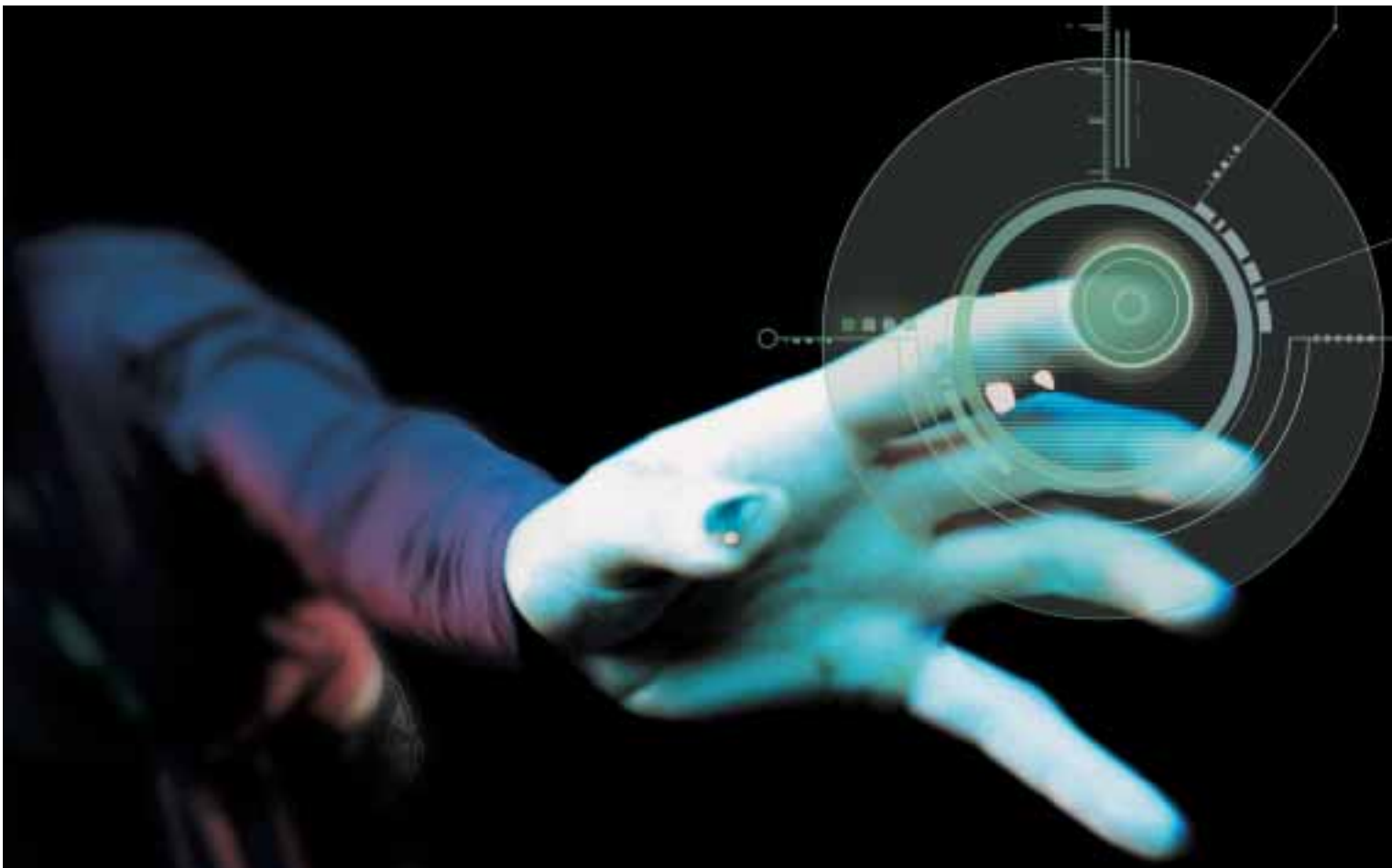


# REMixING CITIZENSHIP

DEMOCRACY AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S USE OF THE INTERNET

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WITH CHRIS ROWE





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report argues that the nature of citizenship is changing and young people are the first to recognise it. Far from being disengaged from democracy, young people are in the process of re-inventing it.

In the past civic and political participation has meant engaging with a fixed body of symbolic references: parties, nations, classes, governments, ideologies, which citizen-consumers could choose to take or leave.

This report draws on existing evidence as well as new research about how young people use the internet to gather information, express themselves and exercise power as pre-voting citizens. The focus of our research is different insofar as we have explicitly set out to challenge the prevailing normative accounts of youth citizenship. Our starting hypothesis is that much of what is offered to young people in the name of 'active citizenship' lacks appeal because it seems to be remote from their everyday experience and disconnected from the levers of power.

Government agencies and other authorities seeking to communicate with young people are urged to consider these findings before embarking upon yet another 'politically cool' web-based strategy.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of extensive online and offline research with young people, this report draws ten key conclusions:

- **It is not young people that are disconnected from formal politics, but political institutions that are disconnected from young people.**
- **Young people are more interested in new forms of participation – demonstrations, signing petitions and boycotting products. Political institutions must take these forms of participation seriously if they are to consider more productive ways of engaging with young people.**
- **Political activity should be planned with the needs of young people in mind.**
- **Young people need more support with finding civic and political information. Search engines are still not making it easy for young people to look for relevant information, particularly at a local level.**
- **Too many websites simply provide information and do not give enough opportunities for many to many conversations. Spaces for online interaction should have resources for online moderation and responding to users.**
- **While carefully targeted information from reputable sources is most likely to be trusted by young people for news and other hard information, when it comes to deeper and more interactive communication they prefer youth-created content.**

- **When seeking to engage with young people, decision makers should utilise those sites and methods of communication that young people already use, rather than simply building new websites and expecting young people to come to decision makers.**
- **If young people are to be engaged effectively in decision making, they must have real power to influence decisions. Only when this happens can the Internet become an effective tool for engaging the 'hard to reach.'**
- **Remixing and sampling are now a key part of contemporary culture. Sampling is a technique in which music – but also text and pictures – can be re-ordered or even reconstructed. This enables consumers to become creative producers, casting everyone as potential remixers of meaning. The democratic potential of the Internet for young people lies in its scope for sampling and remixing so that civic life can be re-ordered and reconstructed to fit in with young people's own needs and feelings rather than predetermined structures.**
- **By giving young people more power and scope to create their own meanings, online participation can become both active and creative.**

## INTRODUCTION TO E-PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

It has been three years since the Carnegie Young People Initiative commissioned Demos to produce *Logged Off? How ICT can connect young people and politics*. The report was a response to emerging policy and practice around young people's participation at local and national level. It focussed on the opportunities of and barriers to online participation.

*Logged Off* concluded that new technologies could only encourage greater participation if they were used to engage and empower young people. It argued that examples of good practice needed to be scaled up and offered practical solutions for taking this forward.

So what has changed for young people and participation since the publication of our last report?

Commitment to engaging with young people has improved greatly, with an increase in policy initiatives across government in the UK. Significantly, Children's Commissioners have now been appointed in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England, a key feature of the Children's Commissioner's responsibility is to 'promote awareness of the views and interests of children in England'. In the rest of the UK, the focus is more specifically on the rights of the child.

Citizenship Education is now established across the UK. In England, it is 7 years since the Crick Report which led to the introduction of Citizenship in schools. In Scotland, it is 4 years since the National Review Group established the framework for Citizenship Education across the Scottish school system. In Northern Ireland teachers are currently being trained in preparation for Citizenship Education becoming statutory in 2007. In Wales, Citizenship is now integrated into the PSE framework.

Despite these significant developments, the challenge still remains to embed young people's participation in democratic processes and everyday practice. The quality of Citizenship teaching and learning is patchy, with varying degrees of success across the UK. Many adults still lack the resources and training to improve ways in which they work with young people, and young people themselves still need more support and encouragement to participate.

It is for these reasons that the Carnegie Young People Initiative invited Professor Stephen Coleman at the Oxford Internet Institute to readdress our understanding of young people's involvement in democratic citizenship and how the internet can help to improve practice.

*Remixing Citizenship: 'democracy and young people's use of the internet'*, is based on qualitative research, designed to hear from young people about how they use the internet to gather information, express themselves and exercise power. For this research, we worked with a sample of pre voting citizens, between the ages of 13 and 18.

The research was conducted online as well as face-to-face. A dedicated website: ([www.eparticipation.org.uk](http://www.eparticipation.org.uk)) was set up and a group of 100 13-18 year-olds were recruited to visit various web sites and respond to questions about them in a web forum. Face-to-face discussions with groups of 13-18 year-olds were also arranged.

The report focuses on three areas of importance. Firstly, we question what is meant by apathy and claims that young people are disconnected from the formal political process. Secondly, we look at digital literacy and how young people access and make use of the Internet. Thirdly, we comment on style and consider the implications of digital remixing for citizenship.

Whilst we remain committed to our recommendations in the *Logged Off* report, our understanding of e-democracy has moved on, and we now know more about ways in which young people *choose* to engage online. It is only once the fundamental themes set out above are understood that we can help decision makers to address the challenges of engaging with young people online.

## ABOUT THE CARNEGIE YOUNG PEOPLE INITIATIVE

Carnegie Young People Initiative (CYPI) is funded by the Carnegie UK Trust and exists to improve policy and practice around young people's participation. It believes that for the voices of children and young people to lead to positive outcomes, they must be involved in all stages of the decision making process. CYPI works to support not only children and young people, but practitioners and organisations seeking to change the way they work. It does this by developing networks, creating new partnerships, improving everyday practice and commissioning research about the impact of participation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Most importantly, we are grateful to Chris Rowe for his patience and diligence in working to ensure all data was gathered efficiently, and that the young people involved felt supported and valued.

**Raji Hunjan, Director of Schools and Democracy**

**May 2005**

## Stephen Coleman

is Cisco Professor of eDemocracy at the Oxford Internet Institute and a fellow of Jesus College, Oxford. He was formerly Director of the Hansard Society E-Democracy programme, which pioneered online consultations for the UK Parliament. Recent publications include 'The Lonely Citizen: Indirect Representation in an Age of Networks', *Political Communication*, 22 (2005), *A Tale of Two Houses - The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home* (2003), *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace* (with Jay G. Blumler), IPPR, 2001

## Chris Rowe

is a freelance consultant and has developed and managed a number of citizenship education programmes for young people. He has produced a number reports and policy documents in the field and is a regular contributor to educational supplements.

## Raji Hunjan

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## HAS DEMOCRACY DISENGAGED FROM YOUNG PEOPLE?

Thousands of people, especially young people, are positively switched off politics and politicians ... There is anger and frustration out there as well as apathy. <sup>1</sup>

The public, and particularly young people, now have less faith than ever in parliamentary democracy. We (politicians and media) who constitute the 'political class' conduct politics in a way that turns off our voters, readers, listeners and viewers ...<sup>2</sup>

For most young people, democracy as they know it is associated with political parties that do not listen, spin and negative campaigning and the pomp and pantomime of Parliament. Politics is regarded as a game in which they are rarely invited to be players – and in which their voices are rarely heard. When asked about their attitudes to democracy, young people express their feelings of abandonment by the political system:

### IF THEY'RE NOT GOING TO LISTEN TO US, WHY SHOULD WE LISTEN TO THEM?<sup>3</sup>

There is a general feeling between politicians and the general public that it's a kind of them and us situation. There are them who are making the decisions and us who don't get their opinions heard.<sup>4</sup>

Typically, the problem is presented in terms of youth having disengaged from the political process. Young people, it is argued, have become (or, most likely have always been) estranged from their democratic obligations. A range of literature has identified and sought to explain and propose remedies for the political disengagement of young people.<sup>5</sup>

### AS ONE 14 YEAR-OLD BOY IN OUR RESEARCH PUT IT, 'WHEN YOU HEAR ADULTS TALKING ABOUT POLITICS, YOU FEEL LIKE THEY ARE TALKING BETWEEN THEMSELVES.'

In this paper we argue that it is not young people who are disengaged from politics but contemporary political democracy that has become disconnected from young people. Specifically, governments and the political media have adopted a narrow, inflexible and parsimonious

notion of democracy which assumes that most citizens – particularly new and pre-voters – have nothing much to say for themselves. Lacking the techniques of listening, hearing and learning, governments find themselves increasingly talking to themselves, listened to by diminishing numbers of citizens. In a world of interactive communication, politics continues to take the form of an unstoppable monologue.

This research sets out to challenge the prevailing normative accounts of youth citizenship. Our starting hypothesis is that much of what is offered to young people in the name of 'active citizenship' lacks appeal because it seems to be remote from their everyday experience and disconnected from the levers of power. This leads us to advance three arguments. Firstly, that rather than witnessing mass apathy amongst young people, what we are seeing is a mass generational migration from old-fashioned forms of participation to newer, more creative forms. There is a need to re-think what we mean by participation. Secondly, we argue that the Internet engenders new skills, habits and protocols of literacy. Online communication not only takes place within a new medium, but also a new language and grammar of interaction which demands specific user capabilities. Understandably, many adults, who are themselves struggling to come to terms with new media, are worried about the provision, scope and quality of digital literacy. In our research we were concerned not to be prescriptive about 'right' and 'wrong' reasons for young people being online, but took the view that there is a need to re-think what we mean by literacy in an age of interactive media. Thirdly, we argue that the aesthetic appeal of online interactivity has to be understood on its own terms. The extent to which it is 'cool' to be online, and to which political and civic sites can meaningfully aspire to such coolness, are also questions for re-thinking.

The questions we raise in this paper are important ones for government institutions and agencies, as well as schools and youth bodies. We have asked young people to help us to put some flesh on the bones of the fashionable concept of online network interactivity. It seems that everyone these days wants to be 'interactive' and most people know that this has something to do with many-to-many, horizontal communication rather than the one-to-many transmission of broadcast messages.

Young people are constantly learning about the world around them and their rights and obligations within it.

They are, in a sense, apprentice citizens. But they tend to be bewildered and unimpressed by the symbolic repertoire of events, and spectacles presented to them in the name of political democracy. For example, events such as the State Opening of Parliament and Prime Minister's Question Time are seen as arcane pantomime rather than meaningful democracy. As one 14 year-old boy in our research put it, 'When you hear adults talking about politics, you feel like they are talking between themselves.' A common conclusion drawn from such comments, and the statistics of media disengagement cited above, is that young people are somehow 'switching off' from democratic communication. We argue that this is a very mediacentric notion. There are other ways of communicating than watching *Newsnight* (or *Newsround*) or reading the broadsheets. There are other ways of being political than joining a party or knowing who the Home Secretary is.

### THE INTERNET TO THE RESCUE OF DEMOCRACY?

Too often the relationship between young people and the Internet is presented as a problem. Worries that young people are vulnerable to online predators and susceptible to unreliable information are pervasive. Tabloid journalism has tended to rehash exaggerated accounts of isolated, zombified, vulnerable youth, once applied to cinema-goers and television viewers.<sup>6</sup> The academic literature has too readily pathologised youth Internet use.<sup>7</sup> Sefton-Green has perceptively argued that 'The concept of an "audio-visual generation" (or what seems to be called at the moment "cyberkids") seems to have become a shorthand way of labelling ... hopes and fears, and it clearly illustrates how each category seems to have become a way of talking about the other.'<sup>8</sup> Youth, as the next generation of citizens, and the Internet, as the next generation of technology, serve as repositories for society's apprehensions for its future. Described variously as amoral, atomised, apathetic, hedonistic and out of control, there is a widespread sense that contemporary youth are particularly disengaged from the structures and processes of democratic citizenship. Remedies ranging from citizenship education (benign) to anti-social behaviour orders (authoritarian) have been implemented in an attempt to resuscitate notions of civic solidarity – or, at least, containment.

Other commentators have sought to reverse these anxieties by suggesting that the Internet could provide a context for reinvigorated citizenship practises involving young people. The argument runs along the following lines:

*Young people are politically alienated and disengaged.*

*Young people are the most active users of the Internet.*

*Therefore, if the interactive features of the Internet were used to encourage young people to civic and political activities this might serve to overcome traditional barriers.*

### TOO OFTEN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE INTERNET IS PRESENTED AS A PROBLEM. WORRIES THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE VULNERABLE TO ONLINE PREDATORS AND SUSCEPTIBLE TO UNRELIABLE INFORMATION ARE PERVASIVE.

In support of such logic, Iyengar and Jackman argue that 'a synthesis of political content and interactive technology can engage youth'<sup>9</sup>, Livingstone, Bober and Helsper find 'moderate support for the possibility that young people who engage with the interactive potential of the Internet become drawn into a greater range of participation, including visiting civic and political websites'<sup>10</sup> and Delli Carpini, writing of American youth and civic engagement, suggests that 'the Internet and related technologies provide new ways for tapping existing interest in particular issues and using this interest to motivate and facilitate action'<sup>11</sup>

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research reported in this paper was undertaken in order to subject to theoretical and empirical scrutiny contemporary hopes and anxieties concerning the Internet as a space for young people to explore democratic citizenship. The aim of this paper is to report the results of a qualitative research study, funded by the Carnegie Young People Initiative, designed to hear from young people about how they use the Internet to gather information, express themselves and exercise power as pre-voting citizens. The research was conducted online as well as face-to-face. A dedicated website:

([www.eparticipation.org.uk](http://www.eparticipation.org.uk)) was set up and a group of 100 13-18 year-olds were recruited who agreed to visit various web sites and respond to questions about them in a web forum. Approximately 800 comments were contributed by these participants. Face-to-face discussions with groups of 13-18 year-olds were run in the following schools: the Henry Compton school, Hammersmith; the Grey Coat Hospital School, Victoria; Southgate School; Woolwich Polytechnic; the Central Foundation Girls' School, Tower Hamlets; the Warriner School, Bloxham; Banbury School and Camden Jobtrain. The classroom sessions typically involved groups of 15 young people in semi-structured discussion sessions which were recorded and later transcribed. In most of these sessions participants had access to computers and were able to refer to specific web sites to illustrate their comments.

There is an emerging literature about how young people are participating online in various forms of civic and political activity.<sup>12</sup> For example, Livingstone and Bober's excellent study of the nature and extent of 9-19 year-olds' online civic participation offers important clues about the demographic variables of online activity and distinctions between young people who interact with online content and those who are disengaged. Their conclusion that 'young people with certain demographic characteristics are more motivated to pursue civic interest participation than their peers, whether they use the Internet more or less and whether they feel more or less self-confident' is a sobering counterbalance to the deterministic claim that experience and expertise in using the Internet are in themselves motivators of civic activism.<sup>13</sup>

The principal aim of the research reported here was to encourage young people to speak freely about how they experience life online and whether this new virtual space offers them any new opportunities to think and act as citizens.

## RE-THINKING PARTICIPATION

Political participation is often discussed in the limited context of formal structures and processes, such as parties and elections. That youth are disengaged and alienated from such formal politics is widely stated and empirically incontestable. In the 2005 election only 37% of eligible 18-24 year-olds voted (representing a 2-point drop from 2001 and a 14-point drop from 1997).<sup>14</sup> Few young people belong to political parties; 8% of Labour party members and 12% of Conservative party members are under 35;<sup>15</sup> the average age of members for each party was 59 and 54 respectively. The number of young people who say that they care who wins the next election fell from 68% in 1994 to 39% in 2003. Only 27% of 18-24s say that they are satisfied with their MPs, compared with 55% of over-55s.<sup>16</sup>

The accessibility, quality and credibility of sources of civic and political information and inspiration are key determinants of whether and how far young people become active citizens. The 2005 findings from the Nfer longitudinal survey on citizenship education found that most students between the ages of 14 and 17 watch 1-2 hours of television a day. Of the year-12 (16-17 year-olds) surveyed, 80% said that they sometimes or often watched television news.<sup>17</sup> But despite its potential as a mass educator, television has failed to grab the political attention of most young people. Richard Sambrook, former head of BBC News, in a speech to the Royal Television Society in December 2001, expressed appropriate alarm:

News viewing – across all channels – is now down 25% for the under-45s. There's a generation growing older which just doesn't sit down and watch news as their parents did. I see that as a time bomb. A demographic wave sweeping up through all of our audiences. If we don't do something, in ten years it'll be the under-55s and then the under-65s who don't watch.<sup>18</sup>

According to an ICM survey of 16-20 year-olds, conducted for the Electoral Commission, 90% say that they have no involvement in politics, but 60% say that they would like to have more say in the running of the country.<sup>19</sup> There is clearly a connection to be made between democratic aspiration and active participation. In this paper we have tried to avoid adopting prescriptive and restrictive notions of citizenship or to blame young people for refusing to engage in activities which they regard as meaningless or non-reciprocal. Non-participation is sometimes a

political act, just as participation in formally non-political activities can sometimes be politically significant.

Although statistics of the kind cited above have been used to demonstrate the disconnection and apathy of young people, they tell only a small part of the story. Most of the young people in our research do not have a vote in public elections, are rarely invited to contribute their views to the wider community beyond the school gates and have very limited opportunities to influence power within the school gates. Of the 100 members of our online panel, only 6 young people belonged to a youth forum. Some are able to participate in school councils, but the power of such bodies is notoriously fragile. Occasionally young people are the targets of consultations, but those running them tend to be more interested in counting the number of responses than engaging with the ideas of consultees.

We reject the argument that young people have recently become 'politically disconnected' because it suggests that more than a small minority of young people ever were involved in political life. In fact, whereas in the past young people were more likely to accept that they had formal civic duties, such as voting, we are now living in a more selective culture in which people are reflexive about their identities as citizens and more critical and consumerist in making choices about how to use their time. Young people are not less connected to politics than they used to be; in fact, when they engage in democratic activities on their own terms, they are often more active than older people. Younger people are more likely than older people to be involved in such activities as demonstrations, pickets, volunteering and symbolic campaigns, such as wearing anti-bullying armbands. Rather than claiming that young people have become disconnected from politics, we would suggest that the traditional channels of accountability within which the old patterns of civic participation were moulded have become disconnected from citizens, leaving the young understandably uncertain about how or where to make their mark. Whereas politics used to be played out within the relatively simple terrain of nation-state, local community and tribal party loyalties, the fluid and global exercise of power in contemporary society is less easy to grasp or influence.

Rather than categorising young people as apathetic about civic and political issues, we would point to recent research which has shown that young people are engaged in a wide range of civic and political activities, but within informal structures not easily recognised or understood by political scientists.<sup>20</sup> Youth activism is often categorised as being non-political, because young people are conceptualised as being pre-social or pre-political beings.<sup>21</sup>

**WHEREAS IN THE PAST YOUNG PEOPLE WERE MORE LIKELY TO ACCEPT THAT THEY HAD FORMAL CIVIC DUTIES, SUCH AS VOTING, WE ARE NOW LIVING IN A MORE SELECTIVE CULTURE IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE REFLEXIVE ABOUT THEIR IDENTITIES AS CITIZENS AND MORE CRITICAL AND CONSUMERIST IN MAKING CHOICES ABOUT HOW TO USE THEIR TIME.**

Having spent much time talking to young people about what they understand by civic and political activity, and having analysed hundreds of messages in our e-participation forum, we would argue that even the most outwardly politically 'disengaged' young people have lively opinions about issues which impinge on their own lives. They may not always have the information required to shape lengthy arguments, but they are usually willing to explain their points of view. At many points throughout our study, participants initiated political discussions about issues ranging from the Iraq war to the nature of global capitalism to the state of the local bus service. When asked, most participants said that they would like to be able to access websites that gave them the opportunity to engage in respectful debate about issues on which they currently feel uninformed or powerless. Our conclusion from talking to them is that young people's thoughts about power and its effects are an integral and routine part of their culture, including their activities online.

## THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S CITIZEN-RELATED ONLINE BEHAVIOUR IS TO MOVE BEYOND THE QUESTION OF HOW MANY CIVIC/POLITICAL WEB SITES THEY VISIT.

The key to understanding young people's citizen-related online behaviour is to move beyond the question of how many civic/political web sites they visit. Most young people are not attracted to sites with which they cannot interact, and that includes most overtly political sites, which either take the form of electronic brochures for a particular point of view or online broadcasts of one-way information. The fact that most young people do not engage with web sites that adults regard as good for them does not mean that they are not engaging online as democratic citizens. Participants in our study were particularly attracted to two forms of civic interactivity: peer-to-peer networks in which they could exchange views with friends and friends of friends, and discussion fora where they have evidence that other people are listening to what they say.

Livingstone and Bober found that email is the most popular form of online communication for young people.<sup>22</sup> Mesch and Talmud have shown that young people have extensive online networks, often including friends with whom they have little or no face-to-face contact.<sup>23</sup> For most of the participants in our research, the one-to-many transmission of web were far less important to them than online peer-to-peer networks. Such networks are casual, porous and ephemeral, lacking both the stability and the insularity of fixed communities.

**If you are having a conversation with someone and they invite you into another conversation you can have a big group conversation with people that you don't know. I have done that before and it ends up as a big chat. (BOY,14)**

**I have talked about the Iraq war on MSN. I talked to someone I had met on a forum and he was from Manchester. Because of the conversation we both watched Fahrenheit 9 /11 a couple of days later. (BOY, 13)**

**I was in a big joint conversation and everyone went apart from me and this other person that I didn't know. We were chatting and I told him that I was stuck on my Spanish homework and he helped me and I actually got a really good mark. I didn't know who he was but he just decided to help me. I have spoken to him since. (GIRL, 14)**

From such informal conversations young people learn about new sites to visit and which sites to trust. It became clear from our research that the grapevine is the search engine that is most trusted by young people.

**People quite often tell me about websites. They just send you loads - news, stuff like that. I just go on everything. I don't mind what I go on. There is not an enormous amount of harm that can come from it, is there? (BOY,15)**

**If someone sent me a funny picture about Prince Charles or George Bush, I would send it on. (BOY 14)**

As well as these loose and fluid informal networks, young people are interested in more structured online discussion fora, such as those run by the BBC, the main attraction of which is the opportunity of being heard by others. In our classroom sessions we were told again and again that opportunities to be acknowledged, recognised or respected online are valued highly by young people. This is hardly surprising: teenagers are used to being 'seen but not heard'; excluded from the discussions of their elders; and surrounded by one-way media to which they cannot talk back. They are warned not to talk to strangers; and yet what is citizenship if not an acknowledgement that strangers matter? (The phenomenal success of Meetup.com, which allows people who share common interests to contact one another online and then meet up in public places, is an example of how strangers can come together as citizens.) For many young people, online interactivity is their best chance of being noticed by the wider world.

**On a forum you are in a community. People know you and you can put your opinion down and people will listen. (GIRL 16)**

**I e-mailed about an environmental story they [BBC Newsround] were covering. They read it out on the programme. It showed me that they cared about what I think. (GIRL, 15)**

**Adults get the chance to get their point across. We are younger and we are at school and we don't get as much respect as adults do. (BOY, 14)**

**It's good when you e mail someone and someone writes back. (BOY, 16)**

We were concerned to explore with young people how they thought that their existing patterns of online communication could feed into the sphere of politics. Several were pessimistic about any scope for a meeting between the two:

**People say we need to know this stuff, but its not happening to us. The thing is we can't vote yet, so why should we get involved? (BOY, 15)**

**You don't want to listen to people who talk about politics. (BOY, 14)**

**If a politician comes on the telly you switch off the TV. (BOY, 14)**

**I'm more interested in the news than politicians. (BOY, 14)**

Others took the view that governments could learn from young people, but 'they shouldn't stereotype us – stereotyping is the worst thing.' (Boy, 16) For young people, the online relationship between themselves and governments is conceived in terms of mutual learning. They reject the notion of citizenship as a set of rules to be disseminated by government and absorbed by future citizens.

**The Government can learn what young people like and what the fashions are, as they might not know. (GIRL, 16)**

There is a recognition that young people must be approached in distinctive ways, but also a realistic scepticism about the capacity of traditional politics to engage them.

**If the Government made a site with interesting discussions and addictive games it could make politics more interesting. But this might not be good because people may just go on to it for the games and not for the content. (BOY, 17)**

**If there were links on to other things that might interest you we would be curious about it and follow them. (BOY, 14)**

**I don't know if it's possible to mix politics and fun. (GIRL, 15)**

**You can engage people in issues, but not necessarily government/ political stuff. (GIRL, 14)**

**PARTICIPANTS IN OUR STUDY WERE PARTICULARLY ATTRACTED TO TWO FORMS OF CIVIC INTERACTIVITY: PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKS IN WHICH THEY COULD EXCHANGE VIEWS WITH FRIENDS AND FRIENDS OF FRIENDS, AND DISCUSSION FORA WHERE THEY HAVE EVIDENCE THAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE LISTENING TO WHAT THEY SAY.**

There are several websites across the UK which aim to engage young people in real democratic processes. The most popular are [headsup.org.uk](http://headsup.org.uk) in England, [wimps.org.uk](http://wimps.org.uk) in Northern Ireland, [funkydragon.org](http://funkydragon.org) in Wales and [youngscot.org](http://youngscot.org) in Scotland. All of these projects have received some funding from government and all offer young people opportunities to discuss issues online as well as some contact with decision makers. [Headsup.org.uk](http://Headsup.org.uk) has been particularly successful in persuading Members of Parliament to join in debates; for example, Hilton Dawson MP took part in an online discussion with young people about the powers of the new Children's Commissioner. Whilst this type of commitment from individual MPs is promising, there is a lack of systemic commitment across political institutions to actively engage with young people through sites such as these. As a consequence, young people are in danger of being left believing that their voices are not being heard by people in power. Despite that, these websites are still important in helping young people to access information in an engaging way. But by the standards of liberal democracy, they fail to provide young people with power to contribute to their own governance.

**THEY ARE WARNED NOT TO TALK TO STRANGERS; AND YET WHAT IS CITIZENSHIP IF NOT AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT STRANGERS MATTER?**

## RE-THINKING LITERACY

To be literate is to possess the capacity to access, code and decode the meanings contained in texts of various kinds. Literacy includes, but goes beyond, simply being able to read and write. It also includes being able to think critically about how texts have been produced; to recognise the emphases and silences within texts; and to possess the social skills and confidence required to translate texts into consequential actions.

As new information and communication technologies emerge they generate new modes of codification and interpretation. For example, the customs, protocols and grammar of listening to the radio, talking on the telephone or sending an email are different, both in terms of the communicative skills needed to use them and the specific sensitivities of the cultural interaction involved. The concept of 'media literacy' has emerged to explain how people do – and how they should – interact intelligently with information in particular mediated contexts. Ofcom, which has a statutory obligation to promote media literacy, defines this as 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts.' They state that

Media literate people should be able to use the Internet to find information and accept that sometimes what they find may represent a particular view rather than a statement of objective fact. They will be able to control what they and their children see to avoid being offended. They may also be confident enough to be able to order and pay for goods and services online and to create their own website and contribute to a chatroom discussion.<sup>24</sup>

not the only way to think about media literacy. Leu et al, in a fascinating study of 'new literacies emerging from the Internet and other information and communication technologies,' argue that 'The forms and functions of literacy ... are largely determined by the continuously changing social forces at work within any society and the technologies these forces often produce.' They describe literacy as 'a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do.'<sup>25</sup> This account accords with Hoggart's idea of literacy being rooted in everyday rhythms and experiences. In a society which regards young people as apprentice citizens, media literacy might be seen to entail a process of learning to communicate and become informed as if one were a responsible adult. On the other hand, a society which regards young people as possessing democratic rights of their own, might be more interested in encouraging autonomous and critical media uses.

We shall have more to say about this in the next section, but at this stage we should note our finding that most young people tend to use and talk about the Internet in terms of consumption. While some of them are producing their own web sites and blogs, and most of them are engaged in interpersonal networks of self-produced communication, when asked to state what they most liked and disliked about using the Internet, they responded as receivers rather than producers of new media. For example, when we asked young people whether they read or produced blogs, most had not even heard of them. For most of the participants in our research, the Internet was regarded as a supplementary resource for coping with fast, busy and confusing lives. Its ubiquity, speed and expansiveness were seen as its greatest assets.

## WE SHOULD NOTE OUR FINDING THAT MOST YOUNG PEOPLE TEND TO USE AND TALK ABOUT THE INTERNET IN TERMS OF CONSUMPTION.

Ofcom's is a useful, but limited account of media literacy. The assumption that people encounter media as consumers leads to a construction of literacy in terms of choice, transaction, protection from offence and occasional 'joining in.' Literacy, in this context, becomes a self-regulating filter, enabling media consumers (or 'users', as we often refer to them) to encounter information without disrupting cultural norms. That is

- **An easier way to find information. It might not be that quick but it is quicker than going to the library.**
- **You can find anything you want.**
- **There's so much you are bound to find something to interest you.**
- **Its easily accessible everywhere.**
- **If you want to find out stuff that people don't want you to know you go to the Internet.**
- **It's private. You can go on stuff you don't want people to know about.**
- **It's another communication option.**
- **You can do more than one thing at once, you can be talking to your friends while doing your homework while doing something else.**
- **It's easy to use.**
- **It's quick.**
- **They [websites] are not specific enough.**
- **Unreliable ... too many links.**
- **Pop ups, adverts, patronising.**
- **Not having the choice to interact.**
- **The moral and social views of the website – if you don't agree with them.**
- **Blocked sites.**
- **The size of the web.**

But young people are not uncritical of the Internet; there is much that they dislike about the online environment.

- **You can't always find what you are looking for – there's so much information, you don't know where to start.**
- **You don't know what you can believe.**

Although many young people are much more technically proficient users of the Internet than older people, they are frequently faced with challenging obstacles when it comes to accessing and making sense of civic and political online information. Participants in our research reported finding it difficult to search for specific and appropriate information and forming judgements about what to trust. As a test, we asked participants in our online forum to find their local MP or councillor, using a search engine, and let us know how long it took them.

**Without help I wouldn't of been able to of complete the task easily ... it took me about 10 minutes to get the information that I needed. (GIRL, 14)**

**Couldn't find anything! I couldn't find much on councillors in Banbury either. I thought I would, easily! Gah! I found something about buses and that the councillors were trying to improve buses, but apart from that, I couldn't find anything about it and it's taken me 10 minutes! (GIRL, 15)**

**It is so difficult to find anything for teenagers, it really is. Now, trying to find my MP, and it is also failing!!!! There, found. That was difficult. It has taken me 15 minutes to do that!!! I now have no more time to do anything else. (GIRL, 15)**

**The information was quite easy to find. They were the first web pages up on the search engine. It only took me about 2 minutes to find the information about my local MP. (BOY, 16)**

Several young people expressed frustration about the difficulty of finding local information via globally-orientated search engines. As one 13-year-old boy explained, in response to being asked to find local youth clubs online,

**I think if I was to look for youth groups locally I would probably look in the newspaper or ring the council because search engines such as Google open up such a vast amount of results it's nearly impossible to get them down to the ones you are interested in.**

## YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE TRUSTED MORE TO DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES, WHEN AND HOW TO ENGAGE WITH NEW MEDIA.

Some of the obstacles faced by young people are imposed on them by adults in the form of firewalls and parental control facilities. Our own research was often blocked in the schools we were working in by school policies and firewalls which did not allow students to access chatrooms or online games. Such restrictions are clearly problematic, when young people are most regularly accessing information through online chatrooms and games based websites. Young people should be trusted more to decide for themselves how and when to engage with new media.

Most of the young people in our research did not doubt their ability to discriminate between trustworthy and unreliable sources of online information. They were asked to visit four news sites – CBBC news, BBC news, the *Guardian* and the *Mirror* – and tell us which they trusted most to tell them the news. They were most likely to trust sources which had established reputations and which made efforts to customise information for teenagers.

**I think the CBBC *Newsround* page has the most appealing news to me as it is more news which appeal to teenagers. (Most other stories were about David Blunkett which are really boring.) (GIRL, 13)**

**The *Newsround* website I think is the best. It has been designed for teenagers and shows top stories and interesting news. (BOY, 15)**

**I liked the BBC news because it's really trustworthy. It's been around for ages and you know they deal with important issues. (GIRL, 14)**

**I trust the BBC website because it always tells you the truth and it has lots of info about what is going on around the world. (GIRL, 14)**

**I trust stuff from the BBC and the *Guardian*. The BBC are reliable and are on the TV 24 hours a day and rarely lie. The *Guardian* is a bit different as it is a newspaper so it will be a bit different but I prefer it to *the Mirror* as it (*the Mirror*) is a tabloid. (BOY, 13)**

While carefully targeted information from reputable sources is most likely to be trusted by young people for news and other hard information, when it comes to deeper and more interactive communication they prefer youth-created content.

**If someone else is writing who is your age, then its kind of more in touch with you, easier to understand. You can almost engage with them even if you don't know where they are, you can kind of say 'yeah, I thought about that' or 'that's a good idea.' (Girl, 14)**

The value of youth-created sites and networks is that they combine information and opinion with diverse entertainments, such as games, music and video clips. Young Internet users are adept at coping with crossovers between fun and seriousness and relaxed about receiving information within hybrid formats.

We asked participants in our forum to comment on three different kinds of website produced for young people: youth2youth (<http://www.youth2youth.co.uk>) which is a helpline run by young people for young people; rizer (<http://www.rizer.co.uk>) which is produced by young people to explain about drugs and the law; and Bushflash (<http://www.bushflash.com>), an American anti-Bush web site. Style and content are intertwined and one does not work without the other.

**The least interesting site was youth2youth. When I entered the site I was immediately bored, it was annoyingly dull and bland to look at. It was set to a very specific set of people and wouldn't be interesting to the wide range of web users. (BOY, 15)**

**I think that the one that is most for our age group is rizer, as the others had too wide a range...(it) is very serious and poses lots of questions. (BOY, 15)**

**The rizer website is very appealing for teenagers, as the writing and the style are aimed at my age group...the website is very good if you need advice on law and crime or if you want to find out about other peoples stories. (BOY, 14)**

**I think that rizer was designed specifically for my age group, although there were some conflicting messages coming from the site. First the graffiti writing and the Flash animation were designed to catch your attention constantly, which leads me to believe it was for young teens - all the moving and flashy animation - as they can get easily bored and distracted - I'm talking in general, not about everyone... (GIRL, 15)**

**Bushflash looks really interesting for teenagers who are into politics. Even teenagers (who) don't, like myself, will still like it. It goes into not much detail but enough to tell us what is going on with Bush. (GIRL, 15)**

**I think that the Bushflash was a good website with lots of games and videos because I don't like Bush - he's a silly head. He started a war for no reason. It was funny. (BOY, 18)**

**Very very funny- it has impressive graphics and is full of clever wisecracks about Bush. The songs are entertaining, and the website clearly contains some political issues without making it irritating or difficult to understand. It gets the point across in a funny, interesting way, without making it irritating or difficult to understand. It is clearly an attack on Bush and his governments, and could be very influential with young people, as it is funny, and on the surface seems like non-political rubbish, and therefore appealing to teenagers. (BOY, 17)**

**Bushflash was really good because it has a lot of anti-war things that appeal to teenagers like animations and music videos that are really funny... (GIRL, 13)**

**Bush's site was complicated and boring. (BOY, 16)**

From comments of this kind it became clear that there is a thin boundary between literacy skills and aesthetic judgements. As uses and gratifications researchers have found in relation to television viewing, the relationship between accessing information, understanding it and regarding it as worthwhile is dependent upon more than merely instrumental motives.<sup>26</sup> Questions of style are intimately related to the value young people derive from civic and political online content. But what, in the context of hypertextual, digital multimedia is style?

## RE-THINKING STYLE

Margetts claims that 'belief in seriousness - rather than fun - runs straight through virtually all UK government organisations' approach to the Web.' Government websites, she says, are 'conservatively designed, use bureaucratic language and contain no incentives other than strict functionality for users to explore the site.'<sup>27</sup> The same aesthetic solemnity characterises many of the online projects intended to inform and inspire youth. Livingstone, Bober and Helsper urge government and civic agencies to 'address the rather dull and worthy appearance of civic sites to ensure a "youth-friendly" appeal that does not undermine young people's desire to be, and to be seen to be "cool".'<sup>28</sup> This begs the question of what is meant by 'youth-friendly' coolness in a digital context. During the course of our research we sent participants to review a wide range of websites. Overwhelmingly, they were unimpressed by government and political sites. Typically, the sites that enthused them were described as 'cool.' For example, the Nike site was widely praised.

## ASKING YOUNG PEOPLE TO EXPLAIN 'WHAT'S COOL' PLACED US IN A SIMILAR POSITION TO YOUNG PEOPLE ASKING ADULTS TO EXPLAIN 'WHAT'S POLITICAL.'

**The Nike site attracts users using colours which complement each other. It looks like it was designed for its target audience which is teenagers. Cool site. (BOY, 13)**

**The Nike website was cool! (BOY, 15)**

**I thought the [Nike] website was pretty modern and cool with lots of features and activities to take part in. (GIRL, 15)**

Despite much effort, our attempts to find out what young people find 'cool' and 'uncool' in their activities as online citizens proved to be the least successful aspect of our research. Asking young people to explain 'what's cool' placed us in a similar position to young people asking adults to explain 'what's political.' We were usually met with the impression (politely offered to us, it should be said) that if we need to ask we'd never really be able to understand. As one participant put it to us,

**You can't be cool if you are trying too hard to be cool. (BOY, 14)**

Others were eager to press home the point that cool should be seen as neither performative nor aspirational.

**The thing that makes the bands\* cool is that they weren't designed to be cool. People make it cool because everyone's wearing it. (GIRL, 14) [\*THE REFERENCE IS TO ANTI-BULLYING ARMBANDS.]**

**This whole cool thing is just really patronising. Like 'look at this cool website' like using words like 'innit' coz they're really cool, but they are so not. (GIRL, 15)**

## **COOLNESS LIES IN THIS CAPACITY TO RE-ORDER AND RECONSTRUCT THE ELEMENTS OF CIVIC LIFE SO THAT IT CONFORMS TO ONE'S OWN NEEDS AND FEELINGS RATHER THAN PREDETERMINED STRUCTURES.**

Just as wrist bands have become "cool" because of the message attached to them, so can websites. For example, the Hands Up for Peace Campaign, run from [www.messengers.org.uk](http://www.messengers.org.uk), which led to thousands of young people from London demonstrating outside Westminster against the Iraq War in March 2003. The demonstrations, organised by young activists, were supported by young people who had heard about the website and its messages mainly through word of mouth. It was not the design of the website itself that was

important, but what it stood for and the fact that it empowered young people to take action.

In the absence of direct evidence, we retreated to theory. The notion of 'coolness' has diverse historical roots. In West African tribal history the symbolic concept of coolness has long been associated with calm and conciliatory attitudes. This symbolic meaning was integrated into African-American idiomatic speech in the urban United States, where to be 'cool' was to be 'calm, unimpressed, and detached,' in the face of white authority, but at the same time socially flexible and honest to oneself.' Frank writes about how 'coolness' became an identifying characteristic of a relaxed, rebellious western counter-culture and how corporate America appropriated 'cool' as a technique for selling itself to commercially-alienated youth.<sup>29</sup> In the 1960s the Canadian cultural theorist, Marshall McLuhan, typified certain media as 'hot' – and therefore untouchable – and others as 'cool' – and open to participatory interaction.<sup>30</sup> In all of these accounts coolness is described as a relationship to power which is both distanced and involved. To be cool is to be neither engaged nor disengaged by external forces, but to feel free to engage with them.

This notion of engaging with characterises the relationship between the user and content in digital communication. In pre-digital communication environments symbolic content derived significance from fixed referent structures. The relationship between digital content and its users is one of polysemous indeterminacy. As Landow has observed,

One of the fundamental characteristics of hypertext is that it is composed of bodies of linked texts that have no primary axis of organisation ... Although this absence of a center can create problems for the reader and the writer, it also means that anyone who uses hypertext makes his or her own interests the de facto organizing principle (or center) for the investigation at the moment.<sup>31</sup>

An example of the indeterminate style of digital communication is sampling: a technique whereby music – but also text and pictures – can be re-ordered or even reconstructed independently of its original reference. The coolness of sampling depends upon the willingness and capacity of consumers to become creative producers and original producers to let go of possessive claims to control the meaning or authenticity of their works.

Coolness, in this sense, rejects the authority of the artistic creator, casting everyone in the role as collaborative remixers of meaning.

The example of sampling and remixing is highly relevant to understanding how the Internet could provide a unique arena for new forms of participation. Traditionally, civic and political participation has meant engaging with a fixed body of symbolic references: parties, nations, classes, governments, ideologies. The rigidity of these determined references requires newcomers to take them or leave them. And most young people have chosen to leave them after little more than a glance.

The essence of digitisation is the undetermined relationship between the creation of content and its subsequent use. In the analogue age one bought LPs and had to listen to them track by track, over and over again; one supported a party or MP or government and entered into what seemed like an unbreachable contract with a wholesale package of values, policies and leaders. In the age of MP3 neither music nor politics are consumed ready-mixed. Coolness lies in this capacity to re-order and reconstruct the elements of civic life so that it conforms to one's own needs and feelings rather than predetermined structures. The popularity of satirical web sites and viral emails which invited their (mainly young) visitors to digitally remix election ads during the 2005 general election campaign (see <http://kryogenix.org/code/conposter/index.php> and <http://www.toryscum.com/2005/04/09/taking-streets-part-2/>) was indicative of this trend towards creative interactivity. Similarly playful are soundboards (<http://www.2flashgames.com/f/f-589.htm>) which allow people to remix politicians' speeches. In a more serious vein, the growth of wikipedia, which publishes on the basis of ongoing collaboration and revision, does far more to reflect the uncertain and contested nature of political terms than authoritative offline sources. See, for example, the entries on New Labour ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Labour](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Labour)), citizenship (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship>) and sampling ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sampling\\_%28music%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sampling_%28music%29))

The Internet might not be very good for supporting LP-style citizenship, but opens up important possibilities for a do-it-yourself, sample-and-remix style of citizenship which involves adopting what works and feels good in civic and political life and discarding what seems to be futile or obsolete. While some established institutions

might perceive this as a threat to their status and control, the enduring effect is likely to be the emergence of a more self-styled, relaxed and flexible conception of what it means to be a democratic citizen.

## CONCLUSION – DIY CITIZENSHIP AND MP3 POLITICS

From the outset, we have argued in this paper that it is not youth who are out of touch with democracy, but democracy which is out of touch with young people. Rather than accept the depiction of young people as 'hard to reach', we contend that it is the political and media elite that are hard to reach, for they have yet to adapt to the age of digital interactivity. If we are to address the problem of young people's political and civic disengagement, we must first of all redefine the nature of the problem, so that we are not implicitly blaming young people for opting out of obsolete political rituals, and we must then redefine citizenship and politics so that, as Giddens puts it, democracy may be democratised.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY LESSONS SUGGESTED BY THE RESEARCH REPORTED IN THIS PAPER?

Firstly, as some other research papers have suggested, young people are not apathetic. The term 'apathy' refers to a lack of feeling or pathos. In fact, young people have an abundance of feelings about many issues and values, but find it hard to articulate them in terms understood by adults. When they do express themselves politically, this tends to be within the kind of casual and fluid interpersonal networks which the Internet is good at facilitating. There is also an appetite amongst many young people for more structured online polylogue, such as discussion fora, but they are not prepared to participate if they are not being heard or respected. A key message for government is that engaging young people in online debates and consultations is counter-productive unless there is a serious and authentic commitment to listen and learn – in sort to engage with them.

Secondly, digital literacy endows young people not only with new skills, but new ways of interacting with information and knowledge. The broadcast model of the Internet is misleading: people do not go online to become an audience for top-down messages. The key to making online civic and political content meaningful is for it to be open to the widest possible interpretation, re-interpretation and remixing. In this sense, digital literacy should be seen as a disruptive and creative force rather than a regulatory mechanism.

This leads us to our third conclusion: that in the spirit of coolness, authorities, including educators and policy-makers, need to loosen their grip on the core of civic and political discourse and accept the pluralistic and polysemous character of the contemporary language of citizenship. Like record producers in the 1990s, they must learn to live in a world in which no cultural product is the final version and every track and beat can be remixed. This does not mean that notions of objective or normative truth or value should be abandoned. We should still teach young people about the importance of courtesy, cooperation and critical thought. Politicians will still have core messages they will want to convey; the media will still pursue agendas; educators will still seek pedagogical outcomes. Our argument is that, to be effective in a digital context, all of these must be offered as projects in progress, vulnerable to the democratic refashioning that is inherent to digital culture.

The consequence of these conclusions for our understanding of the relationships between young people, the Internet and democratic citizenship is to weaken essentialist assumptions about the nature of citizenship and politics and emphasise what Fairclough et al refer to as 'citizenship as a communicative achievement' which gets 'away from preconceptions about what citizenship is, and look at how it is done – at the range of ways in which people position themselves and others as citizens in participatory events.'<sup>32</sup> As apprentice citizens, young people are using the Internet in a variety of ways to find their way into the complex discourses of adult politics; but, as they do so, they weave innovative networks of civic connection which both refresh and reshape the civic and political landscape.

Citizenship is in the process of being re-invented and young people are the first to recognise the new forms of civic communication that will be ubiquitous within a generation from now. The Internet has created an experimental space in which elements of contemporary citizenship are being sampled and remixed.

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