler & Donovan 2002). Indeed, the website of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is a good example of an organisation that is addressing some of the questions raised by these young people by featuring pages that are entitled 'what we will do with your money' and using interactive donation boxes that allow the user to see the benefits of each possible donation amount (Figure 1). By using emotive language and giving users simple choices about their participation, the NSPCC website seems to facilitate both awareness through direct communication and convenience through practical tools.
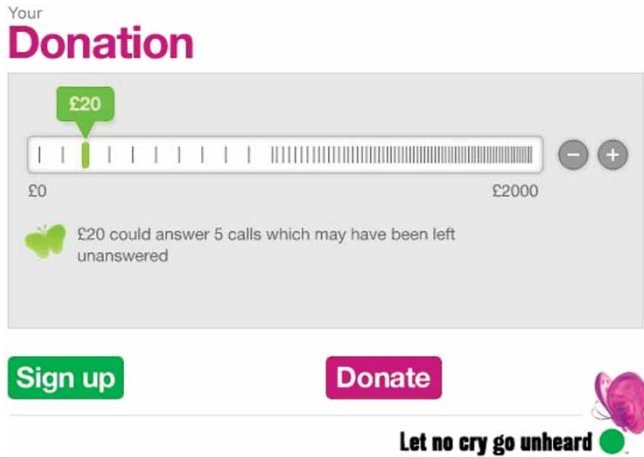
FIGURE 1   NSPCC website donation calculator. Interactive donation calculator showing the potential effect of each donation amount, http://www.NSPCC.org.uk (accessed 10 October 2008). Used with permission.

However, this pattern of responses could also be interpreted in a more critical way, as it essentially denotes a *consumerist* approach to citizenship, which sees civic participation as a choice that has to be marketed in appealing and beneficial terms to the consumer (citizen), rather than as a duty or ritual within a broader democratic community:

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

Furthermore, these users' preference for emotive pictures and convenient online solutions underlines the emerging perception of political messages as mere competitors in a segmented multimedia environment – a civic culture oriented towards convenience rather than informed deliberation:

> Shocking or sad images (hungry children), images of how the world may look due to climate change... The resolutions to the problems – make it sound easy; bitesize chunks. [#3.16]

A third theme, which once again proved particularly salient throughout the study, was the participants' need for emotional engagement, especially through visual material such as images and videos. Our data showed that affective visuals are important in catching an internet user's attention (especially in the case of first-time visitors), but they are also vital in establishing a more lasting

aesthetic and emotional connection between the user and the cause. As Corner and Pels (2003, p. 9) note, 'aesthetic stylisation is an inherent and inevitable feature of mass politics, particularly in its (post)modern mediated form'. While it would be tempting to disregard users' emphasis on aesthetic elements as a sign of dumbing down, a closer reading of our data reveals that this is intrinsically linked to emotions and perhaps, indirectly, to a willingness to step outside of the isolated self and connect with others in what could eventually lead to the creation of a collective identity. A clear need for online civic material that creates empathy was evident in the users' responses on expected gratifications:

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

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

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

The emotional dimension of online civic engagement also extends to the role of interactive applications, such as message boards and forums, mentioned by half of the sample (although interactive features were relatively less important compared with useful applications and emotive content). Hence, a key quality of a website should be its ability to empower users to express their own feelings or voice, as well as to see how others feel. The expressions used by the respondents were oriented heavily towards the notion of sharing ideas and voices, which could explain the recent meteoric success of content-sharing applications.

Hence, it may be the case that, rather than being disengaged, apathetic or cynical, young people in Britain today need a more direct mode of communication that affects them personally and leads to an emotional connection with public affairs, other citizens or political leaders. Such a mode of communication could be part of a more fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship between citizens and government, i.e. what Richards (2007) calls 'emotional governance'.

Having established the participants' civic needs and how these map onto possible web features, the following section pulls together the key themes of their website evaluations.

Young users' evaluations of civic websites

Having completed their first site visit, users were asked to compare their actual impressions to their initial expectations of civic websites. It was assumed that, having been given the opportunity to reflect on what motivates them to

engage via such websites, participants would have an additional set of bench-marks by which to evaluate the sampled sites, apart from the obvious and direct assessments emerging from their live user experience.

Challenging perceptions

A key finding immediately emerged from this data: several of the young people taking part in our study had very negative perceptions of charities and civic NGOs to start with; importantly, however, these negative expectations were challenged by the actual site visits, which in many cases pleasantly surprised them. This was true for all of the three sites of the first evaluation, but particularly true for Fairtrade and FoE. Two-thirds of participants made favourable comparisons between initial expectations and post-visit impressions; with half of those stating that they were either (pleasantly) surprised or that the site exceeded their expectations:

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

Youth perceptions of civic NGOs are significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, charities and NGOs are supposed to be major agents of emerging forms of youth engagement, such as volunteering and donating, which are arguably replacing more traditional forms of political participation such as voting and joining political parties (Henn *et al.* 2002; Bell 2005). Therefore, a widespread pattern of negative perceptions could compromise the thesis that such engagement is flourishing and socially conscious. Furthermore, this data can further illuminate our understanding of youth attitudes towards civic engagement altogether (i.e. what is it that they find de-motivating about these organisations? And what does this tell us about their attitudes towards participation?). Finally, given the 'pull' nature of the medium and the emerging mode of political communication, the reputation of individual organisations, as well as of the civil society as a whole, is crucial in attracting users to their websites.

Hence, it is significant that several participants expected civic websites to be 'pushy', 'patronising', 'negative', 'depressing', 'inaccessible' and 'boring'. These recurring adjectives indicate a consistent perception of issue organisations as using aggressive tactics, transmitting depressing messages, putting unrealistic demands on citizens and featuring inaccessible discourse that is directed at experts [interestingly, these same allegations are usually directed against politicians].

Efficacy, individualism and civic loneliness

The sample's aversion to 'pushy' messages could be interpreted as a blame-avoidance strategy, i.e. as an inability to assume the fractional share of responsibility that falls upon each individual citizen, or as aversion to commitment and civic duty – i.e. as evidence of a consumerist stance to civic engagement in which the individual chooses if, when and how they will engage:

> It wasn't too pushy that you need to change your entire life to make a difference. [#4.39]
>
> They weren't, it doesn't seem like that they were forcing you, you could just read it and then get about it if you wanted to, it didn't really say that 'you've got to do this or you will die! [#3.35]

Having said that, a closer reading of the data reveals that the main factor for this attitude is not so much the need to avoid blame, as the anxiety to find positive and effective ways of helping. In other words, these young people are not so much afraid of taking responsibility, as being keen to produce a useful outcome:

> [The Fairtrade website] didn't make you feel like it was your responsibility- like it was your fault but that you could take some responsibility in helping. [#4.39]

Positive messages of hope and encouragement then become crucial motivators of civic action. Over and over again in the written evaluations and group discussions, practical advice and specific information on how the individual can help (albeit in individualistic rather than collective ways) are contrasted to apocalyptic messages of fear and disaster. In fact, participants themselves often made that direct link between hope and efficacy:

> #1.04: I liked the [Fairtrade] case studies as well. They are a lot more positive and encouraging the user to read more about it, not just to think 'no I'd better get to my mind I'm gonna die...
>
> [Friends of the Earth did not feature] something that stops me thinking that it's too late, there's nothing I can do, so I won't do anything [about climate change]. [#3.22]

Previous studies in public health campaigns and risk communication have shown that unless accompanied by a strong sense of efficacy, the use of fear through scare or shock tactics can have a 'boomerang effect' or unintended consequences, as it is can lead the public to denial about the threat to their lives (Cho 2003; Kleinot & Rogers 1982).

Feelings of helplessness may also be linked to the perceived lack of subjective norms around civic participation. That is to say, many young people may not see

the relevance of collective action, but they also do not feel motivated or socially driven by the behaviour of others. What emerges, therefore, is a feeling of civic loneliness:

> Yeah I'd like to know how... how... how it's gonna make a difference, what I do... as well, that would be important. Sometimes you can just think 'well... it's just me on my own, what difference am I gonna make? [#2.10]

There is some tension between the evidence presented here and the view of youth as materially-minded self-oriented consumers (Rahn & Transue 1998). Individualism is definitely present, and even dominant, in these narratives, but it largely appears to be a natural response to an individualistic civic culture that does not provide young people with the necessary social context for the development of trust in broader social and civic structures (Couldry 2006). It is in (re)building that link between the individual and the collective or global that the use of affective and emotional means of engagement can be particularly crucial. In that sense, the internet may be a particularly appropriate channel for personalised and affective political communication.

Personalisation and consumerism

The link between efficacy and individualism also re-emerged in the users' evaluations of the sampled civic websites. Participants focused on what the individual can do not in relation to others but in their own lifeworld and thought that websites should provide them with accessible tools that help them make a tangible difference *on their own* – what one user called 'giving the consumer the chance to do something for themselves' (#1.01). The reverse was also true: the importance of an issue ought to be demonstrated not with reference to its impact on society at large, but to the individual person:

> Like the page I'm looking at now, which is about what you need to know about factory farms and how it affects you doesn't <u>ever</u> actually say how it affects you! It says, you know for, like, the antibiotics thing it's quite dangerous to humans but they just mention that it will raise healthcare costs... and if you didn't care... you just wouldn't keep reading, would you.... (#1.02 on The Meatrix)

In this particular case, not caring about high healthcare costs could be due to either a selfish disregard for the broader community, or – perhaps more likely – to a lack of a cognitive and affective link between higher healthcare costs (abstract macro-political concept) and e.g. higher taxation or lower quality healthcare (tangible micro-political effect). If this lack of interest in the broader social impact of specific issues were found to be broadly shared, it

would support the notion that young people today are faced with a broken cycle of political socialisation, which does not allow them to see the interdependence of their individual lifeworld with the broader society.

Our data strongly suggest that this individualistic approach to civic engagement is not necessarily driven by utilitarian or selfish motives, but by a genuine conviction that the individual domain is the only visible one and, subsequently, that individual action is the only possible option. 'Making a difference', 'feeling you can do something' and being given 'practical advice' were almost universally cited as crucial elements of experiencing civic websites and there was a widespread and genuine need for efficacious online tools.

This argument is further supported by a clear divide that many participants drew between political actions (such as lobbying MPs) and non-political actions (consumption) that users can take online. While generally praising the website of the FoE, users criticised its mobilisation approach as being remote from their everyday realities:

> Because they place a lot of focus on [. . .] whether we think the government is doing enough for climate change, and that's quite a key issue. . .. I think there was a key focus on the homepage on the political side of it, rather than. . .– that's what I was looking for, the solutions that *real people* – what real people can do and there was a lot on the political side of it. [#3.22]

This view is consistent to responses from participants in other group sessions (e.g. #1.06 'it says like about how the government wants to attack and cut CO2 emissions by 2010 but it doesn't say <u>how</u> like they're gonna do that, it doesn't say 'you can do this'). The implication is clear: the role and the capacity of the government to tackle this issue are questioned, as is the relevance and efficacy of collective action. Representative politics is perceived as almost irrelevant to 'real people's' lives.

This distinction between political and consumer action reflected these young people's scepticism towards large-scale 'changing the world' action as they clearly doubted citizens' ability to bring about social change:

> Also, they were very much you know like. . . bringing down conglomerates and bringing down- changing the world. . . but they weren't- they didn't have any sections about on turning lights off when you leave your house, you know [extended laughs by group] there was no. . . there was *no* – it was very much like taking action *for the whole of the world!* [#4.37 on FoE]

Hence, the participants saw personalisation as the antidote to unrealistically large-scale action. Framing a public affair or social issue with reference to specific cases, communities or 'real people' allowed users to develop an affective

relationship with it. The best example of personalisation in the sampled sites was the profiles of product farmers and growers featuring on the Fairtrade Website (Figure 2), which were praised by almost all users:

It allows you to read how Fairtrade is helping real people and making their lives better, i.e. Carlos, orange farmer. [#1.04]

It was like this family, the farmer and all that and it makes you realise that it's – they're real lives. [#3.32]

It kind of makes you kind of want to find out more – it's more of a personal touch to the website. [#2.11]

Apart from connecting emotionally with the site's mission, case studies help users see the tangible benefits of the organisation's work. Webb (2007, p. 5.8) takes this point further and argues that Fairtrade labelling builds the symbolism of a critique of commodity chain relationships between growers, retailers and consumers into the materialism of a pack of coffee, 'with the "fair trade" product imputing a connection between the lives of low-income farmers and those of affluent consumers' (also see Raynolds 2002).
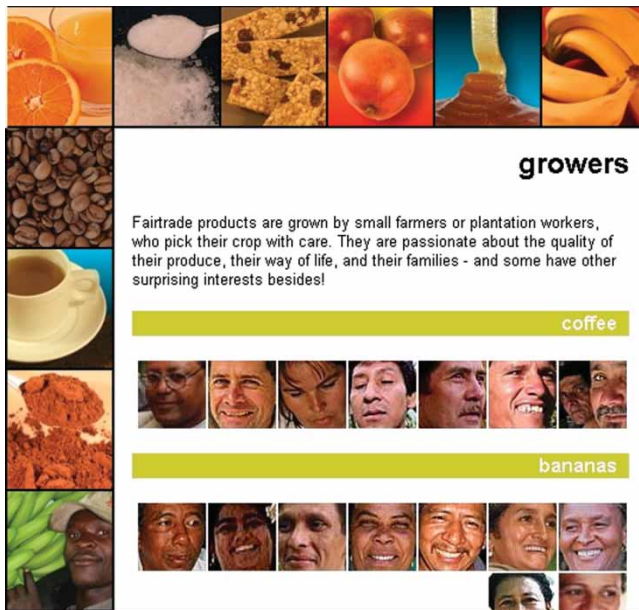

FIGURE 2 Partial screenshot of growers' profiles webpage, www.fairtrade.org.uk (accessed 5 March 2006). Used with permission.

The themes of convenience and personalisation are also ingrained in the users' preferred site features and applications. As part of the evaluations, participants were given the opportunity to nominate their favourite site elements and those features that pleasantly surprised them (Table 3), as well as others that they would have liked to find — a wish list of sorts (Table 4). These responses are very useful in gaining a more applied understanding of young people's preferred means of online mobilisation. They rotate primarily around material consumption at the micro-social level (e.g. recipes, menus, restaurant guides, listings of retailers and local producers).

Furthermore, the embedded role of major supermarkets in youth everyday life also emerged, e.g. realising that Fairtrade-labelled products are available in major supermarkets created a feeling of reassurance among participants in that the product or civic action was within the individual's reach. Major retailers thus appear as crucial spaces that act as mediators between individual consumers and civically oriented consumer brands:

> they're actually telling you to do it in, like, Tesco's and Sainsbury's and things; so you can actually make a difference — it's not just a general site. [#2.11 on Fairtrade]

TABLE 3 Specific examples of best practice as identified by the users.

Site	Feature or application	Motivating factor
Fairtrade	Case studies and profiles of producers	Personalisation
	Images of products	Visual engagement
	Recipes	Everyday life/consumption
	Listings of retailers	Convenience/consumption
Soil Association	10 Reasons to Choose Organic	Specific benefits/accessibly succinct
	Listings of local producers	Convenience/consumption
	Celebrity supporters	Personalisation
	Information on Bird Flu	Everyday life/relevance
Friends of the Earth	Vote feature	Interactivity
	The Big Ask/'Find your MP'	Convenience/tangible action
	E-petitions	Convenience/tangible action
	'Did you know?'	Accessibly succinct
The Meatrix	Animated clip	Visual engagement/accessibly succinct
	Postcode search engine for local farms	Convenience/consumption

TABLE 4 'Wish list' of features proposed by the users.

Site	Feature or application	Motivating factor
Fairtrade	Detailed info on product availability	Convenience/consumption
	Photos of product packaging/on the shelf	Convenience/consumption/ visual
	Self-assessment questionnaire	Personalisation
Soil Association	Insight into farmers' life	Personalisation
	Online Menu	Convenience/consumption
	Restaurant Guide	Convenience/consumption
	Real time chat tool for contacting SA	Interactivity
	E-petitions	Convenience/tangible action
Friends of the Earth	Campaign-related photos/videos	Visual/affective engagement
	Tips on reducing CO_2 emissions	Tangible action/accessibly succinct
	Actions that individual consumers can take	Everyday life/tangible action
The Meatrix	Expand individual country pages	Relevance
	Examples of animal cruelty	Affective engagement

This brings us to the final point about the consumerist nature of these young people's online civic behaviour. A careful reading of the group discussion transcripts reveals a consistent cognitive link between consumption and power. When responding to questions about empowerment or participation, which did not contain references to consumption in any form, respondents often translated getting involved as buying or consuming, e.g.: 'I think it had loads of interesting stuff on there and stuff that you could do yourself, like where to buy things so you can get involved.' [#1.01 on Fairtrade]. One participant thought that The Meatrix was more empowering than the FoE site because:

> when it said "don't buy... sort of... factory meat" sort of... and it said, like, "buy organic food" or "buy food from family farms" or "buy food from local butchers" or "buy local" ...and it's just little things like that, little things like that even [that can help]. [#2.13]

It has been argued that websites of consumer organisations can play a critical role in the process of symbolic negotiation and virtual interaction between producers and consumers (Callon *et al.* 2002). Webb (2007, p. 5.8) argues that '[t]he qualities attributed to products, and their status as 'goods' or 'bads', are not inherent in the artefacts, but are subject to negotiation, and struggle, between market actors, who may include economists, producers, consumer groups, scientists

and international governance bodies'. Bourdieu famously argued that everyday acts carry significant political, social and cultural meanings both for the individual's identity and for social structures: 'consumption practices become important in maintaining the basic structures of power and inequality which characterize our world' (Schor 1999). More recently, thinkers such as Ginsborg (2008) have made the case for the politics of the everyday life, illustrating the relevance and interconnectedness between individuals, consumer behaviour and political issues.

While it is important to acknowledge the role of consumption in the process of identity construction, it may be useful to adopt a slightly more critical stance towards the marketised and highly individualised mode of civic engagement outlined so far. Such a critique could aid the development of appropriate civic interventions and structures that avoid the pitfalls created by the fusion between democratic practice and market consumerism.

The limits of civic consumerism

In addition to creating opportunities for greater inclusion and empowerment of citizens and civic actions, the emerging model of civic consumption faces limitations and raises questions about its impact on democracy. Civic consumerism has very diverse, and possibly some contradictory, expressions and consequences: it could be seen as a self-oriented stance towards public life, according to which political leaders have to 'sell' ideas or policies to citizens-consumers who choose whether or not to engage with certain issues; but it can also be defined as a form of participation through the various facets of consumption (e.g. ethically sourced goods). These two phenomena are intrinsically linked to each other, although they are not identical and, in the case of active citizens attempting to make a difference through conscious consumption, they could even be in tension. However, both expressions of civic consumerism were clearly present in the participants' narratives. Given the increasing weight afforded to consumer choice in contemporary liberal democracies, it is important to identify some factors that may limit civic consumerism's democratic potential.

The first such issue is the disputed political significance of symbolic action. The case of Make Poverty History is particularly interesting in that respect. Gorringe and Rosie (2006, p. 9.3) note that demonstrations 'entail symbolic rituals highlighting the cohesion of protestors and communicating their objectives... MPH voiced concrete demands but relied on heavily symbolic and expressive acts [e.g. white wristband, a minute's silence, etc] – foremost amongst which was the evocative, expressive invocation to *Make Poverty History*'. Indeed, one could argue that there is a certain tension between the outcome-oriented civic attitudes of our sample as outlined above and the wide range of symbolic or cultural actions that have been embraced by younger

generations (such as charity wristbands). The political gravitas of symbolic action has been contested by those who argue that we have lost the distinction between commodity- or culture-oriented actions and end results (e.g. Bey in Bleyer 2004).

A sweeping rejection of the wealth of civic activities that take place through expressive or even consumerist outlets probably disregards the many positive and empowering spill-over effects that such action can have – not least for citizens' own political socialisation and social capital. However, the lifespan and ultimate impact of such actions in creating a sense of collective identity ought to be probed. Observing civic interactions in Holland after the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, Herme (2005 cited in Couldry 2006, p. 323) commented that there was 'curious emptiness at the heart of everyday political talk'. Rhodes (1994) famously described the 'hollowing out of the state' and governance in Britain following the waves of privatisation and deregulation of the 1980s and 1990s. It may not be inappropriate to suggest that we are witnessing the 'hollowing out of citizenship' and political engagement in that individuals are expected to be motivated and feel efficacious within a context of individualism and privatisation of the public sphere. Subsequently, as Edwards (2007, p. 543) notes, the risk is that the impetus to participate is deemed the prerogative of individuals, while the failure to do so is attributed to a flaw of the citizen.

Furthermore, proponents of civic consumerism have argued that the emerging mode of civic interaction allows consumers to use their increasing wealth so as to construct their own lives (Reeves 2008). That is to say, increased affluence gives citizens more choice and power in making important decisions. Yet, Reeves' argument makes a very contestable assumption about the resources available to citizens, especially those of a lower socio-economic status.

The case of Fairtrade is a good example: Webb (2007) criticises the simplistic notion of consumers as passively seduced by the power of marketing and advertising and puts forward the argument that the significant growth in the sales of Fairtrade coffee is consistent with a 'developing politicisation of consumption' and proves the 'market impact of collective consumer agency' (2007, p. 2.2). Our data support Webb's point about the potential of Fairtrade to establish a politically charged relationship between foreign suppliers and domestic consumers – users clearly enjoyed reading the case studies of farmers and reported feeling an emotional connection that also facilitated their cognitive understanding of the more substantive issues. Yet, our participants' civic narrative contests Webb's optimistic view as it shows considerable tension between the theoretically empowering products available to citizen-consumers and the economic realities facing youth groups such as students living on limited means. Table 5 draws together some of the main issues emerging from the user evaluations and examines the extent to which they are addressed by the Fairtrade website, as a metaphor on the key barriers to online youth mobilisation. It is worth noting that the redesigned

TABLE 5   Barriers to online youth mobilisation – case study: fairtrade.

Key issues emerging from the user evaluations	Satisfactorily addressed by the Fairtrade website?
1 *Negative perceptions* of Fairtrade as a 'pushy' NGO	*Yes* – users were pleasantly surprised and found the site welcoming, positive and appealing
2 Lack of *awareness* of, and interest in, the *substantive issues* behind Fairtrade (e.g. trade justice, lives of farmers)	*Yes* – users liked the personalised content, which allowed them to establish an emotional and cognitive link between the abstract issues and 'real people'
3 *Price difference* between Fairtrade and non-Fairtrade products; subsequent perception of Fairtrade as an expensive brand that students cannot afford	*No* – Barbara Crowther (Director of Communications and Policy) acknowledged that consumers still perceive fairly traded goods as more expensive, although there is no evidence of a slow-down in the growth of ethical consumption due to the recent economic recession (Boyle 2009, p. 39)
4 Lack of *awareness* about the availability, presentation, packaging, and range of Fairtrade *products*	*Partly* – many participants were surprised by the range of products and level of information available; others requested more specific consumer details
5 *Site navigation* problems (floating menus, invisibility of homepage link)	*Yes* – these have now been dealt with via the redesigning of the Fairtrade website

website of the Fairtrade Foundation (Figure 3) tackled some of the navigation issues highlighted by the participants.

Participants expressed informed scepticism about the price of Fairtrade products *vis-à-vis* young people's resources, as well as the recent attempt of major retailers to 'jump on the bandwagon' of ethical trading:

> #4.37: There's loads of companies that are now being questioned because they're actually getting into Fairtrade because they're gonna make that much profit… Another thing is not just buying these Fairtrade products but maybe trying to bring these Fairtrade prices down…
> #4.39: I think that is the main barrier though… for students… it is the price difference, when you know you can get something… um crisps or mints or something like that, when you know you can get something cheaper then morally you think 'I should buy that', but that one is half the price, and I think that's the main barrier for lots of people from buying…
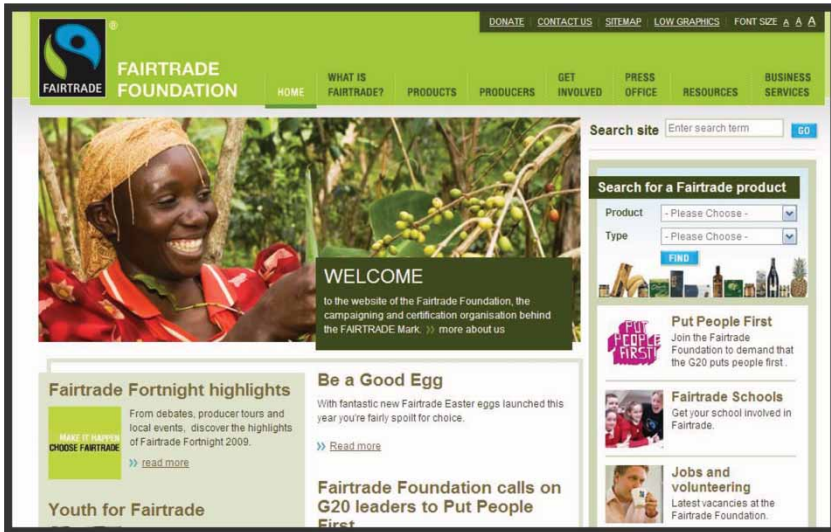
FIGURE 3   Partial screenshot of the redesigned homepage of the Fairtrade Foundation, www.fairtrade.org.uk (accessed 1 April 2009). Used with permission.

Therefore, one of the problems with the libertarian and marketised models of self-empowerment is that 'they may impose new costs and demands on disadvantaged service users, who have to acquire new skills in order to interact successfully with service delivery systems' (Collin 2008, pp. 539–540), as well as to disenfranchise those who are in need of intensive personalised support.

Crucially, the capital required for young people to participate in emerging and online civic rituals is both economic and socio-cultural. North *et al.* (2008, p. 895) concluded that 'the link between cultural capital, habitus and cultural form produces a socially entrenched digital inequality rather than an economically entrenched digital divide'. That is to say, emerging digital inequalities have not only an economic expression but also a crucial habitual aspect, i.e. lack of motivation that can be linked to the particular contexts of individuals' political socialisation. Thus, online participation strategies that do not cater to disadvantaged groups of young citizens may be aggravating, rather than ameliorating, the gap between those who are already engaged and those who are socially disenfranchised. Thus, the limits of civic consumerism are not just economic but also political, social and cultural.

Conclusions: emerging challenges to the internet's democratic potential

This study investigated a series of youth civic motivations and their realisation through users' expected and received gratifications from civic websites. It

should be reiterated that sampling for this research was purposive and focused on a specific community of young people evaluating a small number of websites. Given the limitations of the sample and of the research design, the findings outlined above should be treated as tentative and indicative, rather than formally representative of UK youth at large. However, and while acknowledging the limits of this approach, certain interesting patterns emerged, which can offer valuable qualitative insights into the civic and online 'thought processes' of young internet users.

It was argued that young people may be willing to participate as long as a number of 'terms and conditions' are met that would make that engagement meaningful to them: the benefits of civic action must be highlighted and they must be tangible; the reasons for engaging in such action should be clear and relevant; the act of participation itself should not stress the individual's resources; the user-citizen-consumer should be able to choose why, when and how they will engage with a public affair or cause.

These motivators were further distilled into web features that users themselves consider important, such as visual stimuli that would help establish an emotional connection between the user and the people behind the civic cause. The participants' evaluations of four issue-oriented civic websites showed that, despite their initially negative perceptions of NGOs, a positive user experience can challenge these notions and attract the attention of website visitors. Features such as micro-political online tools and case studies of communities positively affected by the organisation's work can motivate them to engage with the cause. In terms of civic web design, in particular, there was a clear preference among our sample for visual, rather than textual or menu-loaded pages. Breaking up the text, introducing visual signposts and reducing the number and size of menus and links were recurring suggestions. While this emphasis on convenience and ease of use may sound like a truism, the premium put by these users on simplicity and the subsequent frustration with a lot of the pages that they evaluated means that there may well be a gap between current practice and users' needs. Mitra *et al.* (2005) note that a tension may exist between what web designers consider to be state-of-the-art applications in web design and what users actually consider to be attractive. Gibbs also highlights the misperception among many designers of information systems, who wrongly perceive a design problem as *information scarcity* rather than *attention scarcity* (2008, p.130).

However, our study also identified a mode of online youth engagement that is heavily oriented towards consumption and choice. This paradigm of civic consumerism embodies a profound shift in the perceived role of the citizen and could have significant implications both for civic communicators and for youth empowerment. With political messages having lost the protected status that they used to enjoy in the 'old' public spheres of the mass media, civic organisations are forced to market their message within a highly fragmented

environment competing against a myriad of other products. At the same time, youth notions of citizenship – and the motivations, fears and needs upon which they are based – may be different to the traditional norms upon which the political system and civic culture of liberal democracies are based. Coleman (2004, p. 1) reminds us that 'the lament for old, localised solidarities fails to resonate with twenty-first century citizens whose interpersonal networks are increasingly a matter of choice rather than a consequence of geography'.

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

However, the emerging paradigm of civic consumerism also raises questions about the political impact of consumer action and, perhaps more importantly, about the inherent assumptions and resource implications that are embedded within this increasingly individualised civic environment, which could lead to new forms of social and civic exclusion. Hence, in addition to established barriers to online youth empowerment, such as the privatised, hierarchical and commodified structures of online interaction and the 'second-level digital divide' (Hargittai & Hinnant 2008), another challenge to the net's democratic potential is emerging, which is not technological, but fundamentally socio-political.

Note

1   For example, UK sales of Fairtrade products rose by 43 per cent year-on-year to £700 million in 2008 (Boyle 2009), while membership to Friends of the Earth (FoE) rose from 1,000 in 1971 to 119,000 in 2002. FoE is a particularly interesting case from a political science perspective as it is one of few NGOs to explicitly identify itself as pursuing democratic objectives (Taylor & Burt 2001, p. 60).

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