AFTERWORD

Learning the lessons of research on youth participation and the internet

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Reviewing the state of the academic literature in 2003, I noted with some regret, 'The most that can be said is that a few studies are charting interesting initiatives involving young people's participation using the internet, holding out the promise of new opportunities through instances of ''best practice'', although it remains unclear how and by whom these could be evaluated or more widely implemented' (Livingstone 2003, p. 152). Just a few years on, we are witnessing an explosion in initiatives from governments, industry, youth organisations and social activists seeking to engage this supposedly politically apathetic but digitally enthusiastic generation by capitalising on young people's enthusiast, creative and often expert appropriation of the internet (Montgomery 2008). Much of this is motivated by the undoubted irony that, over the past half-century, youth participation has declined at the same time as youth rights to participate have gained recognition.

Recent years have also seen a considerable increase, if not a commensurate explosion, in research studies evaluating these initiatives (Bennett 2008). Reflecting a new source of regret, it has been widely noted that their findings are rather less optimistic than the rhetoric of the providers. A growing number of studies concur with a recent American survey of 15–25-year-olds, which found the internet an even less effective means of engaging disaffected young people than traditional routes, though very effective at mobilizing the already interested (Levine and Lopez 2004). As many critics argue, this is significantly because adults and young people may not agree on what it means to participate (Lister *et al.* 2003). We must listen to young people much more, and to speak with them, not at them, as Philippa Collin puts it in this issue. It is also because, for at least the first generation of online citizenship initiatives, providers were tempted to rely on technology doing the job for them, as if the internet in and of itself could extend democratic participation. The result, of course, was a series of (qualified) failures from which, fortunately, much was learned (Phipps 2000).

The five articles selected for this special issue of the *Journal of Youth Studies* offer some encouraging signs, although they are equally clear that creating and using new websites is hardly sufficient to right the wrongs of youth disillusion with politics. But, in tackling the subtle and not so subtle challenges of participation – especially, participation by whom, in what, and with what consequences – they also, usefully, complicate the simple hunt for constructive and policy-relevant next steps by posing some difficult questions for future research. Philippa Collin remains cautiously optimistic over whether youth participation policies may draw in new political actors, both because online communication is highly convenient, especially as a critical mass of users is reached in many countries, and because

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providers are learning how to appeal to the genuine concerns of young people, working with rather than against their off-line practices and values. Indeed, as the array of civic websites burgeons and diversifies, a greater reflexive self-criticism is enabled among providers, allowing them to learn from each other as well as from their youthful contributors.

A central lesson in recent research has been to broaden out conceptions of participation, looking beyond simply increasing voting (as with early initiatives such as *www.rockthevote.org*) to a range of domains, including the focus of Janelle Ward's article, political consumerism. This, she suggests, works with young people's individualistic and lifestyle-related concerns, supporting a neoliberal rather than radical agenda for participation that relies on the aggregate, not the collectivity. As young people are both citizens-in-the-making and in the here-and-now, consumption decisions may be effective in drawing in new civic actors and encouraging citizen skills in all, whether or not they also contribute to radical change. Knowing how providers imagine their youthful visitors is crucial, Ward argues, in understanding and critiquing the decisions that lie behind the specific interfaces, modes of address, and opportunities for interaction that are instantiated in civic websites.

While Collin and Ward focus on the providers, Tobias Olsson and Shakuntala Banaji turn their attention to the websites they produce. Concurring with Ward, each stresses the vast range of approaches now on offer, though whether any of these reach young people's attention remains unclear. Olsson's detailed and critical reading of the websites against the ideals expressed by their producers illuminates the communicative gap between author and text, a gap that matters as much, though arguably not more than, that between text and reader (Livingstone 2007). Significantly in this often optimistic debate, Banaji also stresses that this range includes the 'uncivic' – the right-wing, hostile or downright racist – eloquently illustrating the point that not all participation is democratic. And these sites are not simply part of the rich array that results from free-speech provision; rather, she argues, they are themselves a response, at least in part, to young people's perception that their concerns go unheard by powerful institutions – a complaint that echoes throughout this field.

Not all dissatisfaction results in antagonism, of course. For the most part, young people simply turn their backs on the many civic invitations targeted on them. Anita Harris asks the important question – what do they do instead? Exploring young women's 'online DIY culture', she argues that blogs, social networking, e-zines and related modes of user-led interaction just might represent new directions in activism. Again sounding a warning that even these creative interactions, civic or otherwise, characterise only a minority of young women, Harris seeks online DIY culture, social networking especially, as providing opportunities, first, to occupy public space, significantly, given the widespread disapproval of young people's public practices; second, to create a public self, a key step in seeing oneself as a citizen; third, to resist feminine stereotypes, and so to avoid seeing oneself through others' limited lens; and, fourth, to explore with minimal commitment the borderline civic activities of, say, social justice campaigning on MySpace. In this way, 'young women are negotiating the absence of traditional citizenship identities', even if those that replace them online are 'somewhat problematic', to both them and us, the adult observers.

Notwithstanding the insights and findings of these five articles, there remain some questions and puzzles for future research in this field. The first concerns the role of context. These five studies were conducted, respectively, in Sweden, Australia and the UK,

and they add to a fast-growing body of literature conducted in many more countries. But although each study provides the necessary information to contextualise their enquiry, one wonders whether they could have been conducted elsewhere with little change in the findings. Yet it is unlikely that the so-called problem of youth participation, and its possible resolution through the use of information communications technology (ICT), is much the same problem everywhere, even in developed countries. Or, do cross-national differences – for example, in the social history of childhood, public dissatisfaction with the state, or the cultural values accorded to technology – intervene in, and so shape, the relation between youth and participation in ways yet to be satisfactorily determined by research? The Civicweb project on which Banaji's article reports may enlighten us as the project develops, for it compares seven different countries as each seeks to address its youth online.

Second, since all five studies use qualitative methods, one wonders what quantitative research would have added. As well demonstrated here, in-depth, open-ended investigations generate insights easily missed by quantitative methods. These latter are poor at understanding the relations among different contexts, practices and forms – in this case, the vital connections, and misunderstandings, between website producers, the texts themselves, and the young people who engage with them. But quantitative research is good at revealing the 'epidemiology' of a phenomenon – how widely has it spread, who is engaged in it, and who is left out. For example, our Public Connection Project found that nearly one in five of those aged 18–35 had contributed to an online discussion about a public issue of importance to them, while for those over 35 the figure fell to 5% (Couldry *et al.* 2007). If just youth are studied, this level of online participation appears to be a minority interest, but compared with the rest of the population, it is more encouraging. After all, social change may result from the activities of a substantial minority marking a new direction, and need not – should not – demand that everyone participates in everything.

Third, and perhaps surprisingly given the topic of this special issue, relatively little attention is paid to the specific interfaces and affordances of ICT, or to its networks of accessibility and reach. So, though we learn how civic or other websites are institutionally situated, funded and used, we learn less about matters of design and technology. Possibly this is a matter of technical expertise, or perhaps instead a concern to avoid an implicit technological determinism, an issue explicitly addressed by Olsson. But technologies are socially shaped – they reflect institutional decisions and social practices (Hutchby 2001). Ideally, as Sara Bentivegna (2002) has argued, the very architecture of the internet, with its flexible, hypertextual, networked structure, its dialogic mode of address, and its alternative, even anarchic feel, should particularly appeal to young people, fitting their informal, peer-oriented, antiauthority approach.

But too often, the civic sites created for young people reproduce traditional, hierarchical modes of address from off-line to online contexts, in direct contradiction of the claims made by providers and disappointing to young people themselves (Livingstone 2007). And, as Olsson notes in this issue, users may themselves treat a potentially many-to-many medium more conservatively as a one-to-many medium, constructing the internet, in practice, as something closer to the mass media they are used to and which demand less of them. This suggests a second great irony, one in which the internet's potential for interactive and democratic engagement goes unrealised, as society – not only users but also institutional providers and website producers, stick with what they know, namely, the familiar and undemanding territory of mass communication. In keeping with the tacit

ideals underlying this special issue, it is surely the task of us all to work with practitioners and young people to ensure that this does not happen.

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