

## The internet, youth participation policies, and the development of young people's political identities in Australia

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In Australia, renewed interest in the principles of youth participation during the last decade has led to an increase in the development of youth participation policies, in both the government and non-government sectors. At the same time, the internet is being increasingly utilised to promote and implement the aims of these youth participation policies. This paper asks, what is the relationship between youth participation policies, the internet and young people's political identities? Is the internet simply a vehicle for participation policies – a mechanism for governments and organisations to extend their reach to otherwise disengaged youth? Or is it a space where young people are authoring new forms of participation and political identities? It is argued in this paper that the internet is significant in shaping the relationship between youth participation policies and new political identities in the following ways: it is a unique and autonomous platform for the realisation of project-based political identities; it is a legitimising space for new political practices of young people; and, though it can address some barriers to participation, there is little evidence to suggest that it challenges the economic structural disadvantage that can exclude certain groups of young people. Drawing on empirical research conducted in Australia, this paper provides insights into Australian young people's experiences of participation, their attitudes to participation policies, and the role of the internet in their participatory activities.

**Keywords:** young people; participation policy; internet use; political identity; Australia

### Introduction

*Youth participation* has enjoyed revived popularity, in policy and organisational practice, in Western democracies during the last decade (Kirby *et al.* 2003, Reimer 2003). In its broadest sense, youth participation refers to youth involvement in decision-making processes from which, traditionally, they have been excluded (Wierenga *et al.* 2003, Livingstone *et al.* 2005). Though youth participation has come to mean different things in different contexts (Sinclair 2004, pp. 108–109), participation policies are intimately linked with distinct theoretical approaches to both 'youth' and 'citizenship' (Collin 2007). There has also been increasing interest in how the internet can promote youth participation in democracy (Coleman and Rowe 2005), and, in Australia, most state governments with a youth portfolio and youth-serving non-government organisations (NGOs) have integrated the internet into their policies and strategies for youth engagement. However, it remains unclear what relationship exists between youth participation policies, young people's use of the internet, and their political participation.

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### Participation and the internet

There are broadly two approaches to the study of the internet and youth political participation. The first assumes a normative position on political participation and looks at how technology is extending or deepening democracy as a legal and administrative mechanism, and strengthening the legitimacy of normative political ideas and culture (Montgomery *et al.* 2004, p. 102). The focus is often on the opportunities and effectiveness of 'e-democracy' in strengthening existing institutional arrangements (Lewis 2005, p. 10), and the ability of technology to link decision-makers and political elites to citizens (Delli Carpini 2000, Dahlberg 2001, Luhrs *et al.* 2001) and extend government to marginalised or 'hard-to-reach' groups, such as young people (Brackertz *et al.* 2005, Simpson *et al.* 2005). The current top-down nature of e-governance has been criticised for focusing on communicating policy to young people, being government/decision-maker focused, and limiting the degree to which young people are able to contribute to agenda setting or decision-making (Lewis 2005, p. 12). There is also concern that digital technologies may reinforce the role of those who are already engaged, while further marginalising those who are not (Norris 2001, p. 98). Studies in the UK (Livingstone and Bober 2004) and Australia (Vromen 2007) argue that class and level of education are predictors of internet use and quality of internet access. Furthermore, top-down mechanisms fail to effectively link policymakers with the forms of online youth participation taking place through NGOs, youth-led sites or social movements.

The second approach challenges both the way that political participation is conceptualised (e.g. Norris 2001, Vromen 2003) and the way that it is researched (e.g. Coleman and Rowe 2005, Livingstone *et al.* 2005). Bennett has argued that the internet is implicated in contemporary political participation, organising and activism (Bennett 2003). He has found that the internet has transformed and is transformed by the political actions of individuals and groups, who, through wide, shallow networks, use the internet as both a space and a tool for political communication (Bennett 2003). Survey-based research in the UK (Livingstone *et al.* 2005) and in Australia (Vromen 2003) has deliberately explored a broad range of participatory opportunities, deepening our understanding of the range and forms of online participation. Nevertheless, one of the key challenges continues to be how 'participation' is defined (Livingstone *et al.* 2005, pp. 289–290). This dilemma reflects a wider limitation of existing research on young people's political participation, epitomised by quantitative studies with predetermined notions of how young people relate to the political and how they translate their conception of the political into action (O'Toole *et al.* 2003, p. 53, Marsh *et al.* 2007, p. 18). Below, I look at several studies that have sought to explore young people's own ideas of the political and the forms that participatory actions take, and argue that further in-depth qualitative research is still required to fully understand contemporary forms of youth participation – particularly in the rapidly changing online environment.

Livingstone and Bober (2004) used focus groups and a multimedia, computer-aided face-to-face survey to study the internet use of 12–19-year-olds in Britain (*UK Children Go Online*: <http://www.children-go-online.net>). They asked young people about their online activities, such as online gaming, chat, looking at other people's home pages, and searching for information, advice and news. Measuring three types of online activity – interacting with websites, visiting civic websites and creating websites – they used cluster analysis to develop a typology of young people's online participation. They conclude that there are three distinct groups: 'interactors', 'the civic-minded' and 'the disengaged'. Interactors are most likely to be middle-class boys, with high levels of access and skills in the internet, and

although they engage in a wide range of online activities, including seeking information, advice and content creation, Livingstone *et al.* conclude that these activities are not likely to be civic pursuits. By comparison, they find that the (somewhat misleadingly named) 'disengaged' are likely to be of lower socio-economic status and not have a computer at home. They find that these young people, not surprisingly, are less likely than the other two groups to engage in online activity.

Despite providing valuable insights into the ways that young people engage with the internet, their conclusions in relation to political participation are limited. Although focus groups were also conducted, it is not clear from the survey research what young people mean by 'political', whether or not interest-based communities and social networking sites are also spaces for issues-based participation, or whether or not simple activities, such as searching for information or using email or chat, are considered participatory activities. The authors acknowledge that unanswered questions on the relationship between online and offline activities remain (Livingstone *et al.* 2005, p. 304).

In their study, *Democracy and Young People's Use of the Internet*, Coleman and Rowe (2005) address this problem by taking a youth-centred approach to researching the role of the internet for young people's democratic citizenship in Britain. Young people were asked to visit specific websites and then respond to questions about them in online and off-line forums. Coleman and Rowe found that young people express themselves politically online through cause-related networks. They want to engage creatively with politics in online environments and to 'remix citizenship' – define for themselves what is 'political' and what kinds of participatory acts they should engage in. Their research found that the internet itself is not enough to ensure engagement – young people want to be agents of change who have real power to influence decisions. Participants were adept at distinguishing between online spaces where they are able to exercise both creativity and influence – and those where they cannot. What is unclear in Coleman and Rowe's study is which young people are likely to engage online in this way, and what factors affect their participatory trajectories.

In Australia, Vromen has used surveys to examine the relationship between young people's political participation and internet use, but employed a broad definition of 'participation' (Vromen 2003, 2007). Questionnaire topics accounted for a range of participatory acts that could be undertaken individually or as a member of a group and that accounted for normatively 'conventional' or 'unconventional' participation (Vromen 2007, p. 54). The broadly representative sample of 287 18–34-year-olds was surveyed by telephone. In keeping with the conclusions of Livingstone *et al.*, Vromen found that the internet seems to reinforce the existing political interests and practices of young people, rather than mobilising new political actors. She also found that a digital divide exists along lines of class and levels of education. Vromen concluded by acknowledging the dearth of evidence on the relationship between online and off-line political and community engagement, and called for qualitative research on the relationship between the internet use of young people and their political and community participation (Vromen 2007, p. 65).

While these studies acknowledge that participation policies (in both government and NGOs) frame young people's online engagement, their research provides no way of analysing whether there is a relationship between deliberate participation policies, and young people's internet use and participatory practices. A focus on the role of online participation also requires a consideration of the kinds of political identities that might emerge in relation to such policies.

### **Participation policies and new political identities**

In Australia, youth participation policies have emerged in both the government and non-government (community) sectors, though the dominant policy approach to youth participation has been to promote ‘youth development’ as an intervention to address social problems (Bessant 2003). This has perpetuated beliefs that young people are ‘becoming’, rather than ‘being’, and has enshrined a ‘deficit’ approach whereby young people are situated as ‘citizens-in-the-making’ and are the subjects of socialisation strategies seeking to create ‘good citizens’ (Owen 1996, p. 21, White and Wyn 2004, p. 87). Influenced by liberal theories of democracy, policy often focuses on socialising young people for ‘minimal’ (Evans 1995) citizenship. Civic republicanism has recently become more influential in shaping policy and political debate, promoting ‘active citizenship’ (e.g. Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Task Force, 2001) in managed, but decentralised, deliberation and decision-making opportunities. Coleman has also found that e-democracy policies in the UK target young people, and he has questioned the extent to which such policies promote ‘managed’ or ‘autonomous’ participation (Coleman 2008).

In such accounts, political identity is primarily understood in terms of the relationship of young people (as individuals or a group) to the state: as either legitimating (consenting to state domination through participation in voting and political parties) or oppositional (struggling against state domination through social movements and grass-roots activism) (Bang 2005, p. 169). However, theories on the individualisation of politics have reconceptualised the role of the state and civil society for policy production and political identity. Theories of ‘network governance’ (Rhodes 1997, Considine 2005) or ‘culture governance’ (Bang 2004a) argue that policy networks have changed, expanding from functional networks in government departments to include other actors from the private and voluntary sectors (Rhodes 1997, p. 45). This has created a shift away from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ and the emergence of new partnerships that traverse old boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors. Under these conditions, governments, leaders and managers need to involve ever more people, communities and organisations in the production and implementation of public policy (Bang 2004a, p. 159). Networks are therefore thought to be energising old institutions of public policy production and stimulating new forms of public participation (Considine 2005).

### ***‘Everyday makers’ and ‘expert citizens’***

Henrik Bang (2004b) argues that the trend towards governance networks is bringing together authorities and lay people through increased participation of NGOs in policy formation. He suggests that civic engagement is mobilised less in support or opposition to the state, and more in relation to governance networks. In this context, he theorises that ‘project-oriented’ political identities are evolving. Such identities do not focus their energies on the state (and other traditional hierarchies of power), but on the building of networks and reflexive political communities that respond to issues, rather than structures. As such, they are not oppositional or legitimising identities, in the ‘passive’ and ‘active’ (Turner 1990) or ‘maximal’ and ‘minimal’ (Evans 1995, p. 16) sense. Project-oriented identities demonstrate how the political has become personal and self-reflexive, about ‘choice’ and responding to one’s own need to take action on a cause. Bang calls these new political identities ‘expert citizens’ and ‘everyday makers’ (Bang 2004b).

### *Expert citizens*

Expert citizens take a discursive approach to 'the political', whereby participants create their own political realities through action. This action involves accessing existing processes and structures of governance by assuming specific roles in voluntary and NGOs. They are strategic in their pursuit of these roles because they seek political influence. Participation is an integral, almost logical, extension of their identity and they consider themselves part of the system. Expert citizens have, or can access, the skills and resources that enable them to influence agendas and decisions, so they place negotiation and dialogue over opposition or confrontation (Bang 2004b, p. 21). Bang warns that expert citizens represent a new republican elite that may further alienate 'ordinary' citizens from the political process. In the Australian youth sector, expert citizens might be staff or volunteers in the youth affairs peak bodies, youth councils, government agencies and youth-serving NGOs.

### *The everyday maker*

Everyday makers are also politically disposed, but their activities are directed at a wider range of targets (state, corporate, community figures). They are cause-oriented, but are not inclined to collective action, favouring individualised or micropolitical participation instead. They see potential for political action in everyday activities, such as writing for a local youth magazine, ethical purchasing, or running an arts festival with friends. They seek to effect small, profound change through their daily interactions, rather than shift grand narratives. Everyday makers operate beyond the 'professionalised' spheres where expert citizens are networked into governance structures. However, they are willing to 'do it' with the system – and work in partnership with private, public and voluntary organisations – to achieve their goals (Bang 2004b, p. 26). They may write blogs on government aid, sit on the local organising committee for the Reclaim the Night March, and mobilise their neighbours to protest against a local council decision to remove trees from their street.

This framework for new political identities is useful because it challenges the political/civil society dichotomy prevalent in discourses of 'active citizenship' (O'Toole *et al.* 2003). Project-oriented identities mobilise in relation to networks and partnerships between private, public and voluntary organisations engaged in public policy production (Bang 2005, p. 160). Conceptualised as micropolitical spheres (Hartmann *et al.* 2007), NGOs that utilise youth participation policies are creating unique pathways to political participation for young people. Such participation, however, may be 'managed' or 'autonomous' (Coleman 2008).

Given that many youth participation policies are articulated through the internet, this paper seeks to consider the relationship between youth participation policies, the internet and the development of youth political identities. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature by utilising a qualitative approach to develop a deep understanding of the relationship between participation policies, internet use, and young people's attitudes to and experiences of participation. Interviews are analysed by considering the following questions. What mobilises young people to participate? What forms of participation do young people associate with government and NGOs? Who is mobilised by internet-based participation policies?

### **Methodology**

In 2006, responding to calls for research to use qualitative methods to explore how young people themselves conceptualise and experience politics (O'Toole 2003, Vromen 2003),

I interviewed 13 young people involved in an Australian NGO, the Inspire Foundation. Borrowing from Hartmann *et al.* (2007), I argue that democratic participation takes place (and indeed is 'learnt') in a variety of 'public' spaces – particularly those of 'everyday experience' (Hartmann *et al.* 2007, p. 170). In this sense, NGOs are considered to be 'micropublic' spheres in which young people participate in decision making. The Inspire Foundation was chosen as a site for the study because of its national reach, its use of the internet, and its explicit youth participation policies.

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organisation established in 1995. The organisation aims to have a positive impact on the health and well-being of young people by using information communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver three national programmes for young people aged 16–25. Young people have been involved since 1999 in two initiatives: Reach Out! ([www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)) and ActNow ([www.actnow.com.au](http://www.actnow.com.au)). The former provides information, support and resources to improve young people's understanding of mental health issues, and help them to develop resilience, increase coping skills, and facilitate help-seeking behaviour. ActNow provides young people with opportunities to find out more about their world and take action on the issues they care about. Young people can access information, organisations, networks and other people, as well as tools for taking action. These initiatives utilise a range of Web-based (public forums, digital stories and online games) and mobile applications (podcasts and Short Message Service (SMS) campaigns) to engage with young people.

Youth participation in the work of the Inspire Foundation occurs through formal and informal mechanisms across all levels of the organisation, including programmes and operations. Formal mechanisms are managed by Inspire staff, whereas informal mechanisms are driven by young people, who may be general members of the public. Formal mechanisms include acting as advisers, ambassadors, project partners and interns, who communicate online via forums and email, face to face, and by phone. Informal participation is via interactive features on the Web-based services run by the foundation and social networking sites, such as [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com). The websites utilise online public forums and feedback mechanisms, including polls, to facilitate youth participation in the development and delivery of these services. On [www.actnow.com.au](http://www.actnow.com.au) user-generated content is produced and moderated by site members. Table 1 provides examples of these forms of participation.

Table 1. Forms of youth participation at the Inspire foundation.

| Formal (structured) participation                                      | Informal (unstructured) participation   |
|--|---|
| Work with staff to create text and multimedia content for the websites | Produce text and multimedia content for <a href="http://www.actnow.com.au">www.actnow.com.au</a> via a Wiki   |
| Discuss with peers and staff in closed online forums                   | Contribute to online discussion forums on <a href="http://www.reachout.com.au">www.reachout.com.au</a> and <a href="http://www.actnow.com.au">www.actnow.com.au</a> |
| Speak at conferences and events  | Complete online polls, surveys and feedback forms   |
| Become involved in recruitment by sitting on interview panels          | 'Word of mouth' and 'viral' promotion of Inspire initiatives and related issues   |
| Attend meetings to develop programme and organisational strategy       |   |
| Conduct peer research in evaluation and research projects              |   |

Interviewees, aged 19–24, were sourced from Reach Out! and ActNow. Reach Out! was launched in 1998, and, since 1999, more than 330 young people from around Australia have directly contributed to the development and delivery of the service. ActNow was launched in May 2006 with 100 young people contributing to its design and development. The research had ethics approval from the University of Sydney and participant, place and organisation names, along with other identifying details, have been changed to protect the anonymity of interviewees. Table 2 outlines the characteristics of the group of interviewees.

Because this research is interested in the role of structural factors in constraining or enabling participation, people with specific characteristics were invited to participate. It was also considered important to have a mix of past, long- and short-term participants. The sample was not intended to be representative of the wider youth population, though it did reflect the overall composition of the group of young people who are involved with the Inspire Foundation. This group is generally well educated, in some form of employment, and of English-speaking background; it is around 60% female. In addition, young people who identified with mental health issues (e.g. through direct experience of depression or a chronic physical illness, abuse, bullying, caring responsibilities for a family member with a disability) and who had limited economic resources were specifically approached. It was a purposive sample designed to explore the relationship between structural factors such as cultural background, socio-economic status and geographical location and young people's attitudes and participatory activities.

Face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted in Sydney, Brisbane, Bendigo and Melbourne in public spaces such as the local library, the place of work of the interviewee, or Inspire Foundation offices. Young people were asked to discuss their experiences of participation, their views on participation policies, and their use of the internet.

### The internet as a platform for project-oriented identities

When asked why they participated in the Inspire Foundation, the young people in this study talked about the issues or causes that they cared about, such as 'youth suicide', 'education', 'mental illness in young guys', and 'the Cronulla riots'.<sup>1</sup> While neither the participation mechanisms used at the Inspire Foundation nor, indeed, the organisation was mentioned as a key mobilising factor, the online nature of participation was. The internet was seen as a vehicle for achieving multiple goals: doing something about the issues,

Table 2. Demographics of interviewees.

| Characteristic                            | Australia |
|---|-----------|
| Male                                      | 6         |
| Female                                    | 7         |
| Aged 18–21                                | 5         |
| Aged 22–25                                | 8         |
| Metropolitan <sup>a</sup>                 | 10        |
| Regional centre                           | 1         |
| Rural town                                | 2         |
| Early school leaver                       | 0         |
| Tertiary educated                         | 13        |
| Employed                                  | 13        |
| Neither employed nor engaged in education | 0         |

Note: <sup>a</sup>Geographical location refers to where young people say they have lived for the longest part of their lives.

meeting new people, generating networks, and gaining experience ‘for the future’. It was also perceived as a very important tool for identifying causes, learning more, responding to issues, and integrating participation into everyday life.

Being able to control how and when they are involved and seeing concrete outcomes are very important to these young people:

I could contribute whenever I wanted, whether that was at 2 am, or after I’d been thinking about something for 24 hrs to get my thoughts straight and type it so it felt like what I was doing was meaningful. So it was on my own time, and terms. (Kate, 23)

The ability to ‘log on whenever they wanted’, to link in with projects, and to disengage or re-engage when they wanted to was critical to their participation. The internet is integral to initiating and sustaining participation.

**PC:** How do you describe what you do with Inspire to your friends?

**Ruth:** I say it’s mostly working online – cos that’s what it is. And I say it’s for young people, driven by young people. So it’s not something where you go and feel like there are lots of big words and stuff you don’t understand. And also it’s somewhere you can go and be anonymous.

**PC:** So when you applied to be involved – what were your expectations of what your role might be? What did you hope to be able to do?

**Ruth:** I don’t think I had any really, I just did it. I guess I just wanted to get involved and see what I could do. (Ruth, 22)

Ruth’s experience of participating is framed by the online environment, and it has both functional and spatial characteristics. Harry was another interviewee who discussed in depth the way that he used the internet to access information, networks, meet new people, and express his opinions on issues that he cared about:

I never thought that I’d be able to use the internet as a volunteer. So that was another thing . . . that really attracted me to being a Youth Ambassador for ReachOut! It’s just really simple, so we use the internet for a really wide range of things. We use the forums on the ReachOut! website for Youth Ambassadors to communicate our ideas, to share information and just to keep in touch socially. That’s really it I guess. The forums are the main way that Inspire [staff] communicates with its Youth Ambassadors. (Harry, 21)

But it is also a place where interviewees develop a sense of connectedness, meaningfulness and ownership. Harry describes how his participation is defined by his interests – not the skills or experience that he possesses to negotiate political or social structures.

The concept of ‘project-oriented identities’ is central to Bang’s theory, which provides a framework for exploring a broad range of participatory acts and attitudes. Project-based political identities are mobilised by *causes* (Norris 2003), direct their energies into developing networks for action (Bang 2004b), and engage in political actions that are embedded in daily activities. Most of the interviewees embody an everyday maker approach – they participate in the Inspire Foundation because it provides them with a forum to act on issues that they care about, while being relevant to their lifestyles. However, some take on the professional, full-time or strategic identity of Bang’s expert citizen. Three participants have taken up employment within youth-servicing organisations – in one case, at the Inspire Foundation. For these young people, the *cause* is not only mental health, racism or obesity, but also *youth participation*. Being able to navigate the structures of governance networks and hold a legitimate role within these systems is important to these young people. However, for the others, their ability to engage in a way that fits in with other interests, and allows improvisation and creativity, is more important. The narratives of these young people support Bennett’s claim that we are seeing a shift



away from *dutiful* citizens to *actualising* citizens (Bennett 2007). Bang's notion of everyday maker and expert citizen (Bang 2005) provides clarity on what mobilises *actualising* or project-oriented identities beyond the state.

### The internet as a legitimising space for new political practices

Maybe government isn't where it's at anyway. Maybe you need to head towards making documentaries, or advertising and sponsorship. Wouldn't it be awesome if Coca Cola had on all their cans 'stop the war in Iraq!' And you got a shot of a politician drinking from this can of Coke! (Phillip, 22)

Phillip explains how he looks beyond government to influence decision making. He starts with identifying 'the issue', developing a 'creative' and catchy way to get his message across, and then aligning himself with those he believes will help him succeed. He identifies [www.actnow.com.au](http://www.actnow.com.au) as a site that connects him to such a network, be it organisations, individuals or campaigns. As such, the internet is central to the way he engages with or creates networks and reflexive communities for action.

The views of many of these young people resonate with Coleman and Rowe's observation that young people are not inclined to use government sites that 'speak at them' – providing information and communicating policy *to* young people. Interviewees were dismissive of initiatives or sites that restrict the ways in which they can express their views and ideas, indicating a strong preference for forms of *actualising* (Bennett 2007) and *autonomous* (Coleman 2008) citizenship. For example, Alana described the importance of the online environment for taking action on youth mental health through the Inspire Foundation, because she could control when she got online, and how she expressed herself and engaged with others, and could see tangible evidence that her views and efforts had been taken on board. However, her views on the utility of the internet for facilitating youth participation in formal politics were less enthusiastic.

[government-run youth Web-based initiative] is a good example of using some online surveying and having young people involved in writing actual content for a website. But it is incredibly limited and there are a lot of restrictions on what young people can and can't have a say on. For instance young people can write opinion pieces but they can't write fact sheets. And when we suggested that young people could write fact sheets that was way too scary, couldn't do it. So, young people could never write a fact sheet on drug use! It was just too risky for government. (Alana, 22)

As with other young people in this study, she clearly distinguished between the use of the internet to facilitate youth participation mechanisms in government or government agencies, and that in NGOs. Table 3 summarises interviewee perspectives on youth participation policies in government, and governance networks, and also the role of the internet.

Across all interviews, there was a perception that governments and politicians were old, exclusive and hierarchical. In Alana's statement above, it is evident that she views government use of the internet as an extension of the control that governments exercise over off-line youth participation. Though many of the interviewees engaged with government online youth participation strategies, others were dismissive and cynical about government use of technology to involve young people. In contrast, NGOs were seen – particularly in terms of their use of the internet – as new, inclusive and discursive.<sup>2</sup> Interviewees saw themselves as playing a valuable, legitimate role in the Inspire Foundation, rather than as 'programme recipients'. The internet, in and of itself, does

Table 3. How interviewees view youth participation in systems of government compared with NGOs.

| Youth participation policies   |  |
|--|--|
| Systems of government  | Non-governmental organisations   |
| Old, exclusive, closed decision-making processes, irrelevant                 | New, open, discursive decision-making, relevant  |
| Deficit-based approach   | Capacity-based approach  |
| Target 'school captains' or youth at risk of social disengagement – 'not me' | Target young people by what they are passionate about – cause-oriented and project-based |
| Tokenistic and make no difference  | Make a difference; essential to the organisation's success                               |
| Use of the internet  |  |
| Government control of the space and terms of use                             | Young people can define the space and terms of use                                       |
| Reinforces institutions  | Responds to the 'community'  |
| Communicating <i>to</i> young people   | Communicating <i>with</i> young people   |

not provide young people with power to influence or make decisions, and government use of the internet for youth participation was seen as entirely distinct from that of other forums, organisations or networks. Bang, like Coleman (2008), is concerned about the issue of 'co-optation' – particularly with the potential for participation mechanisms to define the perimeters of political participation, managing who participates in what. The views of interviewees presented in Table 3 not only suggest that youth participation policies in government are associated with being spoken at, exclusive or elitist processes, and lack of control, but also that the use of the internet to deliver these policies perpetuates elitism. Commenting on the difference between government and non-government sites, one interviewee who works for a government agency said:

I've been thinking about that quite a lot lately in terms of the website that we run here. I think the content [on Reach Out!] really draws people to the website because there's so much there and it's relevant. Whereas the website we've got here is pretty shite and doesn't have much content. So contributing in that way, being able to write content, and get those interviews – the 'clued-up' [interviews] – draw people to the website. (Belinda, 22)

By comparison, non-government, youth-led and interest-based communities and organisations' use of the internet was considered to be open and democratic, resisting the tendency to control or manage forms of participation. This is expressed through a sense of ownership over the project and connectedness to other participants. Belinda further explains that:

[it's] the connection that you have and that interest in what you're doing and you're all there for the same purpose, you're all there for ReachOut! and you've got that goal in common which gives you an ability to relate [to each other]. (Belinda, 220)

Bennett suggests that *actualising* citizens favour connections that are established or sustained through friendship or peer groups, whereas *dutiful* citizens are typically engaged with agencies that employ conventional one-way communication to mobilise supporters (Bennett 2007, 13). Interviewees indicated a preference for the kinds of participatory spaces

that foster meaningful connections through flexible dialogic communication by which they can connect:

They understand that we've got a lot of things going on in our lives and so they're willing to be really flexible and they're people who are not just mentors to me, they're friends, and they're not just people you work with, they're people you want to be like or be friends with. So it's not just a job thing. (Paula, 19)

According to these young people, such relationships are fostered online at the Inspire Foundation, where young people and staff speak *with* each other. However, government sites are perceived to speak *at* young people, limiting the extent to which these sites are seen as relevant and meaningful.

### **Do online participation processes reproduce or challenge elitism?**

Youth participation policies and adult-centric decision-making processes have been shown to privilege those with the greatest structural advantage (Kirby and Bryson 2002, pp. 29–31, Wierenga *et al.* 2003, pp. 24–25, Bessant 2004). There is also evidence that key determinants of internet use include household income (Willis and Tranter 2006), level of education (Vromen 2007) and cultural background (Wyn *et al.* 2005, p. 36). Some scholars raise concerns about the impact of the 'digital divide' on citizenship as other social relations such as employment and friendship groups become increasingly linked to digital connectivity (Stokes *et al.* 2004, Lee 2005, Wyn *et al.* 2005).

Interviewees in this study reflected the general group of young people participating in the work of the Inspire Foundation – most of whom are engaged in secondary or tertiary education or in some form of employment. As such, despite the potential for participation policies and the internet to mitigate elitism and inequality in youth participation, there is little evidence to suggest that this is occurring in practice. However, among the interviewees, there was evidence that the internet served to mobilise new forms of participation among young people who do not consider themselves to be 'politically active'. For several interviewees, the internet had made it 'attractive' and 'convenient' to participate. Louise, 22, is from a regional part of Australia. She was motivated to get involved with ActNow partly because it was online:

It seemed to be this online forum, which I'd never had anything to do with. So that was a personal challenge for me. And it just seemed like this really interesting way to form connections with other young people. (Louise, 22)

Louise had instigated small projects in her community – for example, researching commercial recycling options and then raising these issues with her boss (a nightclub owner) and the local council. She found the experience of participating in an online initiative educational and empowering in that she used the internet to take action in 'a new way'. By the time of this interview, Louise had stopped formally participating in Inspire, but she said, 'It's not something I've ruled out doing. I'd just like to feel inspired and go, "oh! I could put that on ActNow."' Like others, she preferred her participation to be spontaneous so she could be involved 'when it really mattered'. She saw loyalty to any one particular mechanism, organisation or group as counterproductive in the real task of making a difference. The internet enabled her to travel between groups and sites of action.

The internet also appears to play an important role in addressing other barriers to participation associated with geographical location, mental health issues and civic, republican notions of what a 'good' and 'active' citizen is. Interviewees felt that the

substantial focus on online participation at the Inspire Foundation was critical to involving a diverse range of young people.

The internet has been important because the work with Inspire has been about a national project and it's about involving young people from all over Australia and involving a really big community that you can't communicate face to face with all the time. (David, 20)

Being based in a remote geographical location was considered to be a significant barrier to participation for young Australians, but one which could be overcome by having opportunities to participate online. In addition, participants in this study felt that the anonymity of the internet – and the online application process – meant that people felt less judged as either 'able' or 'unable' to play a meaningful role.

However, many of these young people remain sensitive to the discourses that frame participation as 'representation' and influence assumptions about who makes a 'good representative':

**Kate:** Ah, there was a link on the site which was for the youth advisory board. I thought I had no hope, and just sent off an application anyway after spending heaps of time on my application – after school – I sent it off and then got an email from Jono.

**PC:** Why did you think you wouldn't be selected?

**Kate:** Because it sounded like a really special opportunity – which it was – but I just thought I wouldn't get picked because I'd applied for other things before and never got picked – like, I wasn't school captain at school, I'd never really had opportunities like that before. (Kate, 23)

Kate expected selection to be based on skills and experience. However, the foundation looks for applicants who demonstrate commitment to 'making a difference' and values diversity over 'objective' scales of merit. Equal numbers of males and females; young people from rural, regional and metropolitan locations; and those with disclosed mental or physical health problems (including having a chronic illness, suffering bullying or sexual assault, or having a mental illness) are selected.

The issues-based nature of online participation facilitated by the foundation represents a shift from the 'representative', civic republican model evident in many other mechanisms, such as youth representatives on councils, youth round tables, advisory boards to ministers and departments, and youth arms of political parties. Young people applied to be involved on the basis of their interest in the issues, not the process. However, working with diversity was also seen by some as problematic. This played out most clearly when considered in the context of the participation of young people with mental health issues:

Because of the way people hear about [[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)]... there are a number of young people who have been consumers of mental health services or [have been through] tough times themselves. And then I think there's another group of young people who haven't necessarily been through similar experiences and, to put it on a spectrum that probably isn't very accurate, are the overachieving, president of the SRC<sup>3</sup>-type young person . . . . So these people have two very different perspectives on life, and I think it's awesome that they come together, but I think [it's hard] in terms of structuring a program that can actively support and continue to engage with those young people who are at different ends of the participation spectrum, who have different skill sets and are operating at different levels and from different perspectives. (David, 20)

David reflects a wider tension in policy discourse and practice on what the purpose of youth participation is, and who should be involved and in what kinds of decision-making. These tensions complicate young people's own reading of their participation:

I was always very careful – I don't know why – to separate myself from a user of the site, and as someone who helped to create the site. So I guess, just in my language – consciously I guess – I

would say that I work alongside the crew to help ‘those people’ who are struggling with tough times. I’d never included myself as a user or a member of the group that used the site – but rather as a member of the group that helped develop it. (Jade, 23)

Jade stated that she personally had benefited from using the site [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au), but by the end of the interview, she had reconceptualised herself as a contributor only. Empirical studies show that young people are sensitive to civic republican discourses and strongly associate ‘socially constructive participation’ with citizenship status (Smith *et al.* 2005, 436–439). This study also finds that young people are sensitive to the discourses of ‘difference’ and ‘deficiency’ prominent in narratives of youth and participation.

## Conclusion

This study of young people’s experiences goes some way to understanding the role that the internet plays in the articulation of youth participation policies and finds that the internet is significant in the development of young people’s political identities in the following ways.

Firstly, young people experience the internet as a platform for the realisation of project-oriented political identities. The internet is used as a tool for identifying issues, learning more, and integrating participation into their everyday lives. And, in keeping with Coleman and Rowe, this research finds that the internet is a creative space in which they exercise agency, where young people can author the political and their responses to it. Furthermore, young people describe a strong connection between their online and off-line participatory acts, and, for some, the internet makes ‘taking action easier’. However, the question remains, to what end? Though young people describe a strong sense of agency and a belief that their online participation makes a difference to the outcomes of the Inspire Foundation, it is less clear to what extent these young people’s online participation contributes to broader social change.

Secondly, though the young people in this study are mobilised online through networks, their views on political participation are still informed by the online strategies of traditional political institutions. For them, old, highly managed, adult-centric forms of government – whether they employ online communication tools or not – are no longer where political participation ‘is at’. But far from being politically disengaged, these young people identify online environments associated with issues or NGOs as legitimate sites for participation. This is partly because they can opt into managed forms of participation – but also utilise these spaces for ‘autonomous’ participation. As such, NGOs and the online spaces for participation that they create can be thought of as micropolitical spheres where young people feel their participation is recognised and can be influential. The young people who demonstrate an expert citizen approach still engage with government sites because they recognise the role that government plays in policy production and wish to influence that particular process. However, most interviewees were dismissive of government online youth strategies, as they were perceived to be controlled by political agendas and to speak ‘at’, not ‘with’, young people.

Thirdly, through online participation, young people are challenging some assumptions that underpin traditional notions of youth *and* participation, and are able to engage in spontaneous forms of ‘everyday politics’. However, there is little evidence in this study that either youth participation policies or their online execution is challenging the key structural inequalities of employment and education. In fact, by failing to provide access to existing power and decision-making structures to the most disadvantaged group of

young citizens, online participation strategies could exacerbate the gap between those who are perceived to be ‘engaged’ and those who are not.

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### Notes

1. A series of race-related, violent incidents in Cronulla in 2005, a beachside suburb in southern Sydney, has come to be known as the ‘Cronulla riots’.
2. Bang suggests that by participating in NGOs, people are creating political realities, rather than mirroring, representing or acting in the name of ‘objective interests’ (Bang 2005, p. 165).
3. Most high schools in Australia have an ‘SRC’ – student representative council.

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